

REDEFINING

STORY DUSTIN A. WOODS PHOTOS DEREK GARDNER

**LEXUS SET OUT
TO CHANGE
ATTITUDES
TOWARD ITS
BRAND AT LAST
YEAR'S SEMA
SHOW, BUT
IT MAY HAVE
TRANSFORMED
THE ENTIRE
INDUSTRY IN
THE PROCESS.**





Last year's SEMA Show will likely go down in the books as the year of Lexus. Not only was the aftermarket expo the luxury automaker's inaugural appearance, it was also a marketing exercise to make sure the company's initial presence would not be overlooked. This battle plan featured, among other things, the stately yet stylish LS460 built by VIP Auto Salon.

Traditionally regarded as being, well . . . traditional, Lexus wanted to announce its arrival in the performance world with a bang. This involved autocross runs with its newly launched hot rod IS-F driven by Scott Pruett, the launch of its F-Sport line of factory performance parts and the unveiling of a jet fighter-inspired IS-F from Five Axis.

OLD-WORLD LUXURY MEETS NEW-WORLD STYLE

With the performance aspect well represented, Lexus certainly didn't want to betray its roots, and the bread and butter of its business's success—the luxury segment. While there were close to a dozen wild Lexus vehicles, from widebody SCs to supercharged GSs, no modified car epitomized the old-world-luxury-meets-new-word style that is so characteristic of Lexus like the VIP LS460.

THE WALD PACKAGE TRANSFORMS THE LS INTO A MUCH SPORTIER AND MORE AGGRESSIVE VEHICLE WITHOUT COMPLETELY BASTARDIZING THE STYLE TRADITIONS OF THE RELATIVELY CONSERVATIVE LEXUS BRAND.



The So Cal tuner shop VIP Auto Salon has been around for just over a year and the company has already earned a name for itself by importing products into the USA that are hard to acquire and by modifying luxury cars that are difficult to ignore.

"VIP is an automotive restyling firm," says Clark Ishihara, the company's president and CEO. "We specialize in the modification of luxury vehicles and importation of quality automotive styling and performance products not yet available in the U.S. market."

With the company's unique outlook and expertise, it's no surprise Lexus decided to work with VIP to promote both companies at SEMA.

JAPANESE LUXURY SEDAN, JAPANESE TUNER

To give the Lexus flagship the sort of look that would help it stand out at SEMA, while simultaneously retaining a stock feel and luxury-oozing appeal, Ishihara turned to WALD, a company *MLE* readers are no doubt familiar with. While more recently we have seen its stylish aerodynamic kits on German and British luxury coupes and sedans, WALD is a Japanese aftermarket manufacturer, and Japanese cars are still its speciality.

The WALD V1 aero kit package is comprised of a front-lip spoiler with integrated chrome grilles, side skirts, a rear bumper spoiler, front sport fenders, a decklid spoiler and a rear roof wing. While the kit is quite subtle, especially on a subdued Verdigris Mica-colored car, the little details make all the difference. Most notable are the front fenders that mimic the design elements of the IS-F fenders. While the flared fenders add a sporty feel, the chrome detailing helps ensure the Lexus luxury mantra is at the forefront of this build.

"The V1 aero package was created with the intent to turn the LS into a sleek and edgy vehicle," says Jon Pek, president of the Jonari Corporation, WALD's U.S. distributor. "WALD wanted to add just the right amount of aggressive lines and accents to set it apart from its counterparts."

We couldn't agree more. The WALD package transforms the LS into a much sportier and more aggressive vehicle without completely bastardizing the style traditions of the relatively conservative Lexus brand.

Speaking of branding, Pek believes that with the simple addition of the WALD V1 bodykit, the styling of the LS transcends its own market and allows it to compete in a more exclusive and expensive segment.

"The V1 takes the LS to the next level in terms of style and puts itself on the same playing field as the Mercedes S-Class and BMW 7 Series," Pek says. "The WALD V1 is to a Lexus LS as an AMG Sports package is to a Mercedes S Class."

