



# Magnum Force

The three most powerful sports sedans in America trip our triggers.

BY ARTHUR ST. ANTOINE

**W**hen you're talking about sports sedans, there are fast ones and faster ones and really, really fast ones. And then there is the Magnum Force.

Behold three of the highest-performance production four-doors the world has ever seen. Magnum power. Magnum status. And, yes, Magnum stickers. That all three were created in Germany should come as no surprise: only the land of the unlimited-speed autobahn could even conceive of building sports sedans as explosive and exclusive as these.

We are talking about .44-caliber performance here. Would 0 to 60 mph in 6.1 seconds tingle your brain tissue? That's

from the *slowest* member of the trio. And there's more. Mighty brakes. Asphalt-ripping grip. And—oh yes—shameless luxury. As performance-oriented as they are, these limited-production wonders don't skimp on the niceties. Leather is standard in all three. So is automatic climate control. And premium-quality audio. And power everything. And if you want more (a trunk-mounted CD changer, perhaps?) you can order that, too.

Could these high-octane phenoms possibly offer anything else? How about enough room to carry four adults and their luggage?

Now would be a good time to pause

and catch your breath.

The first of the Magnum four-doors was BMW's M5, a 5-series sedan tweaked into a 256-horsepower beast by the maker's esteemed Motorsport division. The M5 first appeared in 1985 and arrived in the U.S. two years later—to rave reviews. BMW then unleashed a new M5 for the 1991 model year, this one based on the all-new 5-series and sporting even more displacement and power. With minor changes, that is the car that continues into 1992.

Having watched aftermarket tuners such as AMG successfully vitalize its products for years, Mercedes-Benz has

## Audi S4

**Highs:** Exquisite cockpit, svelte skin, all-weather proficiency.

**Lows:** Fade-prone brakes, sluggish response.

**The Verdict:** The high-tech Magnum sedan, quick and full of flair.



launched a factory-backed parry for 1992: the 500E. Assembled by Porsche for Mercedes, the 500E is a 300E sedan ignited with a heart of fire: the same 32-valve 5.0-liter aluminum V-8 engine developed for the 500SL sports car. The 500E backs up this awesome powerplant with an extra-beefy suspension. And huge wheels and tires. And flared body panels. The result? A shape that's refined but audacious—even a grandmother could tell that this is a 300E that's been spending time in the Nautilus room.

The most recent arrival is Audi's hot new S4, a 100 sedan fortified with the maker's Quattro four-wheel-drive system, a sport suspension, a host of exterior and interior alterations, and an upgraded version of Audi's turbocharged and inter-cooled, 20-valve, 2.2-liter in-line five-cylinder engine. The car pictured here is an early-production example, obtained through our connections.

If what you've read so far makes you scream "comparison test," you're right with us. We gathered the Magnum Force together, strapped on the test equipment, and let the computer record the amazing numbers. To these hard facts we mixed in our subjective impressions, gleaned from a combination of highway cruising, hard



twisty-road running, and around-town stopping-and-going.

But, hey, you know the drill. Let's get to the results.

### Audi S4 Third Place

As much as any sedan can, Audi's new S4 reminds us of a fine business jet. Not just because of its slick looks and gauge-filled cockpit, but also because of the way it involves the driver in the mission of the machine.

Though built on the shortest wheelbase of the group—105.8 inches—the S4 is the longest and widest member of the Magnum Force. But it feels the smallest. You don't climb aboard this car, you slip it on. It takes a lurch to slide under the air-bag-equipped steering wheel, but once settled you find that your legs and arms have plenty of room and that the driving position is nearly ideal.

There's a jet-like intimacy to the S4 cockpit. The numerous instruments (the main dials are white with black markings)

are arrayed in a tight group around the driver; no reaching is required. The door-sills are high. The materials—a beautiful combination of leather, soft plastic, and wood—look both rich and subdued. Yet the cocoon-like ambiance created by the cabin's gentle curves and appealing hues is merely an illusion: the S4 boasts plenty of space up front and the most rear-seat legroom of the trio.

Like a responsive jet, the S4 feels hard-wired to its driver—this is not an isolated,

laid-back-touring sort of car. Engaging the clutch and shifting the five-speed transmission requires concentration for smooth results. The steering channels the road surface directly to the driver's hands, and there is lots of kickback over rough surfaces—more than some drivers may want. The suspension is equally immediate in the messages it broadcasts to the driver's pants seat.

