

SPORTS CAR ILLUSTRATED



MAZDA MX-6 & 4WS 626

JAGUAR XJ6

FORD FESTIVA

FIERO GT

MITSUBISHI GALANT

SIGMA

AUTO-BIOGRAPHY:

FABRIZIO BARBAZZA

**One-upsmanship
Personified:**

**KOENIG
MERCEDES 500SL**



**SPORTS CLASSIC:
ABARTH 750 RECORD MONZA**



M AZDA 626 & MX-6



*Prettier
faces,
lustier
hearts for
1988*

By Gary Witzenburg

The lot of the underdog can be tough. Take mid-size Japanese cars, for example. Most any knowledgeable car guy can tell you Toyota's Camry and Honda's Accord are hot. But how many will add that Mazda's 626 may be just as good...for less money?


Japanese sports coupes? Toyota and Honda again, with their finely honed Celica and Prelude, take top billing in most folks' minds. But how many think of the equally excellent 626 coupe, let alone the very quick turbocharged 626 GT?

Like Rodney Dangerfield, the 626 just don't get no respect. At least not what it deserves. But that may soon change.

For several years now, Mazda's 626 has been closely competitive with those better known names, and the GTs have outclassed them in both performance and overall grins per dollar. And now there's an all new 626 that's a major improvement over the previous car. We traveled to Japan to check it out.

The first important thing to





know about the 626 is that it comes in three distinct flavors: four door sedan, five door touring sedan, and two door coupe -- the latter now known as MX-6. Each has its own personality, each sports its own distinct alloy wheels and other detail differences to set it apart, and even the sedan is pleasantly slick, handsome and contemporary in shape.

The new 626 engine is a 2.2 liter, three valve per cylinder, electronically fuel-injected four good for 110 bhp without turbo and a robust 145 with -- both ratings substantial improvements over last year's 93 and 120 bhp, respectively. Peak torque of the turbo is 190 lbs. ft. at 3500 rpm, while the naturally aspirated version kicks out a respectable 130 lbs. ft. at 3000 rpm. Both are available with a choice of standard 5-speed manual or optional electronically controlled 4-speed automatic transaxle with lockup torque converter.

The suspension is comprised of MacPherson struts in front, independent twin-trapezoidal links in back, tied down with anti-roll bars at both ends. Automatic Adjusting Suspension (AAS) -- standard with the turbo engine, optional without -- senses acceleration, braking and cornering forces and switches shock rates accordingly. Speed sensitive power rack and pinion steering is standard, with computer-

controlled assist on turbo models. And the turbo sedan, when ordered with automatic transaxle, gets Mazda's unique four-wheel steering (4WS) system in the bargain (see sidebar).

Brakes are power disc/drum with the non-turbo engine, four-wheel discs with the turbo. A new and sophisticated anti-lock brake system (ABS) is optionally available on turbo models and standard on the 4WS turbo sedan.

Compared to the second generation 626 it replaces, the new four door sedan and five door hatchback ride on a 2.4 in. longer wheelbase for improved ride and stability. Tracks are also increased (1.0 in. front, 1.6 in. rear) for more athletic handling. The five door is taller than its predecessor by 10mm for better headroom, and both are roomier in virtually every inside dimension. Mazda says four six foot adults can be comfortably seated (true), and there's occasional room for three grown-ups in back, provided they're friendly.

Although it doesn't yet offer the 4WS feature, the new coupe is significant for a couple of reasons. One, it's the first 626 coupe to get its own separate identity -- MX-6. This is a smart move on Mazda's part, since it should make this worthy entry better able to hold its own with the likes of Celica and Prelude once people perceive it as more than just a coupe version of the 626 sedan.

Second, it's a mechanical twin to the car that will soon (next spring) replace Ford's four cylinder, rear-wheel drive Mustang. This has hard-core Mustang nuts up in arms, probably because they don't understand either the car or the plan. Once they get the full picture -- that the Mazda-based front-wheel drive Mustang was designed in America; will be built in America (in a new plant in Flat Rock, Michigan); is aggressive, even macho (*definitely* not wimpy) in character; and will *not* replace their beloved V8 GT -- they should cool down a bit.

Compared to the four and five door, the coupe is shorter in wheelbase (99.0 in. vs. 101.4 in.),



slicker in shape (0.32 Cd vs. 0.34 and 0.33) and more aggressive in character. Blistered fenders front and rear give a broad-shouldered, muscular look, and the GT's "ground effects" skirts and bladed rear spoiler add just enough visual impact to complement the potent turbo engine. Our only styling gripe: the MX-6 GT's alloy wheels aren't as attractive as the touring sedan's.

If 145 horsepower doesn't sound all that potent, consider the GT's 190 lbs. ft. of torque. Torque makes acceleration, and this mighty motor makes 60 mph from rest a 7.4 second exercise. Keep your boot in it, and the quarter mile comes up in just 15.8 seconds. Top speed (a function of horsepower and drag) is a heady 131 mph. That may be short of V8 Mustang territory, friends, but it isn't exactly slow!

Based on the early prototypes we saw and drove, interior design is functional if somewhat bland. Everything is sensibly laid out, easy to see and operate; but nothing inside the 626/MX-6 cabin especially excited us. A digi-graphic electronic display is available with the turbo engine, but we don't recommend it. The standard analog instruments -- although they don't include oil pressure or voltage dials -- are better for actual driving ...as opposed to profiling.

As best we could tell at Mazda's Proving Grounds, the base car's handling is more than adequate, and the GT's is terrific--fully competitive with the big-name opposition. All-season radials are standard fare: 185/70SR14s on 14 x 5.5 in. steel wheels on non-turbo cars, 195/60HR15s on 15 x 6 in. alloy wheels on GT/Turbos.

Base price for the sedan should be around \$10,500; and if our initial impressions hold true, Mazda's 626 and MX-6 should be underdogs no more. There's only one problem with that: once word gets out, there may be long waiting lists and excessive markups at Mazda dealerships, too. We won't tell if you don't.

SCI



Four-Wheel Steer

Those who drive new 626 turbo automatic sedans home from their Mazda stores will notice something extraordinary: their rear wheels steer. Or maybe they'll just notice that the car is a breeze to park and navigate in close quarters and a lot more stable in high speed handling. Mazda calls it "Nonchalant Accuracy."

Unlike the fully mechanical system available on Honda's 1988 Prelude, Mazda's 4WS is a sophisticated blend of mechanical linkage, hydraulic power and electronic control. The Honda's rear wheel direction and angle are based on steering input; the Mazda's are based on speed. At very low speeds, the back wheels turn opposite the fronts to aid maneuverability. This computer-controlled rear-steer angle decreases as speed increases until it crosses zero at 22 mph. Above that, the rears turn the *same* direction as the fronts to aid stability. Maximum angle either way is five degrees...and the fail-safe mode is straight ahead.

4WS can't increase available traction, so it gave no ultimate cornering advantage at high speeds on Mazda's Proving Ground road course. Following the course's curves at normal speeds, however, we found the 4WS car noticeably more agile and stable than its 2WS counterpart; and it was absolutely glued to the road in 100+ mph lane-change maneuvers. This is why 4WS is offered on the sedan, not the coupe: it's mostly a safety and convenience feature for Mom and Pop, not a cornering aid for would-be racers.