ROUNDING OUT THE PACKAGE

To finish off the luxurious appearance of the LS, WALD also provided its P11F forged 22-inch wheels. Lexus certainly did not hit a home run with the design of the stock 19-inch wheels, and while the big 22s look luxurious (in fact, we often wonder why more WALD vehicles aren't fitted with the company's own stunning wheels), the low-profile Pirelli rubber that surrounds them helps give the big sedan a more driver-oriented and enjoyable ride.

The LS sits nice and low at all four corners, thanks to a Universal Air suspension kit and a Dakota Digital air ride controller. In case





SPECIFICATIONS & DETAILS

'07 LEXUS LS460

ENGINE

4.6-liter V-8

BODY AND CHASSIS

WALD V1 aerokit including front-lip spoiler and chrome grilles, side skirts, rear bumper lip spoiler, sport front fender set, decklid spoiler and rear roof wing; LED headlamps and foglights

WHEELS, TIRES AND BRAKES

(f) WALD 22x9" P11F wheels w/ 245/30/22 Pirelli PZero Nero tires, Brembo 8-piston calipers and 15" rotors; (r) WALD 22x10" P11F wheels w/ 285/25/22 Pirelli PZero Nero tires

SUSPENSION

Universal air suspension kit and Dakota digital air-ride controller

INTERIOR

Custom, two-tone, black-and-ash-colored leather upholstery; hand-stitched leather headliner; new leather on doors; leather A, B and C pillars; LED interior lighting

NUMBERS

Horsepower: 380 at 6400 rpm

Torque: 367 ft-lbs at 4100 rpm

0-60 mph: 5.7 sec.

Top speed: 155 mph





REDEFINING LUXURY

the added rubber, lowered stance and the big V-8 up front create too much temptation to drive the LS like a sport sedan instead of the luxury cruiser it is, VIP Auto Salon has equipped the 4,300-lb land yacht with some bright-red Brembos. Glinting behind the many spokes of the front P11F wheels are eight-piston front calipers with 15-inch rotors.

LIVING ROOM ON WHEELS

With the rest of the vehicle sporting a new look, VIP Auto Salon then turned to the car's interior. The LS already comes with a sumptuous interior, but it was decided that this living room on wheels should be as original inside as it is outside. Custom, two-tone, black-and-ash-colored leather seat upholstery was used

as well as new leather on the doors. A hand-stitched leather headliner replaces the factory fabric, and to ensure continuity inside the cabin, the leather flows down from the headliner along the A, B and C pillars to the doors.

PARADIGM SHIFT

The Lexus/VIP Auto Salon LS460 project is interesting because it represents a shift in Lexus branding. Along with its launch of the IS-F and F-Sport upgrade line, Lexus is clearly trying to take on the Germans in extraordinary performance and exceptional luxury. Lexus is now waging a war on all fronts to attract buyers from a variety of demographics. "Our goal was to enhance the styling of the all-new Lexus LS460 in order to appeal to all age ranges," Ishihara explains. "With the modifications that we made, I feel that we produced a vehicle that isn't age-discriminating. It could be yours or it could be your dad's."

Ishihara wanted to also use this opportunity to develop a completely new audience, not just for the LS, but also for the luxury aftermarket. He believes the LS460 project is one that spans age groups and offers something that different generations can all find appealing.

"For SEMA, in particular, we wanted to expand on the potential of the LS in terms of aftermarket modification, which we hope will broaden and enhance the demographic of those interested in tuning the vehicle," Ishihara says.

Being the first luxury automaker to invade SEMA, Lexus made quite an impact, which left many people wondering why more automakers weren't interested in tapping into this market. For that answer we called up Justin Hood, the brand manager for Lexus USA. Hood believes that SEMA '07 was an obvious choice for Lexus to make a big splash.

"This is an area in which we think Lexus has a significant opportunity," he says. "Much like Scion has successfully impacted the small car market with a focus on customization, Lexus has a similar opportunity to draw in new consumers."

By beginning this branding early across its entire range of products from Scion to Lexus, Toyota hopes that it can retain customers from their first car to their last.

