

The Sweet Science: IS350 F-Sport vs. 335i vs. ATS V6 vs. Q50

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Versatility is everything in life. We love sports cars and highway missiles and just about anything else on wheels, but if you need a single car to do it all, a sport sedan is the only reasonable answer. The recipe is simple: four doors, a stout engine, quick reflexes, a lot of heart. BMW's 3-series has ruled this roost for years, but a host of fresher, cheaper challengers are chipping away at the German car's lead. We gathered the strongest three in the hills of rural Ohio and had them slug it out with the Bavarian bruiser. The results were surprising—and not just because the BMW went down in the final round.

... If you expected the BMW to run away and hide with this one, or for newly resurgent Cadillac to pull an end run to the top, we don't blame you. But, hey, surprise! The best sport sedan here is a Luh ... a Lech ... a Lexus.

Yet here we are, and here's where the comparisons stop. While everyone else was busy benchmarking and chasing the Germans, Lexus seems to have gone and done its own, very good thing.

From the moment we sunk into the black-on-black interior, we were struck by how determinedly idiosyncratic the IS 350 seems. There are deep seats with handsome stitching set in an angular collection of black plastics and tech-happy switchgear. The whole look is kind of a Nineties vision of the 2010s—not retro, but Yesterday's Future Today. (The logbook had one editor comparing the car to being swaddled in a Nakamichi tape deck.) But the look works, both visually and functionally, especially since the console buttons allow you to bypass Lexus's abysmal haptic-mouse dashboard controller.

And the instrument cluster is just plain cool. Set between two sharp LCD screens is a big, central LCD tach that gives you basic information. Push a button on the wheel, and the trim ring physically moves aside with a whir, exposing more detailed digital windows. It's a gimmick, but we found ourselves liking it. The only thing it doesn't do is change function; you can change the needle from red to blue to white—perfect for those who believe the color of your lightsaber says a lot about you—but you can't change it into an analog speedometer. Too bad, since that's what we kept wanting.

Press the start button, spin the drive-mode selector to Sport Plus, and commit; the Lexus will let you drive the LCDs right off it. All those techy sporting hints in the cockpit are backed up and then some. The IS has, as another editor observed, the feel and responses of a less heavily styled car. The Infiniti has gadgets to "help" you, the BMW has motor and hereditary manners, and the Caddy is a milled ingot of doubly refined handling. But the Lexus puts it all together better and lets you enjoy it more, for less money—even optioned to the gills—than anything else here.

It's a good time. The V6 is healthy, and while it won't set any drag-strip records, the power builds pleasantly. The steering isn't as talky as we'd like, but it's tack-driving accurate. The brake pedal is sharp with short travel, and the brakes are strong. And when you're really moving, the stability control stays mostly out of the way. On roads as hinky as these, it's nice to have a car that doesn't second-guess everything you do. (Ahem, Q50.)

The IS 350 F Sport isn't much like a Lexus, at least not how we know them. The way it shrinks at speed until it's just you, a great engine, and that big tach isn't what we've come to expect. Or maybe this is just what happens when Lexus turns its focus from softness and luxury to competent speed. Either way, we're happy. And impressed. —
JOHN KREWSON



Drivers awarded their favorite car in each category with a maximum of five available points. Scores were then averaged and added to determine our winner.

Test conditions: temperature: 81–86°f relative humidity: 41–63% elevation: 930 ft wind:
Calm location: chelsea, michigan

**For complete table of results, see the october 2013 issue of road & track.*

	TOTAL	RANK
2013 BMW 335I	38.5	2
2013 CADILLAC ATS	35	3
2014 INFINITI Q50S	32.5	4
2014 LEXUS IS 350	42.5	1