

March 7, 2005

Geneva Is Not Stuck in Neutral

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

The 75th Geneva International Motor Show opened last week amid thumping club music, a fog of cigarette smoke and the blast of hot air that accompanies introductions of the latest dream machines from the world's auto manufacturers.

The Geneva show is consistently one of the most esoteric gatherings of the global auto industry. Credit the show's neutral feel, since none of the large American, Japanese, German or French automakers enjoy a home-field advantage in Switzerland. The convenient Central European location allows boutique carmakers to participate as well.

An abundance of vehicle debuts for both the American and European markets kept journalists scrambling through the expansive Palexpo conference halls during press days on March 1 and 2. The show is open to the public through March 13.

One of the most-anticipated press conferences was for the unveiling of Mazda's new MX-5 Miata, known simply as the MX-5 in Europe and Japan. When the original arrived in 1989, as a 1990 model, it rekindled the market for affordable roadsters and had few competitors. But when it goes on sale later this year, the new Miata faces strong challenges from Mini and even Pontiac, which will add its Solstice to the roadster mix.

The Miata has grown only slightly in length, but is noticeably wider, and has a more aggressive look featuring prominent bulges around the wheel openings. A 2-liter 4-cylinder engine with 170 horsepower brings a modest performance gain over the current car. But the Miata's new tough-guy style seems out of context, akin to seeing your grandmother with a nose ring and tribal tattoo.

Two new models taking a cautious design approach are the BMW 3 Series and the Lexus IS 250. BMW's styling has been polarizing in recent years, particularly the flagship 7 Series, which has been given a mild rework. The new 3 Series, the company's sales leader and a crucial profit center, cannot risk any guffaws. When it arrives in the United States in May, the next-generation 3 will offer a choice of two in-line 6-cylinder engines, one with 215 horsepower and the other with 255.

A conservative step forward by BMW gave Toyota's Lexus brand an opportunity to imbue their new IS with a higher level of visual excitement. But Lexus's much touted - by Lexus at least - "L-Finesse" design theme only provides the IS 250 with an uninspiring, if uncluttered, look. Two engines were mentioned at the press conference: a 2.2-liter 4-cylinder diesel (for Europe only) and a 2.5-liter gasoline V-6 destined for the United States. A higher-performance version of the IS will be introduced at the New York auto show later this month.

Volkswagen's Passat sedan and Saab's 9-3 SportCombi wagon were also revealed, both charged with the mission of improving weak sales in North America for their companies. The Passat, which goes on sale in the fall, moves further upmarket in terms of luxury features and price tag.

Saab, which is now fully integrated into General Motors, desperately needs to leave a bigger footprint, though G.M. strenuously denies any suggestion that the brand might be killed. The 9-3

SportCombi, based on G.M.'s Epsilon front-drive architecture, hopes to benefit from Americans' renewed acceptance of station wagons, especially luxury models, when it goes on sale in November.

Representing what will likely become a must-have fashion-mobile for the nouveau very riche, the Bentley Continental Flying Spur sedan is based on the platform and the twin-turbo W-12 engine (6 liters, 552 horsepower) of the Continental GT coupe. Buyers will need at least \$170,000 and plenty of patience when the Flying Spur goes on sale in the spring - there is already a waiting list.

Another probable hit is Aston Martin's stunning V-8 Vantage. This "budget" Aston - priced at roughly \$110,000 - may give Porsche cause for concern when it goes on sale in the United States later this year. And yes, there is already a long waiting list for it, too.

Other noteworthy news from the mainstream manufacturers included the introduction of the Dodge brand to Europe, via the Caliber concept car. Call it a wagon or call it a hatchback, but do not call it Neon, the car that the Caliber will replace in 2007.

Cadillac rolled out the BLS, a model intended for Europe only that will be built alongside the Saab 9-3 in Trollhattan, Sweden, on the same Epsilon platform. The BLS will be offered with a diesel engine. This power plant is crucial for sales success in Europe, where diesels now outsell gasoline-powered cars.

This being the Geneva show, there were opportunities to examine vehicles not available in North America and to speak with specialty manufacturers who have hardly more employees than Fiat had vapid models at the show, often sprawled across humble Italian economy cars.

An ailing Korean manufacturer, Ssangyong Motor, scored a 10 for originality when it had Donghua Li - gold medalist for Switzerland in the 1996 Olympics - perform a pommel horse routine during its press conference. Toyota let down its hair too, with a bright orange version of its Aygo city car serving as a D.J. booth with two turntables and a thunderous sound system.

Spyker, a Dutch supercar manufacturer, said it had received certification from the Environmental Protection Agency and could begin selling its cars in the United States. Twenty feet away, a Swedish supercar maker, Koenigsegg, announced that its CCR model had set a record as the world's fastest production car with a speed of more than 241 miles an hour.

The undisputed champion of the bizarre is Switzerland's own Rinspeed. The company's chief executive, Frank Rinderknecht, was busy giving demonstrations of his company's new Senso show car. According to the company's press release, the car "senses the driver by measuring his (or her) biometric data, and then exerts a positive effect on him with the help of patterns, colors, music and fragrances." No release date for the vehicle was announced - and none of the journalists present pressed Mr. Rinderknecht for one.