



## Three-pronged attack

The South Koreans line up up for a renewed attack on the medium-car segment

By GAUTAM SHARMA

**HYUNDAI**, Kia and Daewoo are plotting a fresh attack on the Toyota Camry-dominated medium-car segment with a trio of new contenders.

Hyundai has just provided the first glimpse of its heavily facelifted Sonata, due here in June.

The revamped Sonata is an unashamed copy of the Mercedes-Benz C-class, mimicking the latter's teardrop-shaped headlamps to a T.

Although it features revised sheetmetal, the updated model uses essentially the same underpinnings as the existing model.

Hyundai Australia says the new model will be priced above the current entry level Sonata Executive — which starts at \$23,500.

The Sonata found 3510 buyers in 2000 and Hyundai would do well to maintain this volume in 2001.

Meanwhile, Daewoo's all-new Magnus made its international debut at the recent Los Angeles motor show, but the newcomer is yet to be confirmed for Australia.

Daewoo Australia spokesman Silvio de Denaro said the new flagship would only be viable here with a six-cylinder powerplant.

"Magnus will fly only with a six-cylinder engine — we want it with a six or nothing," he said.

But it is believed the ongoing upheaval within the South Korean car-maker has put a six-pot on the backburner for now.

Mr de Denaro suggests the Magnus will eventually gain an in-line six, as opposed to the more conventional V6 configuration.

Magnus uses a completely different platform to the ItalDesign-styled Leganza, sold here since July, 1997. It is also bigger than the current flagship, being closer in size to the Toyota Camry.

Externally, the car stands apart from the curvaceous Leganza through its chunkier, more angular lines.

The nose is adorned by the trademark chrome-laden Daewoo grille but the profile seems to have been inspired by the BMW 3 Series and Subaru Liberty.

The Leganza earned 994 sales in 2000. The Magnus is likely to fare better, provided it gets here.

However, Kia will fire the first salvo in the mid-size segment with its all-new Optima, due to



replace the slow-selling Credos flagship around April. Based on the same underpinnings as the Hyundai Sonata, the Optima will be powered by essentially the same 2.5-litre V6 used in the Sonata. This unit generates 127kW and 230Nm.

These figures represent a useful improvement on the Credos's outputs of 98kW and 171Nm.

There is no word on pricing but expect the Optima to cost around \$24,000. Kia spokesman Edward Rowe said the exact price would depend largely on exchange rates.

The Credos has been a poor seller — it managed just 145 sales in 2000 — but the introduction of the more stylish and powerful Optima should improve Kia's share of the segment.

Optima will be the fourth all-new model launched by Kia over the past 18 months. Carnival, Rio and Carens were the three that preceded it.

**South Korean trifecta:** The Kia Optima (top), Daewoo Magnus and Hyundai Sonata.

### 4WD ROLLOVER RISK



The latest research from the US reveals four-wheel drive vehicles pose a more serious risk of rollover in a single-vehicle crash than passenger cars.

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## 4WD rollover risk

By TERRY MARTIN

**NEW** research from the US has found four-wheel drive vehicles pose a far more serious risk of rollover in a single-vehicle crash than passenger cars.

The inaugural round of rollover resistance ratings produced by the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) points to a huge disparity — up to 30 per cent of risk — between the top performing car, the Honda Accord, and the best performing off-roaders, the Honda CR-V and Suzuki Grand Vitara.

While the Accord received a five-star rating, CR-V and Grand Vitara managed three stars and larger four-wheel drives, including the Ford Explorer, Jeep Grand Cherokee and Mitsubishi Montero (aka Challenger), only two.

The big losers were the Chevrolet Blazer and GMC Jimmy off-roaders, which were given a one-star rating, or a rollover risk in a single-vehicle crash of more than 40 per cent.

Neither vehicle is currently sold in Australia.

Real-world and simulated crash testing conducted in Australia and overseas has shown that while the majority of modern four-wheel drives represent a big threat to pedestrians in the case of a collision, they provide good protection from serious injury for their occupants in frontal and side-on impacts.

