

# SCC ROAD TEST: MERCEDES 300SL ROADSTER

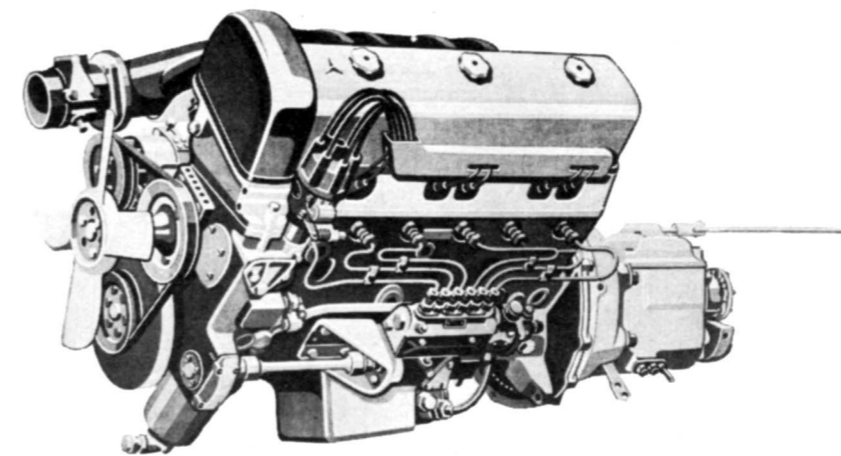


*In this competition model, Paul O'Shea placed third overall and first in class in 1957 Watkins Glen Grand Prix.*

**I**N 1954, after racing the very successful prototype for two years, Daimler-Benz AG introduced the 300SL coupe as a series-production car and created a storm of exclamations and alarms. Most of them were to the effect that they'd never build a hundred of them, much less sell them, and how can you call a car like that stock? When all the fuss had calmed down, most of the noisiest talkers were standing in line outside their nearest Mercedes-Benz dealer. It seems now that in practically no time at all there were gull-winged coupes all over the place, especially at SCCA races. Then there was that really startling announcement

that D-B had completed their 1000th 300SL. Not a hundred, mind you, but a thousand!

Meanwhile, the engineering department at Untertürkheim had cooked up a low-pivot-point swing-axle for the W196 Grand Prix car. It soon appeared on the 190SL and some of the sedans but oddly not on the fastest and most potent car of the line. Because the complicated frame of the coupe had to be extensively redesigned to accept this change, it was some time before word was out that the improved rear suspension would be on the 300SL, but only on the Roadster model which would require a considerably



*The latest edition of the low pivot swing axle features a compensating spring, permitting much lower roll stiffness for the same spring rate.*

*Slanted engine installation keeps the complex Bosch fuel injector pump out of reach of prying eyes and would-be tinkerers. It's just as well it does.*

*The business-office harmoniously combines a clean, purposeful layout with luxurious elegance. Still a bit awkward to get in and out, but better than the famous gull-wings.*

modified frame anyway.

Early this fall we received a telephone call from Mr. Merle Curry enquiring for "the gentleman in charge of road-testing." When connected, he told us he had a new 300SL Roadster which he was offering to us for a road-test. We don't ordinarily accept such offers, no matter how well meant, but we were willing to make an exception in this case. (Naturally!)

According to Mr. Curry, this is the first one delivered to a private owner in the United States, with the exception of Paul O'Shea's, which though "stock" from the technical point of view, is hardly the standard road version sold to the public. An appointment was made, and plans for this issue were happily changed. Two days later Mr. Curry arrived in New York, and after Studebaker-Packard's Mercedes-Benz Service Dept. had seen to the 3000 mile checkup, he handed his jewel over to us.

