

OCTANE BOOSTERS TESTED: Proving what works

JULY 2005 • VOLUME 17, NO. 07

INSPIRED TO DRIVE

SPORT COMPACT CAR

Battle of the Project Cars

11-Car Track Beatdown

Supercharged 350Z ■ ■ 300ZX TT
Rally Beater 510 ■ ■ Turbo Miata
Sentra SE-R ■ ■ Silvia
EVO VIII ■ ■ TSX
SRT-4 ■ ■ Scion tC
■ WRX STi

TECH:
Fine-tuning
camber,
caster
and
toe

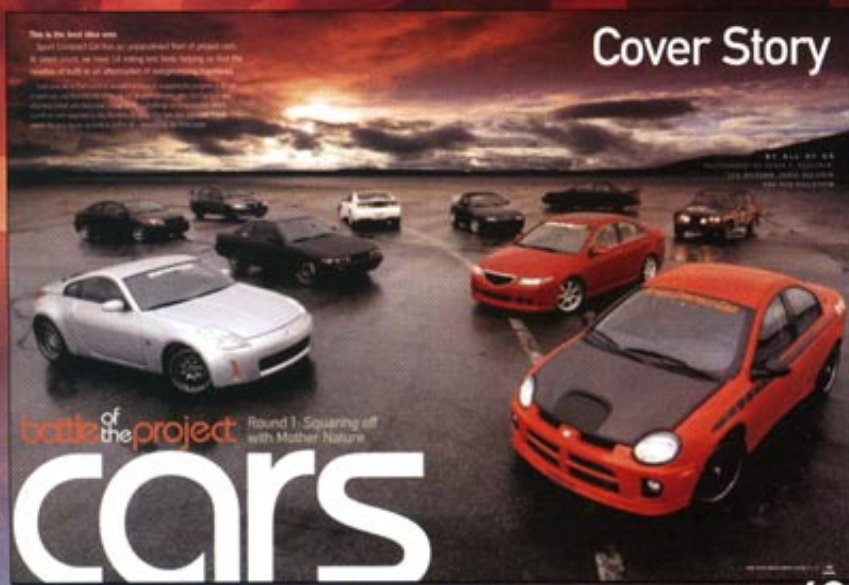
9400 rpm, 17:1
Honda screamer
— We build it

Technobabble —
The Geek talks gear ratios

CARS:

■ Blown G35 ■ Type-R Civic coupe
■ Hybrid Datsun roadster

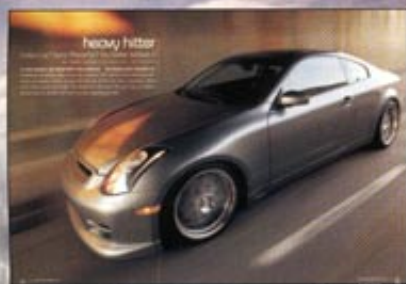
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Cover Story

battle of the project cars
Round 1: Squaring off with Mother Nature

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heavy hitter

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born to commute, reborn to race

PG. 94



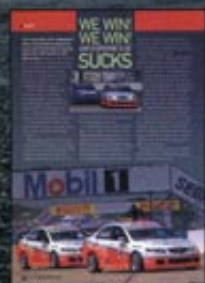
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New parts, new gear

BY ALL OF US
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HENRY Z. DEKUYPER,
LES BIDRAWN, JARED HOLSTEIN
AND ROB HALLSTROM

battle of the project cars

No Parking
or Pitting
Beyond This Point

The idea was simple. Instead of just telling you why they weren't running this month (look for that on page 126), we would take all our project cars and race them against each other, regardless of their present condition. Genius.

It gets better. Not only would the simple act of unpacking the stopwatch squelch all of the normally hollow office boastery, we'd up the humiliation by subjecting all of our cars to the same unsympathetic editorial criticism we unleash on every car unfortunate enough to find its way to our offices.

Each of our projects, you see, is managed by a single staffer. Sometimes that staffer owns the car, sometimes they've just adopted it, but either way, the care and feeding of a project car leads to an almost parental bonding. After carefully selecting each modification and adding countless quarts of knuckle blood to the car's construction, the evenhanded judgment of our

crack evaluators can be tipped to favor their personal creation.

