

## 2005 Acura TL Accord on Steroids or Legitimate Sports/Luxury Contender?

For **The Wheel**

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The automotive journalism gods are sometimes unpredictable. The TL became available and, while it's been on the street for a bit, we wanted to give it a go so that the enthusiasts of the SCCA could have a private look at this relatively new player in the import sedan wars. Our example was a blue over tan leather model equipped with the Acura Navigation system and the standard, five-speed automatic with "Sportshift." OK, so this is not a car that makes your pulse quicken – but let's give it a fair shot. Right off the bat, I'll give the TL major kudos on its design. It is a very contemporary look, with its proper proportions, sloping rear glass, high deck and dual exhaust. Acura also does a great job of integrating a tasteful aero/ground effects package without any sense of boy racer. The TL could upgrade the image of any CPA, pharmacist, or dental hygienist that climbs aboard – for a sedan, this car looks downright hip.

We climbed aboard and hit the road on a 150 mile run up Highway 5 in the dark of night. Immediately we noticed the white light bi-xenon headlights, but we discovered that, rather than older technology lighting which fades out into the distance, these xenon lights have an abrupt edge to their illuminated area, beyond which it is pitch black. So you see what is close to you better, but there is no bleed into the distance, requiring more frequent use of admittedly excellent bright beams. The interior is the best we've seen from Acura. As one looks at a very tasteful integration of leather, metal and wood, one could easily

believe that they are aboard a German marque. Very high marks for cosmetics and ergonomics here, except for my favorite subject – the dreaded Nav system. After panning BMW's iDrive, and calling Cadillac's information screen "almost down to BMW's standard," I'm proud to say with enthusiasm that the Acura system is...well, not as bad. First, a little venting here, please forgive – if manufacturers put equipment in a car, within the driver's easy reach, that is intended to assist the driver in driving the automobile, is it realistic to think that the driver won't use the system while they are driving? NO!! And yet, every time we start a car with one of these systems, we are met by aggravating warnings on the display screen, obviously written by corporate lawyers, stating that I'm not supposed to use the system "while in motion" and I'm asked (every time I reboot the car) to "accept these terms" which then takes me to an interface where I use the system while driving the car!! In the TL's defense, I was able to decipher the system well enough to at least turn off the voice directions and dim the screen so it wouldn't blind me in the dark. And another confession – it was kind of cool to watch the GPS work and see my progress on the real-time map display, while cruising the interstate. The bottom line is, I might actually NEED the Nav system once a month. Yet the busyness associated with the NAV system makes the dashboard far less user friendly for the rest of the time I drive the car – 29 days a month.

Speaking of driving – lets get back on the road. My 5' 11" inch son is riding in the back and declares plenty of room – it really is a good interior package. Good room and plenty of seat travel in front for very large drivers and four passengers. Although the front seats are definitely better to look at than they are to sit in. While nicely made, they simply lack much anatomical shape or support. The car is very quiet which is exactly what I expected from a Honda engineered product. The ride is on 17" standard alloy wheels and a four-wheel double wishbone suspension with a multi-link rear. Very state-of-the-art hardware – and yet I think they might have gone one step too stiff for the stock suspension. Acura offers a dealer-installed "A-Spec" performance package that includes 18" wheels, brake upgrades, suspension stiffening and lowering, and a rear wing. But this stock suspension might be just a bit too harsh for the traditional Honda upgrade buyer. This is where the Euro builders still seem to have a leg up – the ability to provide a compliant ride that adapts readily to sporting driving. However, as our trip will lead us to Thunderhill Raceway, we'll find out if there is an upside to this small dose of harshness soon enough. The final run on I-5 was quite late, and true confessions compel me to admit to an acceleration run as a part of any good test. The TL has a 270 horsepower single overhead cam VTECH V6, but the torque is at a modest-for-a 3500 lb -car 238 lbs-ft. Having driven the high revving VTECH four cylinder Acura engines which take off at motorcycle-like revs, I expected to have a strong pull at the higher range. Didn't really happen. This is a perfectly nice V6, with plenty of power for a sporty sedan. But it never excited us – it's a linear pull all the way up the RPM's, but it kind of poops out early for a VTECH.

The cruise continued – XM on the stereo, stealth, quiet speed on the interstate, and good gas mileage as well. In fact, Acura should get credit here, as this is a capable car that qualifies as an Ultra Low Emissions Vehicle by C.A.R.B. standards. In addition, the TL

has a five star frontal crash rating – another feel good. Speaking of feel good – we arrive at Willows, check in at the motel and rest up for a Hooked On Driving day at the track.

While the journalist fleet of automobiles probably gets hammered pretty hard (rumor has it that the four fleet Vipers lasted 90 days), I suspect that this may be one of the few opportunities for the TL to really be given a track test. With admittedly guarded expectations, we entered the course first thing and did some lead and follow with novices who were there for the first time. I assumed that this would be a perfect pace for the TL – nice and easy with a briskly taken turn here and there. Nope. Had to slow down for the novices, even those with Porsches and M3's. As the day wore on, the pace picked up, and so did the TL. Having assumed that the TL would be retired by 10:00am to avoid getting in the way, we began getting remarks like, "Hey that thing's pretty quick!" What was it really like? Substantially better than you'd think. The slight harshness we felt on the street translated to the sense of a very rigid chassis, which resisted the common nosedive as we broke and prepared to turn in. This car was very drivable. Certainly, there was the natural understeer of a larger front wheel drive sedan. But after a few laps of being pushed, I was actually able to get a routine down of braking, tossing the car into the turn and throttling on to get the tail out just a bit. No – I was not karting the car, but if I went into the turn under control, it would rotate quite nicely. One complaint was almost no feel of the tires on the pavement – way over-insulated. With regard to brakes, while not pushing them real hard, I drove the car briskly for 8-10 laps three times, and the brakes did not fade. This makes one ask – "What would the TL with the 6-speed manual and standard Brembo brakes be like?" Let's not get carried away here though. This is a sedan that is not a track car. But I was very impressed that we could really have a bit of fun while participating in a Hooked On Driving track day event.

Is this car a true Euro/Luxo/Sport Sedan contender? Absolutely. In fact, I'll come down squarely on the point that the TL represents a great value in this market. Anyone shopping for a BMW 330i sedan should take a serious look at the TL. Equally equipped, there is an \$8000 difference for a car with almost 50 more horsepower. Very significant. Compared to the all-wheel drive Audi A6 3.2, there is a \$13,000 difference, albeit for a front wheel drive car – this is serious cash. And, at the low \$30's MSRP, the TL is just one price jump above many domestic sedans with much less sophistication and performance. While we've admired this car for almost a year on the road, the first-hand experience we've had has convinced us that it really is as good as it looks.



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