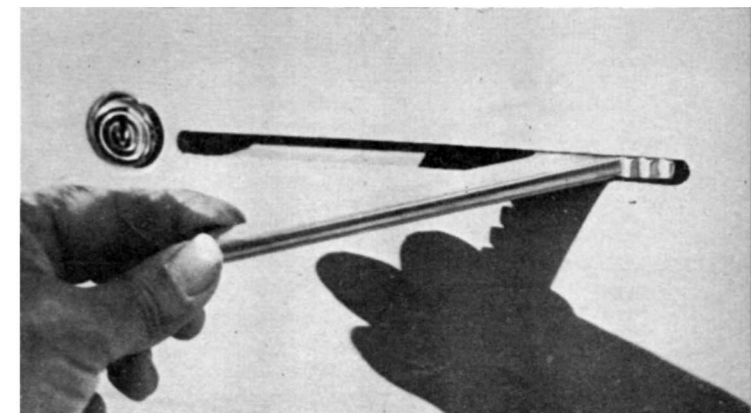
With this car, the Germans have again managed to mix successfully the gracefully sleek tautness of Italian lines with the hard purposefulness of contemporary German styling. There is no pigeon-hole for it except to call it the Mercedes SL school of design. Smoothness is evident everywhere. The trim features vary from the bold spears over the wheel cutouts and the frankly race-inspired outside mirror to the blade-thin, concealed door handles, where only the tiniest of serrated edges projects past the door contour, awaiting your finger tip pressure to bring the rest of the handle into reach. Pulling on this opens the normally hinged door, which, while not as exciting as the famous gull-wings, certainly enables you to make your entrance and exit more easily than before. The very wide door sill (it covers the tubular truss frame but thinly here) is itself covered with expensive-looking cowhide.

The bucket seats, though a bit upright, are well-shaped to provide excellent lateral support. Once settled in them, it was pleasant to see a hand brake lever mounted on the floor where it's easy to get at, yet arranged alongside the transmission bulge so it gets in no one's way.

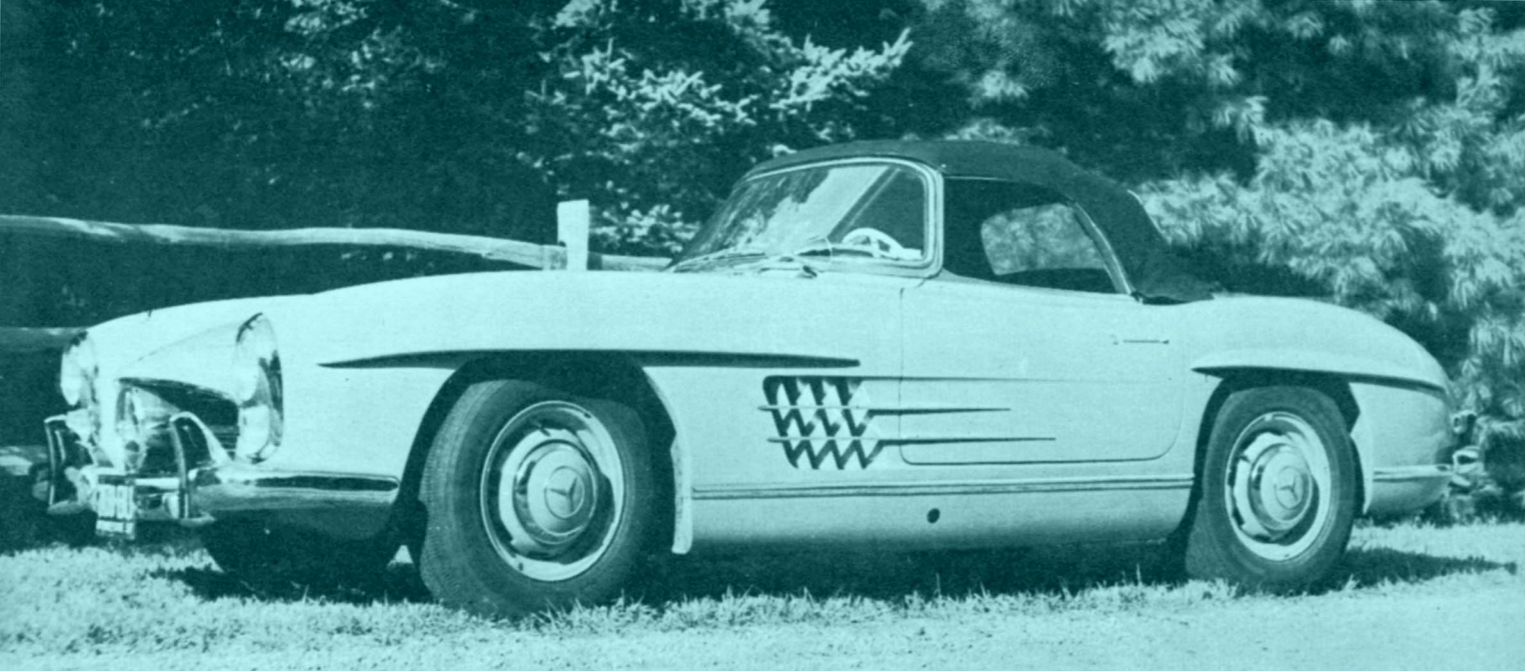
Before even firing the engine up, it was thought best