### US Rollover Resistance Ratings

(Maximum of five stars)

#### Passenger cars:

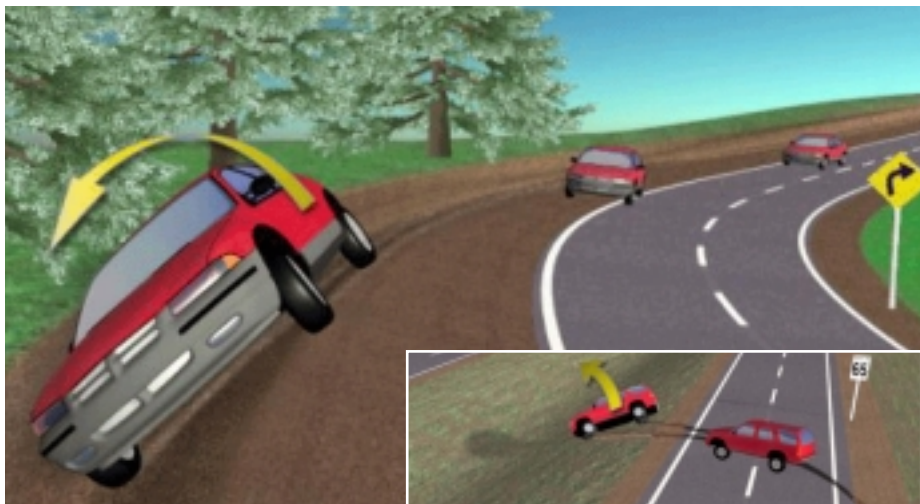
Honda Accord 5  
Honda Civic 4  
Volkswagen Jetta (Bora) 4

#### Four-wheel drives:

Honda CR-V 3  
Suzuki Grand Vitara 3  
Ford Explorer 2  
Jeep Grand Cherokee 2  
Mitsubishi Montero Sport (Challenger) 2

#### People-movers:

Chrysler PT Cruiser 4  
Honda Odyssey 4  
Mazda MPV 3



**ABOVE: Rural road rollover**  
**RIGHT: Freeway rollover**

The new NHTSA rollover ratings go a step further, providing consumers with a more complete picture of a vehicle's crash performance and adding an extra dimension to the agency's New Car Assessment Program.

The ratings are based on a "static stability factor", a measure of a vehicle's centre of gravity and track width that determines how top-heavy it is.

The more top-heavy the vehicle is, the greater the chance of a rollover.

Other 2001 model year vehicles tested for rollover risk included the Chrysler PT Cruiser, Honda Odyssey, Volkswagen Jetta (aka Bora) and Honda Civic, all of which received four stars. The Mazda MPV was allocated three stars.

The testers noted that even a five-star vehicle still has up to a 10 per cent risk of rolling over in a single vehicle crash and that sports cars in particular, when driven aggressively by inexperienced drivers, could have a higher number of rollovers per hundred registered vehicles than some three-star vehicles such as people-movers.

The NHTSA claims more than 10,000 Americans, 80 per cent of whom do not wear seatbelts as it is not compulsory, die each year in rollover crashes.

It says more than 60 per cent of the sport utility vehicle (SUV) occupants killed in 1999 died in rollovers, compared to 23 per cent for car occupants.

### DRIVERS LOSE CONTROL

FROM its studies into real-world single-vehicle crashes, the NHTSA has found that most rollovers occur when a vehicle runs off the road and strikes an object such as a kerb or guardrail.

While the new rollover resistance ratings give us a clue to the performance of a four-wheel drive or car in such a situation, they do not address the reasons why the driver leaves the road in the first place.

So how do drivers lose control? The NHTSA has found driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, driving while sleepy or inattentive, or driving too fast for the conditions are big contributors.

Other triggers include the driver over-correcting the steering as a panic reaction to an emergency or to something as simple as hitting a "cats-eye" that marks the centre or outside edge of a lane.

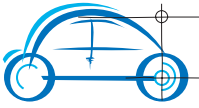
The solution here is as simple as not panicking; slow down then return the vehicle to its previous position when safe to do so.

