



increase low-rev smoothness and torque. The connecting rods are made with a new "block forging" process. The metal blanks are struck from all directions at once, and there is no place for excess metal to escape the mold. The process is supposed to eliminate even the smallest variations, reducing vibration and wear. Honda claims it is the most precise forging method anywhere.

To further limit vibration, the RL has liquid-filled bushings between the chassis and the subframe which cradles the engine. The engine mounts are liquid filled and electronically controlled: A solenoid valve adjusts the flow of fluid from one chamber to the other, increasing dampening rates as engine speed increases. Engineers wanted to make the RL's V6 feel as smooth as the LS 400's V8.

Power? The 3.5-liter V6 is a mild surprise, given Honda's tradition of high specific output (the VTEC four in the Acura Integra GS-R, for example, produces 95 horsepower per liter.) The RL's 3.5 liters make 210 horsepower at 5200 rpm and 224 lb ft of torque at 2800 rpm. That's 10 horsepower and 14 lb ft more than the Legend sedan's 3.2, and 16 horsepower *less* than the 3.2 in the '95 Legend coupe. At 60 hp/liter, Acura's latest V6 is no more proficient at making power than the 3.5-liter Chrysler developed for the LH cars (214 horsepower, 221 lb ft).

The engineers at Tochigi point out the RL's low torque peak, and the fact that nearly 90 percent of maximum torque is available between 2000 and 5500 rpm. That's more important than high-rev power in an elegant luxury sedan, they say, echoing what many have said for years. It's also what the market—so carefully interpreted by the LS 400—has come to expect.

The market should be comfortable with the RL's styling, because it doesn't break new ground. With three-beam headlights and an upturned, snarling grille, the front end recalls Honda's 1991 FSX concept car. Yet the grille is larger and more formal

than on any other Honda product, and the rest of the RL has the stately, big-shouldered look favored by Lexus and Mercedes. The disc-type alloy wheels could have come from an old S-Class.

Acura is catering to a conservative crowd. Its large sedan has been polished, but it is less distinctive than the first Legend was 10 years ago. The big Acura's new look falls into context against those '95 sales figures. The Legend didn't just fall in sales last year, it was passed by the LS 400 (which outsold it by 30 percent). And the Lexus costs at least \$10,000 more.

The RL's sheetmetal covers a number of substantive improvements in the unibody. The roof pillars are filled with rubberized foam to dampen vibration, and the floorpan has honeycomb fiber material bonded between sheets of steel. The RL offers better side-impact protection than the Legend, and exceeds government requirements, according to its designers. There are two separate anti-intrusion beams in the front doors, and all doors have dense foam pads where hips and shoulders might strike them.

The conservative styling extends through the RL's cabin, though inside it is more easily appreciated because it comes with ease of operation. The gauge pod has the speedometer in the center, a slightly smaller tach to the left, and a third gauge with fuel level and other readouts to the right. A new mica paint, intended to make vinyl interior panels more durable, adds a rich finish.

The RL has standard luxury amenities such as dual temperature controls, a microfiltration system and solar-energy absorbing glass. Acura claims that, with improved air conditioning, the RL cools faster than any car in production. The premium Bose audio system matches Lexus's mighty Nakamichi decibel for decibel, and the RL offers buyers the choice of a six-CD changer in the trunk or center console. There's even carpet on the underside of the front seats so rear passengers won't scuff the tops of their shoes.