**» Car of the Year 2005: Mazda MX-5**

Words - John Carey

***Lightning can strike twice in the same place. Mazda’s slim ’n’ simple new roadster repeats the 1989 success of the family’s founder***

DÉJÀ VU. Sixteen years ago the Wheels Car of the Year 1989 award went to a little two-seat sports car from Japan. Profoundly enjoyable to drive, yet surprisingly attainable, the original Mazda MX-5 revived a category that had been dormant for years. The new, third-generation MX-5 cannot claim such a distinction. But it is, like its predecessor, Wheels Car of the Year. And for many of the same reasons…

When the way the Mazda drives is compared with what it costs, it’s a car without peer. Quite literally. A number of the 10-member COTY judging panel observed that getting a better sports car means buying a Porsche Boxster. There are other sports cars in the territory between the basic $41,860 MX-5 and the most affordable, $107,400 Boxster 2.7, but none possesses the Mazda’s almost magical kinetic grace.

Precision and harmony are what make it so special to drive. Steering, throttle and brakes all answer driver commands instantly and accurately. But as well as this, there’s a consistency to the responsiveness and weighting of these major controls that has clearly been painstakingly orchestrated. This polish makes the Mazda unfailingly pleasant, but, in the kind of driving for which it was primarily designed, it’s transcendent transport. The MX-5 is so perfectly balanced, so intuitively agile, so thoroughly thrilling, that it cannot fail to make the spirit soar.

Mazda’s mantra during the design and development of the new MX-5 was jinba ittai, a Japanese phrase that describes the sense of oneness between skilled rider and thoroughbred horse, and you can feel it.

But creating such a car was not easy. Mazda’s designers and engineers faced a much tougher regulatory environment than the team that worked on the 1989 original. Customer expectations, too, would be tougher to satisfy.

For the team working under program manager Takao Kijima, this meant making the new MX-5 cleaner, quicker, safer, roomier, and more comfortable than ever. Without significantly increasing weight, which would reduce the car’s agility.

Under Kijima, the MX-5 team conducted a ‘gram by gram’ review of every component in the car. This effort, which one research engineer frankly admitted was “painful”, paid dividends. Although the new MX-5 is wider and stronger than the second-generation model, with a larger and more powerful engine that conforms with tougher exhaust-emissions regulations around the world, and more safety and convenience equipment than ever, it weighs a scant handful of kilograms more.

One of the car’s most interesting weight-saving measures is the aluminium and steel boot lid, which is manufactured using energy-efficient friction-welding technology pioneered by Mazda. The basics of the MX-5’s suspension are borrowed from the larger RX-8 (Wheels COTY 2003), but for the two-seater aluminium was, where possible, substituted for heavier metals.

It wasn’t easy for the designers, either. Their chief challenge was safety regulations. The car would have to conform with Japan’s new pedestrian-safety regulations, plus the widespread introduction of side-impact standards. These considerations dictated the car’s increased width, and raised bonnet line. Working within these constraints, chief designer Yasushi Nakamuta created a more masculine-looking, but still prettily proportioned, MX-5.

And it satisfies all the safety requirements. The underside of its distinctively indented bonnet features Mazda’s ‘Shock Cone’ impact-absorbing inner skin, basically a thin but effective crumple zone for pedestrian heads. As well as thicker and stronger doors, the MX-5’s seats feature large-volume thorax- and head-protecting backrest-mounted side airbags. There’s the usual pair of frontal airbags, too, in steering-wheel hub and dash.

Wheels COTY judging panel newcomer, designer Sally Dominguez, was impressed by Mazda’s work, although she wasn’t the only judge to find the reflections in the instrument panel’s glossy piano black accent strip when driving with the top down a distraction. Mazda, apparently, has plans to change to a less reflective finish.

Like other judges, Dominguez was totally won by the driving experience. “Gutsy, nuggety chunk’a love,” read her note from Stage One at You Yangs. Other judges were a little more informative about exactly what it was that impressed them.

The crisp willingness of the MX-5’s four-cylinder engine was noted by most. It’s a high-performance, longitudinally mounted version of the 2.0-litre MZR seen earlier in the Mazda 3.

