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# Fast Blast: We Drive the Mega-Fun Saleen S1 Cup Race Car

Production-based Saleen racer makes you feel like a driving superstar



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Mac Morrison - Writer; The Manufacturer - Photographer Jan 31, 2020

As the headline you clicked on promised, we're here to talk about driving the Saleen 1 Cup race car. But the experience needs some context.

Contemporary auto racing faces the same challenges as all forms of entertainment, as each launch of a new streaming subscription for this, or an app for that, splinters consumer attention spans on the daily. That's no revelation, but racing suffers sometimes from an additionally heavy albatross in its pursuit of reclaiming mainstream popularity: it can look a bit too easy from the outside, and not always spectacular.

After all, decades ago, downforce was still a black art, and tire technology was still in the relative dark ages. So when old-time motorsport fans—watching from trackside or on TV at home—saw the era's stars regularly demonstrate exquisite and sometimes not-so-exquisite four-wheel drifts and other potentially sketchy antics at 100-plus mph, it is difficult to imagine the majority shrugged and figured, "I could do that."

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Sometimes, just the sheer physical experience, the borderline violence, of driving a certain type of car proved whistle-inducing. Watch onboard camera footage of Ayrton Senna's monumentally famous Formula 1 qualifying lap for the 1988 Monaco Grand Prix ... and then watch the video of Lewis Hamilton's pole winning lap from last season. Even allowing for changes made to the Monte Carlo circuit during the previous 31 years, Hamilton's modern-technology-backed effort is naturally light year's quicker on the stopwatch. Senna's, though, looks light years more *impressive*.



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By Subaru

The thing is, it's an unfair picture and an unfortunate situation, especially for people who know better. Put it this way: Forget about world champions; anyone who has decent track-day experience and a bit of driving skill has taken some uninitiated soul on a few laps of the local road course and laughed at their reaction. It's usually something along the line of, "Holy *blank*, I had no idea a car could *do* that."

All of this is on my mind as I unlatch the Saleen 1 (or S1) Cup car's five-point Sparco safety harness, and climb over the cockpit safety cage and out of the car. I've never driven this circuit layout at The Thermal Club near Palm Springs before, and I've only done five or six initial laps. But a car like this reminds you immediately that what you feel inside is what really counts, and it's what makes this hobby—this pursuit of speed—so rewarding.





Corona, California-based Saleen first showed off the S1 at the 2017 Los Angeles auto show. You might recognize its styling as similar to the late-2000s GT sports car produced by German firm Artega, and indeed, several years ago JSAT—Saleen's Chinese backer—acquired the rights to the Artega GT and suggested Saleen rework it for the American market. According to company boss Steve Saleen, though, the car you see here shares no parts with the late German upstart.

"None of it could be certified [for the market in terms of the Artega]," he says. "I said, 'No, we're better off just putting everything aside and starting new,' but we will do a mid-engine two-seater vehicle. So that's how it got started. Someone in China, a blogger in China ... is the one that started the connection [to the Artega], which then got distributed over here [in the U.S.]. And then the next thing you know is, [the perception is], 'Oh, yeah. We've kind of taken the Artega and redone it.' [But] there isn't anything [shared]. ... [The S1] is a little more than two feet longer than Artega is. ... The wheelbase is longer. Track, overhang—nothing was used from the Artega. If you actually took the profile of a Ferrari or McLaren, the length and the way we've done [the car] is a much closer profile to those. That's primarily because the aerodynamics today on a two-seat mid-engine sports car dictate where you're going to get your best performance from. [And we did the frame, the chassis], from scratch. There is nothing that was borrowed from [the Artega GT]."

The S1 features an aluminum chassis and carbon-fiber bodywork, familiar fare for a variety of race cars but more "exotic" in terms of road cars, especially at the production version's starting price of \$100,000. A Saleen-developed 2.2-liter turbocharged inline-four engine makes 450 horsepower from 4,000-7,000 rpm (same as the production version) and 460 lb-ft of torque at 4,000 (up by 110 lb-ft, thanks to running on race fuel), with redline set at 7,500. (There's something rather interesting and performance-enhancing in terms of this engine's architecture, but Saleen insists on keeping it under wraps until the company launches the road version, which it hopes to do by year's end.) With a curb weight of about 2,685 pounds for the street version, Saleen says it should run from 0-60 mph in 3.5 seconds, cover the quarter mile in 11.3, and hit a top speed of 180 mph.