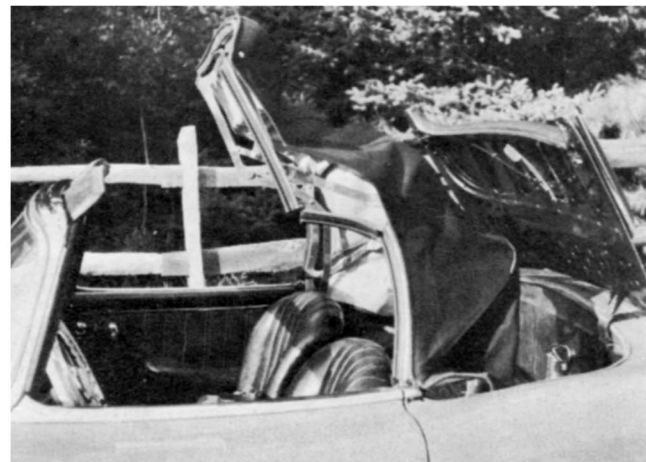
*Door handles: slim, attractive and typical of the attention to details.*







A sleek beauty, the 300SL roadster is every bit as fast (and expensive) as it looks. Similar in many ways to the 190SL, the quick check identification points are the headlights, the air exit on the side, and up top, two power bulges on the hood.



The hand-operated top folds easily down into a well behind seats, then is covered neatly with metal lid.

doors, which hinge open to reveal a storage space for various odds and ends. Oh yes, there's a lockable glove compartment too for papers, plus a generous shelf behind the seats—too small for kids though. The battery, well-covered, is reached through a panel in this shelf.

The first twist of the ignition key turned on the fuel pressure pump with its attendant whirring. A further twist, with the right foot off the accelerator, and the engine burst to life with a happy bark, then settled into a pleasant, restrained murmur. No more hot-start chokes and cold-start chokes; it's all automatic now, just like carburetor cars.

The Robert Bosch fuel injection used on the Mercs has two features that are unusual, not that F.I. itself is not unusual, too. One is that the fuel is injected directly into the combustion chamber rather than into the intake manifold. The other, which follows of necessity from the first, is that the fuel flow through the nozzles is intermittent. This requires a very precise metering pump which must, in a short interval of time, squirt exactly the right amount of fuel, neither too much nor too little, into each cylinder in turn. The quantity required is a function of rpm, throttle opening, and manifold pressure; the problem is not eased by the fact that these three are related to one another by no simple linear relationship. With a successful, flexible F.I. installation such as this, the driver enjoys benefits on increased power, greater economy, more instantaneous throttle response, faster cold starts, and, on very high performance engines, impressively smooth running at incredibly low rpm. Not to be overlooked is the possibility of further lowering of the hood line. On the 300SL credit for the latter must be shared with the 40° cant to port of the entire engine.

The compression ratio of each 300SL engine is stamped on the top of the cylinder head near the front. On this particular car it was marked 8.5/1, which is suitable for 92 octane gas. Future shipments to the US will be 9.5 to one because of the ready availability here of 100 octane (research method) fuel.

