

INSIDE LINE

2005 Sport Coupe Comparison Test

Introduction

For an instant, the arena explodes in light, exposing the band and your 54,000 fellow metal heads. The enormous crowd surges in time with John Paul's bass, a sea of fists repeatedly punches the thick smoky air. As Jimmy Page launches his Gibson Les Paul into the wailing solo of "Black Dog," Robert Plant, shirtless and scrawny, dances out of sync with the licks.

You've been standing on your chair, involuntarily punching the heavens, for two hours. Any feeling in your legs is long gone, and your heart feels like it will burst from your chest with enough force to knock Mr. Plant clean off his feet. The crowd would go wild.

That's the rush we want every morning and every night. We want it on the way to work. We want it on the way to Grandma's house. We want it when we pick up our dry cleaning, drop off Junior at day care and return those overdue movies to Blockbuster.

This is the mission of the new 2005 Ford Mustang GT, the 2005 Mazda RX-8 and the 2005 Nissan 350Z. These three affordable rear-wheel-drive sport coupes are supposed to deliver that fist-pumping feeling every day, and for a low monthly payment. Do they? We decided to find out.

The Cars

The Ford Mustang is the quintessential budget performance car. Despite its low price, it still induces spontaneous shouts of "YES!" the way any Led Zeppelin song does. The Ford Mustang employs a traditional muscle car approach by dumping a powerful V8 into a moderate-size coupe.

Next is the stout Nissan 350Z, which offers a textbook sports car approach by installing a smaller displacement but equally powerful six-cylinder engine in a compact two-seater.

Every band has a ballad. And the Mazda RX-8 is just that. It has the edginess of the other cars but lacks the volume. Its power comes from a smooth rotary engine and offers something not seen on a typical sport coupe; two rear doors and a spacious backseat.

We ordered each with a manual transmission, and tried to keep the options to a minimum. Although each has a base price under \$28,000, the as-tested prices of the Mazda and the Nissan crept up over \$31,000, which is \$6,000 more than the final price of the Mustang.

Then we forced them to navigate the rigors of our daily commutes, unwind on back roads and hang it all out on the track. Our winner might surprise you.

How They Stacked Up

If you think the Ford Mustang GT is clunky and crude, think again. It's our winner, outclassing the others with its future retro style, value, comfort and all-out brute horsepower. For an unbelievable price of \$25,000, the Ford Mustang delivers the daily adrenaline rush a sport coupe should, without any real sacrifices in drivability, or comfort. It's by far the quickest of the bunch. It doesn't need pricey premium

fuel and it has the largest trunk.

The Mazda RX-8's unusual approach is compelling and helps earn it second place. The RX-8 offers substantial comfort and refinement and its two usable backseats set it apart from the competition. With a 1.3-liter rotary engine, the Mazda RX-8 may not appear impressive at first glance, but that engine is good for 238 horsepower. If you really flog it, taking it all the way to its 9,000-rpm redline with each shift, the Mazda RX-8 can almost keep up with the 287-hp Z.

Bringing up the rear is the Nissan 350Z, which is the true sports car of the pack. It's fun to drive hard and hard to drive slow. Like a jaw-dropping drum solo, it looks cool, and delivers serious performance. And we're talking lots of stick twirling and pyrotechnics. For some, however, the Nissan Z is too hardcore for the daily grind, with a harsh highway ride and an interior that lacks finesse. In the end, its high as-tested price and its questionable comfort dropped it to third place.

Third Place: 2005 Nissan 350Z

Remember that cool AFX or Tyco slot car set you had as a kid? And remember how you'd wish to magically make those HO scale cars life-size and drive them on the street? Well, if that were possible, the 2005 Nissan 350Z would be the car you'd get.

Tach up the Z's V6, drop the clutch and the result is a sucker punch right in the gut. As the large tach needle quickly sweeps up past four, five, then 6,000 rpm it suddenly dawns on you, "This is a really fast car." Like the opening drums of Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher," the cacophony of valves, pistons and growling exhaust lends an almost frantic quality to the driving experience; still you can't help but get a huge grin as you work your way through the six forward gears.

The tight suspension helps the car attack corners. And thanks to the 18-inch wheels and tires this sport coupe has grip to spare. The Nissan Z is a blast to drive at the limit but unlike the Mustang, the Nissan Z is less forgiving. You get the clear sense that if the Z lets go at speed it will not be pretty. The Mustang is easier to drive hard and hanging the tail out is cause for shouts of "Hell yeah!" rather than "Uh oh."