The race version (Saleen is also developing a GT4-spec version of the S1 for the next level of competition) adds Continental slick tires and track-only aerodynamic elements, and comes in at 2,866 pounds including driver and ballast, and topped up with fluids, per series rules. Gearshifts come courtesy of a Hollinger six-speed sequential transmission, and the brakes were developed with Italy's TM Performance. A double-wishbone suspension with Ohlins shocks occupies all four corners, with overall weight distribution set to 42-/58-percent front/rear. Track-specific adjustable elements include brake bias, spring rates, damper bump and rebound, antiroll bars, and rear wing.



With Saleen looking to capitalize on its motorsport background—and with no production versions of the 1 yet ready to go—it invited us to test the car in the spec in which it competes in the one-make Saleen Cup arrive-and-drive series held on various U.S. circuits.

Aimed at amateur drivers or aspiring pros, Saleen Cup participants need only to bring a helmet and HANS device to each of the 2020 season's seven stops (two races per event), and they're good to go. The 2020 Saleen Cup begins on March 6 at Circuit of the Americas, and subsequently visits Lime Rock Park, Virginia International Raceway, Sonoma Raceway, Road America, Watkins Glen, and Indianapolis Motor Speedway. No form of this type of auto racing is cheap, but the Saleen Cup is on the lighter end of the spectrum in terms of full-season cost for similar series (think Ferrari Challenge): Drivers who paid in full by December 15 shelled out \$225,000; those who did so by January 15 paid \$270,000, with the cost thereafter rising to \$300,000. Those prices cover everything, including at-track hospitality; only airfare and lodging aren't factored in.


Getting situated in the S1's cockpit takes a moment, as with all race cars. Open the carbon-fiber door, climb over the cage, drop into the Sparco seat, and a crew member assists with tightening the Sparco belts. The environment is comfortable once you're in place, with an excellent driving position; the only change I need is adjustment of the small, yoke-style steering wheel to bring it closer to me. Push a master-switch button to turn everything on, then fire the engine via the "start" button.

The sequential gearbox requires use of the clutch only to get rolling, so dip the pedal and select first gear with the upshift paddle. Because of the racing clutch and low-mass flywheel, you must release the pedal slowly and play with the throttle—bwah, bwah, bwah, on and off—to pull out of the pits without stalling. It's easy to get underway, even though one attempt to make quicker work of the pull-out indeed kills the engine. No problem, just hit the start button again and off you go.

Having not driven a proper race car in some time, I had some initial trepidation about driving this one on a track I had never seen before. Would I generate enough heat in the tires to make them work? Would the Cup car be an intimidating monster due to its lack of ABS, power steering, and stability control?

After the initial exploratory session, the answers are yes, the tires stick, and no, there isn't anything frightening about the car's behavior. The only negative thing the first outing reveals is that I'm an idiot for forgetting to put in my earplugs under my helmet, as the car is plenty loud. Hitting the track for round two, the S1's responses and feel encourage me to go quicker. And quick this car is, clipping past 140 mph flat-out in fifth gear on the front straight heading into turn one.



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Usually I prefer to left-foot brake, but the clutch and brake pedals' positions make doing so feel a bit unnatural here. With some practice, you can get used to the foot movement required to do so, but I stick with the right foot for today. Reach a braking zone and press the pedal hard, especially on the initial application, then trail off for the corner. The pedal's rock-solid feel is superb, and the stopping power provided by the brakes and tires encourages you to go deeper into turns with each lap. Click down two gears and the Hollinger 'box responds sharply and immediately, setting you up for corner entry with satisfying positivity.

Lateral vision is one of the biggest challenges out of the gate; the car's a-pillar and surrounding safety cage make it difficult to see certain approaches through the left-side window, causing me to blow the braking point for a hairpin more than once as I struggle to locate the apex when turning my head left and looking for it. The ensuing lockup on one botched attempt fills the cockpit with tire smoke, causing me to curse and laugh simultaneously. But you get used to the sightlines, and begin to look even further ahead as you anticipate braking and turn-in points for corners where compromised vision is a potential issue.