With the research showing most rollovers occur on rural roads, drivers should be particularly cautious in such areas.

And two more tips from the experts: maintain your tyres and take care when loading your vehicle. Improperly inflated or worn tyres can be dangerous on slippery surfaces while loads placed on roof racks will be above the centre of gravity.

Both situations can increase the likelihood of rolling over.





# Benz Smart ask

By BRUCE NEWTON

**MERCEDES-BENZ** is expected to decide before the end of 2001 whether it will introduce the Smart range of micro-cars to Australia.

Two left-hand drive versions of the two-seat miniature car are due to arrive in March for evaluation purposes and focus groups feedback.

But the managing director of Mercedes-Benz Passenger Cars, Matthias Luehrs, admitted it was future Smart product, rather than the current car, which was really of interest to him.

"Right now we have only the two-seater with the three-cylinder engine," he said. "But in the future there will be the Z-Car platform — which we will share with Chrysler and Mitsubishi — and we are planning to build a four-seater and that is going to be the year 2004.

"If we come to the conclusion that it (bringing Smart in) is worthwhile then the timing would be very important, that's why I am telling you about four-seater. Whether we are going to do that straight away or four years time — and that is something we are going to evaluate."

Mr Luehrs would not be drawn on pricing, volume or even the specifics of who the Smart would most likely be sold to. But he did suggest one distribution option could be to sell Smart through Chrysler and Mitsubishi dealers here, as well as Mercedes-Benz. This arrangement is already in place in Japan.

Benz will boost its small car stocks more immediately with the arrival of the facelifted A-class late in the first half of the year, then the long-wheelbase version two months later.

Set to be unveiled at the Geneva motor show in March, the long-wheelbase A-class remains a five-seater but is 16cm longer than the standard car. Engine options are expected to be 1.6 and 1.9-litre four-cylinders, with the 1.4-litre engine not offered.

**Smarty pants:** The Smart line-up was bolstered by the funky City-Cabrio last year.



"We had a prototype long-wheelbase A-class here in January and we conducted two focus clinics and the response has been exceptionally good," said Mr Luehrs.

"You have either a long space in the back seat which gives you more space than in an E-class currently, or you can put the bench forward and you have a big boot space so it gives you a lot more flexibility."

Overall, with the arrival of the Sports Coupe, the C-class wagon, the diesel C220CDI and improved supplies of the ML270CDI, Mr Luehrs is forecasting an increase in Mercedes-Benz passenger car sales in Australia from 2000's 9544 record to 11,000.

The Sports Coupe — which will be priced under the C-class — is expected to account for 300 units of that total despite arriving late in the year. The AMG sports division is also expected to make a more substantial contribution in 2001, boosting its sales tally from 110 to 260.

The just launched ML55 is planned to account for 200 of

those sales, with 60 deposits already lodged for the \$139,900, 255kW, 4WD V8. The AMG range will be boosted later in the year with the arrival of the C32 AMG and SLK 32 AMG.

■ Mr Luehrs revealed DaimlerChrysler will invest \$US43 billion in product development over the next three years, with 60 new products to be unveiled over the next four years and 80 per cent model line-up replacement over the next five years.

■ Mercedes-Benz will celebrate the centenary of the SL nameplate with the launch of a new generation of the sports convertible at the Frankfurt motor show in September. It will appear initially with a 5.0-litre V8, then a 5.8-litre V12 and later a V6 engine. There will eventually be an AMG version.

“ We had a prototype long-wheelbase A-class here ... and the response has been exceptionally good ”

## UP CLOSE on PERSONNEL

### Ramsay leaves Volvo

VOLVO Car Australia network and marketing director Ewan Ramsay resigned his post and left the company on January 17.

In the short term, company managing director Richard Sniijders will assume Mr Ramsay's responsibilities.

"The whole thing is quite amicable. The new MD needs to run the business the way he feels to take it forward, and I need to look at my direction for my career," Mr Ramsay said.

He joined Volvo in January, 2000, and was previously the managing director of the now defunct Inchcape-owned Australian Volkswagen distributorship.

