

BALANCE OF POWER



Werner Alfrecht, the far-sighted boss of AMG, has no doubt noticed the irony. A decade ago, his idea of building a 4-door supercar seemed hopelessly radical to Mercedes' Powers That Be. Nowadays, AMG's Affalterbach factory turns cars out on Mercedes' own say-so, struggling to fulfill the company's long waiting list.

The road to such respectability was a long and fascinating one. Back in 1985, Mercedes' old SOHC 5-liter V8 came up against a tuner's brick wall around 275 bhp. Along came AMG with some very expensively produced 4-valve heads, and suddenly that figure jumped to 340 horsepower, in the big W126 S-class coupe of the era this made 0-60 in 6.1 seconds and 164 mph possible—both remarkable at the time.

Limited Warfare

But Alfrecht couldn't leave it at that. In 1986 he decided to stuff Mercedes' new 5.6-liter V8 from the heavyweight S-class into the 660-pound-lighter 300E midsize, which he hoped would be the perfect platform for a compact hotrod muscle car in the

Ian Knoch gets the keys to an early AMG E50, Mercedes' factory-blessed war machine.

best American tradition. With 4-valve AMG heads, 355 bhp @ 5500 rpm, and 390 lbs.-ft. of torque @ 4500, the resulting sedan was capable of 180+ mph, 0-60 in 5.2 seconds, and a 13.6-second quarter, all with a 4-speed automatic! For any sportster it came up against, this innocuous-looking 4-door was the Benz From Hell. Smoking its tires with the auto left in Drive, the so-called AMG Hammer was a supercar-killer in a pinstriped suit. Hugely expensive to produce, only a few true Hammers were built, though cosmetic copycats abounded.

By 1990, AMG's efforts had earned it worldwide fame and respectability. At the same time, the normally conservative Mercedes-Benz factory was looking for a midsize muscle car of its own to go head-to-head with BMW's M5. They eventually turned to Porsche, knowing that creating

and building such a small-run special in-house would be prohibitive. (How right they were: Mercedes' engineers originally thought that about 100 pieces would need to be modified to adapt the 500SL's new 32-valve, 326-horse V8 to fit. In the end it was more like 1100, including the whole front structure and suspension.) Eventually, Mercedes launched its own V8-powered E420, based on the lessons learned with the Porsche-built 500E. The factory also went ahead and planned a similar V8 offering for the next-generation E-class of 1995.

Verbal Detente

In the meantime, the factory began to realize that increasing numbers of their customers wanted their cars to be personalized. Rather than missing out on this potentially profitable sideline, Mercedes decided to find a way to capitalize on the situation, simultaneously allowing a certain amount of control over what was done to their cars on the aftermarket. First they moved to buy AMG, and Alfrecht was willing to sell, but the German mergers and monopolies commission wouldn't allow it. The relationship became a partnership instead.

The AMG C36 was the first complete car to be marketed by the restructured AMG organization, which also runs the works' German Touring Car team, as it has for some years now. The SL60—a 6-liter version of the SL roadster—came next, and now there's the AMG E50. Mercedes says this is the spiritual successor to the E500, but some will argue that the fabled Porsche-built Mercedes of days gone by is still a more special proposition.

Whatever your point of view, there's no denying that the AMG E50 is one hell of a car. Its heart is an AMG-modified version of Mercedes' 4-cam, 32-valve V8, which in its latest form with sequential Bosch fuel injection produces 320 bhp in the S-class. AMG has mildly tweaked the engine with a freer-breathing intake manifold and exhaust, polished cylinder heads, bigger valves, and recalibrated ECU. None of this changes the 354 lbs.-ft. of torque that peak at 3750, but it has added another 27 horses to the stable. Coupled to the new electronic 5-speed automatic box, the E50 is even smoother and more economical than its predecessor.

As it has better aerodynamics and has not put on weight, it's just a fraction quicker, too. Sixty mph comes up in 5.9 seconds compared to 6.0, the quarter-mile is

dropped to 14.2, and top speed is the same electronically limited 155 mph. This is perhaps the one sore point of an AMG car today: Because these are now official offerings of Mercedes-Benz and sold through their traditional dealer network, the current cars fall under the gentlemen's agreement BMW and Mercedes maintain with the German Green Party to limit their cars to 250km/h, or about 155. Thus, even if you pay a significant amount of money over a standard Mercedes for a 6-liter SL with 381 bhp, it will go no faster than the standard SL500. You can, of course, have the electronic limiter removed once you've taken delivery of the car.

