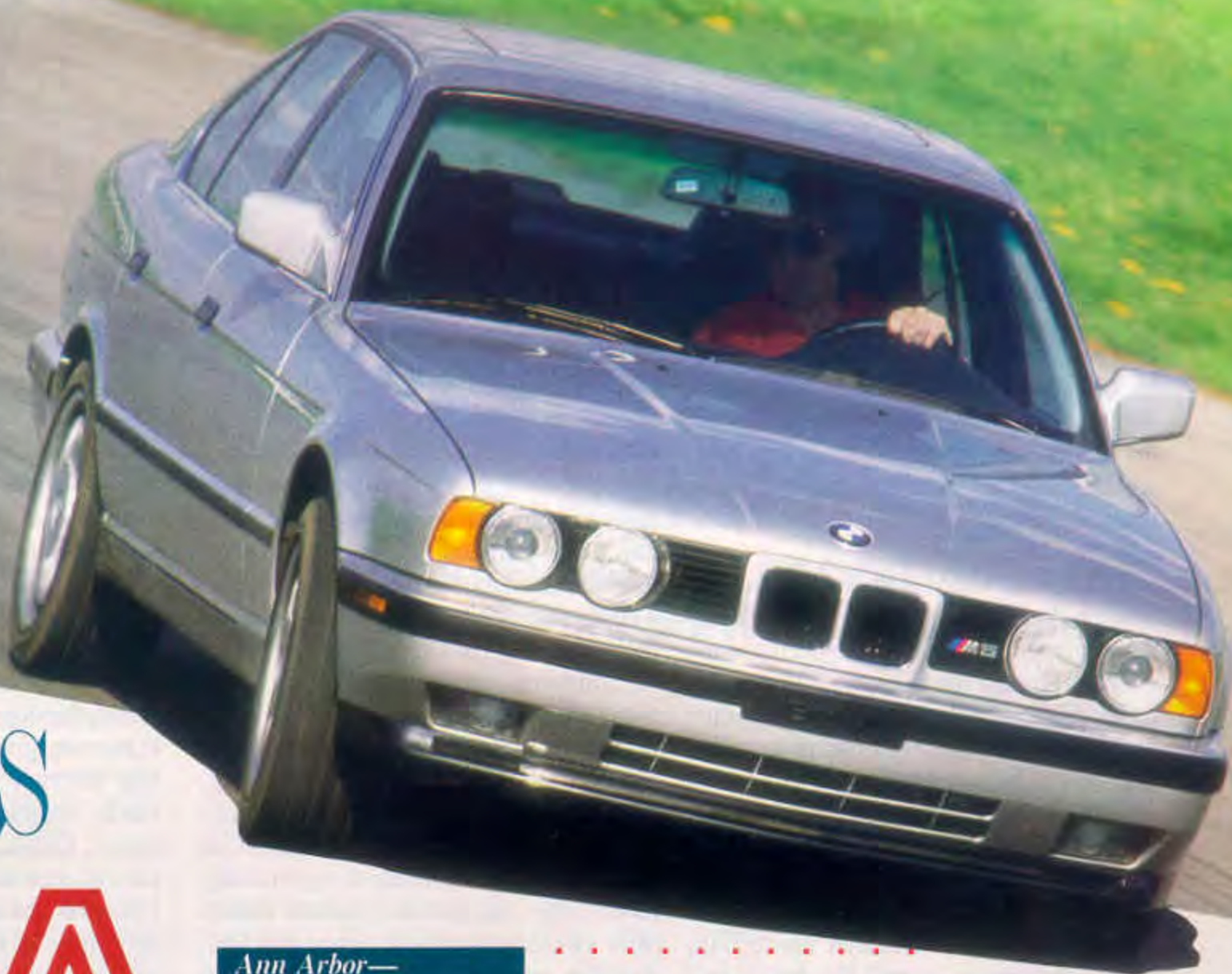


BMW'S HIGH FIVE

*The M5 is
so good, it
almost renders
two-seater
supercars
redundant.*



Ann Arbor—

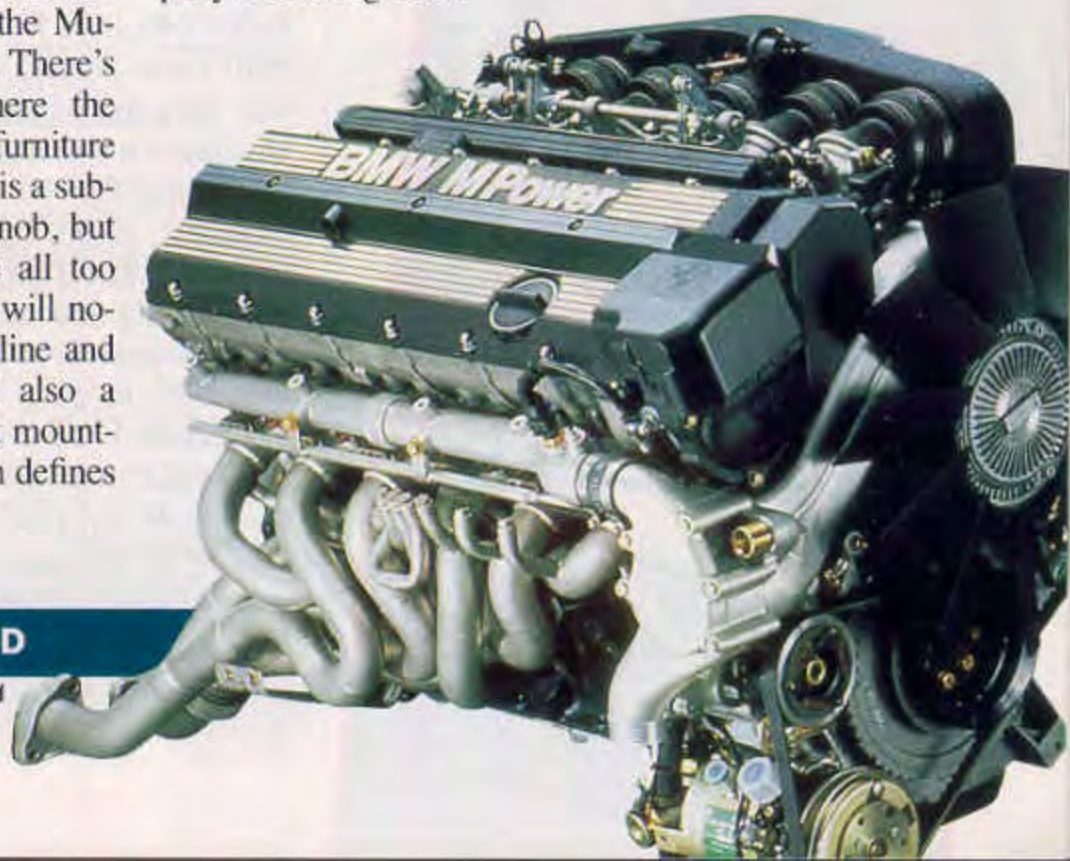
After reading European reports on BMW's M5, you would be forgiven for having high expectations. After all, published accounts of its 310-bhp engine, 6.1-second zero-to-sixty sprint capability, and electronically restricted 155-mph top speed certainly seem to describe the ingredients of a genuine supercar more than they do a four-door sedan. But the real paradox is that, with all that performance propaganda in mind, you still might find your first experience with the car puzzling.

For one thing, the interior of the M5 isn't that much different from the Munich stable's lazier look-alikes. There's an oil temperature gauge where the econometer normally goes, the furniture is suitably supportive, and there is a subtle tricolor stripe on the shifter knob, but the surroundings are otherwise all too familiar. Observant individuals will notice a 7200-rpm tachometer redline and a 180-mph speedometer, and also a prominent storage compartment mounted between the rear seats, which defines the M5 as a four-seater only.

The exterior is not much different from that of the 535i, either—or even the 525i, for that matter. Only the very low-profile Michelin MXX2s and the unusual turbine-effect wheel covers set it apart. Oh, yes, and the discreet tricolor M badges, but those are used inappropriately by many uppity BMW owners on cars where they have absolutely no business being. The M5, you see, is largely hand-assembled on BMW's Motorsport premises, and the engine is entirely a creation of that department. So that M badge is a sign of real distinction and has no place on one of the company's cooking cars.

