

"Built for Speed"

(for *Star Ledger* NY Auto Show section publishing 4/14/95)

By Jim Koscs

To sports car buffs who grew up with British roadsters of the 1950s or 1960s, the Mazda Miata (\$17,500) is probably the perfect sports car. Like the old MGs and Triumphs, the Miata is light, nimble and peppy. Unlike them, it's reliable, and its convertible roof keeps out the rain. There is, however, a group of buyers that demands the one ingredient missing from the Miata -- raw speed. For them, only a car that can exceed the 55-mph speed limit in five or six heartbeats will do.

If this describes you, here's a look at 1995's fastest cars. They start at \$17,266 and go all the way to a quarter of a million dollars.

Under \$20,000 -- The Road Warriors

You don't have to spend \$50,000 for supercar-level performance. Chevrolet's Camaro Z28 (\$17,915) and its fraternal twin, the Pontiac Firebird Formula (\$19,344), come to the starting line with a 275-horsepower version of the Corvette's 5.7-liter V-8 ("350" to those born before 1970), a six-speed stick shift and can do 0-60 in under six seconds. Firebird Trans Am (\$21,184) adds some luxury amenities and slightly different front styling to the Formula. Convertible models start at run \$24,000-\$27,000. Optional traction control should reduce the sweaty palms of winter driving in any of these V-8 cars. Some Pontiac dealers offer a 300-horsepower Firebird called Firehawk (\$26,000), which is modified by SLP Engineering.

Ford introduced a redesigned Mustang last year, with nostalgic touches that recalled the original 1965 model. This year, a new GTS (\$17,950) joins the line. For about \$2,000 less than the GT, you get that model's 215-horsepower V-8, but not power windows and locks, rear spoiler, fog lights and fancy seats. For Z28-level performance, you'll need the 240-horsepower Cobra.

If you prefer new-tech to old-fangled V-8s, the front-wheel-drive Mitsubishi Eclipse GS- (\$19,999-\$22,929) and Eagle Talon TSi (\$17,266-\$19,448) serve up musclecar-like performance from 210-horsepower turbocharged four-cylinder engines. The up-level models feature all-wheel-drive. Both coupes are built by Mitsubishi in Illinois, and differ only in styling and standard equipment levels.

Over \$20,000 -- The World's Best Sports Cars

If you travel life with just a close companion and a couple of suitcases, treat yourself to a real sports car. The best and fastest include the Porsche 968 coupe (\$39,950) and Cabriolet (\$51,900), Mazda RX-7 (\$37,200), Nissan 300ZX and its turbocharged brother (\$35,750- \$42,500) and the mid-engine Toyota MR2 turbo (\$29,250). The "slowest" among them will hit 60 mph from rest in about six seconds.

Need a little more room for groceries? The BMW M3 (\$35,800) is a pumped-up 3-Series coupe, with a 3.0-liter 240-horsepower straight six, stiffened suspension and 17-inch wheels. Toyota's 320-horsepower Supra Turbo (\$46,750) combines Vette-beating performance with Lexus refinement. Its non-turbo twin (\$36,900) is no dog, either, with 222-horsepower. Like the Supra Turbo, the Mitsubishi 3000 GT VR-4 (\$40,000-\$62,000) and its Dodge Stealth R/T Turbo twin (\$37,905) can also brag about 320 horses, but this pair sends the power through all four wheels. The Mitsubishi offers a novel hardtop-convertible model, with a steel roof that folds into the trunk like the 1957-59 Ford Skyliner.

No car can settle arguments about power and speed like the Dodge Viper (\$56,000), a "no excuses car for no-excuses people," according to Dodge. Its huge 8.0-liter (488 cubic inch) 400-horsepower V-10 engine is larger than the V-8s of classic muscle cars like the Dodge Hemi Charger. Viper attracts a crowd wherever it's parked, and can blast away from the crowd to 60 miles per hour in a blink over four seconds.

Chevrolet's Corvette (\$36,750-\$43,665) may lack the Viper's presence, but this 300-horsepower modern classic is no slouch by any measure. Want more? Step up to the 405-horsepower Corvette ZR1 for another \$30,000.

Although the Porsche 911's basic shape hasn't changed in three decades, comparing the new car to the original would be like pitting Jaws against your goldfish. The 1995 911 Carrera (\$59,900-\$74,200) is nearly as quick as a Viper, while the 400-horsepower 911 Turbo (price to be announced) is quicker.

What the mid-engine 270-horsepower Acura NSX (\$75,725) gives up in brute power, it more than makes up for with its uncanny blend of racecar handling and sport sedan comfort. A revised model with more power and a targa-top will be introduced soon.

The Exotics

Before companies better known for economy sedans started building sports cars, there was Ferrari. The new mid-engine F355 (\$136,500) draws 375 horsepower from a V-8 of only 3.5 liters. The less boisterous, but nearly as quick 456 GT (\$225,000) recalls Ferrari's "Gran Turismo" models of the 1960s with its front-mounted 442-horsepower V-12.

Lotus Esprit, the wedge-shaped sports car that James Bond drove in the 1970s flicks is still around in "S4" form (\$70,000), with an amazing 264 horsepower from a tiny 2.2-liter turbocharged inline four. And what of Aston-Martin, the "real" James Bond's car? It's back with the DB7 (\$125,000), which echoes classic styling themes of the '60s Aston-Martins like the DB5 that 007 drove in "Goldfinger." No word on whether there'll be an ejector seat option.

And last -- but certainly most outrageous -- the Lamborghini Diablo lives up to its demonic looks with a 492-horsepower V-12 in back and your choice of rear-wheel-drive (\$239,000) or all-wheel-drive (\$275,000).