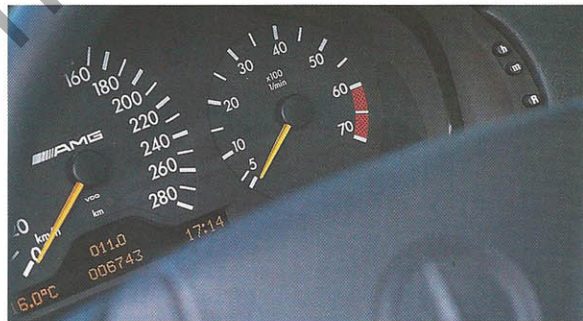
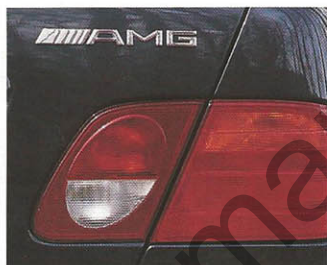
It's hard to believe this same basic engine has been around for seven years

now. As a paradigm of smoothness, bulldozer-like torque, and overall refinement, you'll find no better engine at any price. The 4-cam Merc is silent at idle, totally docile around town, and, with as much as 295 lbs.-ft. of torque available at 1800 rpm, it's always ready for a fight. Stomp your foot to the floor and the new gearbox seamlessly shifts down to accommodate. An effortless wave of torque simply picks the car up and hurls it towards the horizon.

It all seems so easy that you don't even think it's happening at a supercar pace, but the speedometer needle tracks around the clock nearly as fast as the tachometer, at least in the lower gears. In fact, the E50 feels like it's only limbering up until you're well into three-figure speeds: 120+ mph cruising is this car's true forte, and even after three hours of autobahn charging I found myself fresh as the proverbial daisy.

Battle Dress

A chassis able to contain and deploy all that power and torque is vital if such a car is to be used to its full potential. The "regular" E500 had 225/55ZR16 rubber on 16x8-inch wheels, and the niftiest Limited model wore larger 17x8.25s and 245/45ZR17 Michelins. Its suspension was basically that of the SL



Originally, Mercedes wanted to take over AMG and absorb it completely, but apparently the German government no longer approves of that kind of thing. Instead, a fixed-term partnership was created, with the Affalterbach tuning house providing cars directly to Mercedes for resale all around the globe and looking after the works DTM race program. In exchange, AMG gets steady orders and a worldwide dealer base.

roadster, but with stiffer spring and damper rates. With the larger wheel and tire combination the ride could be a bit jiggly on short sharp bumps at low speeds, but it got better the faster you went. And the 500's ASR traction-control system helped keep things in check if the driver unwisely deployed too much torque (though enthusiasts moaned that it couldn't be turned off, unlike the equivalent system on BMW's M5).

The new AMG E50 neatly sidesteps all these problems by using the European E-class' factory Avantgarde suspension. Upgraded Bilstein dampers and slightly larger antiroll bars complete the package, which AMG claims cuts roll by 15% compared to the old E500. On the road, this fact is borne out: The dynamic abilities of this new chassis are staggering. Despite the much larger



18x8- and 9-inch wheels and 235/40ZR18 and 265/35ZR18 Bridgestone S-02 rubber specially made for this car, superb spring and shock control gives it a very comfortable ride. In this respect, the new E50 is miles ahead of its forefather. Combined with largely neutral handling, this outstanding balance produces a touring machine that feels totally at ease on all types of roads, wet or dry.

As before, there's enough torque on tap to throttle-steer the chassis within the limits of the ASR. Now, however, you can also choose to switch the ASR off and play bad-boy all you want with your right foot. If you have enough room to toss such a sizable beast around, it proves remarkably easy to unsettle this car's tail with the engine's massive torque, and then hold it delicately on the throttle.

This isn't to say that you can't get the rear end loose even with the ASR engaged.

