

A Legend Fades into Road Luxury



Acura's new flagship is smooth, quiet and refined like a Lexus, but don't expect precision-crafted performance

On a skid pad at Honda's proving grounds in Japan's Tochigi Prefecture, a flagman glares at a guy in a car. Perhaps the flagman, in his Honda uniform of white coveralls and green-and-white ball cap, isn't pleased to see someone pounding one of the few copies of the heaviest, most refined sedan Honda has ever built. Maybe he recognizes the driver's mistake before the driver does.

The guy in the car can't get the new Acura 3.5RL going fast enough to push it off the big circle painted on the pavement. It takes a couple of runs to realize that—umm, the traction control is engaged. The traction control intervenes so smoothly, even with the gas pedal floored, that it's not immediately apparent when the V6 engine throttles back to keep the front tires within the limit of adhesion. It's time for the driver to stop and ponder this RL.

The automotive world has changed in the decade since Honda launched the Acura brand in the United States. In 1986, the Legend was the first Japanese car to break the \$20,000 "luxury" price barrier. Critics claimed, rightfully, that Acura had no image. But the company set about building one, and avoided a straight luxury label in favor of "Precision-crafted Performance." The hardware lived up to the advertising. By the end of 1987—Acura's first full year in business—sales exceeded projections and topped 100,000.

The 1996 3.5RL replaces the Legend sedan, and nearly completes Acura's transition to alpha-numeric nomenclature (only the Integra remains). RL stands for road luxury; Acura's large car will no longer be offered as a coupe. The role of the Legend coupe is left to the less-expensive Acura CL (AW, January 29).

At first blush, it seems odd that Acura ditch model names it worked so hard to establish. But it doesn't take a lot of digging to get to the root of this change. In 1995, Acura barely topped 97,000 sales as volume dropped 13 percent from '94 to the lowest level since 1987. Sales of the second-generation Legend fell nearly 50 percent in one year, to 18,159 units. Part of the problem was supply; Legend production at Honda's Sayama plant stopped by summer's end for the change over to the RL. But demand was declining, too. Legends were available through the year, and there are still a few at U.S. dealerships. Something is not working the way Honda intended.

There are issues beyond Honda's control, certainly. The Big

Three have launched a calculated strike at import buyers. The Europeans have long since realized that they can't continue to raise prices without consequence; they've bitten the bullet and produced cars that are more sensibly priced. And other Japanese manufacturers are meeting luxury buyers' needs. If the Lexus LS 400 is less dynamic than Acura's early interpretation of luxury, it's nonetheless perfectly still and serene. The LS 400—and not the Acura Legend—has come to define what Americans expect in a Japanese luxury car.

The world has changed, and Acura must, too. Parked on the skid pad, in oblique, late-afternoon light that makes photographers salivate, the RL shimmers like jewel. On one hand, this car is aimed squarely at the market segment dominated by the V8-powered, rear-drive LS 400. On the other, the RL maintains Honda's commitment to front-drive sedans, and clings to the efficient engineering principle that fewer cylinders are better than more.

With a wheelbase of 114.6 inches and a length of 195.1, the RL matches the Legend sedan. An added 1.4 inches in height makes more rear headroom in the RL, and better packaging adds two inches of rear legroom. Front-drive and the V6 engine suggest otherwise, but the RL is just as big as the LS 400. The Acura's wheelbase is 2.4 inches longer than the LS 400's, and other exterior dimensions match the Lexus' within a fraction of an inch. At 3693 pounds, the RL weighs 44 pounds more than the LS 400.

The RL comes close to being a total redesign of the Legend. About 40 percent of its parts are carryover—mostly in accessories and chassis components such as brakes, according to Honda engineers. The sheetmetal, interior panels and stampings are all new, and there are refinements in just about everything else. Some of the most prominent are under the hood.

The Legend's 3.2-liter sohc V6 has been stroked six millimeters, increasing displacement to 3.5 liters. The balance shaft is belt-driven and the cams have been re-profiled to reduce valve overlap and