

BY DAVID COLMAN

PHOTOS BY SCOTT DAHLQUIST



SLicker Than Ever

I never considered the SLK a candidate for my garage until I drove RENNtech's version. Although the appearance of the bobcat Benz was intriguing, the stock car's performance never matched its aggressive good looks. Flaccid handling made it perfect for the poseur more interested in the mantle of sportiness than the substance of sport.

But RENNtech has changed all that with their R170SLK, a true sportscar if ever there was one. Scintillating acceleration, extraordinary handling and fearsome braking convert the SLK from a terrier to a terror. If you consider the stock SLK to be an update of the 190SL, then the R170 constitutes a reprise of the 300SL. Factor the traditional Benz virtues of stout design

and engineering genius into RENNtech's salsa, and you have yourself a decathlete dressed in a pinstriped track suit.

So ferocious is this R170SLK that it makes me realize I dismissed the potential of the new Mercedes prematurely. If only Benz had optimized their car like this in the first place! But to their credit, MBNA did develop the ideal platform for a world class sportscar. They just tuned it for golfers rather than racers. But the enthusiasts at Benz were eager to develop their baby along RENNtech lines. So Wayne Killen, platform boss of the SLK for Benz, assisted in RENNtech's re-engineering of the car. But the real inspiration for the project goes to Hartmut Feyhl, resident genius and owner of the Lake Park, Florida super

tuning firm, who recognized not only the latent brilliance of the SLK, but also what was needed to effect the transformation.

Most of the magic transpires under the bonnet, where four stages of supertune are offered, from the modest 30 hp Stage 1 increase (\$4900) to the full house 100 hp boost of Stage 4 (\$19,950). Our test car, which made its public debut at the LA Auto Show, depends on Stage 2 tune for its 55 hp boost. For \$8850, RENNtech modifies the computer, adds a larger supercharger pulley, substitutes a Magnuson-reworked Eaton supercharger, fits a replacement exhaust and larger intercooler. Even the relatively modest enhancements of Stage 2 offer a dramatic boost compared to the stock SLK's 185 hp

and 200 lb/ft of torque. With 240 hp on tap, 0-60 times drop from 7.2 seconds into the 5.9 second range.

And 250lb/ft of torque make the automatic gearbox much easier to live with when left in "Drive." Though strengthened by RENNtech to the tune of \$1290, the 5-gear automatic is still unsuited to the otherwise sporting character of the R170SLK. The weak detents in the linkage make it virtually impossible to select intermediate gears with any certainty of success. Several times while upshifting, I swept the lever right past fourth and into neutral — once when passing slower traffic on the wrong side of a two-laner. Not terribly confidence inspiring when the engine revs but the wheels don't.

Knowing that the 5-speed automatic would have less appeal to enthusiasts than a manual tranny, RENNtech tried to equip their show car with the 5-speed manual offered on the European SLK. But even Wayne Killen was unable to secure the transmission in time for the LA Show deadline. The good news, however, is that the SLK will be available with 5-speed manual gearbox in the USA about the time you read this review. This is the missing piece of the puzzle that will convert the R170SLK from a good car to a great one. Knowing RENNtech, they will offer the manual SLK with a variety of different ratios. After all, they already stock a 6-speed manual 'box for a mere \$18,000!

Although RENNtech found that their

modified engine lived happily at speeds exceeding 7000 rpm on the dyno, they decided for longevity's sake to retain the stock Mercedes rev limit at 5800 rpm. The good news is that this bit of conservatism allows the company to offer a 2 year, unlimited mileage warranty on all their modifications. This dovetails nicely with MBNA's extant four-year, 50,000 mile warranty on everything else. The bad news is that the retained 5800 rpm redline means you always seem to be running afoul of Mercedes' overbearing rev limiter, which kills the motor quicker than a speeding motorist can brake for a cop with a radar gun (more on that later).

