

2

The SL – Born On The Track

The Mercedes-Benz racing team had attained legendary status in the 1930s, with its silver cars hitting the headlines in virtually every country they appeared in. But the war had broken up the *équipe*, and it wasn't until March 1952 that Mercedes returned to the racing world with a purpose-built factory-backed car. This development marked the birth of the SL ...

With the cessation of hostilities and a gradual return to normality in the industrial nations of the world, Alfred Neubauer wanted to return to Grand Prix racing as quickly as possible with new versions of the prewar W165 voiturettes, but almost as soon as the production order was granted, it was withdrawn again. A meeting of the hierarchy in Stuttgart concluded that if Neubauer wanted to go racing in 1952, it would have to be with sports cars representing the marque, and any plans to enter a GP machine should be delayed until 1954, when a new formula was set to be introduced.

With classic events like Le Mans, the Mille Miglia and Targa Florio revived, sports car racing was extremely popular following the war, as it was a perfect way of promoting a brand in a manner that allowed enthusiasts to readily relate a victorious machine to a showroom model they could buy, or at least dream about. The need for Europe to export led to an explosion of LWS models, with England leading the way, supplying an American market that was taking as many cars as the ships crossing the Atlantic could carry.

Sports car racing also appealed to those looking after company finances, as road vehicle technology could be developed and tested within the competition department budget – killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. For instance, the C-type Jaguar that had won Le Mans in 1951 was based on XK120 components,



An interesting picture of a W194 300SL (or 300SS as it was nearly called) on display at Neu-Ulm, with the shut line on the gullwing doors finishing on the top of the vehicle's waistline, as was the norm on early cars. The number plate is a mismatch for a Mille Miglia machine, though.

and lessons learnt during the 24 hours could then be applied to produce a better road car. In the case of the Mercedes-Benz team, the three-litre W186 II chassis was deemed to provide a suitable starting point for a new kind of sports-racer.



A small selection of some of the hundreds of exterior design proposals submitted for the R230 project.



It was too late to turn back now, as full-scale production of the R230 SL500 began in July 2001 at the Bremen factory – an ex-Borgward site that had been used to build the R129 SL and R170 SLK. All management could do was sit and wait to see if the new SL would receive a good reception from press and public, and hold enough appeal to overcome a difficult financial situation in the car's biggest traditional outlets ...





An SL350 with the AMG styling kit, Sport Package, and a panorama roof. The cockpit shot shows the interior that came with the Sport Package, although the Airscarf feature on the seats was an option on all cars (SA 403).

door panels, a luggage net in the passenger-side footwell, a ventilated glovebox, sun visors with a light and mirror, ashtray and cigarette lighter, cupholders, key-operated infra-red central locking, illuminated entry and footwell lighting, the Easy Pack system with a removable luggage cover and luggage box in the

boot made possible by the Tirefit system, an alarm system with an engine immobiliser, and a first aid kit.

Moving up from the SL280 to the SL350 added a power adjustment and memory function to the steering column, seats and mirrors (available as option 242 on the SL280 as a €400