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1952 CARRERA PANAMERICANA



MERCEDES-BENZ 300 SL SPORT COUPES

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1:18 SCALE MODELS BY CMC

Mercedes-Benz racing driver Karl Kling pressed down hard on the accelerator of his 300 SL sports coupe on a long, curving section of the Pan-American Highway. His concentration is high and everything outside is a blur as the car approaches 180km/h, when suddenly – what's that... BANG! Windscreen glass and bird feathers everywhere and his co-driver/navigator Hans Klenk lay unconscious in the passenger seat. Kling slowed the powerful racer to a stop, while his mind

recapped what had happened; he'd just hit a low-flying buzzard (vulture) at high speed and the big bird had come through the windscreen, hit Klenk and knocked him out. As Kling tended to his injured friend, Klenk came to and immediately asked him why he had stopped driving – "there's a race to be won!". Kling got the car going again and charged on to the next tyre point, where Mercedes-Benz and rally officials, astounded by the story, treated Klenk's thankfully

superficial injuries. Both men agreed the bird's wingspan was more than 1m, and it was of considerable weight. To avoid a recurrence, eight steel bars were attached vertically in front of a newly fitted windscreen and Kling and Klenk went on to eventually win the tortuous road race known as the Carrera Panamericana, a maker and breaker of motor cars. This is just one of many recorded incidents that occurred during the 1952 event.

The Carrera Panamericana road race came about after the Mexican government completed its section of the Pan-American Highway stretching from Ciudad Juarez in southern Mexico to the Texas border. The race was run from 1950-54 as a means of publicising the new section. Its distance covered more than 3300km and drivers were faced with all manner of obstacles, including extreme weather, high altitudes and dangerous cliffs during the five-day event, with eight stages providing relief and maintenance stops. So arduous was the race, an attrition rate of 50 per cent was not unusual. The inaugural (1950) race was won by an American Oldsmobile, and in 1951 a Ferrari took the honours.





Mercedes-Benz entered four 300 SLs in the 1952 event: three coupes and one roadster (hopefully a future CMC release). A win at the world's toughest road race would cap a magnificent competition year that had seen Mercedes-Benz win Le Mans and also the World Sports Car Championship. Team manager Alfred Neubauer was at first sceptical about the idea, but when the race organisers allowed limited production sports cars to participate, his attitude changed. Kling and a team of mechanics and cars were dispatched to Mexico to begin the process of fine-tuning the carburettors and other details for Mexico's higher altitudes and changes in climate. The new Mercedes 300 SL competition sports coupe (designated W194) used an unbreakable highly tuned 3.0-litre six-cylinder triple-carburettor engine from the 300 series sedans, but in a much lighter space-frame structure clothed with aluminium panels. Chief engineer Rudolf Uhlenhaut designed the sports coupe body with unique gull-wing doors, necessitated by the wide-sill space-frame. With only 175bhp available (compared to rivals Ferrari and Maserati),

the 300 SL coupes had to rely on light weight and low aerodynamic drag to win the race.

That the race (and the car) was tough is testified to by the No.4 car (Kling/Klenk) hitting a buzzard and the No.3 car, driven by Hermann Lang and Erwin Grupp, hitting a dog soon after the start. All four cars suffered numerous punctures, and later the No.3 car would also have its driver's side door torn off through a combination of oversight and high speed. The 300 SL roadster (No.6), driven by American John Fitch and Eugen Geiger, finished third but was (questionably) disqualified for being pushed backwards over the starting line on Stage 4. The third coupe (No.5), driven by Gunther Molter, finished fourth. Were it not for Fitch's disqualification, Mercedes-Benzes would have filled the first four places outright, a remarkable achievement from a relatively new sports car. Kling also set a new race record with just under 19 hours for the race distance.

Hence we go from the 1:1 size versions to CMC's 1:18 scale diecast models of the winning Kling/Klenk 300SL (No.4), and its second-place Lang/Grupp sister car (No.3).



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At first glance you would think there are not many differences between the two, but these become more apparent on closer inspection. A most obvious difference is in the identification "flash" colours above each headlamp and the large Mercedes-Benz logo on the bonnet: green for No.4 and blue for No.3. The bonnet strap colour is also different on each car, and the distinctive steel windscreen bars are only fitted to Kling's model. The seat colours also differ in check-cloth patterns. Harking back to the bonnet straps, they are exquisitely made from thin leather and each has a working buckle so small that tweezers are necessary to undo them (a delicate operation!). Once the bonnet is lifted, it is easy to see the replica slant-six engine with its prominent, high exhaust

doors too far when opening them. Interior door trim is also from flock material. Inside the boot are two spare wheels and tyres sitting above the fuel tank, which is also plumbed. The solid steel wheels, made by Rudge, were attached with a single knock-off wingnut for fast changes, à-la their grand prix counterparts. Externally the perfectly painted bodywork is just as detailed, with accurate Tampo-printed numbers and markings applied to the external surfaces. Just look closely at the glass frame areas and take in the fine black rubber seal replication with chrome strips inserted into the centres, and those windshield wipers are so thin you almost need a magnifying glass to see them. The thin steel bars are also accurately scaled, but would they really have stopped another

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pipes curving down to exit under the passenger side. A huge air cleaner hides the three Solex carburettors but the rest of the engine has the detail we expect from CMC, including wiring, plumbing and even a compliance plate.

Lift a gull-wing door and peer inside the driver's area to see the workmanship applied. This includes flock imitation carpet, real cloth-covered check pattern seats, four-spoke steering wheel and legible instrument dials. Other strong features apply to the doors, which have windows with swivel-opening air vents. The opening gull-wing doors have very strong hinges built into the roof structure, and these tend to look bulky but are necessary for strength and longevity. Be careful to not force the

buzzard? The front air grille and Mercedes-Benz star is a masterpiece of engineering, and the headlamps and other lights are just so realistic you expect them to work at any moment (maybe this will be next on CMC's list of future features?). These models are beautiful (and heavy) replicas of Mercedes-Benz's most famous racing coupe, and honestly so good it's like observing the real car from a small distance.

The 1953 Carrera Panamericana race (sports cars category) was won by Juan Manuel Fangio in a Lancia, and in 1954 by Umberto Maglioli in a Ferrari. The race was cancelled in 1955 and, after a long hiatus, was resurrected in 1988 as a seven-day classic car rally event, in which form it still runs today.

