

COMPARISON TEST

FOUR OF A KIND

WE LOOK AT FOUR DISTINCT WAYS TO SPEND \$35,000 ON A COUPE AND TRY TO FIGURE OUT WHICH IS THE BEST SPORTS CAR.

BY MICHAEL AUSTIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY



FORD
SHELBY GT



MAZDA
RX-8



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» There's something special about coupes. For one thing, they sacrifice function—ease of entry, room for stuff—in the name of style. There's a reason why most of the best sports cars are coupes: It's because driving fast is supposed to look good. Choosing a coupe is different because it says aesthetics are important to you. In the past, midrange sticker prices—\$35,000 in this case—could get you high style or outright speed, but rarely both, which brings us to the 2008 Audi TT.

The old TT was a triumph of design but lacked driver involvement. The new TT straightens out the rounded bulging

shape of its predecessor and is now creased and pressed like a fine suit, as if to say, "This time I'm serious." The insides also dismiss the previous circle theme in lieu of a more straightforward, if less interesting, interior.

Does the zoomy new look of the TT equate with a corresponding improvement in performance? To find out, we rounded up three other coupes, all around a sweet-spot price of \$35,000, and flogged them from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. Between the blackjack tables and sleep-deprived nights, we spent a day at Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch in Pahrump, Nevada,

to see how each car works at its absolute limit (being careful to steer clear of any establishment with the words "chicken ranch" in the name). Then we toured the winding and heat-warped roads around Lake Mead to get an impression of how the cars perform in the real world. Like the TT, each entry here is a different take on the coupe formula, and each has its own style.

First up is the Ford Shelby GT. Similar to the Shelby GT-H [November 2006], the car starts life as a Mustang GT and then heads to Shelby Automobiles in Las Vegas where the upgrades are installed. On the



NISSAN
350Z

AUDI
TT 2.0T

outside, the Shelby GT gets a lower front air dam, an aluminum grille, dual exhausts, chrome wheels, and three scoops that have no performance mission: one on the hood and one behind each door. You can choose between a white or black paint job, both with the obligatory silver racing stripes. The inside is jazzed up with new floor mats and an authentication plate on the center of the dash.

The Shelby GT is almost mechanically identical to the GT-H car rented out for a big fee from Hertz, except this one has a standard manual transmission. The suspension upgrade over the Mustang GT is the Ford Racing Handling Pack, which consists of new shocks, stiffer springs that lower the car by an inch and a half, a front strut-tower brace, and special anti-roll bars. The engine is massaged with Ford

Racing's Power Upgrade package, a cold-air intake, a new engine calibration, and a free-flowing exhaust. On premium fuel, power increases 19 horsepower to 319 and torque is up 10, to 330 pound-feet. The bill for this transformed Mustang, including leather seats, an upgraded interior, and a 500-watt stereo, comes in at a hefty \$38,970, \$500 more than the Audi TT.

Next is the Nissan 350Z. Fresh off some minor upgrades in 2006, the 2007 Z gets the latest edition of Nissan's 3.5-liter V-6 (the VQ35HR). Shared with the Infiniti G35 sedan, 80 percent of this engine's parts are new, and it has six more horsepower, better midrange torque, and a redline 500 rpm higher than previously. To accommodate the taller cylinder block, the 350Z also has a bulging new hood. Our test car was the base 350Z, which comes without stability

control, a limited-slip differential, or even cruise control, but such frugal optioning keeps the sticker price to a low \$29,485. The 350Z also lacks back seats, a luxury found in the closely related Infiniti G35 coupe, which we didn't include because the G35 is near the end of its run, and its replacement, the G37 coupe, wasn't yet available.

Rounding out our foursome is the Mazda RX-8, which is a sort-of coupe, owing to the tiny doors that open to the rear seats. Virtually unchanged since its 2004 introduction, the latest SAE standard rate the RX-8 at 232 horsepower. Our car came loaded in Grand Touring trim, which includes a sunroof and keyless ignition, and it was optioned with navigation and satellite radio. Still, the as-tested price was in the middle of the group at \$34,095. Okay, open the gates.



