

ADRENALINE AND NITRO EQUAL PARTS "WOO HOO!" AND "OH YEAH!"

BY JOE SAGE

Lexus builds F Sport versions of many models and full-blown performance-built F models of some, not always the same ones year to year. Between weekly vehicles and regional or national comparo events, we've surely driven most if not all.

Every sedan and coupe in the current Lexus lineup is a rear-driver except the midsize ES, their top-selling sedan (with AWD available on many). This creates a lot of opportunity for performance builds. Currently, only GS and RC (coupe equivalent of the IS sedan) offer full F models. We've realized for a while that we had never driven an F and an F Sport of the same vehicle back to back. We did have the RC F Sport and RC F some months apart, about a year and a half ago. This time, we nailed it.

The GS 350 F Sport arrived first; it departed one week later when we swapped it for the GS F.

Past experience with both types of build, one at a time, had already shown us their fundamentals—sort of a nimble pony car versus beefy muscle car personality comparison. If you really like chocolate, what's best? A milkshake or cake? Surely you'll like them both. It's much the same here.

If you naturally gravitate toward an F Sport first, it's likely because it's available on so many mod-

els, even the front-drive ES. You may also go with F Sport for its all-wheel-drive availability.

If you dream of a full F car, your lust will start with its high-powered V8 and only grow from there, as you delve into details of its suspension, brakes, wheels and torque vectoring rear end with track and slalom modes, then settle yourself into its performance-inspired interior. But again, all this is only available on two cars.

And the GS F rear-drive-basis sedan is one of those two. Compare specs at right, but also compare pricing. The GS 350 F Sport's base is more than \$32 grand lower than the F. Percentage-wise, that's almost 40 percent off. Fuel mileage ratings are three points lower in the F, not likely to be a real dealmaker or -breaker in this category.

Then again, the F Sport's horsepower is almost 35 percent lower than the F, and its torque almost 30 percent. What's more, the GS F is quite complete right out of the box, while our F Sport added enough options to bring its price a notable degree closer to that of the F (enough so that inspiration could build to cross-shop). Notable is that the F Sport adds an array of options—limited slip rear end, orange brake calipers, dynamic handling and

rear steering, and an F Sport steering wheel—that seem as though they should be part of an F Sport build in the first place, probably an active decision by Lexus to keep price comparison first impressions farther apart. Whether that creates a cost-saving opportunity or a gap-narrowing annoyance will depend upon your goals and response.

Migrating in sequence from F Sport to F, as we did, reveals an interior that is fundamentally very similar, though with black carbon fiber insets and in our case Circuit Red leather sport seats in the GS F, not an over-the-top move from family sedan to race car, but a very solid step in that direction.

The GS F has a more dramatic body when you compare details, though its basically clean presentation belies the power beneath its skin. The grille is, surprisingly, the same. Air intakes are bigger on the F, but more wildly styled on the F Sport. Scalloped and F-badged fenders and door sills on the GS F are far more dramatic, though still low key. All in all, the F has the edge on edginess, but as standalones, they are both visually strong.

The GS F is 300 pounds heavier than the GS 350 F Sport (8.26 percent), but its power and torque are 50.2 and 39 percent higher, with differences in zero-to-60 times and top speeds as you would expect (see sidebar). Weight distribution front/rear remains the same in both, despite the V8 versus V6, with the weight of an advanced rear suspen-

sion in the GS F balancing out increased engine size. Differences in suspension, wheels and engine size impact not only your drive and performance, but various dimensions and capacities—with notable differences in specs for legroom and cargo volume, as well as turning circle.

Our time in both consisted of what most daily drivers' time will—freeways and surface streets. Drive modes work through an effective controller—twist one way for eco, the other way for sport (and twist again for sport-plus). Press a button in the center to exit the modes—a great eyes-off interface. In some cars, modes rate a shrug, but in both of these, they are effective, especially satisfying in the GS F, which gives you an added grin from its amped-up but authentic V8 soundtrack.

All in all, are they dramatically different? Yes and no. The differences are obvious, but when you live with one and only one (kind of like getting married), the experience is equally wonderful with either. The only thing we didn't do was move from the F back to the F Sport. Would that be disappointing? If so, only momentarily? Our guess is yeah a little bit and yeah definitely. But we've learned a lot and affirmed a lot. Everything we thought even when driving them months apart holds water, and the decision to be made is no easier nor harder with our newfound experience.