Back in the real world, the slot car analogy holds up as the Nissan 350Z feels like it was purpose built for turning in hot lap times. This is both a blessing and a curse. When you're on the track, you can't imagine driving anything else, but jump on the local crowded freeway and the fun turns to misery. Like a horror movie with clowns, the 350Z is fun and games one minute then bloody horrible the next.

The same suspension that devours curves leaves you arriving at your destination with the equivalent of an 8th grade kidney punch. Granted, our tester was a performance version but we've experienced other Zs and found them to be equally harsh especially on rough or rutted pavement.

Adding to the Nissan's harsh nature is the fact that the clutch is heavy, the shifter reluctant and at low speeds the car is just too jumpy. One editor confessed to taking his wife's Toyota sedan to the supermarket because the Nissan 350Z was "just too much hassle." It's a car you have to pay attention to drive smoothly.

Like any slot car, look beneath the curvy bodywork and there's not much going on. Inside, the Z doesn't look or feel the part of a \$31,000 sports car. The dash is filled with plenty of black plastic. The layout is simple and user-friendly, but it lacks polish, and the seats become taxing on the backside after 45 minutes.

On the other hand, the 350Z's 3.5-liter engine is a real bright spot. It revs willingly and has enough low-end pull to make you rethink the purchase of a thirsty V8. At any speed and in any gear, the car can leap forward like a bracket racer. Even while cruising at 60 on the freeway, drop the Z from sixth gear down to fifth and it lurches forward begging the driver to apply a little more throttle.

Despite its purebred performance, the Nissan 350Z gets the best fuel economy in the group. With an EPA estimate of 20 city and 26 highway, the Z makes more power but uses less fuel than the RX-8.

Of our three test cars, the 2005 Nissan 350Z is the truest sports car. Its stellar handling, attention-getting styling, spartan interior and lack of a rear seat all add up to a great performer that does just a few things really well. Everyday commuting isn't one of them.

The Z's bruising ride and high "as-equipped" price all conspired to keep it at the back of the pack. In a world of \$25,000 V8-powered Mustangs and refined RX-8s with a real backseat, the Nissan 350Z is a tough sell. But if quick lap times at the local track day are your number-one priority, the Z will deliver.

Second Opinions:

Road Test Editor John DiPietro says:

If you're a hard-core sports car enthusiast, this is your ride. The 350Z makes no pretenses at being practical and in true sports car tradition offers a low, sleek and sexy body with seating just for two. Although it's a hatchback, you won't be able to make any Home Depot runs in this baby, as the needlessly oversized cover for the rear strut tower brace robs a few more cubic feet than it should. And regular readers will know that the interior has already been lambasted by us for being about as luxurious as a Sentra's, what with the abundance of hard plastic panels and lack of fancy trim.

Take the Z on an early morning romp through your favorite twisty road, however, and that's when you'll forget about such quibbles and discover this car's engaging personality and reason for being. With nearly 300 horses, the V6 supplies plenty of urge, even down low. And it seems to egg you on to take each gear to the max as its low timbre turns into an entertaining howl when you wind it out. Just don't tell that to the cop if you get pulled over for speeding, unless you want to kill any chance of getting a warning instead of a ticket.

At the track, I discovered that the Z would be the one to go with if a no-compromise sports car is what you desire. The stout engine is complemented by a sweet-shifting gearbox, taut and communicative chassis and snug yet comfortable buckets, all of which inspire confidence in both yours and the car's abilities. It was the Z that made me feel most directly connected to the course, as its linear and predictable responses to the throttle, brakes and steering allowed me to fine-tune my line and get my groove on.

Road Test Editor Dan Kahn says:

I have mixed feelings about Nissan's latest Z car. I love the pseudo-Porsche looks and race-inspired interior. Low and sleek with an exotic exhaust note, our bright yellow test car screamed for attention everywhere it went, even from local law enforcement who caught me exceeding the posted speed limit and issued a hefty fine as punishment.

The silky-smooth V6 sounds glorious and cranks out impressive bottom-end torque and surprising power near redline. The transmission features excellent gear spacing that perfectly matches the motor, but a notchy shifter and heavy clutch made driving the car more of a chore than I would have liked.

Similar complaints apply to the suspension. The 350Z is not only the best handling car in this

comparison test, it's one of the best corner carvers on the road today. A total absence of body roll, amazing lateral grip and razor-sharp handling made tossing this car through the canyons an absolute joy. We're talking exotic sports car handling at a bargain-basement price.