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C/D RESULTS	BEST IN TEST	PRICE (\$)		DIMENSIONS (inches)						WEIGHT			FUEL TANK (gal)	OCTANE RATING	INTERIOR VOL. (cu ft)		
		BASE	AS TESTED	LENGTH	WIDTH	HEIGHT	WHEEL-BASE	FRONT TRACK	REAR TRACK	CURB (lb)	% FRONT	% REAR			FRONT	REAR	TRUNK
		\$35,520	\$38,470	164.5	72.5	53.5	97.2	61.9	61.3	2960	60.8	39.2	14.5	91	48	26	13
		\$36,970	\$38,970	167.0	73.9	54.0	107.1	62.3	62.5	3540	54.8	45.2	16.0	91	53	32	13
		\$31,665	\$34,095	174.3	69.7	52.8	106.4	58.9	59.3	3060	52.3	47.7	15.9	91	50	37	8
		\$28,515	\$29,485	169.8	71.5	52.5	104.3	60.5	60.6	3340	54.5	45.5	20.0	91	52	-	4

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FORD SHELBY GT

THE HIGHS

Rumbling exhaust, power oversteer on demand, gets plenty of gawkers.

THE LOWS

J.C. Whitney-esque hood scoop, not much faster than a Mustang GT.

THE VERDICT

Still unsophisticated—and proud of it.

» The Shelby GT has two things the rest of the group go without: eight cylinders and a solid rear axle. The V-8, with the greatest horsepower of the group, is good for the best 0-to-60 time and a tie in the quarter-mile. It also has the sweetest engine note of this pack, a raucous growl that sends shivers down your spine every time you hit the ignition. The live axle, on the other hand, is responsible for the worst handling of the group. In truth, the blame isn't all located at the rear. The front suspension is lousy enough that one tester compared the whole package to a 20-year-old pickup truck. On a particularly rough stretch of road, the vibrations were severe enough that the hood clips worked themselves loose. Combine that with the



EVERYTHING BUT THE CHILI

The Shelby GT comes with a Hurst short shifter (left) and a signed number plate (above) to impress your friends on cruise nights.



BUILD YOUR OWN SHELBY GT

Ford would have you believe the Shelby GT is more than a dressed-up Mustang. For one thing, it's exclusive. Production is capped at about 6000 copies a year. And the Shelby name carries a lot of weight with Mustang enthusiasts. But if you want all the performance of the Shelby GT and don't need the stripes, various scoops, or Shelby name, you can save a lot of cash. All the upgrades on the Shelby GT are available from Ford Racing Performance Parts, and the parts come to \$2656. Shipping and installation will cost extra, but it's still far cheaper than the Shelby GT. Unlike the Shelby, the do-it-yourself approach will void at least part of the factory warranty on a new Mustang GT, but it's a decent upgrade for a used car in need of some tweaks. Plus, you don't have to drive around with that silly fake hood scoop, which some might consider a bonus.

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greatest curb weight and its overboosted, numb steering, and it's easy to see why the Mustang was the last choice on the curvy roads surrounding Lake Mead. The brakes didn't inspire confidence, either, but the long, 189-foot stopping distance from 70 to 0 mph suggests that something was awry with our test vehicle; the last Mustang GT we tested came to a halt in 170 feet.

The Shelby also drew gripes for the Hurst shifter, which is so high-effort that it's difficult to make two-to-three and four-to-five upshifts. The speedometer was also criticized for a crowded, small font that's

impossible to read at a quick glance. The cheap-feeling interior, a questionable value on a standard Mustang, is not improved as part of the price of the Shelby upgrade.

On a smooth surface, such as a track's, the Shelby GT shows a much better side. The stiffer suspension controls body roll well, and the prodigious torque from the V-8 allows for tail-out cornering in any situation. In some respects, its penchant for lurid, tire-smoking slides made the Shelby GT the most fun in the right situation. But then again, the same antics are possible in a \$26,440 Mustang GT.