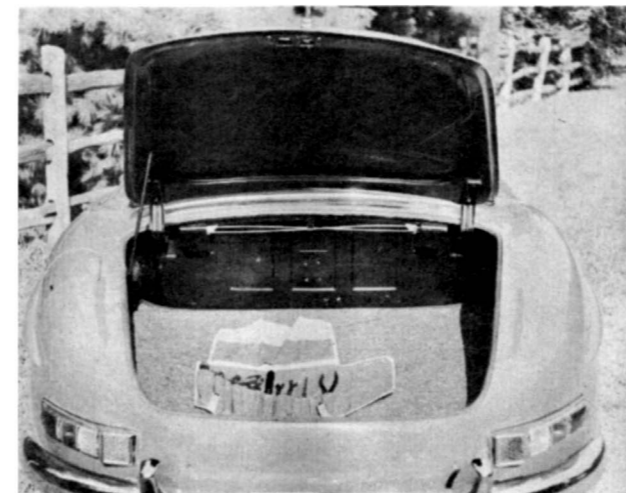
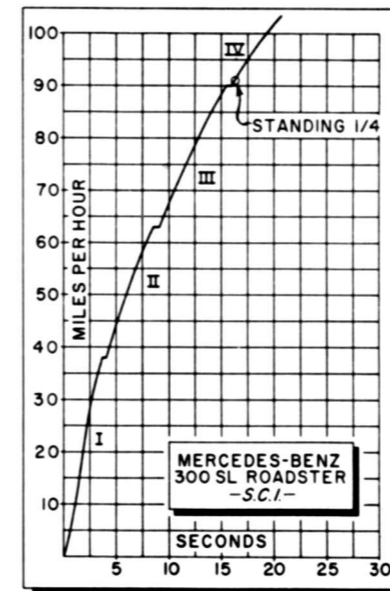
It is interesting to note that the difference in quoted

to familiarize ourselves with the controls, which are numerous but sensibly arranged. To the left of the clutch pedal is a windshield wiper and washer foot control; it is supplemented by a dash-mounted knob for continuous operation of the two-speed wipers. Extending from the left side of the steering column is the now-usual Continental high-beam flasher; it will function whether or not the running lights or ignition are on. But again there was a surprise for us, for when you are really excited and press it *hard*, it blows the horn! Turn signals are operated by twisting the horn ring, a familiar and well-regarded M-B feature. New, though, was the arrangement whereby if you turn it further than usual, distant signaling lights are operated.

All minor instruments are grouped in one panel between the speedometer and the revcounter. Each one reads as a brightly colored vertical bar graph. Whether bar graphs are easier to read at a quick glance than circular dials is a moot point, though.

The small controls for headlights, wipers and the complex heater system (seven levers!) are fitted with knobs done in that peculiarly satisfying Teutonic fashion.

Also very satisfying are the well-placed arm rests on the



Although fitted suitcases are available, it's not because ordinary ones won't fit. Fuel tank was reshaped, and spare tire now lies beneath the floor of the trunk.

power rating is nowhere near in proportion to the compression ratio change, namely only 10 horsepower. In both cases they differ from the coupe, which was rated at 220 hp @ 6100 rpm with the racing cam. It is safe to assume that the racing cam is now standard, for the effect reported before is still there; "at 3600 rpm, all hell breaks loose." Indeed, in first gear on dry concrete it was possible to burn rubber quite ruthlessly right up to the change to second where another big black strip or two would appear if the throttle was again punched injudiciously. On the other hand, fourth gear could be used down to about 15 mph, though only above 30 mph did it feel really smooth at full throttle.

Heading for our test area, we got to feel the car out on all sorts of curves and surfaces — from New York City's variety of expressways to winding country lanes in Connecticut's suburbia. This new 300SL encompasses a racy blend of luxurious comfort, exuberant power, and especially nimble handling. It is a truly enjoyable car for pleasure driving, and enjoy ourselves we did, to our heart's

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## MERCEDES-BENZ 300SL ROADSTER

### PERFORMANCE

#### TOP SPEED:

Two-way average ..... 123½ mph (see text)  
Fastest one-way run ..... 125 mph

#### ACCELERATION:

From zero to	Drive range
30 mph	2.7 sec
40 mph	4.3
50 mph	5.9
60 mph	7.8
70 mph	10.6
80 mph	12.8
90 mph	15.4
100 mph	19.2
Standing quarter	16.3
Speed at end of quarter	91 mph

#### SPEED RANGES IN GEARS:

Corresponding to 1500-6000 rpm, for full throttle work:

I	9-38 mph
II	16-63
III	22-90
IV	31-124 (6600 rpm, giving 136 mph, is permissible in IVth)

#### SPEEDOMETER CORRECTION:

Indicated	Actual
30	29
40	38½
50	48
60	58
70	67

#### FUEL CONSUMPTION:

Hard driving ..... 13.0 mpg  
Average driving (under 60 mph) .. 21.3 mpg

#### BRAKING EFFICIENCY:

(10 successive emergency stops from 60 mph, just short of locking wheels):

