

*A continuing series of caring for your car*

# Where The Rubber Meets The Road

by Chuck Wills

A tire's job is not very glamorous. It rolls around in dirt and muck, through temperatures ranging from well below zero to far over 140 F. Snow, rain, sand, gravel... not a job for the faint of heart. Through it all our beloved tires may occasionally get hosed off at the car wash and air pressure checked every few months. Wheels don't have life much better. While they don't go down the road face first like our poor tires, they do take serious abuse from road impacts like pot holes. And don't even mention curb damage! I remember the time in the Taco Bell drive through when I cut the corner a little too hard and GRUNCH!! One rim with a bad case of curb rash.

Together our wheels and tires shoulder the responsibility of keeping our cars rolling, turning and braking, and without them we wouldn't be going much of anywhere. Because of this, it pays to have good rubber on your car. While grippy, high performance tires may not last as long as the latest 50k mile tire from the local discount, it will give you a great deal more traction and safety in nearly every situation. Your tires are your first line of defense for safety, so don't skimp on them.

Depending on what year your car was built, it may have 14, 15, 16 or even 17 inch wheels. The cool thing is that the overall height of the tires is the same for all of them. This means that you can interchange any stock size wheel and tire on any year Miata. Typically, when using a larger diameter wheel, the tire sidewall is shorter, which is better for performance. An added benefit to larger diameter wheels is that wheels are normally wider too. A wide wheel with a low profile tire is a good recipe for good grip and lightening fast reactions. You think about turning the wheel and the car is already cornering. Telepathic, that's what you want, right? The bad news is that larger wheel and tire packages are normally heavier, which can degrade ride quality and slow the cars reaction. The factory has been obsessive about light weight wheels and tires from the very beginning for a reason, so putting heavy boat-anchors on your roadster is only undoing some of the goodness that the factory built in to it.

There are two ways to upgrade your roadsters rolling stock. You can put high performance tires on your stock wheels, or you can upgrade to a larger size. Now, understand that I'm writing from the perspective of street performance. If you want to autocross or race, it's a whole different ball game!

The factory 14" wheels are super light weight and a perfect compliment to the chassis. The bad news is that there are fewer and fewer good performance tires available in the proper sizes. A very popular upgrade for the early cars is to 15", and there are plenty of good tires available for those wheels. The 15" combo is a great compromise between light weight and low profile. Later Miatas came with 16" wheels, which are heavier yet, and have even lower profile tires for good performance. There is no real reason to upgrade from the 16" wheels on those later cars, that's as big as you need to go.

Some people ask about upgrading to 17" or larger wheels. While the Mazdaspeed Miata came with 17's, most of the available 17" wheels are too heavy and too big for your Miata. Unless you are prepared to spend a fortune for ultra light weight wheels, don't even consider going that big. Other than the trendy look, there are no reasons to put them on your car.

Let's get down to the recommendations for street performance:

*Yokohama ES-100* – These are currently my favorite street performance tire. They are light weight yet has firm sidewalls for quick response. The grip is good in dry and wet weather and they are fairly quiet for a performance tire. I've driven on them at the Gap and through torrential downpours and couldn't be happier. There may be slightly stickier tires on the market, but not at this

price point and with street manners this good. Available in a range of 14, 15, 16 and 17" sizes, prices range from \$68 to \$90 each, making this a real steal.

*Toyo TI-S* – A perennial favorite for Miatas, the T1-S is a great tire. They are another light weight option with good grip both wet and dry. The sidewalls on the T1 are a little soft, giving a great ride but hurting turn-in response when compared to other tires. Fortunately, a few extra pounds of air will get back any of the response lost to the soft sidewall. These tires shine in real-world road holding and are quiet with good road manners. I've put more than a few miles on these too, and I highly recommend them, especially if you want a good ride with your high performance. Note: these tires are being replaced by the T1-R this year, which will provide better performance but at a higher price. If you like the T1-S, buy 'em now! Available in 14, 15, 16 and 17" sizes ranging from \$72 to \$114 each.

*Falken Azinis RS* – An autocross winner for the street. Don't expect much tread life, but they will grip like a cat to your curtains. They are heavy, loud, noisy, harsh and so-so in rain. I don't suggest them for lapping days at the race track because their grip falls off as they heat up, but for autocross and street they are fine. They grip like mad and are CHEAP! 14", 15" and 16" range in price from \$45. What a deal!

*Kumho MX* – make no mistake, this is the grippiest, stickiest tire for the street, period. It's a race tire in sheeps clothing with big tread blocks and soft rubber compound. These are suitable for street or even light track use and you will find nothing that grips like this unless you are buying a true R compound race tire. They are very light weight, yet have super stiff sidewalls and lightening fast turn-in. They are noisy on the street unless you rotate them often, but man, are they sticky! This is the newest street-tire class autocross favorite, and if you can accept a little extra road noise, this is the ultimate performance

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