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Lotus Elise Sports Racer

Loaded Lotus raids the options list – and gets all stripey

Like the parka and meat pies, it seems that skunk-like, full-length body stripes are fashionable again. Whatever car they're stuck to they're 'LOOK AT ME!' loud, but somehow they seem more appropriate affixed to a low-slung sports car like the Elise than a hot hatch. Be-striped Elises are nothing new – we've already had the Type 25 (green with yellow stripes) and the Type 23 (white with green stripes) – but the limited edition model pictured here, the Sports Racer, is of particular interest because it is being launched simultaneously with the revised 2006 Elise 111R

on which it is based. This means it features new seats and LED rear lights, revised instrument markings and pedal box, and Yokohama rather than Bridgestone rubber. Also, for the first time, the regular 111R is being offered with the option of LTC – Lotus Traction Control – which the Sports Racer model has as standard.

This goes some small way towards justifying the Sports Racer's list price of £31,995, some £4000 more than the 111R. LTC costs £395 on the standard 111R, while the Sports Racer also comes with both the 'Sport' and 'Touring' packs (£1495 and £1995 options respectively), hardtop (£1295) and lightweight forged alloys (£1380, and a saving of 1.2kg per corner). That's £6560-worth of options, >>>

'Disabling the traction control doesn't feel like taking your fate in your own hands'



not including the stripes... How much of this you actually need to enjoy the Elise is questionable, but the Sports Racer (also available in blue with two fat stripes) gives us our first chance to try the revised car on its new tyres and with traction control.

It seems curious that Lotus has chosen to develop



a simple traction control, even though the Toyota-powered Elise has anti-lock brakes and therefore most of the sensors required to facilitate a full stability control system. LTC modulates the engine's output to rein-in wheelspin, which is partly why the new pedal box has been specified – the throttle is now an electronic drive-by-wire design. The new pedal arms are steel rather than aluminium (saving weight, against expectations), and their positioning and action has been modified for reduced travel, improved feel and to make heel-and-toe downshifts easier.

The pads that your feet find are still aluminium, so as you slip into the driver's seat, little appears to have changed. Even the new 'ProBax' seats seem much like the old but are, in fact, designed to support the seated spine in a natural way, promoting long-distance comfort and alertness through better blood-flow. The Elise is the first car to use this new design and, after much testing, Lotus is so convinced of its value that it has specified the ProBax seat for all its models. A positive side effect is that the seat itself is lighter because the pump

and bladder that adjusted the lumbar support on the previous seat are no longer necessary. Having the car for just 24 hours, during which we had to bag all our photographs, precluded an extended drive, but the Elise certainly felt comfortable.

Look more closely at your surroundings and you'll notice that, race-car-style, the new tach markings compress the first 3000rpm of the needle's sweep into the same-sized segment as each 1000rpm that follows, emphasising the upper reaches where the high-revving 1.8-litre Toyota engine does its best work.

The Sport Pack that comes as part of the Sports Racer package brings uprated Bilstein dampers and stiffer Eibach springs, and their effect is certainly noticeable. The regular 111R is a notch firmer than the Rover K-series-powered version and the Sports Pack suspension adds a further degree of firmness.

The Sports Racer feels taut right from the off, jiggling over the imperfections of typical A- and B-road asphalt and falling all-of-a-piece for cambers and dips. This feeling that all four wheels are firmly attached to a stiff platform never quite leaves you,



Lightweight forged alloys (top left) save 1.2kg per corner. LED rear lights (bottom middle) new for 2006, as are 'ProBax' seats (bottom left), which improve long-distance comfort and save weight



but there is an athletic suppleness that's apparent once the pace is up, almost as if there's a pre-loading that's overcome by commitment.

Any changes in characteristics and performance brought about by the new, snappily titled Yokohama Advan Neova AD07 LTS tyres are subtle. There's perhaps a little more steering weight and feel at low speeds, but the same deft lightness at pace; an almost 911-like flavour with the nose light and tail heavier.

During our limited time with the Sports Racer the roads were helpfully greasy and, later, plain icy. On surfaces slick with the sort of emulsion that coats winter roads after a few days without rain, the traction control is quite busy, and subtly effective, but you can't help thinking that the Elise coped pretty well without it. The high-revving 189bhp Toyota engine doesn't develop a troubling amount of low-down torque (although we felt that the engine was a fraction more energetic low-down than we recalled, even if Lotus claims no improvement) and any excess would simply bleed away as mild, easily managed wheelspin on the 111R. On a straight

but cambered icy road, LTC prevents the back end slithering sideways by more than a few degrees – just enough to let you feel the conditions. And the conditions tell you that with little weight pinning the front tyres to the road, you don't really want to be able to gain too much speed.

The Elise chassis is remarkably well balanced and it's an absorbing car to drive even moderately briskly. It's a compliment to say that pushing the rather cheap-looking LTC button to disable traction control doesn't feel like taking your fate in your own hands – you're already on the ball, sensitive to what's happening at each corner. Maybe at high speeds it offers a degree of protection in extreme situations, but we didn't have the time or facilities to investigate this. It's interesting to note that the optional torque-sensing limited slip differential (€995) cannot be specified without LTC.

As mentioned, the 2006 111R gets the new ProBax seats, pedal box, instrument markings, LED tail-lights and Yokohama tyres. The limited edition Sports Racer, of which there will be just 199 (100 for the UK) is simply a higher-spec, more sportingly

firm Elise with very neatly applied stripes and, for those who were considering some of the option packs, a not unattractive price. An Exige, with most of the 2006 upgrades, is £2K less, though. Fashion has its price.

John Barker

Specification

Engine	In-line four, 1796cc, 16v
Max power	189bhp @ 7800rpm
Max torque	134lb ft @ 6800rpm
Top speed	150mph (claimed)
0-62mph	5.2sec (claimed)
Basic price	£31,995
On sale	Now

evo RATING

- + Full equipment list
- Fulsome price