Flaws are understood, rationalized and driven around when the parent is behind the wheel. Each bad habit is a trade-off consciously adopted to achieve some other goal. Rides like crap? Sure, but it handles. Can't idle? Maybe, but the huge injectors and lumpy cams make giant-killing power. Unmanageable clutch? Yeah, but it won't burn up doing 12-second quarter-mile passes. You get the idea.

It's easy to forgive your baby for these faults, but jump in a car you've never driven and the balance of performance to pain-in-the-ass shifts. Only then do we see if the payoff is really worth the compromise.

Each car, then, is driven for lap times by the staffer who knows it best, but the rest of the day's lapping, and the harsh editorial pen, belong to someone else. To someone, in most cases, who has never been behind

the wheel of that car.

So this is it. After years of not quite getting around to it, months of planning and countless nights of thrashing to get almost everything running for the big day, nearly the entire SCC fleet is assembled, ready for battle. On the day of reckoning, 11 of the 14 cars showed up to justify their existence. Some even seemed prepared.

Then, precisely at 8:30 a.m., as the last project car rolled into the pits ready for the day when all the boasting would be replaced by excuses, when the burning questions of which project car really reigned supreme would finally be answered, the unlikely happened—water fell out of the sky.

OK, so never mind that “who's the fastest” crap. It's time to see which car is fastest in the rain.

PROJECT 350Z

“Whatever you do, don't wad it up,” Jacquot lectures me as I pull on my helmet. “I don't want to have to explain to Nissan PR that you totaled their car, got it?”

“Sure, boss,” I mutter as I turn the key. I already know what I'm in for. Following Project Z at the Track Attack, I'd seen

PRECISELY AT 8:30 A.M., AS THE LAST PROJECT CAR ROLLED INTO THE PITS READY FOR THE DAY WHEN ALL THE BOASTING WOULD BE REPLACED BY EXCUSES, THE UNLIKELY HAPPENED—WATER FELL OUT OF THE SKY



battle of the project cars

PROJECT TSX

The stock Acura TSX is such a sweet-natured machine that doing anything to it risks detonating that delicate balance. But this magazine isn't about leaving cars alone. We screw with them. The trick is to screw without screwing up.

First a review of the TSX itself: It's the JDM/Euro Honda Accord slightly redecorated and re-engineered for U.S. duty. That means it has a real double-wishbone Honda chassis beneath and the slickest-shifting six-speed Honda transmission outside of the CBR600F4i. And it's really a family car, which, unlike the CBR600F4i, means it's comfortable for four. In other words, it's a perfectly respectable go-to-church car that we're now consistently feeding fistfuls of aftermarket crack.

Compared to an unmolested TSX, Project TSX has almost infinitely greater rear roll stiffness. Having a stiff ass end is almost always a virtue (unless you're in a Turkish prison), but what's satisfying about Project TSX's ass is that it doesn't come at the price of all the ride comfort.

The credit goes to the Skunk2 coil-over adjustable shocks. Of course, the ride isn't as velvety as stock, but it's still plush, and diving into corners the rear end now rotates in a predictable arc. This TSX wants to turn. It would have been even better on

test day if it had wanted to swim.

Just as impressive is how the front end remains stable instead of burrowing into the pavement like a gopher and bouncing around like a porpoise with diaper rash. The front and rear now work together to produce an almost neutral front-driver. You'll find understeer at the limit, but the limit has moved—in the right direction this time.


It's relatively easy to isolate the effect of the Skunk2 shocks; it's tougher to distinguish the performance of the brakes and the wheels and tires from one another. The brakes feel great, but the BFG g-Force KD tires do the real friction work.

Because of their luscious looks alone, it's almost a shame to operate the Brembo Gran Turismo stoppers in this weather. These are really good brakes: throw a 40-pound rock at the brake pedal and the car stops like it hit a block of granite. Side step the pedal and speed dribbles off in manageable droplets so the front end can bite into a corner (or at least the puddle where the corner should be). Acura offers Brembos on the TL, and it ought to offer them on the TSX as well.

Finally the Skunk2 short shifter actually feels better than stock. That's like someone adding a few brush strokes to the "Mona Lisa" in the Louvre and actually making it better. It's baffling.