### Jag man for Ford

THE man responsible for the look of the new "baby Jaguar" X-Type will become the chief designer at Ford Australia in February.

Simon Butterworth, senior designer on the X400 team, replaces American Scott Strong, who served only two years in the top design post here.

Mr Butterworth will have the crucial role of developing the looks of the all-new Falcon, due around 2005.

Mr Strong has been promoted by world styling boss J. Mays to a post in North America, which is yet to be announced.

[COMING ON STRONG](#)

### Ford boss for Austrade

FORMER Ford Australia president Mr David Morgan has been appointed to the board of Austrade, the Federal Government's export and investment facilitation agency.





## State in push for peak body

By GAUTAM SHARMA

A **REPORT** prepared by the Victorian Government suggests the state automotive industry needs a peak industry body — the Victorian Automotive Industry Council.

The State Government audit is the second in a series that examines key industry sectors, with the aim of developing a strategic plan for each respective sector.

According to a report in *The Age* newspaper, the audit found that the manufacture of motor vehicles, parts and accessories was Victoria's largest manufacturing industry, making up 2.3 per cent of the gross state product in 1998-99.

The 30,000 workers employed by the industry are spread across passenger car assemblers — Holden, Ford and Toyota — bus and truck assemblers (such as International and Kenworth) and in excess of 150 component, spares and accessory manufacturers.

In addition, the report found the motor vehicle industry had a profound impact on other sec-



tors of the manufacturing industry. The automotive industry is the largest buyer of products from the rubber, furniture and mattress sectors, the second largest buyer of iron and steel products and the third largest buyer of paints.

The main thrust of the audit's conclusion is that the automotive industry is crucial to Victoria's entire manufacturing industry.

Apart from the setting up of a peak industry body (the VAIC), the report recommends several measures, including:

- The VAIC working together with other

motor vehicle industry bodies and the Office of Manufacturing to undertake co-ordinated marketing to promote the automotive industry as an attractive career choice.

- The establishment of a Victorian automotive industry web site.

- Setting up a workshop to identify the sector's education and training needs.

- Establishment of a business-to-business e-commerce mentoring program.

- The holding of an industrial relations management symposium.

### Opel chief quits

OPEL chairman Robert Hendry stepped down last Wednesday, taking responsibility for mounting losses at the German subsidiary of General Motors.

"I have to admit today that at the start of my tenure I had expected to show evidence of our turnaround more quickly," he said.

Opel last Wednesday reported a net loss of 835 million marks (\$US402 million) in 2000, after posting net earnings of 381 million marks the previous year.

Excluding one-time charges, Opel had an operating loss of 982 million euros (\$US924 million), compared to a loss of 275 million euros last year.

### Honda gains Insights

HONDA Australia has landed a couple of Insights in Melbourne for evaluation purposes.

The Japanese car-maker plans to launch the

### e-tags

petrol-electric hybrid here in March as a toe-in-the-water exercise.

Honda Australia spokesman Ron Hammerton says future versions of the Insight's Integrated Motor Assist powerplant will eventually be used in mainstream models such as the Civic.

Honda Australia has small volume aspirations for the Insight, expected to be priced over \$40,000. Honda's other key debutant this year will be the new Integra, due around August.

### GM profits down

GENERAL Motors reported adjusted fourth-quarter earnings of \$US609 million, down 51 per cent from the same quarter last year —

not counting a host of mostly negative one-off costs, including a \$US939 million hit for phasing out Oldsmobile.

Net income for continuing operations for the full year 2000 was \$US5 billion, down 12.6 per cent.

GM took one-time hits in the fourth quarter of 2000 totaling about \$US1.7 billion.

### Ford upbeat

FORD remained upbeat about its financial future even though fourth-quarter sales fell 3 per cent and earnings dropped 32 per cent.

Ford was buoyed by the \$US33 million profit the world's No 2 car-maker earned in Europe, up from a \$US30 million loss a year ago.

At a global level, Ford earned \$US1.08 billion in net income during the last three months of the year, down from \$US1.81 billion a year ago.