1st stop	81	6th	70
2nd	77	7th	72
3rd	74	8th	75
4th	75	9th	70
5th	70	10th	70

#### POWER UNIT:

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Type	Six in-line
Valve Arrangement	Single ohc, parallel valves
Bore & Stroke	3.35 x 3.46 in (85 x 88 mm)
Stroke/Bore Ratio	1.04/1
Displacement	183 cu in (2996 cc)
Compression Ratio	9.5/1 for USA (8.5/1 on test car)
Carburetion by	Bosch timed fuel injection
Max. Power	250 bhp @ 6200 rpm (240 bhp on test car)
Max. Torque	228 lb-ft @ 5000 rpm (unknown on test car)
Idle Speed	750 rpm

#### DRIVE TRAIN:

Transmission ratios I	3.34
II	1.97
III	1.39
IV	1.00
Final drive ratio (test car)	3.89 (hypoid)
Other available final drive ratios	3.25, 3.42, 3.64, 4.11
Axle torque taken by	Radius rods

#### CHASSIS:

Wheelbase	94½ in
Front Tread	54½ in
Rear Tread	56½ in
Suspension, front	Independent, unequal wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Suspension, rear	Independent, low pivot point swing axles, two coil springs to frame plus third one between levers
Shock absorbers	Tubular hydraulic
Steering type	BD rotary ball-joint, self-adjusting, with steering damper
Steering wheel turns L to L	3.0
Turning diameter	30 ft
Brake type	Ate T50/12 vacuum-assist, radially finned Alfin drums
Brake lining area	257 sq in
Tire size	6.70 x 15 (6.50 x 15 for racing)
Rim size	5½K x 15

#### GENERAL:

Length	180 in
Width	70½ in
Height	51 in
Ground clearance	5 in
Weight, test car, full tank	3100 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R	49/51
Weight distribution, F/R, with driver	48/52
Fuel capacity	26.4 U.S. gallons

#### RATING FACTORS:

Bhp per cu in	1.37 (1.31 on test car)
Bhp per sq in piston area	4.73 (4.55 on test car)
Torque lb-ft per cu in	1.25
Pounds per bhp—test car	12.9
Piston speed @ 60 mph	1670 fpm
Piston speed @ max bhp	3580 fpm
Brake lining area (test car)	168 sq in/ton
Speed in IVth gear @ 1000 rpm	20.6 mph



## Mercedes 300SL

(Continued from page 27)

content. What a car! Never once did we find a road surface that the supple all-independent suspension couldn't gobble up without effort, even when cornering under a full head of steam.

Perhaps it's no longer amazing that a 3000 pound luxury car (it's really a convertible coupe, not just a roadster) should have such a surfeit of power, but to couple this with a lightness of control that amounts to delicacy is truly an astonishing engineering feat. The credit for this huge improvement over the gull-winged coupe, which, let's face it, had a reputation for tricky handling, must go to the new rear suspension with a mention of the use on the test car of Michelin X tires. The latter are perhaps well-known by now but for those who are unfamiliar with them, a word of explanation. They have layers of steel cord imbedded in the tread to stiffen them, while still permitting soft sidewalls. This enables a given cornering force to be achieved at a smaller slip angle than required of an ordinary tire, yet with little or no reduction in riding comfort.