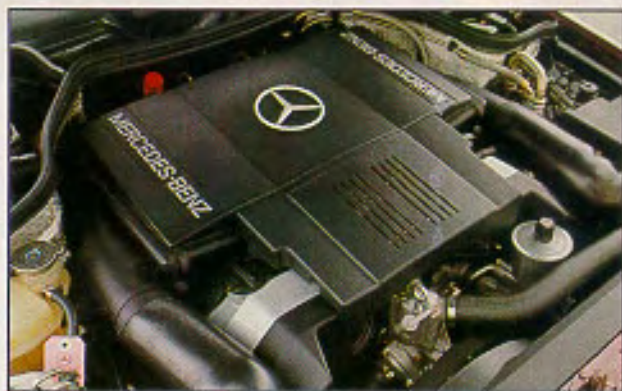
The S4's 2.2-liter turbo five makes impressive power for its size—227 horse-

power at 5900 rpm—and it winds to its redline with the growling, turbine-like whine we've grown accustomed to hearing from Audi fives. The engine delivers inspiring performance—a dash from 0 to 60 mph takes just 6.1 seconds. Yet the other two Magnum sedans are much quicker, thanks to their larger, more powerful engines. And the S4's top speed is limited by a governor to only 127 mph. (Without the limiter, Audi claims, the S4 can climb to about 150 mph.)

Extracting the most from this car can be work. Though peak torque comes at a low 1950 rpm, the 258-pound-foot maximum is less than the others offer. Moreover, the turbo lag, though minimal, delays the effect of this thrust, which translates into lots of shifting around town.

The logbook also notes that the brakes—despite being able to stop the car from 70 mph in only 171 feet—suffered from severe fade during our energetic road drives.

The S4 is easily the most affordable member of the Magnum Force: Audi estimates that the car will start at about \$45,500 when it reaches dealerships. And the S4 has much to recommend it, including a gorgeous cabin, sparkling performance, and the all-weather traction of



## Mercedes-Benz 500E

**Highs:** Stunning speed, lively chassis, tank-like construction.

**Lows:** Stratospheric sticker.

**The Verdict:** For those who can afford it, a supersedan of awesome ability.



## BMW M5

**Highs:** Stirring sounds, graceful gear box, phenomenal performance.

**Lows:** Impassive interior, weird wheels.

**The Verdict:** The enthusiast's sports sedan—swift, spirited, and soulful.



The silver rings that give BMW's M5 its whitewall-tire look are unfortunately an integral part of the modular aluminum wheels.

Audi's Quattro system. But against its big-  
brother competition, this low-flying jet is  
simply outgunned.

### Mercedes-Benz 500E Second Place

No way the 500E is going to be out-  
gunned. No sir. Everything about this  
machine is Magnum impressive.

Beginning with the power. The 32-

valve 5.0-liter V-8 engine pours out  
322 horsepower and 354 pound-  
feet of torque. Even with 3927 pounds in  
tow, that kind of muscle translates into  
speed you can feel in your bones.  
Feeding its power to the rear wheels via  
the standard four-speed automatic, the  
500E hurtles to 60 mph in just 5.5 sec-



onds, blows through the quarter-mile in  
14.1 seconds at 101 mph, and charges all  
the way to an electronically limited top  
speed of 156 mph. That's enough perfor-  
mance to keep the 500E nipping at the  
heels of an LT1 Corvette.

CID Test Results	acceleration, sec								top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, ft	roadholding, 300-ft skidpad, g	maneuverability, 1000-ft circle, sec
	0-60 mph	0-100 mph	0-120 mph	1/4-mile	street start, 5-60 mph	top gear, 30-50 mph	top gear, 50-70 mph	top gear, 70-100 mph				
AUDI S4	6.1	17.5	29.4	14.9 @ 94 mph	6.9	9.7	7.0	127	171	0.85	105.8	
BMW M5	5.6	14.7	21.9	14.3 @ 99 mph	6.1	9.1	9.4	156	169	0.82	108.7	
MERCEDES-BENZ 500E	5.5	13.8	20.8	14.1 @ 101 mph	5.7	3.0	3.5	156	166	0.85	110.2	

Vital Statistics	price, base/as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque	transmission gear ratios:1/ maximum test speed, mph/ axle ratio:1	curb weight, lb	fuel tank, gal	wheelbase, in
AUDI S4	\$45,500/\$45,500 (estimated)	turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 20-valve 5-in-line, 136 cu in (2226cc), iron block and aluminum head, Bosch Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection	227 bhp @ 5800 rpm/ 258 lb-ft @ 1950 rpm	5-speed/ 3.50, 2.09, 1.23, 0.99, 0.73/ 35, 65, 99, 123, 127/ 4.11	3839	21.1	105.8
BMW M5	\$64,430/\$64,760	DOHC 24-valve 6-in-line, 216 cu in (3535cc), iron block and aluminum head, Bosch Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection	310 bhp @ 6000 rpm/ 265 lb-ft @ 4750 rpm	5-speed/ 3.51, 2.08, 1.35, 1.00, 0.81/ 39, 65, 100, 135, 156/ 3.91	3800	23.8	108.7
MERCEDES-BENZ 500E	\$87,365/\$88,685	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 303 cu in (4973cc), aluminum block and heads, Bosch LH engine-control system with port fuel injection	322 bhp @ 5700 rpm/ 354 lb-ft @ 3900 rpm	4-speed auto/ 3.87, 2.25, 1.44, 1.00/ 40, 69, 108, 156/ 2.82	3927	18.5	110.2

But the 500E is ever so much more composed than the Chevy. The body is as solid as a battleship. The chassis never ruffles. The engine is relaxed at high speed. The cabin is hushed at cruise. As a result, 100 mph feels like 70. This thing *devours* miles.



