


DRIVER'S
NOTEBOOK



With
a Rebel Yell



A widebody Lexus SC430
defies convention.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN MORGAN

CUSTOMIZING A REGULAR PRODUCTION CAR has become so common in the last few years that today there are numerous tuners that specialize in chassis modifications, special bodywork, and wheels for individual marques. Most of these shops have developed signature design elements that create special but identifiable looks; it's fairly easy, for instance, to tell the difference between a Mercedes-Benz massaged by Brabus and one with Lorinser accessories. But what if the car you drive—say, a Lexus—is all but ignored by major tuners?

Michael Snipes enjoyed his Lexus SC430, which was beautifully constructed, solid, and possessed a magnificently engineered engine and convertible hard top. But Snipes has a penchant for hot, tuned cars, and it wasn't long before personalization started in earnest. With no tuners offering anything of substance for the SC owner,

Snipes went to JRD, located in Hoschton, Ga.'s Panoz Auto Development compound. Johan Ragnarsson's small shop specializes in custom metal fabrication, one-of-a-kind body modifications, and high-performance engines and suspensions.

Ragnarsson and his partner, Niclas Jancic, work in steel and aluminum, hand-forming body parts from sheet metal. Ragnarsson's résumé includes one-off show cars for Rinspeed, fenders for Renntech's modified Mercedes-Benzes, and special-order Panoz Esperantes. His client list is a who's who of pro athletes and entertainment industry celebrities.

JRD's modifications started with power Recaro sport seats upholstered in Lexus-supplied leather for a correct match to the SC's factory interior. However, this was only the beginning of a very ambitious project. Overachieving plans for the engine required wide rear tires to be fitted—in this case, 345/25/20 Pirellis. Mounted on purpose-built HRE 20-inch-diameter rims measuring 12 inches wide, the ultralow-profile tires required several inches of extra body width to be added to the Lexus.

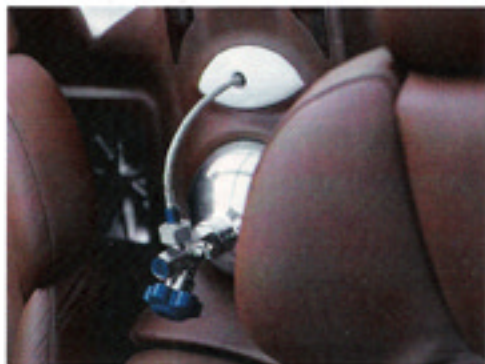
Eschewing the "signature" look, Ragnarsson did not want the car to appear as though it was modified. This Lexus would have a custom body, done entirely in steel. The design would be a seamless retention of the Lexus DNA, while affording the melted soap-cake shape of the SC an entirely new look. "I do all my drawings on the computer, working with photos of the car," says Ragnarsson. "I make everything fit together smoothly, so that the car looks better. Once we have the design, it has to be transferred to the car itself, and to do that, we make steel



body panels by hand." The Lexus body panels were shaped and butt-welded into position. "The welds have to be perfectly solid. Even a little pinhole can cause corrosion to start, causing a paint problem," he says. "The welds are hammered solid and perfectly flat, so that they are undetectable. Then the inside of the fender is treated with the original anticorrosion coating, just as it was when it came from the factory." In all, four new fenders were constructed, along with new fender liners to provide clearance for the wider front wheels, retaining the excellent turning radius of the Lexus SC. The new fender lines match perfectly with the modified front and rear fasciae. A functional roll bar constructed of oval tubing was also installed, to complement the SC's new shape. The factory aluminum hood was modified as well, with aluminum vents welded into place. (Members of the Lexus styling staff came by to see the restyled SC and were impressed with the new look.)

With the bodywork completed, more power was needed to complement the SC's new image. With few parts available for the dohc V-8, Ragnarsson turned to Chris Anderson's Anderson Audio & Performance (AAP) of

Suwanee, Ga., which specializes in custom turbocharger and supercharger systems for the Lexus 4.3-liter V-8 engine. "The engine still has the stock cams and valve gear," says Anderson. "The crank has been balanced and knife-edged, and the rods and pistons are custom parts. I wanted a symmetrical look in the engine compartment and used two of the latest-design IHI turbos, with custom-made mounts and a stainless steel exhaust header system. The intake tubing is all aluminum, and the cooling system pipes are all stainless. Everything had to be fabricated. There are two large intercoolers in a cross-flow design for best efficiency, with a nitrous spray bar instead of water for high-boost cooling."



The stainless steel exhaust system has a drainpipe-like 3.5-inch diameter from the turbos all the way back to the tailpipes. Though much larger in diameter than the original SC430 system, the tubing still follows the same path. It is an amazing example of mandrel bending and welding skills. Of course, the transmission also was reinforced, including a huge cooler with twin fans mounted under the rear of the car.

Having had prior experience with the Lexus V-8, the

This widebody's nitrous bottle, used to help keep the intercooler's core cool, definitely won't make the factory options list.

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crew at AAP increased the SC430's power output to a pavement-wrinkling 600-plus hp at the rear wheels. This indicates that the engine produces over 700 hp at the flywheel. A solid citizen, the dohc V-8 retains its Lexus demeanor, burbling contentedly through its straight-through mufflers as it waits in traffic or cruises down the turnpike. Drive it like an adult, and one would never know its capabilities.

Of course, Snipes did not order this car just to cruise down the freeway, nor did he intend to drive it like an adult. Pressing down on the right pedal causes some very un-Lexus things to happen. First, there is the sound of the turbos spooling up, then the trees start to blur, followed by the rest of the world being sucked into the windshield at an alarming rate. The sound of the engine turns into a metallic howl as the unmuffled waste gates pass excess exhaust gas from the turbos. This acceleration continues unabated, with 100 mph arriving in about 8 seconds, and it never seems to slow down. Release the pedal, and the two pressure-releasing, unmuffled HKS pop-off valves toot like a Mississippi riverboat. This is not an exaggeration. Use the Lexus to slice and dice traffic,



and you are accompanied by your own cheering section of rattling and hissing waste gates, followed by whistles and catcalls from the pop-off valves.

The suspension is well matched to the grippy ultralow-profile tires, and ride quality has been maintained through the use of aluminum Tein cockpit adjustable shocks. The Tein units have an adjustable mounting system

for lowering the chassis ride height without compromising the suspension travel. This results in a ride that is pleasantly firm but compliant, without exhibiting any un-Lexus-like behavior.

As with most modified road cars, there is good news and there is bad news. Although AAP might build you another Lexus engine, JRD only builds one-off customs. "I am bothered enough that a car has two sides, because I don't like making more than one of anything," says Ragnarsson. So, if you have a SC430 that needs a special new suit, it probably won't look exactly like Michael Snipe's, and that is the best reason of all to visit JRD. ☐

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