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Mercedes McLaren SLR uses Grand Prix heritage to challenge top Ferraris, Porsches

By Neil Winton

LONDON, January 14, Graphic News: If you've ever wondered whether there was any practical reason for Grand Prix racing, the Mercedes-Benz McLaren SLR is doing its best to convince you.

This new mid-engined, two-seater coupe, with its gull-wing doors and supercharged V8 5.4 litre engine, inherits some impressive innovations derived from the Formula One racetrack.

Not only is it, as you would expect, fearsomely fast with a top speed of 334km/h (207mph), but the racetrack experience also contributes important safety features as well. The car boasts a carbon-fibre body and chassis, which is about 50 percent lighter than conventional steel, but absorbs 4 to 5 times more energy in an accident. The double wishbone suspension is made of forged aluminium to save weight. The brake discs too inherit techniques developed on the racetrack. They are made from fibre-reinforced ceramics and have high fade-resistance and long life. This all must make McLaren Mercedes F1 drivers Kimi Raikkonen and David Coulthard sleep more soundly at night.

The gull-wing doors, inherited from Mercedes' last supercar, the 300 SLR from the 1950s, hinge upwards from the front and top of the windscreen pillar. Vents in the body just behind the front wheels also borrow cues from the 1950s car, which Stirling Moss drove to victory in the 1955 Mille Miglia in Italy.

Mercedes says this latest SLR is mid-engined, but the motor is ahead of the driver. The bonnet is therefore huge and the driver sits almost over the rear axle.

Performance is suitably awesome. The car blasts from a standstill to 100km/h (62mph) in 3.8 seconds, and reaches 200km/h (124mph) in 10.6 seconds. From a standing start it reaches 300km/h (187.5mph) in 28.8 seconds.

The car has a five speed automatic gearbox, but you can switch to manual and shift the gears using buttons behind the steering wheel spokes. Manual mode has a choice of three shift speeds: "sport"; "super sport" and "race". The starter button lurks under a flip-top lid on the automatic gearbox control lever.

Mercedes says this may be one of the fastest road cars in the world, but it is also a practical car for everyday use. After all, it has space for two golf bags.

But this so-called supercar costing £313,465 / EUR452,000, which will compete against cars like the Porsche Carrera GT and the Ferrari Enzo, has had a less than enthusiastic response from some motoring journalists. Britain's Autocar magazine found what it called "significant flaws" in the steering, brakes, ride and noise levels. "The SLR is not yet worthy of McLaren, nor Mercedes," said Autocar.

Despite this, Mercedes says it has two years' worth of firm orders. That's not saying much because annual production is a mere 500.

So that's 334km/h top speed, 0-100km/h in 3.8 seconds, and room for two people and two golf bags; all for EUR452,000. Who said Formula One racing was pointless?

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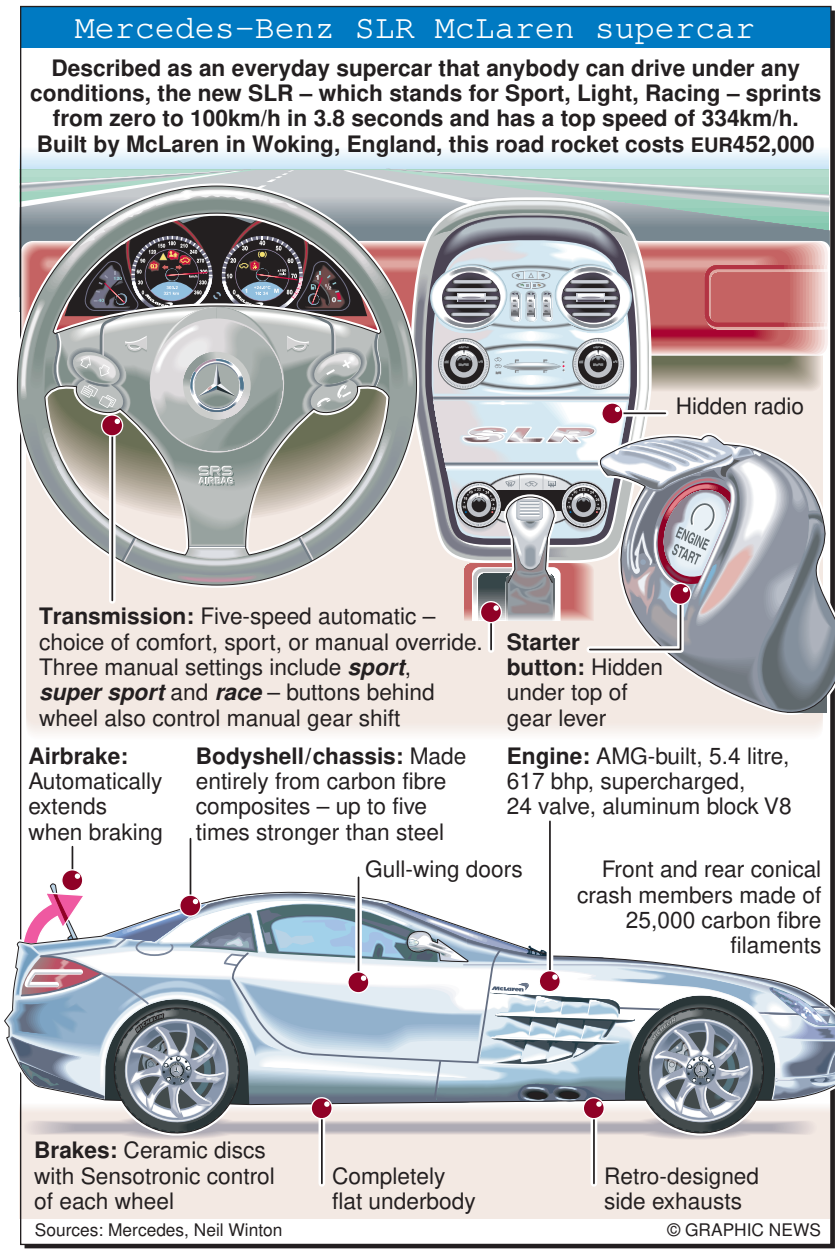

EDS -- DATA CORRECT AS AT JANUARY 14, 2004

STORY TO LEFT OF GRAPHIC << STORY TO LEFT

Cut-and-paste conversions:
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334km/h = 207mph
EUR452,000 = £313,465 = US$576,226

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