

Considering a Mitsubishi Evo MR Type?
T2 Decals Might Indicate “Brisk” Weekend- Only Miles!
For: The Wheel
By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com

There was a time in the not too distant past when enthusiasts within automotive manufacturers had to hide in their cubicles and withhold their enthusiasm for what they did. Design a car that was either high volume or high margin – that was the mandate. But recently, SCCA types have benefited from automotive industry executives who have discovered that car nuts not only buy cars, but have massive influence in the marketplace on a much broader scale. It didn't a Wharton MBA to figure this out. Building cars that create a corporate image of quality, durability and performance, that are purchased by informed and excited buyers, who bring the trickle-down customers to the showroom, is now firmly established as a way to sell cars. This has certainly been a boon to car aficionados like us. The Dodge Viper, Corvette Z06, Cadillac CTS-V and XLR-V, BMW M3, Mercedes AMG models, the new Pontiac Solstice, and GTO, the Mazdaspeed conversions, Subaru STI, Chrysler SRT's, Ford SVT's, and so on – create a virtual cornucopia of automotive playtoys that probably couldn't be justified on volume alone. But taken as demonstrations of the manufacturers' engineering capability, these performance models have become crucial to their very credibility. All together now – Yee Haaa! The choices are plentiful, and shopping for a performance automobile has never been more exciting. Enter the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution VIII MR. The Evo has become such a cult car, that has polished the image of somewhat stodgy and middle-of-the-road Mitsubishi Cars, it is now clear that the Evo team has great financial leeway in continuing to develop this stellar sedan as the true image leader for the company. Funny how the Galant just didn't do the trick. While the Evo IX has just been announced, this MR model, when it became available to us, was too tempting for The Wheel to resist. In the off season, the Evo, previously categorized in the T1 (Touring) class of SCCA National and Regional competition was changed to T2. The touring classes, both 1 and 2, are great classes for those who do not want to engage in a significant racecar build, and, barring major incident or mechanical failure, are a reasonably low-maintenance way to race. As they say, run what you brung. A quick overview of allowed modifications for touring racing includes, shock replacement, brake pad and fluid replacement, some coolers allowed, removal of A/C parts, exhaust behind the cat (so the car remains street legal), mods to the ECU as long as its in the original housing, and other miscellaneous upgrades that are specified on a per-car basis. This, of course in addition to full racing safety equipment. With the Evo, there a no additional mods allowed beyond those listed above that are available to all T cars, as SCCA is saying this car is very competitive right off the showroom floor. And that's the way we got it – bright red, Le Mans capable wing, BBS wheels and all. One perusal of this “sedan” by a trained eye will yield a healthy respect for the Evo MR's very real street modifications. This is not a boy-racer, it is a RACER.

The MR model (we've searched unsuccessfully to find out what MR stands for – let us know if you know! – we'll guess Mitsubishi Racing) has a number of subtle but significant changes from the standard Evo VIII. And while the RS model was built to be totally spartan, the MR is an attempted balance of street-necessary equipment with a high performance edge. First and probably most importantly is the switch from the 5 speed to a 6 speed. With this comes an upgraded shift cable system that smoothes the lever action, as well as a WRC looking aluminum shift knob. On the surface, this seems like a great improvement for the prospective racer, as the gearing changes with lower options for torqueing out of mid-speed corners. More on that later. A true indicator of how serious Mitsubishi is about this car is reflected in its unique aluminum roof panel, and other weight savings totaling right at 25 lbs. However a check with the SCCA national office confirms that the MR will need to run at the regular Evo weight of 3380 lbs, which may require some ballast. The good news is that the owner would be moving weight from a very high center of gravity to the floor – a big win in any race setup manual. The suspension tuning which includes an upgrade to Bilstein shocks on the MR takes the lateral G capability from .88 to .98. This will translate directly to useable speed on the track. Some little things that are special for the MR are simply cool, and reflect that the designers know SCCA gear-heads pretty well. The aluminum pedals not only look good, but are functional in heel and toe maneuvers on track. The “vortex generator” first of all is a feature you'll all want to brag about.....”Yeah, the vortex generator got me at least 3 MPH at turn one...” OK, maybe not, but this roofline ridge rack of spikes lining the top of the rear window sure looks menacing and definitely announces that you are in an MR. Additional gauges are always good, with a boost gauge set installed below the radio controls – they wouldn't be useful in a race, but good for general reference in indicating any problems. BBS wheels replace the standard Enkei's, which provide a bit more weight savings, this time of the unsprung variety. And lastly, for those tactile fanatics, the emergency brake handle is crafted of real carbon fiber and billet aluminum, and yes – it does inspire a sense of quality and cool.