BY BARRY WINFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JAREM



BMW M5

The difference is clear from the moment the M5 starts. There's increased virility in the emphatic, richly resonant tones of the engine. Hit the pedal, and a decisive *voomp* from the induction system speaks of pedigree and power. There's another clue to serious valve event timing in the slightly knobby idle, which has the car rocking gently at rest. If the clutch is springier than those of lesser Bimmers, it's noticeable mainly at first acquaintance, so when you guide the moderately weighted shifter into first and ease the lively clutch pedal off the floor, the car pulls off with no more fuss than any other 5-series.

Thanks to a valve in the induction resonance box—which varies inlet tract length depending on engine speed to improve midrange torque—the S38 engine feels unexpectedly flexible, and your first few sorties through the gears may lead you to believe that the car is a well-isolated, well-damped, slightly too-civilized vehicle. But then, as the oil temperature needle moves off its stop, you inevitably succumb to the temptation of all that yawning tachometer space. As the needle rotates around the dial in response to your right foot, the engine takes on a new urgency. Careful attention to inlet and exhaust system lengths is made clearly evident by the rich harmony of the six-cylinder unit as it hits its sweet zone and by the wonderful rush of power that sweeps the car on a swelling, exhilarating thrust of energy.

At first, the controls require careful, deliberate attention to coordinate clutch, gas, and shifter. As the miles pass, however, you start to have a feel for



Tachometer and speedometer values reveal Motorsport genes. Magnesium wheel cover (below) cools the brakes. Tailpipes blow delightful burbles.

the car's rhythms, and everything slips into place. Gradually, the careful inter-relationship among ride, roll, steering weight and speed, shifter loading, clutch feel, and engine characteristics begins its combined sensory persuasion. And then, as you explore the car's road manners, you find plentiful traction, nicely damped but superbly accurate steering, and cooperative handling that eases gently into understeer but will rotate progressively into oversteer if you really insist. The larger-than-standard brakes offer awesome stopping power and fine, readable pedal messages, with ABS to back you up in circumstances that transcend the huge amount of available grip. You realize, with gradually dawning enlightenment, that this is one of the best-integrated luxury rocket ships ever let slip of the Motorsport stables.

European writers criticized the M5's gearing as being too tall, blaming it on gas consumption priorities, but with about 3000 rpm on the dial at 70 mph in fifth, it's hard to imagine the car with tighter gearing. That engine speed is comfortably close to where the torque lives, so the car requires only more pressure on the throttle pedal for brisk passing. A downshift into fourth puts the husky 24-valver firmly on the boil, and third (with about 105 mph available) will suck the windshield out of almost anything on the road.

Running the car hard from a standstill produces surprising results. The car gulps its first two gears in brief but wonderfully sonorous blasts of power, yet it somehow understates the performance to the point that when you hear the recorded sound effects played back, you realize with astonishment just how quickly the car uses up its lowest ratios. Passing power is so good that the driver is in danger of overrunning the stream of traffic. One moment you're deciding to pull out, the next your victim's car is

backing past as if it were in reverse.

Perhaps because of the car's decent aerodynamics—with only the panoramic mirrors giving account of their progress through the air—you don't have much audible evidence of increasing speed. Consequently, when the manic six-cylinder engine goes looking for its 155-mph cutout point, it does so with a deceptive lack of drama. So you can surprise yourself pretty easily with a glance at the speedo; the needle burrows quickly into big numbers.

Vivid acceleration, irresistible passing performance, and a relentless autobahn stride combine to make this car a dominant roadgoing entity. This is the stuff of delusions of grandeur, but it's done so subtly, and with such remarkable restraint, that the car seldom triggers the tribal envy or social outrage that a Corvette or a Ferrari will. For the plebs out there in their pickups, this is only a BMW. If only they knew.

BMW M5

Base price/price as tested \$56,600/\$56,600

GENERAL:

Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive sedan
4-passenger, 4-door steel body

POWERTRAIN:

24-valve DOHC 6-in-line, 216 cu in (3540 cc)
Power SAE net 310 bhp @ 6900 rpm
5-speed manual transmission

CHASSIS:

Independent front and rear suspension
Variable-power-assisted recirculating-ball steering
12.4-in vented front, 11.8-in rear disc brakes
Anti-lock system
235/45ZR-17 Michelin MXX2 tires

MEASUREMENTS:

Wheelbase 108.7 in
Curb weight 3804 lb
Fuel capacity 23.8 gal