It also devours twisty roads like a car half its size. The 500E's steering, smooth and accurate, is among the finest we've ever experienced, making it easy to position the car *just so*. The suspension is balanced and neutral and—in concert with the fat Michelin MXM tires—delivers up to 0.85 g of grip. (It could be even grippier than that, except that the standard ASR traction-control system kicks in annoyingly whenever the driver attempts to steer the rear end with the throttle.)

And, ooohhh, does this car have brakes. It screeches to a halt from 70 mph in just 166 feet—putting it in sports-car territory. And it does it

time after time with no fade.

Yet the 500E only reveals its supercar status when you ask it to flex its muscles. Driven sedately, it's as composed and refined as any other Benz. In fact, it's damned good at going slow: the V-8 purrs at idle, there's plenty of torque for moving smartly away from stoplights (though the automatic prefers to start in second gear), and the ride is reasonably supple.

Certainly there are few interior clues to the 500E's prowess. The cabin is roomy and handsome—if a bit more austere than the S4 cockpit. Leather is everywhere, and wood trim is used generously. The seats are firm and expertly shaped. Dual air bags are standard, as are heated front seats and a nifty, electrically controlled rear sunshade. We had a few criticisms regarding the controls—the awkward radio buttons, mostly—but overall the 500E's interior is hard to fault.

So if the 500E does everything so well, you ask, how did it get edged out of first place?

There is but one blemish in the 500E experience: the price of admission. The base price is \$87,365. Our test car, outfitted with the optional trunk-mounted



Out on the road, our man Markus summarizes his impressions (or is writing home).

maneuverability, 1000-ft slalom, mph	interior sound level, dBA				fuel economy, mpg		
	idle	full throttle	70-mph cruising	70-mph coasting	EPA city	EPA highway	C/D observed
61.8	49	83	70	70	18	24	16
63.4	59	78	71	70	11	20	16
60.7	43	75	68	67	14	17	15

fuel tank, gal	dimensions, in				weight distribution, % F/R	interior volume, cu ft			suspension		brakes, F/R	tires
	wheel-base	length	width	height		front	rear	trunk	front	rear		
21.1	105.8	193.4	71.4	56.1	59.6/40.4	50	43	17	ind, strut located by 1 lateral link and anti-roll bar, coil springs	ind, 1 control arm and 1 lateral link per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Firestone Firehawk SZ, 225/50ZR-16
23.8	108.7	185.8	68.9	54.8	51.1/48.9	51	41	13	ind, strut located by 1 lateral link and 1 leading link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, semi-trailing arm, coil springs, load-leveling shock absorbers, anti-roll bar	vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Michelin MX2, 235/45ZR-17
18.5	110.2	187.2	70.7	56.3	53.3/46.7	50	40	15	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 2 lateral links and 3 diagonal links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Michelin MXM, 225/55ZR-16

CD changer, totaled \$88,685.

That's pocket change compared with the stickers of such aftermarket-activated Benzes as the AMG Hammer. But viewed in any other light—especially next to our victor—the 500E's price tag is monstrous. Even by Magnum standards.

### BMW M5 First Place

The M5 is a seriously sporting machine. You know that the moment you turn the key.

The 3.5-liter in-line six fires off and immediately settles into a lumpy idle—not rough, mind you, but with just enough burps and gurgles to let you know that there's something different about this engine. You blip the throttle. Instantly the rev needle spins upward and the engine note rises to a silky whine. Your neck hairs straighten as the goose flesh spreads down your arms.

