

MAZDASPEED3
Ripping the Road while Holding On Tight!
By David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com
For: The Wheel

Mazda has become a very good friend of the enthusiast, with the history of quick and sporting rotary-engined cars, then the sports car icon Miata. They have been very supportive of the motorsports hobby as well, with a seeming disregard for the liability associated with encouraging competition. The MAZDASPEED3 arrives at our door with great anticipation – what have the enthusiasts at Mazda created here? True confessions – we drove an early Mazda 3 five door hatch back in 2005 in a brief but memorable encounter. While we didn't do a full write up, fond memories are evoked, as the cool, edgy style, nice utilization of space and perky, revvy 2.3 liter four banger really got the grins going. So – now this fun little sportsmobile, with room for Rover and your buddies from the skateboard park arrives, having been injected with the MAZDASPEED steroids. These guys know how to make cars go and the car doesn't sit long before being hoisted about on the open roads in the neighborhood.



Our overall reaction to the car is; “Nice job Mazda” – love the style – definitely carrying a unique and sporty Mazda theme, while staying true to the need for practicality. The demographic and price range would suggest that the buyers of the Mazda 3 will be doing lots of things with it. Weekends in the mountains, commute to work or school, hauling stuff, and they have hit a bullseye with a style that combines those capabilities while providing a distinctive and modern look. When climbing in the cockpit, we were astounded at the headroom. At over 6 feet tall, I reached up to feel at least 4-5 inches of oxygen above my receding hairline – more than enough for the family Stetson, and an

Arai helmet would have ample space to bounce about...the thought came to us that this car had so much headroom that it might be too much....what would this car look like with a slightly lower, chopped profile? Ah, but that's not our job.

The MAZDASPEED3 has some very interesting statistics. We've selected some of the most relevant for the enthusiast below:

Available in both Sport and Grand Touring Packages – the main difference is the GT comes with the Bose sound system and the option of Nav

Base prices: Sport - \$22,835 and Grand Touring – \$24,550

Engine: 2.3 liter direct injected four cylinder turbocharged – 263 HP 280 Ft Lbs torque

Limited slip differential (front wheel drive)

Suspension: MacPherson strut front, independent multi-link rear

Wheels: 18" aluminum alloy

Body style: Five door hatchback

0-60MPH: 5.8 seconds

Top speed: 154 MPH

Gas mileage: 20 city, 28 highway

Jeepers, these statistics sound like a super car 1990, don't they? The bottom line here is that there is a HUGE value to the performance car buyer – the definition of a pocket rocket that will run with the V-8's on the street and stay shy of the magic \$30,000 price point. If that was the goal for Mazda with this car, mission accomplished!

Now let's take her for a spin. From the statistics listed above, this shouldn't take long – this is a quick little hot rod. Hop in – the seats are good to excellent. Firm, with some wrap, they might not be too friendly to the larger enthusiasts, but are pretty darned well-designed for the real world of performance driving. Back seat is what you'd expect in a compact five door. Not bad for short trips. Oops – the dashboard is a mess. Don't you love it when the designers and ergonomics engineers get in a fight? The result is the dash of the MAZDASPEED3. Reminds us of the days of Ford's oval fixation. Only this time, Mazda fell in love with the idea of a big dial in the middle of the radio controls. So all the other buttons are stacked in two rows on either side....argh. Something as simple as the 1-6 memory buttons for the radio, something we thought humanity had nailed down as simple, have been layered 1-3, then 4-6 in the second row. So now, you could hit a poor pussy cat in the road while you're trying to find your favorite tunes on the dial. The dash/radio notwithstanding, the other switchgear and driving position get passing grades. Thanks for the fully adjustable steering wheel...we have a soft spot for this feature and find it disappointing when its not on a more expensive car, knowing that it can be on a \$25K Mazda.

Start engine, put in first gear. This is where things get interesting. Ride is good for a sport chassis – nice balance of firm without jostling us too much. Bigger sway bars help the tendency of body roll, but the car still feels a bit tall and high – making it lean more than we'd like. Humm – the specs on the car say "Sport exhaust" – the suits must have won this battle. It's way too subtle. After listening to the Sti and Evo, this is a purring

pussycat. But these things are only part of the bigger story. This is a front-wheel drive car, albeit with limited slip differential and a “torque management” system. But with 280 ft lbs of torque pulling the front end, this car is a handful. This is close to the torque of the Mustang GT rear drive, but being pulled rather than pushed is a completely different experience. And we gotta shoot straight here. We didn’t like it. Does the car perform? Absolutely spectacular, for a car in this price range and overall utility. Is it fun to drive? Well, let’s just say that you’d better use your Right Guard before you drive this car hard anywhere. We like to teach a 9 and 3 o’clock hands on wheel posture, with a firm, but not clenched grip of the wheel. In the 3 the wheel just begs to be clenched. When you’re on the power, the front tires get pretty perky and are willing to pull you any direction the wind blows, pavement leans – it almost feels like if you are left handed, you’ll go to the left...I know – the Mazda engineers have worked hard to eliminate torque steer, the tendency for a front driver to pull unevenly through the steering wheel. And I can’t say that its “darty” like the older torque steer specials of the 1990’s. But those cars didn’t have 280 ft. lbs. of torque!! This car gives you an appreciation of what Randy Pobst and his Mazda racing teammates go through to handle these higher horsepower front drive race cars. So – this is a VERY quick car that handles really, really well – but the conflict for us is the sense of hanging on for dear life, even at 7/10ths. We did a rolling start, with the traction control off and nailed the throttle from 10mph, and the tires readily broke loose in a somewhat gaudy display of power....think GTO from the front. And holding that torque in your hands comes with a lot of responsibility. One could be pulling toward a tree in a split second of inattentiveness. Driving in the fast lane at 65mph, we gave her full throttle in 4th gear and she wanted to wander just a bit to the less fast lane. Hold on tight and you’re fine, just plan your actions. At the end of the day, this car is jammed with performance for the buck. But we think that, with this front drive platform, sporty street car formula, a sweeter revving, non-turbo (think VTEC) version of the standard 2.3 would have been a better match for the fun driving quotient. And then there is the wish list. If Mazda, for another \$1500 or so could drop an all-wheel drive under this scooter, you could have an Sti or Evo competitor for \$10K less, and that would be big news.