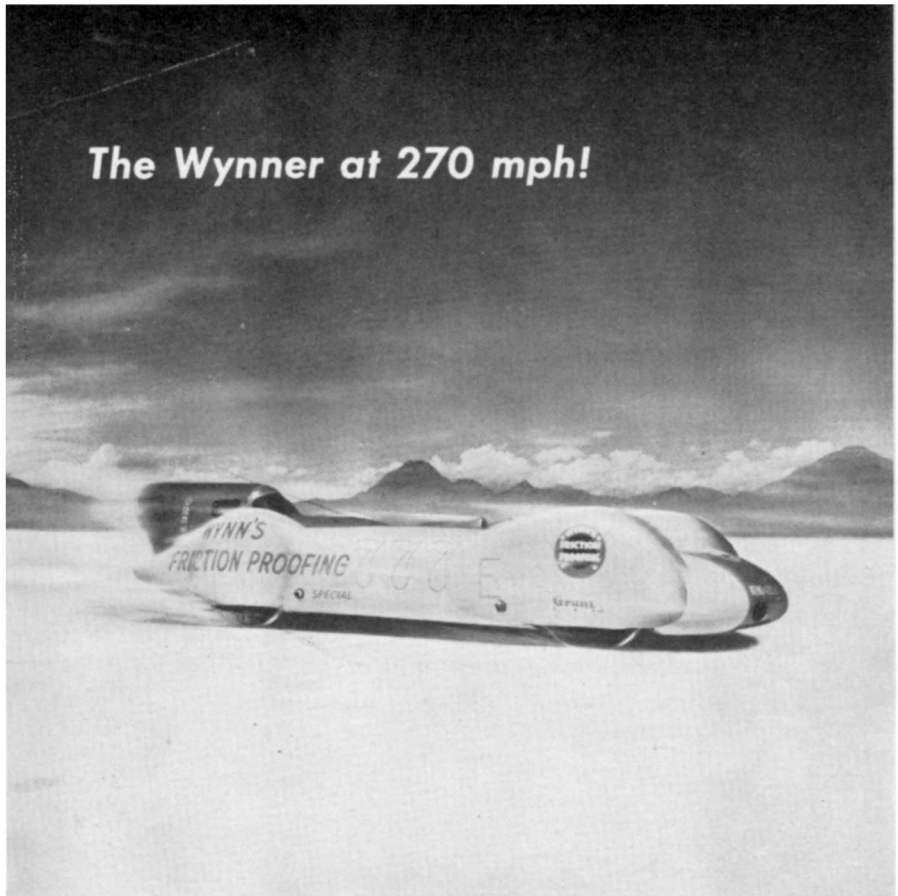
The lion's share of the credit however, must surely go to the rear suspension, with its combination of the low-roll-resistance coil spring arrangement and the low-pivot point swing axle, the latter stemming from Mercedes racing experience and already in production on several other models. (See SCL, April and Sept. '56 for an illustration.)

In addition to two normally situated coil springs, one above each axle tube, there is a horizontal one above the differential casing. It is loaded in compression by two brackets extending perpendicularly from each axle tube. For vertical motion the third spring stiffens the suspension, but when the car rolls, the spring is neither stretched nor compressed, as both lever arms move in the same direction, towards the inside of the corner. The Stuttgart engineers have thereby neatly overcome a weakness of the usual swing-axle layouts. Ordinarily, the rear end's roll stiffness cannot be reduced without also reducing spring stiffness, which unfortunately is all tied up with riding comfort and pitching problems. Mercedes owners may now have light handling, and still eat their cake of comfort, too.

During this first session a high-speed metering fault which developed put an end temporarily to our attempts at acceleration runs as the engine leaned out at the top end. A roadside check-up was called for. The complexity under the hood was strongly impressive. Unfamiliarity certainly breeds respect, as even the Technical Editor was unwilling to do more than inspect the hard-to-see but readily accessible spark plugs when misfiring arose. Despite widespread statement to the contrary, the 300SL is not as complicated to service as a jet-engined interceptor and you do not need a full time staff of mechanics to care for it. However,

(Continued on page 56)

## The Wynner at 270 mph!



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Here are Wynn's Friction Proofing distributors Bill Kenz and Roy Leslie, with their Streamliner, just before the record-making run. Two engines drive the front wheels, and the third engine, separately mounted, drives the rear wheels. Each engine has a displacement of 304 cubic in. for a total displacement of 912".

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**Mercedes 300SL**

(Continued from page 55)

it is not the sort of car you can have adequately serviced at just any old gas station. It must be serviced by well-informed and capable men or it may be returned to you in poorer shape than when you left it.

Reluctantly, we returned to New York through a slight drizzle, which pointed up once more the sure-footed behavior of this powerful machine.

A cheering sight on this trip back was the sight of an admiring young couple who waved at us so violently that they practically fell out of their MG.

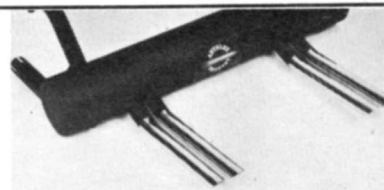
The M-B mechanics had corrected the fuel injector the next day, but by then the owner was anxious to rush off to the Holland (N.Y.) Hill Climb. Such are the vicissitudes of owning the first available roadster, that he was unsure, when we arrived at his home a week later to complete the tests, whether he'd placed 1st in D Production, 2nd in D Sports or 3rd in the C Sports category! We should have such problems!