Since the modified engine now produces 14 pounds of boost instead of seven as



delivered by Benz, you're bumping into that boost bleeding rev limiter twice as quick as stock. It's all but impossible to keep up with the shift requirements in the lower gears when using the stick of the automatic gearbox. Your best bet is to just park the lever in "Drive" or "4" and occasionally tap it down a gear or two. Even driven like that, the R170 is extremely quick to respond, cranking quarter mile times in the low 14s at nearly 100 mph. I also ran the Benz up to an indicated 146 mph at 5300 rpm before running out of road. The extra 500 rpm still left before redline indicates that this is a genuine 150+mph sportscar. The stock SLK tops out at 140 mph.

The handling at triple digit speeds is impeccable. The front end did not feel floaty, even near top speed. So give a doff

of your helmet brim to the aero improvements wrought by RENNtech's front spoiler (\$690), side skirts (\$1160) and strut tower brace sized rear wing (\$780). That rear wing, penned by Hartmut Feyhl himself, gives just the needed sort of kick-up to the SLK's truncated tail. When you compare the looks of the stock Benz to this tuner version, you realize this car's won the performance Oscar before you ever twist its stiletto-bladed ignition key.

Although RENNtech recognizes that the R170's ride quality is just North of unacceptable for typical Mercedes clientele ("Borderline" is the way Feyhl puts it), I thought the choice of wheels, tires, springs, bars and shocks was nothing short of brilliant. Gone is the tuna boat pitchiness of the stock SLK, replaced by a

RENNTech UNLEASHES THE SPORTS CAR

hiding within the standard SLK by turning up the power and tightening down the chassis. Massive Alcon 14" 4-piston front rotors are fully apparent through the slender spokes of the 18" alloys. A few touches of yellow leather liven the otherwise stock interior, while a reworked supercharger and larger intercooler liven the 2.3-liter 4-banger.

deep-keeled gyroscopic equipoise. Although the ride quality feels harsher from the passenger's seat than the driver's, in no case does this car punish its occupants. The added stability is more than worth any tradeoff in comfort. Our test car carried Koni development shocks, valved by RENNtech, and adjustable for both jounce and rebound. Production Konis will be rebound-adjustable only, and if you want the special valving, you'll have to order them from RENNtech. Likewise, the solid front sway bar, 3mm larger than stock, the 14mm rear sway bar, and the 5 percent stiffer coil springs, are all available only through RENNtech.

Even the 40 series front and 35 series rear tires (18 inch Yokohama AVS S1-Z) are remarkably compliant, considering their sidewall height barely clears Bott's dot lane markers on the freeway. The \$3200 wheel and tire combo transforms not only the handling of the car, but its looks as well. Former OZ/Fittipaldi/BBS wheel specialist Rich Zucchini has concoct-

ed a simple "New Wheel" 5-spoke design for RENNtech that enhances the lines of the car while showing off the Alcon/RENNtech 14" 4-piston front brakes (\$5760 option) to stunning effect. The vented rear brakes, which remain M-B stock at 11", look more than a tad wimpy behind those monstrous 9x18" wheels.

The word on RENNtech has always been that their cars cost too much, that they build no-expense-spared objets d'art more suited to the pages of *The Robb Report* than the roads of the real world. With that rebuke in mind, Hartmut Feyhl decided to keep costs in check on this SLK project. RENNtech's idea of "in check" means the R170 can be yours for \$76,000, just a few pfennigs short of twice what a stock SLK runs at retail. Among the heroic cost-cutting measures on this project car were the limited interior modifications. The buckets, dash and door panels are stock Benzware, done in subdued octaves of oyster and grey. But supertuner Feyhl couldn't resist the temptation to graft a RENNtech signature

SPECIFICATIONS

RENNTECH MERCEDES R170SLK

General

Vehicle type: Front-engine, RWD
2-door roadster
Structure: Steel unibody chassis
Market as tested: US
MSRP: \$76,000 (est.) as tested

Engine

Type: Roots-type supercharged and intercooled inline-4 with iron block and aluminum head
Displacement (cc): 2295
Compression ratio: 8.8:1
Power (bhp): 240 @ 5300 rpm
Torque (lbs. ft.): 250 @ 2500 rpm
Intake system: EFI
Valvetrain: DOHC, 16 valve, variable intake-valve timing

