

Volvo thinks outside the 'boxy' with stylish, sporty C30 hatchback

by Mark Maynard

Forget four doors and family function -- Volvo is building a bad boy.

Its new C30 three-door hatchback that goes on sale in the United States next summer will fill a couple of holes in the lineup and put Volvo in the hot-hatch, high-fashion segment.

VOLVO C30 -- Volvo's new three-door hatchback C30 goes on sale this summer and is supposed to put Volvo in the hot-hatch, high-fashion segment. CNS Photo courtesy of Volvo.

The car will debut in one well-equipped, turbocharged front-wheel drive model with a 218-horsepower, five-cylinder engine and manual transmission. The exterior styling is contemporary with a nod to vintage Volvo in the frameless glass tailgate in the style of the P1800 wagon. Pricing is expected to start at about \$23,000.

It's early to predict 2007 award winners, but I'll say the C30 will be THE hot sport compact car of next year. The styling is unique, particularly the rear end and glass tailgate, and the techno-contemporary image goes beyond Nano or the latest Chocolate cell phone.

And that's just the production model.

To rev up some presale buzz, Volvo held a contest among custom car builders to create a wild child. The winners would get \$75,000 to design and engineer a car that was unveiled in Las Vegas at the Specialty Equipment Market Association trade show in early November.

Of the 10 drawings presented, three were selected -- all different views of the C30. One was high style with gull-wing doors, one was high performance (507 horsepower) and one was ... just right.

"A concept car shouldn't just be whipped cream on the ice cream," Volvo spokesman James Hope said of the C30 Heico Sportiv. "It should provoke thought and mean something to the customers. And this one does that."

The C30 Heico, a collaboration with Burton Snowboards, is today's test car. While the world knows Volvo for safety and design, it doesn't know the automaker for revolution. And the C30 Heico concept has many revolutions per minute from the 320- to 325-horsepower, turbocharged and computer-chip-enhanced five-cylinder engine.

Compared with the other two SEMA concept cars, the C30 Heico is reserved, even with its six-layer-deep camouflage paint. All three concepts had to be able to move on their own, but not necessarily be "drivers."

The Heico concept is fully drivable with electronically controlled all-wheel drive (a first for this vehicle), height-adjustable suspension and custom-cut Toyo tires. The interior is dressed in two-tone leather with gray stitching, aluminum sport pedals, portable GPS system and console slots for a Motorola Q phone and an iPod. The trunk has a storage system for boards, boots and gear.

Heico Sportiv is a German-based builder of performance parts and accessories for Volvos. It also happens to be a Volvo retailer, which gave Heico Sportiv unique access to company support. Among the builder's feats was adapting the all-wheel-drive system from the S40 sedan to the concept car. All-wheel-drive wasn't part of the business plan for C30, but it may be now.

And all-wheel drive in this turbo screamer is a good use of traction. The C30 is based on the S40 sedan, but is 8 1/2 inches shorter and about 100 pounds lighter.

There is a custom-fit feel to the thick steering wheel and seats, which are not overly bolstered or rigid. And the craftsmanship and assembly has production-level quality, not the typical cut-to-fit, hand-massaged concept work.

The car scoots, turns and stops with large, slotted disc brakes with blue sport calipers. There is the right mix of hardware and software for this car to be the SCCA Solo II weekend racer and the daily commuter.

At idle the engine hums smoothly, but blip the throttle and the exhaust crackles and pops in all the right ways. The clutch is remarkably light for channeling so much power and the gearbox has buttery smooth transitions.

There is a fine balance to steering, brake and throttle inputs, with brake and accelerator pedals spaced right for heel-toe shifting. Turbo lag was a nonissue, as would be expected from 310 foot-pounds of torque.

When the car goes on sale, Volvo expects to have a range of accessories and performance upgrades, provided by at least the three groups that built the concept cars.

Pricing is expected to be about \$23,000, which would make the C30 the least-expensive Volvo. And Volvo needs to bring younger buyers to the brand.

"With the S40, we brought down the average age of our buyers from 38 to 33-35 years," Hope says. "That was a big move for us. Now we want to bring in an even-younger buyer, maybe to the upper 20s."

And with 60 percent of Volvo buyers being female, this coupe's decidedly male stance, broad shoulders and angled frowning headlights should get the guys' attention.

Now that it has a credible entry in the "hot hatch" segment, Volvo will go boldly into the ring against cars such as the VW GTI, Audi A3 and Acura RSX. It might attract some possible move-ups from the Honda Civic and other such imports, Hope says.

The buyers would be college grads, mostly singles or couples, who might be ready to leave behind the sport-tuned Civic.

"This car will show the boss that they aren't a kid anymore," Hope says.

Copley News Service SPECSVolvo C30 T5 Heico Sportiv all-wheel driveBody style: Compact, four-passenger coupe hatchbackEngine: 2.5 liter, turbocharged five-cylinder with modified cylinder head and injectors, electronically adjusted water-injected intercooler, power upgrade computer chip and Heico air filterHorsepower: 320 at 5,500 rpmTorque: 310 foot-pounds at 3,500 rpmTransmission: six-speed manualAcceleration: 0 to 60 mph, less than six seconds, estimated

FEATURESExterior Heico treatment includes: front bumper spoiler with cornering fog lights, rear skirt with integrated diffuser panel, side skirts, fender flares, sport grilleInterior: hand-crafted Lugano leather, including modified Volvo sport seats in two-tone black and alpaca gray with gray stitching and embossed Burton logo. Leather-covered center console features integrated iPod, Motorola Q phone with BluetoothHeico interior hardware: aluminum sport pedals and foot rest, shift knob with aluminum insert, aluminum emergency brake handle and boot, unique door pin set, floor mats and modified Volvo sport steering wheelTrunk: integrated snowboard storage system, including boot, helmet and gear; illuminated with LED lighting and integrated covers

CHASSIS Brakes: Heico Sportiv four-piston, blue sport calipers and 12.8-inch vented and slotted rotors; rear, blue calipers with 11.4-inch custom vented and slotted rotorsSuspension: MacPherson with Heico coil-over strut-spring with adjustable height; Heico Sportiv carbon-fiber strut-tower brace; rear, multilink with Heico coil-over shock-spring with adjustable heightTires and wheels: P245/40R 18-inch custom Toyo with Heico tread pattern and Volution V sport alloy wheelsExhaust: Heico Sportiv downpipe and stainless steel sport exhaust with dual-quad tops; metal racing catalyst

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