The timed runs were made with permission from all concerned on an unopened section of the New York State Thruway not far from Buffalo. Paving operations at one end and hills at the other meant we were unable to get more than a mile run into the measured quarter mile. The speedometer needle was still climbing slowly as we flashed through on each of our four runs. With its 3.89 axle this car can probably surpass 130 mph with ease, given another mile or so to reach it. And with the 9.5 compression ratio, the factory's figure of 137 mph seems equally attainable.

On these runs, we noticed that the quick steering got lighter at very high speeds. On deceleration from 125, it felt much too sensitive, and this despite an increase of 44% in the steering gear ratio from the coupe, which we criticized in SCI, April '56 as "definitely heavy (but with) a wonderful feel." A small increase in caster angle might well pay dividends in high-speed stability. Fins, anybody? The top and windows were up on all runs and perhaps this may have moved the aerodynamic center of pressure too far forward. Increasing the pressure in the rear tires is definitely out, for we were already running 40 psi front and 46 psi rear, in accordance with Daimler-Benz instructions for top speed runs on Michelin X's. And talk about D-B thoroughness—for each of three types of tires—touring, super-sports or racing, and Michelin X, they list pressures for three different conditions of driving, ranging from all out racing down to cruising on winding roads at an average of only 90 mph (!). No doubt about it, 300SL pilots must dream for the days when the police and the populace are far from the highways.

With the pressures we were using, it required discretion to avoid wheelspin off the mark during the acceleration runs. But with the aid of the low-roll-resistance rear suspension, we were able to chop a tenth of a second off the coupes 0-30 time.

(Continued on page 57)



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**Mercedes 300SL**

(Continued from page 56)

But after the first shift, we were hopelessly behind as the roadster's 250 extra pounds began to make themselves felt. The shift from second to third was slow, as considerable effort seemed necessary to pop the lever into the third-gear slot. When this loosens up a bit, a half second could be shaved off all runs involving third. The first-to-second and third-to-fourth shifts were quick as a wink and without any gear crunching, either. Third gear featured a very vintage whine, more so than the other indirect ratios. First, incidentally, is also synchronized. The shift lever is well placed and does not require an extravagance of movement to reach or to use it.

From a standstill, the quarter mile came up in 16.5 seconds during the shift into fourth; we literally loafed across the line at 90 miles per hour. Clutch action was always smooth and positive, with nary a trace of slip.

Brakes, on the other hand, while free of fade and generally very smooth indeed, on this car were inclined to judder lightly at speeds below 10 mph after after we had finished our 10 rapid stops from 60 mph. This apparently is a matter of small adjustment between the wheel cylinder and the tip of the brake shoe. Whatever the reason, it is certainly uncomfortable, though it has no effect whatsoever on the braking at higher speeds, which is commendably good and well on a par with the rest of the performance of the car. Perhaps the figure of 168 square inches of brake lining area per ton has something to do with it. So do the really beautifully finned bi-metallic drums. These brakes have a vacuum servo assist, but it is not overdone; so we never had to apologize for pitching Mr. Curry into the windshield. This is more than can be said for some of our domestic sedans.

The surprising touch on this car, which may well be 1958's big threat in Class D "Production" SCCA racing, is that when you open the aluminum trunk-lid, you find that the generous space is not filled by a bulky spare tire at all. Instead, the tire's fitted under the floor of the trunk and there's plenty of room above for suitcases.

The bumpers are sturdier than they look, but when we followed the 300SL on rough roads in another car, they were seen to vibrate rapidly in a horizontal plane. This was the only symptom, incidentally, as that all-independent suspension can really take it. Very little reaction is thrown back to the driver on these rough roads, yet there is a very good sense of feel and the car seems very responsive under all conditions.