Test drive either one, and you're likely to think, why would I even need to look at the other? Or test drive both, and join the conundrum club. It's a pretty great conundrum to have. ■

SPECIFICATIONS: GS 350 F SPORT

ENGINE	3.5L alum/alum V6 DOHC 24v VVT-i
HP / TORQUE	311 hp / 280 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	11.8:1
DRIVETRAIN	RWD (AWD avail)
TRANSMISSION	8-spd sequential auto, paddles
MODES	eco, normal/custom, sport, sport S+, snow
REAR DIFFERENTIAL	(RWD) 2.937
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	5.7 sec / 143 mph
SUSPENSION	F: dbl wishbone w high-mount upper arms, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar; R: multi-link, coils, gas shocks, stblzr bar; F SPORT: Adaptive Variable Suspension (AVS)
STEERING	speed-sens elec power rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 14.0x1.2; R: 12.2x0.7
WHEELS	(F SPORT) 19x8 front, 19x9 rear
TIRES	F: 235/40R19; R: 265/35R19 summer
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	192.1 / 112.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	(w LDH rear steering opt) 33.4 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.1 in
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.0 / 37.8 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	42.3 / 36.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	18.4 cu.ft
WEIGHT / DISTRIBUTION	3726 lb / 53/47%
FUEL / CAPACITY	91 premium unleaded / 17.4 gal
MPG	19/27/22 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$52,760
COLOR HEADS-UP DISPLAY	900
PREMIUM TRIPLE-BEAM LED HEADLAMPS	1160
LIMITED SLIP DIFFERENTIAL	500
PREMIUM AUDIO: Mark Levinson premium surround sound audio w 17 speakers, 7.1 premium surround, GreenEdge and CLARI-FI tech	1380
ONE-TOUCH POWER TRUNK	400
ORANGE BRAKE CALIPERS	300
INTUITIVE PARK ASSIST	500
LEXUS DYNAMIC HANDLING, REAR STEERING	1700
F SPORT HEATED LEATHER STEERING WHEEL	150
OPTIONS: Rear bumper applique (85), illuminated door sills (425), trunk mat (105), wheel locks (80)	695
DESTINATION CHARGE	1025
TOTAL	\$61,470

SPECIFICATIONS: GS F

ENGINE	5.0L alum/alum V8 DOHC 32v VVT-iE
HP / TORQUE	467 hp / 389 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	12.3:1
DRIVETRAIN	RWD w torque vectoring differential w slalom, track and standard modes
TRANSMISSION	8-spd sport DSG auto, paddles, man
MODES	eco, normal/custom, sport, sport S+
REAR DIFFERENTIAL	2.937
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	4.5 sec / 168 mph
SUSPENSION	F: linear adaptive variable system, dbl wishbone w high-mount upper arms, high-rate coils w bound stopper, large-diameter hollow stblzr bar; R: linear adaptive variable system, multi-link w low-mount upper arms, high-rate coils w bound stopper
STEERING	speed-sens elec power assist, rack & pinion, F Sport mode adjustable
BRAKES	Brembo vented, opposed alum calipers, high-friction pads; F: 14.9, 6-piston; R: 13.5, 4-piston
WHEELS	19x9 front, 19x10 rear
TIRES	F: 255/35ZR19; R: 275/35ZR19 Michelin PSS
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	193.5 / 112.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	36.8 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.1 in
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.9 / 37.8 in
LEGROOM (R/R)	40.6 / 32.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	14.0 cu.ft
WEIGHT / DISTRIBUTION	4034 lb / 53/47%
FUEL / CAPACITY	91 premium unleaded / 17.4 gal
MPG	16/24/19 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$85,010
BBS 19" WHEELS: hand-polished, split	600
COLOR HEADS-UP DISPLAY	900
PREMIUM AUDIO: Mark Levinson premium surround sound audio w 17 speakers, 7.1 premium surround, GreenEdge and CLARI-FI tech	1380
ILLUMINATED DOOR SILLS	425
PKG: Trunk mat, cargo net, wheel locks, rear bumper applique, glove	370
DESTINATION CHARGE	1025
TOTAL	\$89,710

FAREWELL, LEXUS GS? Between the time we drove the Lexus GS F Sport and GS F and the time these words hit the page, word came down the pike that Lexus plans to discontinue the GS after this year. Then again, this year has been so disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, everybody's crystal balls have become murkier since that announcement. Plus... didn't we hear the same thing in 2019 about 2020? And yet here we are.