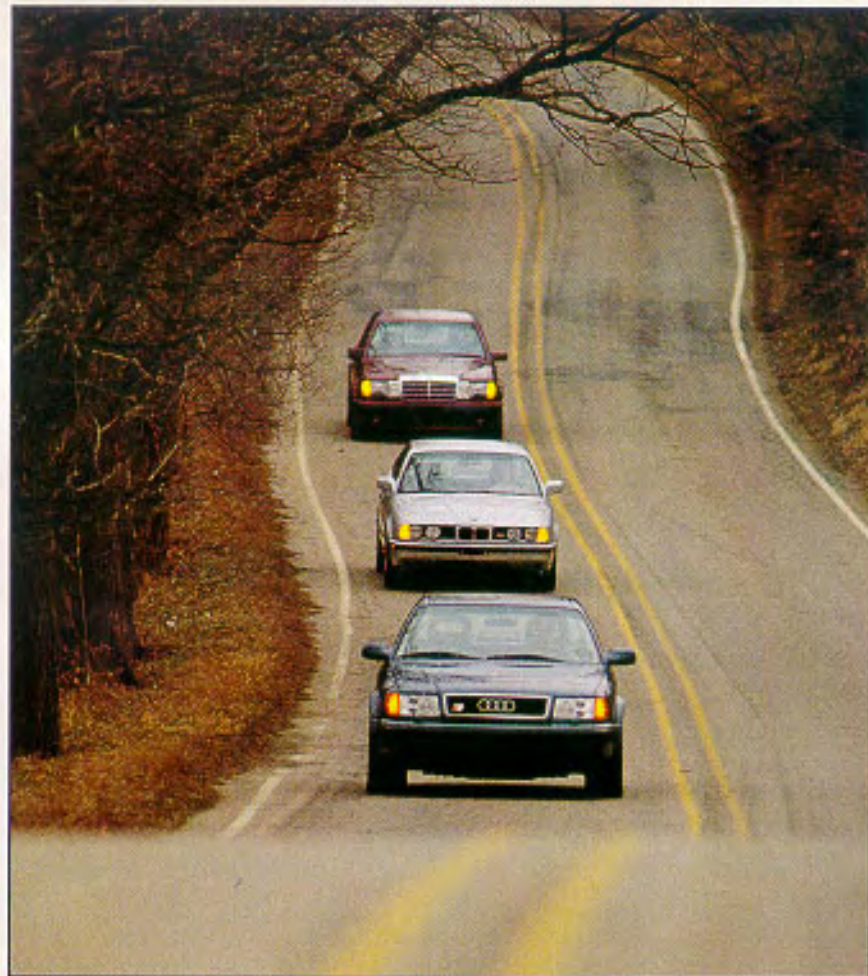
The engine's warm now. Clutch in, slip the meaty five-speed shifter into first. Ease the clutch out. And nail the throttle. *Hoooleee sssshhhhh...!*

Welcome to sports-sedan heaven. As one of our testers wrote, "If this engine doesn't stir your blood, call the coroner." The M5 is all about this powerplant—a 310-horsepower, normally aspirated wonder. In the cockpit, its sound is immediate and omnipresent—at idle, when whirring at 3000 rpm, when screaming at the 7250-rpm redline. It begs your right foot to lunge for the floor.

Good things happen when your foot obeys that plea. Zero to 60 mph in 5.6 seconds. The quarter-mile in 14.3 seconds at 99 mph. A top speed of 156 mph (electronically governed). All accompanied by that stirring, sexy, satiny song.

The M5 is happiest when you give it the spurs. Around town, the clutch feels heavy and engages abruptly. The brakes grab at the touch of the pedal. The engine lopes along in boredom.

And then you find yourself on a clear country road. Suddenly, the M5 comes into its own. The clutch and the shifter, so heavy in the city, work seamlessly at speed. The brakes, cooled by strange fan-



blade wheels that make the low-profile seventeen-inch tires look like whitewalls, display perfect feel and unfailing power. And the chassis can do no wrong. You'll note that the M5 posted the group's highest slalom speed by a wide margin. We could mention chassis balance and roll control and steering response here, but let's just say this: many of the world's "sports" cars would be hard-pressed to keep up with this four-door sedan on a challenging road.

The M5's driving environment is as serious as its personality. Though the cabin is trimmed in leather and outfitted with every imaginable convenience, some of

our drivers found it somewhat cold and spartan. Certainly, the dour shades in our test car's cockpit did nothing to warm our dispositions.

Of course, you don't buy a sports sedan—a serious sports sedan, that is—for its dashboard decorations. The M5 delivers the important goods: a great drivetrain, fantastic brakes, a confidence-inspiring chassis, and a stalwart personality.

Base sticker is \$64,430. The optional heated seats in our test car added another \$330.

That's a lot of dough for a car. But it seems a fair price for a Magnum sedan that's guaranteed to blow you away. ●

Editors' Ratings		engine	transmission	brakes	handling	ergonomics	comfort	ride	panache	value	styling	fun to drive	OVERALL RATING*
	AUDI S4	7	8	7	8	8	9	7	8	8	9	7	84
	BMW M5	9	8	9	9	9	8	8	9	8	7	9	93
	MERCEDES-BENZ 500E	10	9	10	8	8	9	8	9	6	8	8	92
HOW IT WORKS: Editors rate vehicles from 1 to 10 (10 being best) in each category, their scores are collected and averaged, resulting in the numbers shown above.													
*The Overall Rating is not the total of those numbers. Rather, it is an independent judgment (on a 1-to-100 scale) that includes other factors—even personal preferences—not easily categorized.													