

**2005 Media Day
Disneyland for Drivers
For The Wheel
By: David Ray, Hooked On Driving**

I recently was fortunate enough to participate in the Western Automotive Journalist's Media Day. This is actually two days, staged by the major automotive manufacturers, with the first day being road tests on Monterey County highways, followed by a great day at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca where we could test any car that was offered. One hundred cars were offered for tests. Here is just a sample of this awesome experience. First – I was compelled, no chastised to start the day driving the **2005 Porsche Carrera S** with Craig Stanton, Cynergy GrandAm Racing team's pro driver riding along as a coach. Tough job, but someone had to do it. This new Carrera is just flat awesome. With flexible torque and horsepower any time you need it, the predictable turn in and great brakes, and the melodic motor sounds all combine to say, simply – world class driving experience. Craig being along was a great bonus as well. After racing with some degree of respectability at Laguna, I was confident of the line. But Craig immediately picked up a lack of smoothness – too abrupt on gas and brakes, and I was “feeding” the steering wheel which he admonished me to halt immediately. All of this during an absolutely delightful hard run on this world-class race track. The only minor but niggling concern is why Porsche continues to refuse to put adequate seats in their “best in the market” sports cars. The seats in the Carrera S are inadequate enough to make Recaro stock move up a tick. All in all though, to say the least, the day had started off quite well. Next was my second opportunity to drive the **2005 CTS-V Cadillac**. And once again, I fell in love. Tell me I'm crazy, but something about this car makes me prefer it to driving the Corvette. I know, this must be a character flaw – maybe it's the more upright seating position, the great seats and the wonderful sound of the torque being generated all the way to your toes. This car is simply a hoot to drive – especially on the track. Which is the opposite of most sporty street cars. I'd admit to second thoughts about the CTS-V as a commuter. It's a brutish car with a fairly stiff clutch driving the six-speed manual. Just remember, when you see someone driving one of these gray-haired sleepers, take solace in the fact that they are having a blast.



2005 Ford Mustang GT – The Mustang was understandably the most popular car in this testing opportunity. Flame red, I hopped in and discovered that some wise guy had already overheated the brakes and the pedal was soft. OK, make the change in brake points and proceed. Sitting in the car you'll have a flashback to 1969. You sit low and look out over a massive hood. But give it the gas and you know you have a serious GT. This car handles crisply but not without compromises. Obviously this car will keep tuners eating steak for years to come, as minor tweaks with handling, brakes and horsepower can get big benefits from this very sound platform. The Mustang gets a B+ for handling, but I must admit to still being disappointed with the ergonomic package. They've made little progress in making seats that reflect a GT, and back seat room will not keep up with our friend the GTO. This new generation represents a huge step forward for the Mustang, yet it may have been preceded by expectations that were just a bit too high.

2005 Pontiac GTO – The first day of Media Days, we were able to exercise these steeds on the back roads of Monterey County, and I had quite a bit of time in the Goat. And once again fell in love. Great buckets, console and driving position and excellent room in back considering this is a legitimate high performance GT. While the two tone leather is a bit too much, I came to feel quite at home in the GTO. Why – this car hauls the mail while compressing your spine very nicely into the seat. It's obvious that the T in GTO stands for Torque. This is a comfortable, sporting GT with enough juice to stay with almost any of the Big Dogs, and in many cases leave them whimpering. What I truly loved about this car is its two dimensional personality. Want to cruise in quiet comfort to Seattle? Bring it on. Want to smoke the new purple Mustang GT next door? Bring it on. What you shouldn't do with the GTO is take it to the race track. This is a sports coupe, not a sports car by any means and this Pontiac complained loudly about being pushed on a track. Body roll, push, and soft brakes were the order of the day after a couple of laps. But I didn't mind. This is a really cool car, and the hood scoops, rear valence and dual exhausts that they've added this year reduce the Cavalier styling factor to where I can deal with it....The GTO gets a big thumbs up, just not on the track.