Transmission

Type: 5-speed automatic
Final drive: 3.27

Dimensions

Curb weight (lbs.): 3036
Wheelbase (in.): 94.5
Length (in.): 157.3
Width (in.): 67.5
Height (in.): 50.7

Suspension, brakes, steering

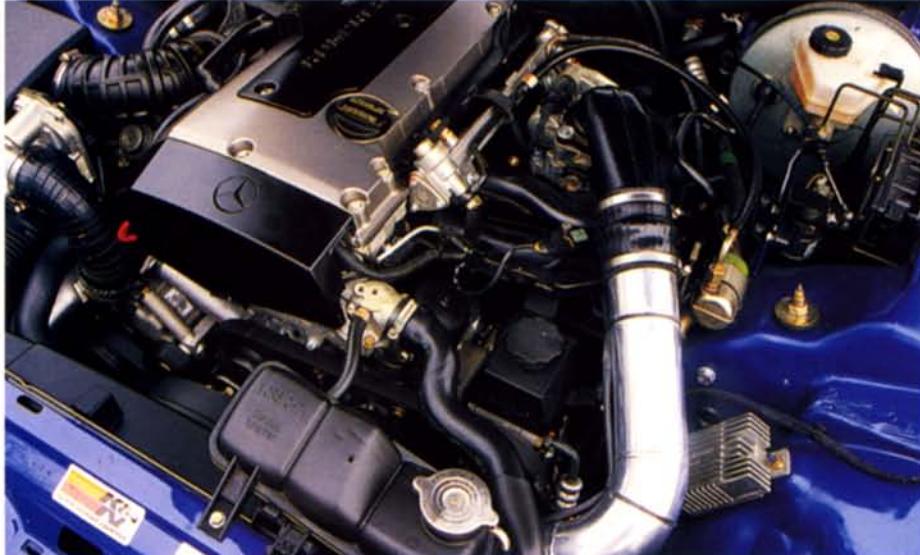
Suspension, front: Double wishbones, coil springs, Koni gas-pressurized shocks, antiroll bar
Suspension, rear: Multi-link, coil springs, Koni gas-pressurized shocks, antiroll bar
Steering type: Recirculating ball
Wheels, f&r: 8 x 18, 9 x 18
Tires, f&r: 225/40ZR18, 265/35ZR18
Brakes, f&r: 14-inch vented discs, 11-inch discs
ABS: Standard

Performance

0-60 mph (sec.): 5.9
Top speed (mph): 155

Contact

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touch to the look of the cabin, so he hired former M-B master upholsterer Andreas Georgi to trim the roll bars, door grab handles, shift knob and handbrake in Chiquita yellow leather. The juxtaposition of the Bahama Blue Metallic exterior and banana yellow upholstery makes for a startling example of German Expressionism.

The sweet spot of the R170 comes into focus on two lane backroads. Just about where I came into focus on the Marin County Sheriff's radar unit near Point Reyes Station. Closing fast on a blind rise, I cut my speed abruptly before I noticed the cruiser parked behind the tree line, driver's right. Even with those big Alcons squeezing the life out of their eight pistons, I knew I was dead.

Did I mention that the best part of this

car is the sound it makes? The cop told me he heard the Merc coming long before he ever saw it. "What is that, a turbocharger or something?" he said asked casually while examining my license and fishy-looking Florida registration. "No sir," said I helpfully, "That's a supercharger." The big pulley makes the Roots blower scream like, well, like a cop siren. Add the burbling free-flow ChrisCraft exhaust, and you've got quite the center of attention here.

"I know you've gotta do this, but do it somewhere else" he said magnanimously as he shuffled back to his cruiser, ticket pad still buttoned down on his belt. "I mean I got you at ninety, actually, more than ninety..." Right, that would be redline in third gear for the R170SLK. With two more gears to go. But not today, okay officer? ●