## Classy cruiser

By TIM BRITTEN

**FOLLOWING** standard practice in the car industry, BMW waited a while before dropping a convertible version of its current E46 3 Series range into the product line-up.

The 3 Series convertible comes with the usual assurances of safety and body rigidity; BMW says the 10,900 Nm/degree static stiffness is a high level for a four-seat open car.

Safety elements include the provision of dual front airbags as well as side airbags for front and rear passengers, plus pop-out roll bars behind the twin rear-seat headrests. These deploy in an instant if the car is in danger of inverting itself.

The new convertible also comes with fuss-free folding and unfolding. It dispenses with wind-screen clips and goes smoothly through its contortions to open or close in just 25 seconds.

And, importantly, the BMW now has a proper glass rear window complete with demisting wires.

Like most convertibles it looks best with roof down, although the quality and comfort factors are improved markedly simply through the thermally padded roof lining and glass rear window. An optional hardtop can be ordered to create a full coupe atmosphere during the winter months.

Also like most convertibles, the BMW weighs more than either sedan or coupe 3 Series models – exactly 165kg more than the four-door and 155kg more than the two-door.

It's fortunate that the 170kW, 3.0-litre engine is standard in the convertible because it keeps performance at respectable levels. The five-speed manual version will see 100km/h coming up in 7.4 seconds, while the optional five-speed automatic Steptronic takes 8.1 seconds.

The torque figure is impressive too, with 300Nm developed at 3500rpm — 90 per cent of which is available from 1500rpm.

Various measures taken with the bigger engine mean fuel consumption remains the same as the previous, smaller engine.

In the manual transmission convertible, this means a city figure of 10.7 litres/100km and a highway figure of 6.6 litres/100km – excellent figures for a powerful convertible approaching 1.7 tonnes.

The cockpit is essentially the same as the sedan and coupe in terms of general layout, except the rear seat holds two passengers only, due to the extra confinement caused by the roof mechanism.

The boot, like all convertibles, is compromised



### BMW 330Ci Convertible

**Price: \$105,955 (auto)**

#### FOR:

**Smooth, powerful and melodic six-cylinder engine, user-friendly convertible roof**

#### AGAINST:

**Unexpected rattles and squeaks**

a little by the need to accommodate the roof, but can be expanded from 260 to 300 litres by folding up the bag that holds the folded roof.

Inside, leather is dominant on seats and door inserts as well as steering wheel and gearshift, and there's a reasonable amount of wood grain on the dash and centre console to engender feelings of luxury consistent with the price tag.

Front seats are electrically adjusted (and heated) and there's a killer 10-speaker sound system complete with a boot-mounted CD stacker. A park-distance control system is standard to take some of the guesswork out of squeezing into tight spaces.

Like most four-seat convertibles, the BMW is more comfortable in the role of boulevard cruiser rather than sports car, although it acquires itself pretty well in the latter context.

The 170kW engine has deep reserves of torque, more than its immediate predecessor, and delivers useful response from relatively low engine speeds.

It also sings a delightful song, slightly hard-edged when wound out towards the redline and issues a deeper, melodic thrum when cruising at lower rpm.

The five-speed Steptronic

auto in this case responds better at most times to manual selection as it is a helpful way of dealing with the extra weight.

Manual override allows the driver to anticipate upcoming engine loads and generally avoids the hunting around for correct gear ratios that even a system as sophisticated as the BMW's is occasionally prone to suffer.

The convertible also steers with precision, using the grip of the asymmetric tyres (225/45R17 at the front and 245/40R17 at the rear) to generate impressive G-forces before any loss of traction. And then, the stability control system steps in anyway.

The steering felt as responsive and progressive as in 3 Series sedans, making the convertible a device to move quickly, safely and enjoyably from point to point should you wish to do so.

Surprisingly, the test car was not entirely free of the squeaks and rattles common in large soft-tops. Although most of the noise came from relatively superficial areas, suggesting body flex was not a major contributor, their very presence was unexpected.

But the convertible BMW is a lovely, easy to live with prestige soft-top that delivers the style, quality, comfort and performance that are the cornerstones of the brand.

### BMW 330Ci CONVERTIBLE

