

Comparison

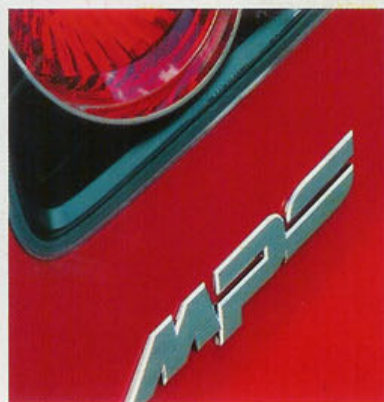
MAZDA 6 MPS
SUBARU LIBERTY GT

ADULTS ONLY!

The following comparison test contains gratuitous cornering shots, explicit AWD turbo performance, graphic descriptions, and subtly attractive sheetmetal. *Wheels* guidance is recommended to reveal whether 6 MPS or Liberty GT is the most suitable car for mature driving audiences



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ROLLING north-west on the south-eastern freeway, through Melbourne's endless suburban sprawl, the Mazda 6 MPS and Subaru Liberty GT are virtually anonymous.

Maybe for just a few seconds they manage to intrude on the vision and psyche of a commuter or two with an automotive interest. Perhaps their eyes catch the subtle hint of performance the Mazda

exudes from its humped bonnet, large lower air inlet, boot-lip spoiler and dual exhaust tips; perhaps even the discreet MPS badge on the rump. It's possible they've registered the mailbox slot in the Liberty's bonnet, the only real hint this is anything more than a 2.5i.

No matter, for their ignorance is our bliss. These two are quietly spoken new-age performance cars that carry a big, but refined, stick. There's no sign of surfboard wings and berko bodykits, but the important stuff is there – scintillating turbocharged and intercooled four-cylinder performance matched with compelling all-wheel-drive grip.

A comparison between these two has been eagerly awaited ever since it became clear that the oft-promised Mazda Performance Series would become reality with the debut of a hot 6. Not only because they're mechanically in-sync (despite their technical differences), but also because there's a philosophical commonality: these cars are for grown-ups.

More recently, though, the need to get these two together has become that much more urgent because it's a case of now or ... wait too long. Australia's tightening emissions laws will kill off the GT from January 1 (see panel, p73), until it can return compliant with ADR 79/01. That's set to happen sometime late in 2006, but we aren't prepared to hold off till then.

There are no bureaucratic issues for the 6 MPS, which is powered by an engine so fortified and modified inside that it shares little more than its capacity and Euro IV compliance with the MZR 2.3-litre that resides in the rest of the local 6 range. The MPS's pumped-up bonnet allows an entry in the upper part of the five-point grille for the twin ducts that feed the top-mounted air-to-air intercooler. That sits upstream of a single-scroll Hitachi turbocharger and direct fuel injection to help extract 190kW at 5500rpm and 380Nm at 3000rpm from the dohc 16-valve MZR DISI (direct injection spark ignition) four.

Meanwhile, the GT's 2.0-litre dohc 16-valve boxer four is no technophobe, either. A close relation to the just-superseded WRX STi 2.0, it gets a top-mounted air-to-air intercooler and single IHI turbocharger with trick titanium blades for quicker spool-up. And while it retains traditional port injection, Subaru's AVCS variable valve timing works on the exhaust as well as the inlet cam. The result is an MPS-matching 190kW, albeit at a higher 6400rpm. There is a torque deficit, however, although the still-substantial 330Nm peak kicks in at a low 2400rpm.

On the road, the differences are more significant than the figures might suggest.

Off idle-speed revs and pre-boost, both engines feel similar – not stumbling, yet not into stride, either. But from 2000rpm they're sorted, and from there the Subaru simply gets on with the job, accelerating in a strong, linear fashion, impressively quick, clean and responsive all the way through to its 7600rpm cutout. The improvement from the old twin-turbo, two-step B4 is remarkable and, in isolation, outstanding. But it still comes off second-best to the Mazda.

The 6's direct injection increases the loading efficiency of the fuel mixture, which in turn improves the low-rpm torque with 90 percent of the maximum delivered from just over 2000rpm. The turbo also spools up earlier and starts adding substantial boost from 2500rpm. On the road it shows. Once on boost there's a massive step up in performance that fires the MPS rocket-like through the mid-range and along straights, combining flat-line torque with quicksilver response via its sensitive electronic throttle. Smooth and flexible, it makes gearchanging optional on all but the tightest roads. Third will usually do.

It's an ability underlined by in-gear 80-120km/h acceleration times. The MPS absolutely wallops the GT. Mind you, it's not quite apples with apples, because the Subaru has five speeds in its WRX-sourced (albeit different ratios) manual gearbox, versus the MPS's trick new Aisin six-speed, three-shaft gearbox. Regardless, in the real world the message is still clear: Mazda's DISI is dizzyingly fast; the Sube's boxer swings and connects without landing a knockout blow.

But no surprise that the GT refuses to be cowed, actually edging the MPS by a few

EXTRA ZOOM

Mazda's desire to go hot-rod is nothing new – it just had to wait while the mainstream product was sorted out over the last few years. With 6, 3 and 2 that has certainly been achieved. MPS stands for Mazda Performance Series, although in some markets

it is known as Mazdaspeed. Either way, the intention is the same: to crown the everyday range with flagship performance cars that complement the company's RX-8 and MX-5 sports models. While the emphasis of MPS is more on sophistication than boy-racer, the

character of each model will vary depending on the donor car. For instance, the Mazda 3 MPS due in 2006 will retain DISI 2.3-litre power but eschew AWD. It will also project a tougher image than the 6 MPS because of its younger target audience.





THESE TWO ARE QUIETLY SPOKEN NEW-AGE
PERFORMANCE CARS THAT CARRY A BIG STICK



Don't read too much into
the 0-100km/h times:
in the real world, MPS is
appreciably quicker than GT