Part of my test route was a wide, 2-lane, uphill bend that I took faster and faster in the pouring rain, looking for the limit. Even with the ASR turned on and holding a smooth racing line, the tail finally let go on a large throttle opening at about 65 mph. The car telegraphed it well, and the slide was progressive and easy to catch—but it did slide regardless. Mercedes-Benz now has the Bosch-developed ESP (Electronic Stability Program) hardware available to counteract this tendency further still, but I do believe that in the end, physics will always win out over technology!

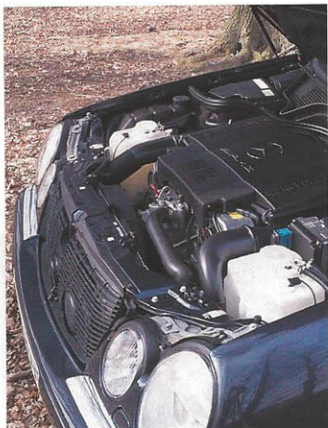
Precision Bombing

The new rack-and-pinion steering used on all E-class cars is considerably more direct on center and a lot more communicative in corners. The E50's Bridgestones give plenty of warning as you approach break-away, and they're surprisingly quiet and

effective on surfaces that would upset most lesser cars.

To my mind, one of the weak points of the old E-class V8s was the brakes. The original 500E used the Brembo-sourced anchors from the 500SL V8, but when the car was facelifted in '93 and renamed E500, it also gained the brakes of the heavier SL600. These weren't the most confidence-inspiring units in the world, and the E50's new twin-pot ATE front calipers and full-floating discs are a considerable improvement. The rear brakes come from the AMG SL60, and together this new hardware is a major improvement in both stopping power and fade resistance.

Not surprisingly, the cabin of the E50 is a wonderful place to be. The rear seat can now accommodate three people, and leather—previously an option except on the E500 Limited—is now standard for the two front sports seats. The wood trim is a lovely



Poor, poor Ian. He left a trail of breadcrumbs going into the woods, but the little birds must have gobbled them up. Now he'll have to drive around lost until he stumbles on a woodsman's cabin, or a magic pond, or better still a gas station that's having a humongous sale on Super Unleaded.



SPECIFICATIONS

1996 AMG-Mercedes E50

General

Vehicle type: front-engined RWD sedan
Structure: steel unibody
Market as tested: Germany
MSRP: \$105,000
Airbag: std., driver, passenger, side

Engine

Type: longitudinal V8, aluminum block and heads
Displacement (cc): 4973
Compression ratio: 11.0:1
Power (bhp): 347 @ 5700 rpm
Torque (lbs. ft.): 354 @ 3750 rpm
Intake system: SMPFI
Valvetrain: two overhead cams per bank, four valves per cylinder
Transmission type: 5-speed automatic

Dimensions

Curb weight (lbs.): 3885
Wheelbase (in.): 111.5
Length (in.): 188.7
Width (in.): 70.8

Suspension, brakes, steering

Suspension, front: double wishbones with coil springs and antiroll bar
Suspension, rear: multilink with coil springs and antiroll bar
Steering type: rack and pinion, power assisted
Wheels, f&r (in.): 18x8 & 18x9
Tires, f&r: 235/40ZR18 & 265/35ZR18
Brakes, f&r: 13.1-inch vented disc/13.0-inch vented disc
ABS: std.

Performance

0-60 (sec.): 5.9
Quarter-mile (sec.): 14.2
Top speed (mph): 155 (electronically limited)

grey bird's-eye maple from the Avantgarde package, and the leather-clad steering wheel is straight from the current SL roadster.

Mercedes-Benz is in the middle of an engine-change program that will see new, lightweight V6 and V8 mills replacing the present range of straight-6s and V8s in the spring of 1997. The imminent debut of this new modular engine range means that many markets outside Europe, including England, won't get the new E420 or E50 until after these powerplants are homologated some months past their initial launch—for now, they'll have to make do with the 285-bhp, 6-cylinder E36. America, at least, can have an E420 straightaway.

The Muscle Gap

Musclecars are as much about feel and sound as they are about speed, but here we've got a package that delivers on every front. Subjectively or objectively, this is very likely the best performance sedan in the world. No wonder BMW's next M5 is going to drop its inline-6 for a 4-cam V8: The arms race is on! ●