Designing a good convertible top is no easy project when weight is a consideration. Daimler-Benz have done well with this one, which retracts as much as it folds. To avoid the mechanism's rattling about, a latch (similar to the one on the windshield) locks it in place in the down

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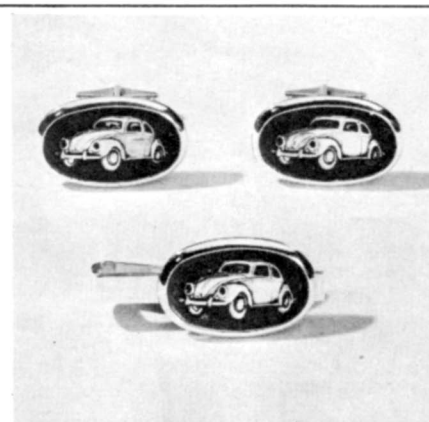
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<p>3 Ferrari</p> <table border="1"> <tr><th>GEAR</th></tr> <tr><td>Top Sp</td></tr> <tr><td>5th</td></tr> <tr><td>4th</td></tr> <tr><td>3rd</td></tr> <tr><td>2nd</td></tr> <tr><td>1st</td></tr> </table>	GEAR	Top Sp	5th	4th	3rd	2nd	1st	<p>2 Corvette</p> <table border="1"> <tr><th>GEAR</th></tr> <tr><td>Top Sp</td></tr> <tr><td>5th</td></tr> <tr><td>4th</td></tr> <tr><td>3rd</td></tr> <tr><td>2nd</td></tr> <tr><td>1st</td></tr> </table>	GEAR	Top Sp	5th	4th	3rd	2nd	1st	<p>1 Jaguar</p> <table border="1"> <tr><th>GEAR</th></tr> <tr><td>Top Speed</td></tr> <tr><td>5th</td></tr> <tr><td>4th</td></tr> <tr><td>3rd</td></tr> <tr><td>2nd</td></tr> <tr><td>1st</td></tr> </table>	GEAR	Top Speed	5th	4th	3rd	2nd	1st	<table border="1"> <tr><th>SPACES</th></tr> <tr><td>15</td></tr> <tr><td>13</td></tr> <tr><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>8</td></tr> <tr><td>6</td></tr> <tr><td>3</td></tr> </table>	SPACES	15	13	10	8	6	3
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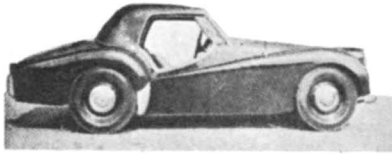
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**Mercedes 300SL**

(Continued from page 57)

position. When the top and windows are up, wind noise is satisfyingly low.

The back window is only medium-sized, so the car comes with an outside mirror complete with a "Dagmar" front — just like a racing car, and quite justifiable for the speeds this car can reach.

The increase in price over the coupe (\$10,970 vs \$8,135) is pretty steep; but it's in about the same proportion as the improvement in fun. The roadster, despite its size and power, is a fun car. It can be "played" around a corner in a manner, and at speeds quite unbecoming to the coupe or many other sports cars. The small loss in acceleration, if not completely overcome with the 9.5 c.r. engine, can certainly be made up for by ordering the 4.11 gears — shift points then become 35, 60, and 85 and top speed according to the factory drops to "only" 129 mph.

Our summary — a sure fire classic of today.

Stephen F. Wilder

**Table Top  
Grand Prix**

(Continued from page 29)

the wheel is made of softer rubber. The fastest lap possible with the locked rear-end car was approximately 70 scale mph, while the fastest lap was 96.5 scale mph for the new type car, owing to the bite coming out of the corners and climbing the bridge upgrade. I am told that speeds of 160 scale mph are possible with a ten foot straight.

Also available are a 2.5 G.P. Ferrari, an Austin Healey Sport, and a 2/4 Aston Martin is now being prepared. For the tests, the power was supplied by a 1 1/2 amp twelve-volt DC model railroad transformer. However, the power supply that comes with this Scalextric set is in the form of three Ever-ready #126 batteries enclosed in a sturdy simulated brick house, the type that may be found on several British circuits. I am told by a representative of Scalextric that the cars perform just as well on these batteries.

At the present time four sets are available. Each includes two cars, drivers, track, batteries, fences, wire and lubricating oil. However, one may purchase enough extra track to lay out a fairly close replica of any existing circuit in the world. I am told that in a month or so it will be possible to get special track that will fit on the inside and on the outside of the existing track so one may run three or four cars abreast.

Set #3 has a section of flat cross-over track like an ordinary cross-street, which should prove to be a great place for "gymnastic shunts." The fences at the turns afford all the crowd-safety you will need.

(Continued on page 59)



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