JUST FOR SHOW

The nonfunctional hood scoop is modeled after the one on the original Shelby Cobra, cheap rivets and all.





BEST IN TEST		ENGINE		DRIVELINE			ACCELERATION (seconds)						TOP SPEED (mph)	SOUND LEVEL (dBA)	FUEL (mpg)		
*C/D EST	C/D RESULTS	POWER BHP @ RPM	REDLINE (rpm)	TRANSMISSION	DRIVEN WHEELS	GEAR RATIOS:1	AXLE RATIO:1	MPH			1/4-MILE @ MPH	ROLLING 5-80 MPH		TOP GEAR (mph)		IDLE	EPA CITY
POWERTRAIN		TORQUE LB-FT @ RPM	LB PER BHP				MPH/1000 RPM	0-30	0-60	0-100			30-50	50-70	FULL THROTTLE	EPA HWY	
															70-MPH CRUISE	600 MILES	
AUDI TT 2.0T turbocharged DOHC 16-valve inline-4 121 cu in (1984cc)	200 @ 5100	6500	14.8	6-sp auto man	front	3.46	5.3	2.4	6.0	15.4	14.6 @ 97	6.6	2.8	3.7	130 (gov. lim., not a claim)	44	23‡
	207 @ 1800					4.06	6.5									76	31‡
FORD SHELBY GT SOHC 24-valve V-8 281 cu in (4601cc)	319 @ 5750	6000	11.1	5-sp man	rear	3.38	6.8	2.1	5.1	12.6	13.7 @ 104	5.5	10.9	10.3	147* (drag lim.)	53	16
	330 @ 4500					3.20	11.1									84	23
MAZDA RX-8 2-rotor Wankel 80 cu in (1308cc)	232 @ 8500	9000	13.2	6-sp man	rear	3.78	4.5	2.2	6.5	18.0	15.0 @ 93	7.5	12.1	10.9	144* (drag lim.)	48	18
	159 @ 5500					2.27	7.4									81	24
NISSAN 350Z DOHC 24-valve V-6 213 cu in (3498cc)	306 @ 6800	7500	10.9	6-sp man	rear	3.79	5.7	2.0	5.2	12.8	13.7 @ 104	5.6	10.6	8.6	156* (drag lim.)	45	20
	268 @ 4800					2.32	9.4									86	27
@CARANDDRIVER.COM CHECK OUT BEHIND-THE-SCENES PICTURES WE DIDN'T HAVE ROOM FOR.						TEST AVERAGE		2.2	5.7	14.7	14.3 @ 100	6.3	9.1	8.4	144	48	19
															82	26	
															75	17	

†First ratio is for gears 1 through 4; second ratio is for gears 5 and 6. ‡2008 EPA fuel economy.

C/D RESULTS	BEST IN TEST	SUSPENSION		BRAKES			STABILITY CONTROL	TIRES	BRAKING 70-0 (ft)	ROADHOLDING 200-FT. DIA. SIDEPAD (g)	LANE CHANGE (mph)
CHASSIS		FRONT	REAR	FRONT	REAR	ANTI-LOCK CONTROL					
AUDI TT 2.0T		struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar	multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	12.3-inch vented disc	11.3-inch disc	yes	yes	Continental ContiSportContact 2, 245/40R-18 93Y	157	0.93	64.8
FORD SHELBY GT		struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar	rigid axle, coil springs, anti-roll bar	12.4-inch vented disc	11.8-inch vented disc	yes	no	BFGoodrich g-Force T/A KDW5, 235/50ZR-18 97W M+S	189	0.92	61.3
MAZDA RX-8		control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	12.7-inch vented disc	11.9-inch vented disc	yes	yes	Bridgestone Potenza RE040, 225/45R-18 91W	158	0.92	68.9
NISSAN 350Z		multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	multilink, coil springs, anti-roll bar	12.5-inch vented disc	12.1-inch vented disc	yes	no	Bridgestone Potenza RE050A, F: 225/45R-18 91W, R: 245/45R-18 96W	169	0.93	63.2
TEST AVERAGE									168	0.93	64.6



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NISSAN 350Z

THE HIGHS

Most bang for the buck, great steering and brakes, fastest on the track.