Unfortunately, all-out handling performance doesn't come without compromise. The Z is downright uncomfortable on bumpy roads, and the heavy clutch became painful after an hour of stop-and-go driving on a clogged L.A. freeway. The bolstered bucket seats are great for gripping your posterior in the canyons, but get uncomfortable on long drives.

Another area where the Nissan falls short is its near-total lack of interior storage. The glovebox is located behind the passenger seat and is impossible to reach while driving, cupholders are shallow and don't appear strong enough to handle a big soft drink, and the trunk is bisected by a large crossbar. The most glaring standout in this department is that the Z only seats two, as opposed to the other cars in this test that can handle four people plus luggage.

Nissan engineers definitely put a lot of time and effort into making this a top-rung performer. If you're looking for a street-legal go-kart and are willing to deal with the harsh ride, this is the car for you. As much as I enjoy a good romp through the twisties, I usually end up spending most of my time plugging along in traffic at 10 or 15 miles per hour, and that's when a soft ride, smooth clutch and convenient cupholders become more important than all-out speed and handling. Factor in the inconvenience of only having two seats and a price tag that peaks over \$30K and you can see why I slotted the 350Z behind the American muscle car.

Stereo Evaluation: Nissan 350Z

System Score: 7.0

Components

Simple and clean. That's the best way to describe how the 350Z incorporates the Bose head unit into its swoopy dash area. There is one minor complaint — while the overall look and feel are very pleasant, the "load" button for the CD changer seems to be placed rather far from the buttons one must use to choose which slot you want to load a CD into. Otherwise, everything is just where you'd expect, and changing functions or skipping tracks is very intuitive. Given the high-performance nature of the Z, we'd like to see the addition of steering wheel-mounted audio controls — especially on the Performance and Touring models.

Nissan uses two door-mounted speakers that are complemented by two tweeters mounted high on the doors plus two larger speakers mounted behind the only two seats. Those speakers are driven by a 240-watt Bose system.

Performance

Bass response is great no matter what you're listening to, while a boost of +4 or +5 delivers a nice punch and doesn't overwhelm the speakers thanks to the rear-mounted subwoofer. The sound quality is not great but neither is it terrible. The highs are too high and the mids are all over the place with very little separation or clarity. Volume is the one thing this stereo can do well.

Best Feature: Straightforward controls and nice bass.

Worst Feature: Lack of midrange.

Conclusion: The 350Z doesn't exactly provide the ideal listening environment for hard-core

audiophiles, but the Bose system does make a nice companion to the sweet exhaust note that seems to come in just above the music as you're running through the gears. In short, a slightly better than average system. — *Brian Moody*

Second Place: 2005 Mazda RX-8

The obvious question here is: How did the faster Nissan 350Z get bumped out of second spot by the Mazda RX-8?

The answer is comfort.

Although the 350Z out-handles and out-accelerates the Mazda, the RX-8's combination of performance, comfort and spaciousness easily tops the Z. This car is sporty enough to make a mountain pass fun, but it still manages to feel like a normal car when more mundane duties come up.

Let's start with the fun.

With only 1.3 liters of engine displacement under its long hood, the Mazda RX-8 still manages a respectable 238 horsepower and a 7-second 0-60-mph sprint. Mazda's rotary engine lacks the low-end grunt of the Mustang's big V8 and the Z's big V6, but wring it out, and we mean really wring it out, and it provides plenty of power.

This engine makes its peak horsepower at 8,500 rpm. For the first few days you have to fight the urge to shift at 5,000 or 6,000 rpm. Shifting early seems like the right thing to do, but it isn't. Winding the tach up to 9,000 rpm rewards the driver with great thrust and an almost spooky, shrill sound from the Mazda's two exhaust outlets. Yes, we said 9,000 rpm.

But the extreme revs are only part of the fun. The eager-to-perform attitude is enhanced by the slick and quick transmission. The clutch is perfectly weighted and the shifter boasts short throws and a precise feel. Even at engine speeds above 7,000 rpm, the rotary never loses composure despite its high-strung nature. By comparison, the Mustang and Nissan 350Z feel more like powerful weapons crudely fashioned from available elements while the Mazda RX-8 feels like a precision-built instrument with slightly less bludgeoning authority.