Our street time with the MR was quite a pleasant surprise. Freeway behavior is predictably a bit firm, but a long drive did not have any negative impact on our personal body parts. The MR is deathly quiet, even to the extent that they went overboard on hushing the muffler. And belying its econobox Lancer heritage, our test car had 9000 presumably hard miles on it, yet there was not one squeak or rattle. This baby is screwed together like a Swiss watch. The one thing that is a huge advantage on the track yet a compromise on the street is the ultra-quick steering. If you've ever driven a car that is set to zero toe, you'll know what we're talking about. Not only is the steering a bit darty, the car seems to want to follow grooves and crowning in the pavement more aggressively than a standard car. Casual cruising in the MR takes a very soft touch, and the "Detroit lean" is just not an option. The Recaro seats are awesome and the very adjustable Momo wheel is probably the best we've encountered in a stock automobile.

We were anxious to let this bad boy stretch its legs, as the mildly annoying elements of the MR's street behavior become an asset on the track. So, after only two days of street driving, we headed to Thunderhill where we had the pleasure of several mid-length runs. Here are some impressions of our play time in the MR: After driving many street cars on race tracks during our Hooked On Driving track days, the steering of the MR jumped out immediately as the best we'd driven. This quick ratio really pays off in the precision of input and feel, and less turning to accomplish the task. This also makes it much easier to keep your hands at home at 9 and 3, or whatever your preference. Turn two, a wide left-handed carousel was a great test turn almost serving as a skid pad for the MR. With the MR, one can wait later than might be otherwise prudent to turn in, as the front end bites nicely and the tail of the car comes around to follow quite willingly. In fact, as confidence grew, fears of a four-wheel drive plow faded completely. The Active Center Differential (ACD) goes to work subtly in directing torque to the corner most in need. This very sweet system allows the car to feel like a two-wheel drive car, with a balanced oversteer settling in as you pass the apex. You can hang this car out – as long as you've

hit the apex and don't pinch the exit, as she might just oversteer all the way around if you try to bring her back in too abruptly. Another feature of the MR is the low-lag, big pull turbo horsepower. Rated at 276HP and 286 ft lbs of torque, the Evo's 2.0 liter four cylinder overhead cam engine is always there when you need it. We had had comments from passengers in our street test that our shifts lack smoothness. Ouch, but it was true. Driving this car on the street and occasionally punching it, then seeing that you were 30 MPH over the limit so lifting and shifting would be a good idea – we weren't always silky smooth. However on the track, shifts and boost arrival was easy to modulate as it is totally predictable, with negligible turbo lag. One key observation here that may be relevant for a prospective T2 buyer – every time we looked down at the tach, we were at or near redline. It seemed that the 6 speed was overkill, and with the big torque in the mid-RPM range, any time spent at redline was probably costing us acceleration. It would be very interesting to compare shift points to see if the 5 speed might be a bit more compatible with getting maximum boost to the road at all times, at least in this environment. The suspension on this “street car” is one of the best we've ever tested on the track. The 997 Porsche and Z06 come to mind as cars that adapt to the track as well, but this is a \$35,000 car! Overall, the springing feels quite adequate, preventing nosedive on braking, and rolling gently in the medium speed turns. However, we'd like a bit more roll stiffness in left, right, left transitions, which would be a legal modification in T2. The brakes are champs as well. We always give a bit of slack here, making the assumption that the Brembo calipers are prepared to take a much harder compound than what came for the street. As it was, the pedal went a bit soft in three quick laps, but the brakes stayed with us, at least at 90% speeds. They'd probably be smoke at 100%, but that's only achieved in a true race situation. Overall this car shows up at the track very capable and a threat in the T2 class. Brake pads, sway bars, a performance alignment to include some negative camber in the front, R compound tires, all would simply be icing on this cake. To say that we are lucky to have options like the Evo MR available to us, with a 5 year, 60,000 mile warranty, and favorable lease terms on your good credit is simply awesome. Just remember – if you ever shop for a used MR, you'll have to inquire very directly if it's marketed as “only driven on weekends.”