PROJECT TSX (2004)

ENGINE
Engine Code: K24
Type: Inline four, aluminum block and head
External Modifications: Skunk2 intake, header, stainless-steel exhaust and prototype grounding kit
Engine Management Modifications: Hondata K-Pro ECU
DRIVETRAIN
Layout: Transverse front engine, front-wheel drive
Drivetrain Modifications: Skunk2 short shifter and lightweight lug nuts
SUSPENSION
Front: Skunk2 coil-overs
Rear: Skunk2 coil-overs
BRAKES
Front: Brembo four-piston calipers, 12.9-in. two-piece rotors, braided lines
Rear: Stock
EXTERIOR
Wheels: 18x8-in. Volk GT-7
Tires: 225/40-18 BFGoodrich g-Force KD
Body: Ken Style knockoff body kit

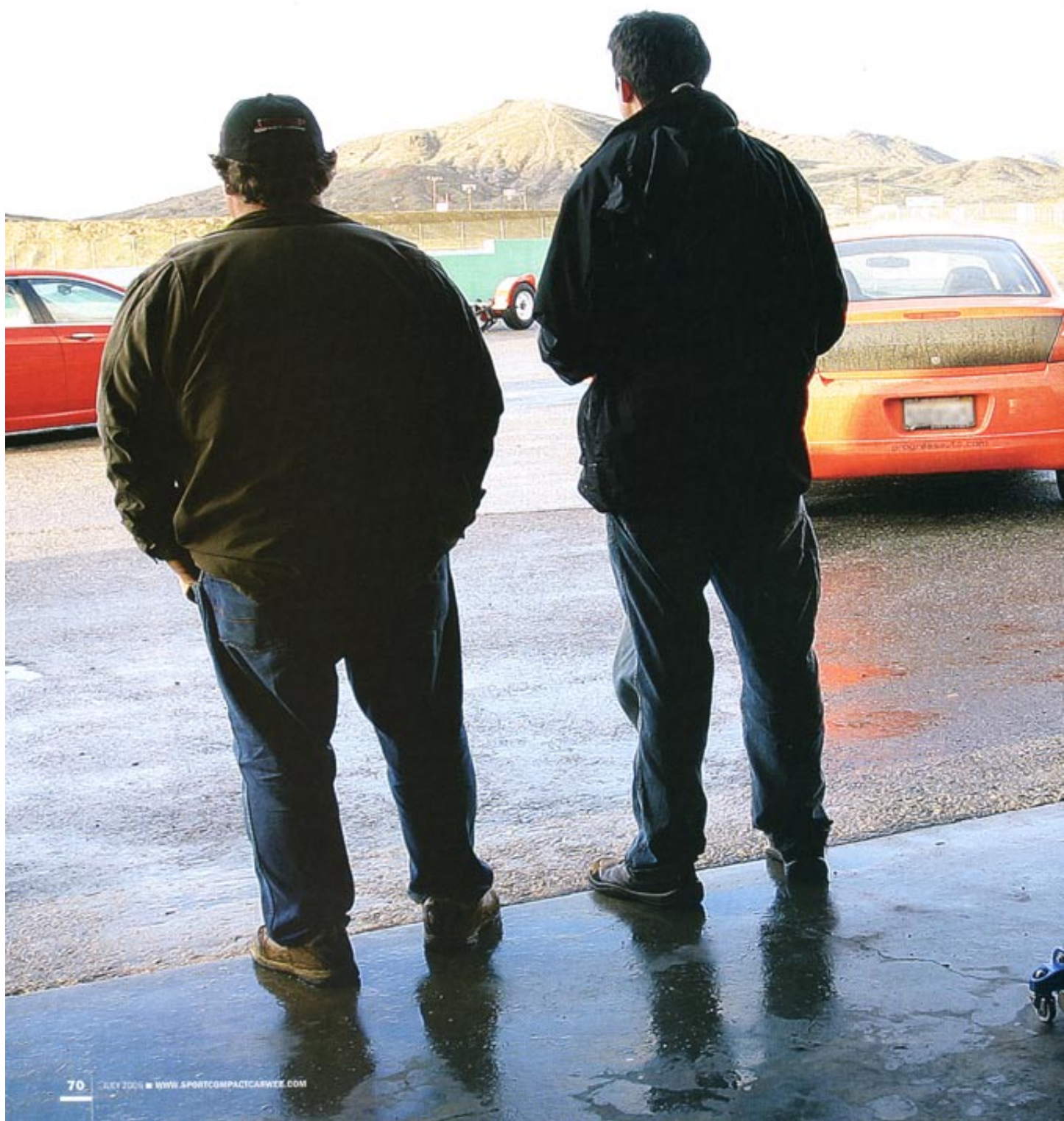


At this stage, the Project TSX remains unscrewed up. It's more capable and a bit louder, but pleasant enough to putter around Presbyterian style. But the engine still remains relatively mild. Today, the TSX shows its size and its weight—something only an infusion of M3-like power will fix.