Another small issue I find, despite being strapped in tightly, is figuring out how to brace myself in the car. Specifically, my left leg, going around several corners, gets pushed over from the g load, and the lack of a full-on vertical footrest to push against takes some getting used to. Some of my problem is self-induced, as I catch myself tensing up a bit and trying to hold my leg in an unnecessary position, something you don't want to do. Thankfully this trouble mostly subsides the longer you drive and the more comfortable you become.

The lack of power steering, on the other hand, never registers as anything but welcome, as the car transmits plenty of information about how the chassis and tires are working. Small steering inputs are your friend, but the S1 is compliant enough to allow you to throw it around some and send it into corners while carrying a lot of speed without fear of the rear end overtaking the front. In other words, the S1 feels nicely progressive in its behavior, inspiring confidence from the jump—an important trait for any car used in entry-level GT racing. The balance and reactions make this a very approachable yet rewarding car to drive for competitors of varying experience levels.

It takes a while before you begin to feel like you know where the tires' limits are, but the handful of times I step over the line only produce some easily correctable little slides; one of the biggest ones comes when standing on the gas while exiting the pits, as the reduced tire temperature resulting from a break in the action tells me to watch it.



I drive about 20 laps throughout the day, and confidence spikes with each one. I'm smiling the entire time at the physical experience: the cracking and booming sounds from the exhaust on spark-cut upshifts always reminding me this is an entirely different proposition compared to even the best modern street-legal production cars. Shift lights in the steering wheel make it easy to know exactly when to bang your upshifts, their placement perfect for being able to see them without having to take your eyes off of the track, and there's just something satisfyingly cool about getting to use this style of racing steering wheel. Thanks to the Continental slicks and what seems like a good amount of aerodynamic downforce (Saleen declined to provide exact figures), it's easy to begin to think the grip level is infinite. Knowing it is not, and not wanting to be the sucker who bends one of Saleen's cars not long before it's needed for the racing season, I keep within about 75 or 80 percent of where I think I can be in terms of aggression and pace, but I know there's a lot more in it.

If anything, that's the only frustration I carry as I climb out of the car: I want to go quicker, but since this is only a test and not a race, with no lap timers running, the downside of a mistake while doing so outweighs the potential satisfaction of finding the absolute limit, at least of myself if not the car. The chassis rolls through corners really well, with compliance as mentioned, but also with immediacy. The S1's overall character makes it relatively easy for you to show up to an unknown track and come to grips with it quickly, another hallmark of a very good one-make series race car. And despite the car's light weight and a fair amount of power, transferring the go to the pavement is no problem. If anything, a bit of turbo lag and the throttle pedal's travel require you to jump on the power early out of slow corners, at times before you reach the true apex, to ensure it comes on full-bore when you need it. In that sense, there is some nuance to driving the S1 Cup car well, which is the type of Driving Nerd pedantry hardcore enthusiasts appreciate.

When I undo the belts for the final time, I feel electrified from head to toe. Threading the S1 through Thermal's esses in fourth and third gears is a delectable challenge, the kind that makes you think on every lap, "I can do better next time." Everything about the experience is pure enjoyment and adrenaline, despite not running to the absolute limit. When company boss Steve Saleen walks over and says, "Nice job," I reply, "I wasn't really going that fast, though." "It was quick enough," he replies, and he's right.



Indeed, it might not have looked like much from the outside, but I struggle to think of a recent time I've had more fun and felt more satisfaction behind the wheel of a car. I imagine that's how drivers participating in the actual Saleen Cup series feel every race weekend, and then I think about it again: If everyone could feel a race car from the inside and know what it's like to drive, they'd have a much greater appreciation for motorsports across the board. It's sensational, then, to get a firsthand reminder of why we love this stuff—even if we're a long way from impersonating Senna on an all-time lap around Monaco. The only lingering disappointment: I don't have a spare \$225,000 available to fund a full season in the Saleen Cup.

*Editor's note: Special thanks to Alpinestars (alpinestars.com; Instagram: @alpinestars), Bell Helmets (bellracing.com; IG: @bellracinghelmets), and Corby Concepts (corbyconcepts.com; IG: @corbyconcepts) for supplying the racing safety equipment used for this test.*



Image Gallery (28)