Another high mark for the RX is its pleasant road manners. Its suspension is tuned noticeably softer than the Z's, but the Mazda still offers spunky and agile handling. The RX-8 equals the Z's slalom speed of 63.9 mph but does so in a less brutal, barf-inducing manner. Body roll in the RX is evident in hard corners but the suspension remains composed and confident. In this case, fun in the twisties doesn't translate into a bone-jarring highway ride.

A real sports car can't have four doors, right? Wrong. The Mazda RX-8 has clamshell rear doors, like those found on many full-size pickups, which provide easy access to a rear seat, which is reasonably comfortable for two adults or a great place to throw stuff.

The downside to the comfy rear seats is that the front seats sit a little higher than normal to allow rear passengers a place to put their feet. Combine a 6-foot or taller driver with a sunroof-equipped Mazda RX-8 and you can forget about wearing a hat.

But the interior is still roomier than the other two cars. It also looks and feels like a higher-quality automobile inside and the design is more intentional. Each control or switch feels precise and the red/blue glow of the instruments and a small red light that shines down on the driver-side door switches

enhance the cockpit feel of the Mazda RX-8 at night.

If there's one thing the car is lacking, it's swagger. Both the Mustang and 350Z announce their arrival and name-taking intentions with little subtlety or finesse. The 2005 Mazda RX-8 is confident enough to know its abilities without having to boast.

Those abilities earn it second place.

Second Opinions:

Road Test Editor John DiPietro says:

I've always been a fan of the RX-7 and its rotary engine and the RX-8 is the best expression yet of Mazda's sports car philosophy.

Light weight, perfect balance and an engine that spins like a turbine are all qualities of Mazda's sports car that have intrigued me for decades. I know that the naysayers will argue that the RX-8 lacks low-end torque. And yes, it does when compared to the thumping V8 in the 'Stang and the muscle-bound six in the Z. But even when slogging through the perpetual traffic of Greater L.A., it never struck me as lackluster.

That said, it's true that you have to rev it up past 4 grand to get into the meat of the power band, but that's half the fun. Keeping the RX-8 on the boil keeps the car on its toes, ready to slingshot out of the corners and down the straights as you work the light yet precise six-speed. Like the 350Z, the RX-8 feels buttoned down when you push it hard yet doesn't tax its occupants with as stiff a ride.

When you're not playing Michael Schumacher, the RX-8 adapts to everyday life quite nicely, with its finely trimmed cockpit, pleasant ride, four doors and rear seats that are more comfortable than those in a sports car should be.

Still, although I thoroughly enjoyed driving the RX-8, it comes in last for me. If I'm going to get 18 mpg, I want more grunt and zero to 60 in under 6 seconds. And although there are some attractive elements to the styling, overall it strikes me as both awkward and juvenile, with its relatively tall greenhouse and overdone taillight treatment.

Road Test Editor Dan Kahn says:

Mazda's latest rotary-engine sport coupe (or is it a sedan?) caught me off guard. While I thought the previous-generation RX-7 was drop-dead gorgeous, I never cared for the looks of the new car. In fact, I think the front-end design looks like an alien sucking on a lemon.

Oddball looks aside, there's a lot to appreciate about this unique ride. The 1.3-liter rotary engine is the least powerful of the group yet never left me wanting for thrust, and the sheer joy of revving a car past the 9,000-rpm mark makes me absolutely giddy. Like the small-displacement British sports cars of old, the RX-8 moves along just fine, as long as you let the motor wind up and scream. The six-speed transmission is smooth, tight and perfectly matched to the engine, and the exhaust note sounds like a highly mechanized siren song.

Where the RX-8 surprised me is in the handling department. I've actually spent a fair amount of time behind the wheel of our long-term '04 RX-8, but most of those miles were logged cruising city streets. When I drove the car back-to-back with the Z and Mustang through tight canyons and on the racetrack, I was impressed by how refined the car feels at speed. The four-wheel independent suspension provides excellent grip without sacrificing ride quality, and the car offers plenty of feedback and warning when

pushed to the limit.

Mazda isn't afraid to deviate from its competition, and that point is made quite clear in the car's interior. Rear-opening doors provide excellent access to the small but comfortable backseats, making the RX-8 the only vehicle in its class with four doors. The front buckets are very comfortable if somewhat garish when decked out in red and black leather, and the seat heaters came in very handy on a few cold December mornings.