—John Pearley Huffman



battle of the project
cars



THE RESULT

The dim, dark, ugly reality of racing project cars against each other is that someone, or rather some car, has to finish last.

And to finish at all, one first must start. Project 300ZX TT did neither. It spent the day bathed in the dry, warm shelter of the pit garage, escaping only to make the occasional camera appearance before returning to the garage for another diaper wipe.

In the unforgettable words of Kojima this car is "Uhhhh, way too valuable to risk in the rain," or "it's a concourse-winning machine with priceless historic value." Or "it's probably the nicest Z32 in the country." Sure, Mike. All we know is it's a car. And it doesn't get driven in the rain. And that's laughable.

In 10th place, surprisingly, is Project 350Z. A victim of its own aggressive setup with wide tires and massive roll stiffness, it proved to be a mess beyond what any of us predicted in these conditions. Unable to put power down or corner with authority, it proves exactly how compromised a 1.0g-car can be if you take away its primary weapon: grip.

Amusingly, Project Rally Beater, Coleman's tree-crushing Datsun 510, isn't last. We're sure it would have been slower than the 350Z had its laps not included so much intentional course cutting. Coleman claims he couldn't keep it out of the dirt. Either way, it's still ahead of Project 300ZX.

Project TSX, with all its luxurious amenities and family car compromises, finds itself about where we expect any 3,230-pound four-door Honda to end

BATTLE OF THE PROJECT CARS

RESULTS

1)	EVO MR	1:05.98
2)	SILVIA	1:08.11
3)	SRT-4	1:10.53
4)	STI	1:10.67
5)	SENTRA SE-R	1:10.75
6)	TC	1:11.65
7)	MIATA GEN. I	1:12.10
8)	TSX	1:12.84
9)	RALLY BEATER	1:16.66
10)	350Z	1:16.95
11)	300ZX	DNS

up—eighth place. It proved a respectable drive, but without the power or, frankly, the poise of many of our other project cars, it's relegated to a back-of-the-pack finish.

It's hardly a surprise to find a heavy two-wheel-drive sedan at the back of the pack, but finding a nimble, responsive and far-from-underpowered Miata only one rung up the ladder amazed everyone. Sure, Project Miata wasn't exactly prepared for this contest. But it is a Miata. And it is turbocharged. Perhaps the curse of Jacquot still lives in its soul.

How funny is it, then, to find a mildly modified Scion tC in sixth place? This freshman in the fleet finds itself among proven metal in the rankings. Sure, the rain certainly played in its favor by reducing the power advantage of every car here. Meanwhile, the little tC put every last horsepower to the ground, rotated mildly and splashed its way to a result far beyond its pedigree.

Third through fifth spots are covered by a mere .22 seconds. And, oddly, the car that at least two staffers regarded as the odds-on favorite to win, the STi, falls drastically short in fourth. Hot on its tail

is the champion of the more-for-less philosophy of fast cars, Coleman's Sentra SE-R. The two couldn't have achieved such similar lap times in more different ways—the STi all straight-line motor and efficient power-to-the-ground engagement, the SE-R with pure cornering speed and early throttle application.

Don't count out the massively entertaining SRT-4 in third. The automotive embodiment of piss-and-vinegar slid, spun and muscled its way onto the wettest podium in car test history. Impressive.

Only the big guns are left. And one of them, embarrassingly, is completely stock. The silver medal goes to Project Silvia. And in the absence of the highly anticipated STi, Silvia and 300ZX dogfight, watching the Silvia draw graceful, sideways arcs at every corner was a testament to both its development and the effectiveness of some serious aftermarket hardware. But, in the rain, it just wasn't enough.

So yes, the champion of Battle of the Project Cars version wet-point-o is our virginal EVO MR. And yes, as of this test, it bears no aftermarket enhancement. And yes, in the dry, it would have been destroyed by at least four cars.

It all comes down to what you want: easy, thoughtless, keep-it-simple-stupid speed. Or, at roughly half the cost, a car like Project Silvia, which is more involving than every stock EVO in the world, more adjustable than a Gumby doll, and on any day except this one, faster than any stock EVO.

Next year. ■

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