THE LOWS

Cheap interior, engine sounds like a coffee grinder inside the car.

THE VERDICT

Great performance makes the flaws bearable.



NOOKS & CRANNIES

The 350Z doesn't have a glove box, but there are two tiny, tiny bins and one larger compartment behind the seats, great for holding all your spare neckties.



» Don't let the modest increase in horsepower fool you. This is a faster car than before in every respect. The 0-to-60 time of 5.2 seconds is 0.2 second quicker than that of any other 350Z we've ever tested. Better still, the new internals make for a smoother engine. Smoother, but not smooth. There's still some coarseness, and the thrumming engine noise inside the cabin becomes annoying on even short highway trips. Aside from the seats, which drew praise for their comfort and support, the interior doesn't provide much comfort. The plastic has been upgraded since the 350Z's launch in 2002, and the padded armrests are a nice touch, but it's obvious that this car was built on a tight budget, as evidenced by headrest stakes that bulge into your back when you lean your head rearward.

At least the 350Z is still a focused driving machine, which is what really matters. Not only does it keep up with the Mustang in a straight line, but it also beats the three



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other cars around the track, thanks to the best power-to-weight ratio and tenacious grip. The steering drew positive reviews as well for its good on-center feel and feedback. The brakes felt solid and resisted fade.

On the worst road surfaces, the 350Z keeps going where the driver points it, but the way the suspension bucks and jives requires a certain amount of faith from the driver that the car will stay planted.

Think of the 350Z as a Japanese Corvette. It has plenty of speed at a good price but lacks the refinement needed for all-around greatness. In this group, that's enough to keep the 350Z down.

