

HERE, BUNNY, BUNNY, BUNNY

NISSAN LURES SPORT-COMPACT DRIVERS TO THE SENTRA WITH A NEW SE-R AND SPEC V **BY MARK VAUGHN**

» TOMMY CONSTANTINE, WHO drives a Nissan 350Z in the Koni Challenge, is so cool that he showed up at Willow Springs racetrack with not one but two actual, live Playboy bunnies. For all we know, Constantine has a minimum of two bunnies with him at all times. This could have to do with the fact that his race car is sponsored by *Playboy* magazine, or it could be that bunnies find him irresistible.

In any case, Constantine is a fast driver, easily pulling away from us in a Sentra on the long frontstraight of Willow's big track, even though one of the bunnies was riding with him in the car. What's the weight penalty on a bunny, anyway? Let's say 80 pounds. So the physically fit Constantine and the well-proportioned bunny together still weighed more than our scrawny carcass even with a helmet on.

So we should have been faster.

Or he might have been pulling away because he was using what professional race drivers call "skill" and therefore came off Willow's notoriously tricky Turn Nine better than we did. Or, say, it might be that he had an extra 23 hp on us. Hey, that's it—Constantine was in the Sentra SE-R Spec V,

and we were plugging along in the plain old ordinary Sentra SE-R, with none of that fancy Spec V stuff and no bunnies.

The difference, minus the 80 pounds of *Lagomorpha Leporidae*, is significant.

Let's start with the plain-wrapper Sentra, all new at the end of last year. Since the subcompact Versa came online, the Sentra had to move slightly upmarket. So the new Sentra is almost 3 inches longer, 3 inches wider and a



Koni Challenge driver Tommy Constantine maneuvers around the curves.

chapeau-happy 3.6 inches taller than the old Sentra, all of which means another 9.2 cubic feet inside. The all-new, larger Sentra is built on an all-new, larger Renault-and-Nissan-developed C platform that sits under everything from Sentras and Renault Meganes to the coming Rogue crossover and the Japan-market Lafesta and Serena minivans.

Yes, minivans. Making a minivan into a sport-compact car is Nissan's biggest challenge here. That and getting the bunnies to talk to the writers.

The first step up from the base Sentra is the SE-R, a model designation beloved of sporty-car drivers on a budget since 1991. The 2007 SE-R gets a bigger engine than the base Sentra, a version of the 2.5-liter four from the Altima, which makes 177 hp and 172 lb-ft. That's for a car that weighs 3102 pounds.

That 177 hp sounds pretty sprightly, doesn't it? But it works out to a somewhat slothful 17.5 pounds per horsepower, whereas competitors are lighter and/or have more power and are therefore sportier.

With unique intake and exhaust manifolds and unique pistons and connecting rods, the Spec V gets 200 hp and 180 lb-ft of torque from that 2.5-liter four, which gives it a weight-to-power ratio of 15.5, about what cars that might be cross-shopped by SE-R buyers are getting.

Those competitors include a healthy squadron, from the Honda Civic Si and the Volkswagen GTI to the Chevrolet Cobalt SS and the Mazda Mazdaspeed 3.

The big drawback to the regular SE-R



2007 NISSAN SENTRA SE-R

ON SALE: Now **PRICE:** \$19,400 **DRIVETRAIN:** 2.5-liter, 177-hp, 172-lb-ft four; fwd, CVT
CURB WEIGHT: 3102 lb **0-60 MPH:** 7-8 sec (AW est.) **FUEL ECONOMY (EPA COMBINED):** 29.7 mpg



model is not power, however, but transmission. It must make do with a CVT. How this is supposed to be sporty is beyond us. Even with the artificial feel programmed into the shift map to make you think it's changing gears, the SE-R's CVT, like all CVTs so far on the market, just isn't sporty. It gets good gas mileage, but it isn't sporty.

The base SE-R does get 17-inch alloy wheels with 225/45R-17 all-season tires (ContiPro Contacts on ours), as well as sport-tuned springs and bigger disc brakes. The result is a very stable ride. At Willow, we found that braking was almost unnecessary—you just throw the whole

thing into a turn and mash the gas pedal to get out. The car seems to take care of itself.

The more sporty Spec V, however, was a little more serious. To make the most out of its 200 hp, it comes in a stiffer package. In addition to fewer flat panels in the floorboards, Nissan engineers added a thicker front bulkhead that functions like a strut tower brace, a V-shaped brace across the rear bulkhead just behind the rear seats and a crossmember under the car up front. Those changes increased torsional rigidity by 30 percent. That allowed Nissan engineers to add stiffer springs, shocks and antiroll bars, as well as two harder bushings in the front setup

“for correct handling and steering response,” according to suspension engineer Yasufumi Okadome. The whole thing rides on W-rated 225/45 tires (Continental Sport Contact2s on our test ride). A limited slip differential helps get power to the ground, while stopping comes from 12.6-inch disc brakes.

So, yes, the Spec V is noticeably more responsive in turns. You can rotate it around corners by lifting off the throttle as you near the apex and then mashing the gas on the way out.

The SE-R could have been fun, too, except for that CVT. As it is, the Spec V is by far the better of the two, as you'd expect, though the electric power steering can be twitchy in both. But in the class—at least, the class as we define it—the competitors are all more fun to drive. They all have more power and slightly more enjoyable-to-drive suspensions.

The Nissan is designed to be a lot of things to a lot of drivers, though. Its added interior roominess makes it a more practical ride and is one of its biggest draws. That and price. The SE-R is \$19,400, and the Spec V is only \$500 more. Both prices are \$2,000 or \$3,000 below competitors. So if you want some more inner space to go with your outer pace, one of these two could be just fine. Even without the bunnies. 🐰