2005 BMW M3 Competition – I was able to give this old friend a go both on the road and track. On the road, this car defines what a refined sports tourer should be. While the Alcantara steering wheel, which is spongy to the grip is simply not a good idea for those without Sparco gloves, the cloth seat inserts are appreciated when the derriere attempts to hold on during lateral G's. On the track, BMW has taken small steps to stiffen this Competition version (misnomer – I'd call it the Sport version) of the M-3 which admittedly comes stock in understeering trim. I felt the different suspension settings immediately, but the understeer still is present. Clearly, one must "slow down to go fast" in entering turns, as a hot entry will just get you chunked front tire shoulders. Bottom line though, this is still a sweet ride – with domestics starting to look interesting at much lower price ranges – they still have a long way to go to catch this all-star road car.

2005 Chevy Cobalt SS – OK, this takes a major adjustment to be fair. Climbing out of a world-class \$60,000 tourer and into a practical, \$24K sports coupe takes a complete reboot of the evaluation process. I'm disappointed by the look of the Cobalt – it seems to be yet another generation of the 1995 Cavalier. This is not a bad style as it has been updated, but it certainly is not bold enough to convert skeptics. On the road, this car was stiff and a bit buzzy, with the supercharger providing a nice push through the mid-range RPM's. The driving position also is lacking, as the seats feel too low to the floor. But on the track, the reengineering that was done by GM Performance Division kicks in and we discover that this car handles. In fact, after a couple of laps getting acquainted and picking up confidence with a faster pace, we discover that we're having a blast and running with supposedly quicker cars. The Cobalt turns nicely, however the lack of a limited slip front transaxle is a real bummer – we went ahead and shredded some inside front tire rubber while letting the Cobalt plant on exit. The SS Cobalt has a huge wing which is cool for the twenty something's (and those of us who still are mentally trapped at twenty something), but this one is placed right in the middle of the rear window providing a major obstacle to visibility. All in all, we had more fun with the Cobalt on the track than on the road. I fear that the refinement of cars like the Acura RSX-S in the same price range will continue to hold sales back on this new entry.

2005 Mercedes C55 AMG – OK – True confessions here. This is my first AMG experience. And I discover that the AMG must stand for "Ah, my god!!" This is the real deal, and BMW should worry. In the clothing of the efficient C four door sedan body, Mercedes has placed a potent weapon that is for serious drivers only. With great seats, an intuitive best-in-class autostick, fully upgraded suspension and brakes, Merc applies serious V8 muscle to a large car that HANDLES. I expected this car to be good on freeways and fall apart on the track – NOT. The C55 is flat, turns and rotates, and will allow the tail to come out if you whip the ponies without sufficient soft touch. In turn two at Laguna, on cold tires, I had a complete tail slap exit, with the stability control lending a hand (I don't admit this to just anyone). In fact, this car, the CTS-V, and the soon to be mentioned Chrysler 300 SRT8 are cars that convince me, finally, of the need for traction control. These cars all look like family sedans but have serious performance going on. The traction control is a very good idea for this family of cars and will be put to use frequently. Bottom line: The C55 AMG impressed me with its competence and ability to compete with the best sport sedans in the world.

2005 Chrysler 300 SRT8 – How can I say it? You just won't believe this car. At \$39,000, the SRT8 is a total wolf in sheep's clothing that is completely capable to fly on

the track, and then take your kids to college the next day. Feeling like a European sedan, the body is tight, there is little body roll, it is very tossable, and has enough torque to launch a locomotive. This car must have the Chrysler employees giggling about the benefits of the Daimler Chrysler merger. Value? The SRT8 wins hands down for best value of any car I drove during this experience. Styling? The only thing that kept me from stealing this car – just a bit on the retro-bulky side for me. But would my not falling in love with the car's look prevent me from heading to the dealer? No. This is a great car that really creates a new category, along with the CTS-V of American sedan supercars. With the Chrysler being the only one available in a more practical for everyday life autostick, the SRT8 may build market share a bit more quickly than the Cad, depending on how many of these excellent drivers Daimler Chrysler produces. And so goes another day at the office.