Working with tuners, Lexus was able to build a rapport within the community and help create excitement to raise awareness for its F-Sport parts for the IS250 and 350. Who knows, perhaps in the future Lexus will expand its in-house tuning parts catalog to include flagship vehicles like the LS. **MLE**

LEXUS MOTORSPORTS—MORE THAN LUXURY

Toyota may be brutally unsuccessful at Formula 1, but the team's track record is quite an anomaly as far as Toyota racing efforts are concerned. The company has had a great run in NASCAR, and let's not forget that the Chip Ganassi Racing Lexus team has dominated in the Rolex Sports Car Series DP Class for the past two years.

After some modest success in the SPEED World Challenge Touring Car series, Lexus created a lot of excitement two years ago when it announced it would compete in the ALMS with the IS chassis. That, so far, has turned out to be just a tease.

It is possible, however, that the DTM-style IS-F Racing Concept, which debuted at the '07 Tokyo Auto Salon, could be a prototype of just such an ALMS car.

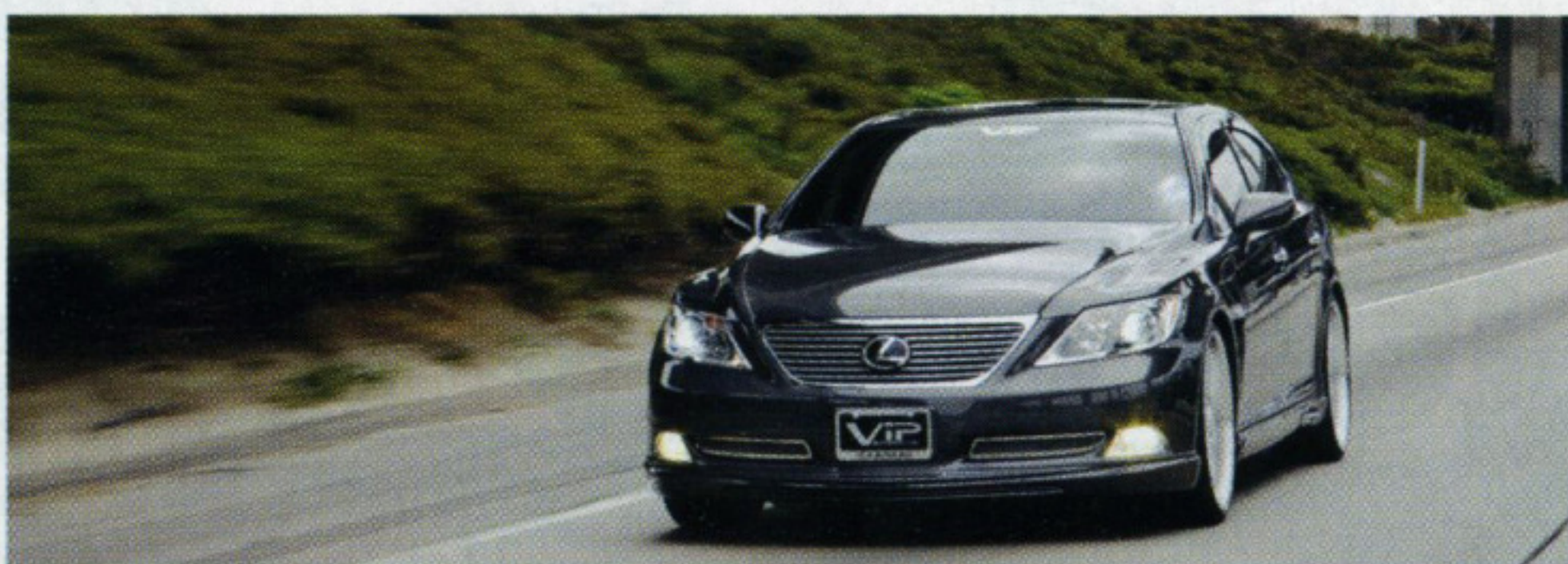
In other Lexus racing news, after posting an unofficial Nürburgring lap time of 7:24, hopes were high as the popular Japanese automaker announced the 500hp, V-10-powered LF-A prototype would run testing laps at the annual 24-hour race. Lexus wasn't officially competing there, and it's a good thing because after a practice session accident and limited repair time, the team was forced to retire early from the race with a best lap time of 9:19.



The LF-A retired early from the Nürburgring 24-hour race.



The IS-F Racing Concept may be a prototype for the ALMS.



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