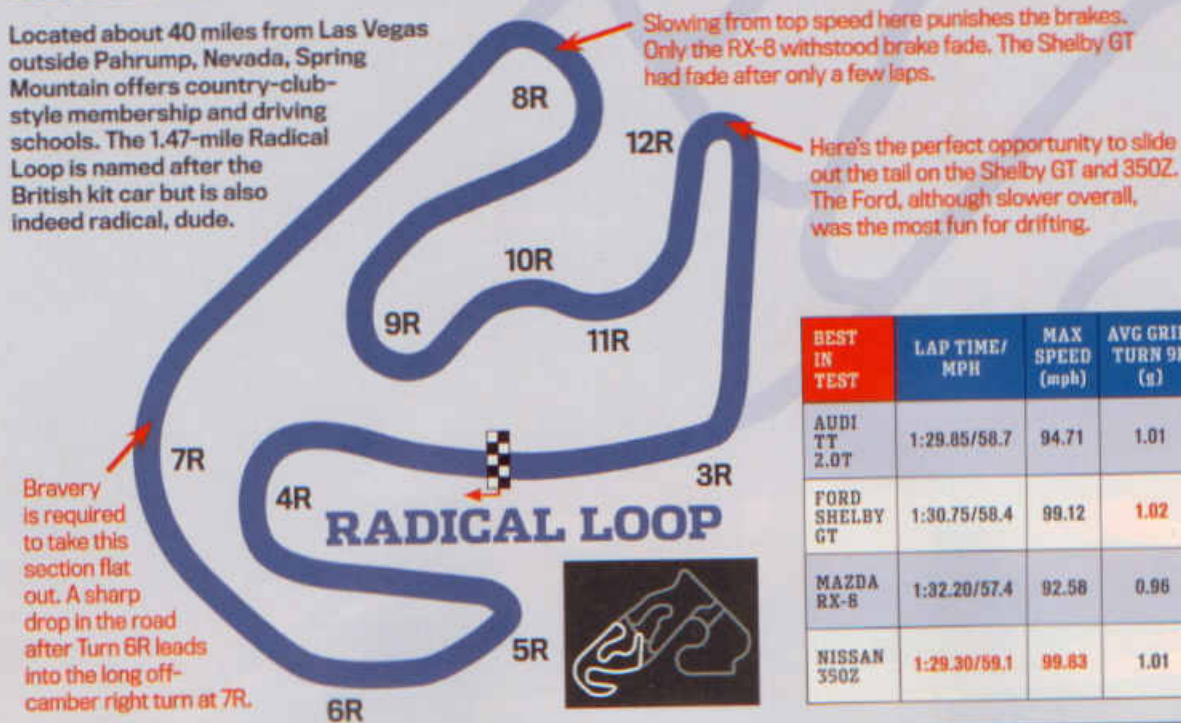


TRACK MEET

Differences in each car's handling characteristics were obvious on the road circuit. The front-wheel-drive TT is fast but not as much fun to fling as the others.

SPRING MOUNTAIN MOTORSPORTS RANCH

Located about 40 miles from Las Vegas outside Pahrump, Nevada, Spring Mountain offers country-club-style membership and driving schools. The 1.47-mile Radical Loop is named after the British kit car but is also indeed radical, dude.



BEST IN TEST	LAP TIME/MPH	MAX SPEED (mph)	AVG GRIP, TURN 9R (g)
AUDI TT 2.0T	1:29.85/58.7	94.71	1.01
FORD SHELBY GT	1:30.75/58.4	99.12	1.02
MAZDA RX-8	1:32.20/57.4	92.58	0.96
NISSAN 350Z	1:29.30/59.1	99.83	1.01



AUDI TT 2.0T

THE HIGHS

Feels like a luxury car, performs like a proper sports car.

THE LOWS

Front-wheel drive and it shows, useless back seat, expensive.

THE VERDICT

A GTI wrapped in a sexy skin.

» What's the front-driver doing up in second place? Heresy, you say, and it doesn't even have a clutch pedal. We're as surprised as you, dear reader, but the TT moves. It has the least horsepower of the group, but the 2.0-liter turbo four earned praise for its quick responses. The engine doesn't have much weight to move around, either, as the TT is the lightest car of the group.

On the highway, the TT gains speed with a transparent smoothness, due in





part to the hushed cabin. The power seats, covered in Alcantara, give plenty of lateral grip and long-term comfort. The overall impression of the TT interior is so pleasing that the insides of the rest of the group feel rental quality in comparison.

There is one carry-over from the old car, at least in philosophy. It shares its architecture with the Volkswagen Rabbit, including the engine and the dual-clutch transmission, the latter of which will shift at redline even in manual mode. Audi claims 69 percent of the TT chassis is made of aluminum, but the car is only 195 pounds slimmer than the last GTI we tested.

Most significant, the TT is still front-

wheel drive. The only way to get all-wheel drive for now is to upgrade to the 3.2-liter V-6. Even with the aluminum weight saving focused at the front of the car, 60.8 percent of the Audi's heft hangs over the front wheels, a setup that results in understeer when entering a corner and the front wheels fighting for grip on the exit.

Powering the wrong wheels didn't stop the Audi from posting the second-best time around the track, though, and it came away with the shortest braking distance, too. It also earned top marks in fuel economy, both from the EPA and our aggressive drivers.

On rough roads, the TT exhibits a wor-

rying amount of creaks and rattles, and it isn't quite as composed as the Mazda or Nissan. And it's expensive: Our test car was optioned with upgraded wheels and tires and the Premium package, which includes power heated seats and a leather steering wheel. Add in magnetic ride-control shocks or navigation, and the TT's price creeps over 40 large. That's a lot of money when an A3 or GTI will perform at almost the same level for less money and with more interior space. But the A3 and the GTI don't have the eye-catching exterior of the TT. The TT's premium is its style. Fortunately, it moves as well as it looks.



UNCOMFORTABLE POSITION

Left: Audi cautions that rear-seat passengers' heads must be at least one inch below the rear glass. As a result, only the very small are allowed in back.





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MAZDA RX-8

THE HIGHS

Nimble and responsive chassis, easy to drive fast, good value.

THE LOWS

A wallflower in engine grunt, guzzles gas like a private jet.

THE VERDICT

The winner, but 100 horsepower short of perfect.

