



First drive

MAZDA 6 MPS

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Mazda's first turbocharged all-wheel-driver in a decade is also the first in a new series of exciting high-performance models. John Carey belts the 6 MPS about in Japan, and discovers its secret weapon



WORDS JOHN CAREY

FANDBRAKE isn't usually the first word you expect to read in a piece about a luscious new turbo AWD like the Mazda 6 MPS. But trust me: that lever between the seats is rather special, chiefly for what it says about Mazda's performance-car philosophy. Before I explain why, let's set the scene.

MPS stands, in case you were wondering, for Mazda Performance Series. Fittingly, the global media introduction to the first of the line was staged at a racetrack, the TI Circuit near Okayama. Usually Mazda stages its preview drives at the Miyoshi proving ground, outside its hometown of Hiroshima.

Today, the former Formula One track – famous in a small way for being the place Ayrton Senna raced a fortnight before his

fatal accident at Imola in 1994 – is wet. The handful of cars assembled for the exercise are all handbuilt prototypes and, we later find, very valuable. Around \$500,000 each is the whisper. Proper US dollars, too, so that makes the number \$600,000-plus in our money. When the production 6 MPS makes it to Australia, around June, each example will cost rather less than one tenth of this amount.

With grey clouds threatening more rain, we queue for our allotted first three laps of the slippery 3.7km track. Despite its former F1 status, the TI Circuit is dauntingly short of run-off areas, even at road-car speeds. Especially the fast, slightly downhill and off-camber Turn 2. Or, to give its proper name, Williams Corner.

The 2.3-litre MZR DISI Turbo engine of the 6



TI Circuit sessions in prototypes were interspersed with technical briefings (above right)



MPS doesn't feel melodramatically mad in this environment. The blacktop is broad and smooth, and there's nothing really close to its edge to heighten the perception of speed. But glancing at the speedometer as I near the end of the back straight, I see more than 160km/h on the dial before braking hard for Turn 7, a right-hand hairpin that's TI Circuit's slowest corner.

The 6 MPS's engine doesn't come on hard in the mid-range and rush ecstatically to a wham-bam rendezvous with the rev limiter like some turbo fours. Instead, the Mazda engineers seem to have aimed for snappily accurate throttle response right off idle, followed by a beautifully broad band of linear response. It's one of those engines where you can accurately visualise the flat torque curve just from the way it reacts to a sustained squeeze of the throttle pedal.

In keeping with the engine's characteristics, the ratios of the compact, three-shaft, six-speed manual especially developed for the 6 MPS are wide-spaced. The engine has ample torque to cover the gaps. There's simply no need for close-stacked gears and the frenetic shifting that they would impose. Shift quality is damned good. Moderate effort, shortish lever throws, well-defined shift gate.

There's no doubt the 6 MPS has enough grip to utilise everything the engine has got. It's surprising how early the car will take wide-open throttle on the still damp and glistening corners. Although Mazda hasn't chosen to

endow the 6 MPS with a permanent all-wheel-drive system with torque-splitting centre differential, instead deciding to develop an existing on-demand system, there seems little reason to criticise its performance. The car hooks up, goes.

The car's handling hallmark, on this first outing, is stability. Over-optimistic corner-entry speeds and throttle applications bring understeer. Avoid such errors and the 6 MPS will adopt a tenaciously settled cornering attitude. It proves largely impervious to sudden throttle lifts and coarse steering inputs. And when things do get a little out of shape, the standard, switchable, and rather subtle electronic chassis stability system proves that it doesn't mind a bit of fun.

Just as I'm getting the hang of both car and circuit, the allotted laps are up. Must remember to peel off into the pit road before Turn 12, and observe the strict 40km/h speed limit. The brakes are a little smelly, even though a special, hard pad compound that eventually may be offered by Mazda is being trialled. Otherwise, the prototype Mazda seems utterly unflustered by the spanking it's just been given.

Back in the pit garage, I join a group of journalists surrounding Mazda engineering boss Joe Bakaj. The Englishman is batting a barrage of questions.

How far across Mazda's range might MPS be stretched? "If we thought we had a credible

product and there was customer demand..." Bakaj lets the thought roll to a standstill. So what will be the next MPS model? "I'm not allowed to answer that today." But he does concede that, to be a credible MPS product, a car doesn't necessarily have to be all-wheel drive, turbocharged or have four cylinders.

Bakaj is more comfortable when discussion moves to the 6 MPS. He explains patiently the reasoning behind decisions made during the drivetrain and chassis process. It's at this point that I eventually learn about its handbrake.

The handbrake, the engineer explains, communicates with both the all-wheel-drive and the chassis stability systems. It's quite simple, really. A computer controls the clutch pack that connects and disconnects drive to the 6 MPS's rear wheels. Another computer runs the chassis stability system, which selectively brakes individual wheels to restore stability when the front or rear of the car begins to slide. But tug the handbrake, and both systems are instantly neutralised. This feature has been included, Bakaj says, specifically to allow drifting-style fun. And once the car is flicked sideways with a brief dose of handbrake, the intentionally aggressive torque transfer to the rear wheels is designed to deliver the ability to throttle steer. Or, as Mazda's official 6 MPS press material coyly puts it: "The ability to fully balance the car in a turn by deft use of the accelerator pedal."

Armed with this knowledge, the second – and unfortunately final – three-lap stint we're allowed in the 6 MPS becomes an opportunity to find whether Bakaj speaks the truth.

Watching their precious protos in the hands

THE MPS HAS ENOUGH GRIP TO UTILISE EVERYTHING THE ENGINE HAS GOT