

LEXUS' ALL-NEW GS SERIES: TIRE-SMOKIN' FUN

Five miles down the road in the new Lexus GS400 and I'm just pinching myself. While I've never met a Lexus I didn't like, this is different. Never has a luxury sedan done so much for my psyche. I whipped the GS around curves with aplomb and blast straightaway, like a NASCAR driver. Tire-smokin' fun in a Lexus? You betcha.

The 1998 GS series now comes in two scrumptious flavors -- the spicy six-cylinder powered GS300 and the four-alarm, fire-breathing V8 powered GS400.

Most GS aficionados have come to love this model for its refinement. But Lexus has added a

Without question, this machine is fast and furious. The 32-valve V8 has a "kick-in-the-pants" feeling that will cause envy among its competitors. Stomp on the gas pedal and the forward motion plasters you against the front seat.

This is the car for congested traffic areas; with its catlike reflexes and ample power, it propels you past the slow pokes when that break in traffic occurs.

The ride? Sports car firm, but with just enough plushness that Lexus customers have come to expect. Comfortable leather-covered bucket seats give the necessary support for aggressive driving. Despite shrinking in exterior dimensions, head, leg and hip room have expanded in the front and rear. While five occupants can ride inside the car, four seems to be the best fit.

The dashboard differs radically from other Lexus gauge packages, employing a newly developed lighting system, called "Optitron," which silhouettes the meter pointers and markings. The interior fit and finish is nearly flawless, another Lexus trademark.

Included in the long list of standard equipment on the GS400 is Vehicle Skid Control, a blessing in bad weather. When slippery driving conditions cause the car to skid or spin out of control, computer electronics activate the anti-lock

brakes and adjust the engine output to correct over- or under-steer.

Gear selector buttons located on the steering wheel allow the driver the option of manually shifting the five-speed automatic transmission although, I confess, I was enjoying the automatic too much to try.

The car looks as good as it drives. Other than a vaguely familiar-shaped body, little is carried over from last year's GS. Shorter by six inches, it looks more rugged on an

all-new platform which isn't shared with any other Lexus product.

With a base price of \$36,800 for the GS300 and \$44,800 for the GS400, either version is a good deal. In fact, the GS400 with a V8 is less than last year's six-cylinder GS300.

new twist with the GS400 V8: variable valve timing, the first ever used on a V8, according to Lexus, Toyota's luxury car division. You get a 300-horsepower boost in return and acceleration of zero to 60 in a mere six seconds. The GS400 has a top speed of 149 mph.



Hersey Mollory, a member of No. 98 Castrol/Degree Reynard racer's pit crew at work.

Carmen Wheatley is in management at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Junious Matthews is pit crew coordinator for Riley & Scott Racing.

Dierdra Girardeau, sports programming manager for Walt Disney World with Toren Peterson, general manager, Richard Petty Driving Experience.

working in the field say they aren't even sure of how many there are, but agree that the number is small. Several reasons are cited for the tiny representation, including lack of exposure to the sport, lack of experience and, quite frankly, having access to the decision-makers, like the team managers or the sponsors. Sometimes, racism also is a factor.

However, despite these problems, a few African Americans are breaking new ground in the industry. Today, as the industry is experiencing rapid growth, there are blacks overseeing motorsports marketing programs

on the racing circuit and for corporate sponsors, transporting racing crews across the U.S., reporting on races and servicing cars in the pits.

Racing is big business, the fastest growing sport in the U.S.

According to Goodyear Tire and Rubber's racing division, auto races held in 12 racing series in 1997 attracted 16.8 million spectators, up from 15.4 million in 1996. The rapid expansion of motorsports has meant the development of more teams and more racing venues in places like Walt Disney World and Las Vegas.

Corporate America last year pumped a record \$1.09 billion into motorsports marketing, far exceeding the sponsorship dollars of any other sport.

"Like it or not, this is a lot of the direction of major sports marketing efforts of the future," says Larry Haney, a 41-year-old African American who is R. J. Reynolds' sports marketing manager. His company lent the Winston brand name to the coveted NASCAR Winston Cup racing series.

"The numbers aren't just comparable to basketball. NASCAR draws 180,000 per

race weekend," Haney explains. "For the next 10 years, every NASCAR track is sold out. You can't walk up to a window and buy a ticket."

Similar trends are occurring in the Indy Racing League (IRL). Carmen Wheatley, the first and only African American to land a management position with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, estimates attendance for the one-day Brickyard 400 at 300,000 and the Indy 500 race at 400,000.

Wheatley is the hospitality manager for the Indy Motor Speedway, overseeing infield