The new six-speed manual, as expected, proved deliciously tactile to use. A bigger surprise was Mazda’s new six-speed automatic, a quite conventional torque converter and planetary gear transmission. “Amazing! Auto isn’t complete shite,” noted Michael Stahl. Left alone, in ‘D’, the six-speeder does a fine job of choosing and shifting gears. If the driver desires, the stick can be moved to the left, to access the ergonomically preferable forward-to-shift-down, back-to-shift-up manual-selection mode. There was some divergence regarding the auto’s supplementary steering-wheel-mounted shift button. While editor Ged Bulmer thought them effective and reasonably intuitive to use, a majority of judges found them an unnecessary distraction on an already busy-looking steering wheel. “Paddles are a marketing wank,” was Mike McCarthy’s pithy dismissal.

The MX-5’s handling was universally praised through Stage One. The car’s quick, hydraulically assisted steering, perfect weight distribution and great grip made the 80km/h double lane-change almost laughably easy. Excellent braking on dry bitumen was backed up by reasonably strong ABS-aided wet-bitumen and gravel-surface stops.

While there had been some questioning of Mazda’s decision to not equip the car with either electronic chassis or traction control systems, driving You Yangs’ treacherously low-grip dirt-handling circuit elicited no negative notes. Instead, remarks highlighted the MX-5’s communicative and controllable nature.

The other Stage One issue was Mazda Australia’s decision to specify conventional tyres and what it labels an ‘Instant Mobility System’ (a plastic bottle full of sticky goo and a 12-volt air compressor), instead of the run-flat rubber that MX-5 is fitted with in other global markets. Neither technology is a completely satisfactory substitute for a spare tyre, but at least the repair kit doesn’t impact on ride comfort the way stiff-sidewalled run-flats often do. Additionally, the benefits of going spareless in a sportster are greater than in larger cars. The new MX-5’s boot isn’t huge, but it is a little more spacious than that of the space-saver-spare-equipped model it replaces.

In Stage Two of the test program, on public roads, the focus was firmly on practical everyday issues. Mazda has improved the MX-5’s soft-top by designing it to look good without a tonneau and lock down with a single, central latch instead of two, but some judges found the car to be noisier than expected driving with the roof erect. Others thought the noise level acceptable. The lack of turbulence when driving with the roof stowed, even with the side windows down, seemed to indicate Mazda had carefully tailored the MX-5 cockpit’s aerodynamics.

The car’s roominess, especially in the passenger side footwell, was noted. So, too, were the interior’s provisions for storage. Among the new MX-5’s greatest advances is the improvement in comfort brought by the installation of an adjustable steering column.

Judge after judge was moved to note how impressively rigid and unshakeable the body felt. And a majority also thought the MX-5’s ride was outstanding, given its handling focus. “Ride is better than some upmarket Euro sedans,” wrote Mike McCarthy.

Even more impressive was the car’s fuel consumption in real-world conditions. The new MX-5’s official fuel consumption test results are significantly lower than the model it replaces, and the car backs these up with excellent on-road efficiency. Both auto and manual delivered sub-11.0L/100km consumption through Stage Two. This partly compensated for the extra cost of the 95-octane premium unleaded the engine requires.

Other running costs are economical, even though the MX-5 requires servicing at 10,000km intervals, not 15,000km as do the majority of contemporary cars. Servicing required to 30,000km should, according to Mazda, cost only a little more than $500. Or, to put this number in perspective, roughly the same as a common or garden four-cylinder hatchback.

By Stage Three – a final evaluation of the car’s accommodation, ergonomics, features and low-speed dynamics – the MX-5 had emerged as a clear Wheels COTY favourite.

Perfect fulfilment of intended function. Great overall technical polish, if nothing in the way of significant technological innovation. Very impressive efficiency, especially in light of its performance. Excellent array of passive-safety features. Unrivalled value.

As the judges met for the final round-table discussion before voting, the only point of concern remaining was the absence of a safety net for the unskilled or inattentive driver. Was it a lapse of judgement by Mazda to not equip the new MX-5 with an electronic chassis stability system? Or is such technology out of place in a car with such trustworthy basic dynamics? Would it have been better to install a stability system, but with a switch for drivers to disable it?

There was forthright debate, before each judge had to privately decide whether the Mazda’s few shortcomings were greater than the flaws of the other finalists.

You know that the Mazda MX-5 is 2005 Wheels Car of the Year, so you know how they answered that question. Déjà vu indeed…

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(All prices and details accurate at time of publication)