

Another "M" Car In the Garage?

by Chuck Wills

For the last month my house has resembled a FEMA disaster site. Someone set off a "stuff bomb" that has scattered remnants of photographs, record albums and out-of-season clothing all over my house. I got the brilliant idea that I would finish our basement, and as is the case with most brilliant ideas, I forgot a few "important details". Things like the fact that when we moved in to our house five years ago, we deposited dozens of boxes in the basement and forgot about them. As boxes of junk often do, they began to multiply and their contents even had the nerve to overflow onto the floor. So, here I am five years later with boxes up to the rafters and a family shouting in chorus "when's the basement going to be done!"

I needed a break, and fortunately for me I was able to take a break at my favorite place, the racetrack. Motorsport Drivers Club was having their season ending event at Putnam Park and it offered me the perfect excuse to slip away and take out my basement aggression on ten corners and one set of tires. In the wee hours of that Saturday morning, while the family lay fast asleep in their beds, I pushed the Miata down the driveway and was off to Putnam Park.

Not only did I get to drive on the track that day, I was also instructing a student in his 1973 Porsche 914. If I had to make a list of things that flip my switches, near the top of the list would be Miata's, track driving and 914's. I was in heaven when I saw that little green box, as it was the nicest 914 I'd ever seen – even better than my often-lamented 914/6. There's just something about a boxer engine planted a few inches behind your hips that makes you feel like you're in an old GTP car, hurtling down the straight at LeMans.

A low center of gravity with a taught suspension and flickable handling, am I describing the Miata or the 914? Well, both actually. I consider both to be pure sports cars, with little of the compromise that you would find in other "sporty" cars. Rear drive, great brakes, suspension tuned for your favorite road and a willing engine. And you can't forget the fact that there's nothing but clouds above your head. I had considered all this before the track event and knew that I was in for a day in sports car heaven.

We were in the pits hanging out before the event, mingling with the other Miata and Porsche drivers when in came an unusual sight. A new MINI Cooper S. I think the MINI is a fine looking car, with equal parts of British heritage and BMW technology. Sort of a modern retro mobile, but the first question across my mind was how would it work on the track? It's not a Miata or a 914, you can tell that from just a passing glance. Front drive, the top doesn't come off, it's a tall car with the center of gravity up around shoulder height. Yikes. Sporty, yes. Sports car? I wasn't convinced.

As a purely scientific study, I decided that I needed to ride in the MINI to see if it felt like a proper sports car. So, in the interest of science I begged a ride and strapped in. It felt decidedly unMiata like. Tall, narrow, with a cavernous cabin, I felt like I was sitting in a shoe box on stilts! The speedometer was stuck in the middle of the dashboard, with the tach right behind the steering wheel. As the driver taxied down the pit lane, I tightened my safety belt and prepared to hang on as we rolled through the corners.

Man, I was wrong about that car. When the crew gave the signal to pull out on the track, the driver hit the gas and we blasted down the straightaway. The wheels spun all the way through first gear and laid rubber in second, too. The muted scream of the supercharger was barely audible over the growl of the tuned exhaust as we hurled down the straight towards turn one. As the driver

shifted into fifth gear at 105 mph, I thought "OK, this thing has power, lots of power, but it'll be all over in turn 1, right?" Wrong. Even though the MINI felt tall and boxy to me, we flew through turn one like an F16 banking over Baghdad. Smooth, fast and flat. This is all wrong. Front drive cars do not handle like this. I've ridden in a lot of cars, but I can't think of any from the factory that carve the corners as flat and controllable as this MINI did. The driver flew around the track, passing other "real" sports cars with relative ease.

I'll say it again. I was wrong about this car. I had a ball during my 20 minutes in the passenger seat. We slid around corners and blasted down that straight and the car never missed a beat. It felt like it was built to bang against the rev limiter and slide around corners all day long. Hmm, just like a Miata. I admit it, the MINI is a sports car. It's a different formula than a Miata or 914, but that sports car soul is in there. MINI got this little car right on the very first try. It looks good and has the sport car guts to back it up. I don't think I could ever trade the Miata for a MINI, as I'm still a little partial to my rear-drive roadster. But, I might be willing to make a little extra space in the garage.

Classifieds

For Sale: 1) *Hardtop* - 1995 Miata OEM Brilliant Black with defroster and rain gutter. Is like new. OEM sells for at least \$2,000. Will sell for \$1,200 to club member. (Very Firm)
 2) *Kevlar High Performance Clutch* - from Dealer Alternative. New in the box. This is NOT an ACT clutch. It is a genuine Kevlar clutch with unlimited holding power. Similar clutches are sold new from \$800 to \$1,000. Ssell to club member for \$485. (Very Firm).
 3) *1999 Ford F150 Pickup* - Full Size Bed and Cab. AT / PS /AC/ Tilt Wheel/ Cruise Control/ 5000 lb. Trailer capability with 4.2 Liter V6. Only 19,000 miles. Bought new, well maintained, garaged. No dings or dents. Edmonds average retail in the Indy area is \$10,775. Will sell to club member only for \$9,200 (Very Firm). Call Jim Barrick @ 765-342-6352.