» Now in its fifth year of production, the Mazda RX-8 is getting gray at the temples. But the virtues that earned it a 10Best selection three times (the RX-8 fell off the list in 2007) are still there. That means a chassis that instantly reacts to driver inputs. At 3060 pounds, the RX-8 is 100 pounds heavier than the TT, but the weight is better balanced from front to rear and the diminutive rotary engine sits low and aft of the front axle. This allows the

RX-8 to change direction more quickly, as shown by the lane-change speed, which was more than 4 mph faster than the second-place Audi. The Mazda is easy to drive fast; test drivers all praised the responsive steering and low cowl height, which make it easy to place the car on the track.

The RX-8 is great at speed, but getting up to speed is a challenge. With only 159 pound-feet, the RX-8 has less than half the torque of the Shelby GT. The six-speed gearbox

and short gearing don't alleviate the problem, either. On steep grades, downshifts are required from sixth gear to hold a constant speed, and two-lane passing requires a downshift to third and a planted right foot. The lack of oomph was more than a source of constant frustration—running the RX-8 near its 9000-rpm redline burns a lot of fuel as well, resulting in a cruising range of less than 250 miles.

The RX-8 is the only car here that of-



FULLY LOADED

Not even the nav system (above) could distract from the RX-8's wheezy air-conditioning system. Idling in traffic in 80-degree temperatures demands the highest fan speed.



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fers any comfort in the rear seats. Taller drivers have a hard time fitting in front, however. The rotary-engine theme is carried through to the interior in the shift knob and cutouts in the seats, a constant reminder that, yes, this engine is different, and not in a good way.

Get off the highway, and the annoyance caused by the wheezy engine subsides as cornering speeds increase. The suspension takes hits from the road like a champion prizefighter, so much so that during our driving loop the RX-8 was actually the fastest car on real-world roads.

On the track, the Mazda couldn't make up for its woeful lack of torque and posted the slowest time around the circuit. But just as on the street, the RX-8 inspires confidence in the driver to carry more speed through the corners, and the challenge of maintaining velocity in this car is ultimately more rewarding than relying on the gas pedal in the others to make up for your mistakes. That's not to say some extra power isn't sorely needed here—it is—but even at the ripe old age of five, the RX-8 pleases us the most.



*OBJECTIVE		BEST IN TEST		VEHICLE										POWERTRAIN					CHASSIS					EXPERIENCE		GRAND TOTAL		
RANK	MAXIMUM POINTS AVAILABLE	DRIVER COMFORT	ERGONOMICS	REAR-SEAT COMFORT	REAR-SEAT SPACE*	TRUNK SPACE*	FEATURES/AMENITIES*	FIT AND FINISH	INTERIOR STYLING	EXTERIOR STYLING	REBATES/DISCOUNTS*	AS-TESTED PRICE*	SUBTOTAL	1/4-MI ACCELERATION*	FLEXIBILITY*	FUEL ECONOMY*	ENGINE NVH	TRANSMISSION	SUBTOTAL	PERFORMANCE*	STEERING FEEL	BRAKE FEEL	HANDLING	RIDE	SUBTOTAL		GOTTA HAVE IT	FUN TO DRIVE
		10	10	5	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	20	100	20	5	5	10	10	50	20	5	5	10	10	50		25	25
1	MAZDA RX-8	8	8	5	5	2	8	8	8	8	1	17	78	14	2	3	7	7	33	20	5	4	10	9	48	18	21	198
2	AUDI TT 2.0T	9	8	1	2	5	10	9	8	9	0	14	75	16	4	5	7	8	40	19	4	4	7	8	42	18	17	192
3	NISSAN 350Z	6	8	0	0	1	4	6	5	7	0	20	57	20	5	4	5	6	40	17	4	4	8	7	40	14	16	167
4	FORD SHELBY GT	6	7	3	4	5	3	6	6	7	0	14	61	20	5	3	9	4	41	15	2	2	6	4	29	17	17	165

*These objective scores are calculated from the vehicles' dimensions, capabilities, rebates and discounts, and/or test results.