Overall I thought the Mazda's interior was the nicest and most livable of the group. Unfortunately, that fact didn't outweigh my disdain for the car's exterior styling and its lack of bottom-end power when compared to the other two. The RX-8 made me feel like a Formula One champ in the canyons, but for my money I'd still go with the cheaper and (in my opinion) far more attractive Mustang.

Stereo Evaluation: Mazda RX-8

System Score: 8.0

Components:

This RX-8 came with the Grand Touring package which includes an upgraded Bose stereo. The optional system is good for 300 watts, nine speakers and has a single CD player. Mazda's Pilot noise compensating system is also included in the deal.

The controls are arranged in a large circle on the center stack and it's not the most user-friendly layout we've seen. Our car has a single CD player but controls for a CD changer are incorporated into the head unit. Buttons for "load" and "disc up/disc down" usually indicate a CD *changer* but on our car they seem to do nothing. There is a separate knob for tuning the radio manually, a feature we like. But it is placed away from the rest of the controls. Thankfully, the RX-8 has steering wheel-mounted audio controls so we rarely had to even touch the dash-mounted buttons.

Performance:

This upgraded Bose system is the best-sounding stereo of the three comparison cars we've assembled. The bass is warm and sharp and the highs are clear as well. Occasionally when listening at higher volumes, the speaker would squeak but the stereo sounds very good overall.

Best Feature: Sharp, clean sound quality.

Worst Feature: Somewhat busy interface on the dash.

Conclusion: A very good stereo worthy of a \$30,000 sports car.

First Place: 2005 Ford Mustang GT

Like live rock and roll, the new Mustang GT burns from the very beginning. The late 1960s styling flat rocks. One look and it's apparent this car means business.

That styling also raises expectations. Just being fast doesn't cut it anymore. To be successful in today's cutthroat market, the new Ford Mustang needs to be a mighty muscle car like in the old days, with more speed and attitude than anything else in its class, however, it also needs to be easy to drive, comfortable and refined.

Cue the applause, the 2005 Ford Mustang GT delivers on all counts. It's a bases-loaded, game-winning

home run. The new Mustang is light-years ahead of the previous versions and is simply better than the Mazda RX-8 and Nissan 350Z.

Our test car was a GT with essentially no options, which kept the price at about \$25,000. For that price you still get a 300-hp V8 hooked up to a five-speed manual, a CD player, ABS, traction control, foglights, 17-inch wheels, cruise control and remote keyless entry. That's a fair value even when considering a more sedate V6-powered sedan.

Value might get you in the door, but it's the kick-in-the-pants driving experience that keeps you coming back for more. Fire up its willing V8, ease the clutch out, stab the gas and the Ford Mustang GT jumps forward with the urgency of a jackrabbit being chased by a retriever. As the exhaust roar builds it's as if there's a little devil on your shoulder shouting, "Yes! Faster! Faster!" Grab third gear, nail the accelerator and 100 mph comes up faster than you can say, "Is that a cop?"

But the Ford Mustang is more than a mindless power pop. Its chassis is tight, its interior is incredibly composed and quiet and its suspension offers a highway ride that just might fool you into thinking you're driving a midsize sedan. With the five-speed manual, the car keeps its viscous edge but the clutch and shifter work so well it isn't taxing to drive in traffic. This 'Stang, unlike its predecessor, is so comfortable it'll make a great commuter car.

We also found it to be an awesome road trip ride, with nicely shaped front seats that are good for at least two hours of interstate, this is a huge departure from the previous Mustang and its "why won't it go any lower" front seats. In addition, a tall fifth gear supplies a relaxed cruising attitude and acceptable fuel mileage. With an EPA estimate of 17 city and 25 highway, fuel economy is similar to the Z's. Thankfully, the Mustang's 300-hp V8 does not require pricey premium fuel like both the 350Z and RX-8.

During the 200-mile ride from Long Beach to Rosamond, Calif., the Mustang's interior proved pleasant. Visibility is good, thanks to the small side windows, which Ford's designers borrowed from the 1966 'Stang, and the ergonomics are very well thought out. No longer is the shifter in the next county, and the radio has a big volume knob like it should. Even the cupholders are well placed and well shaped, with a removable insert in one for extra-tall beverages.

Like it or not, you're going to need a rear seat at some point in your life. Unlike the Nissan, the Ford Mustang GT has a backseat, although it's really just for small children. And it folds down, which is an added measure of flexibility the Mazda RX-8 doesn't offer.

One of the really great things about this new 2005 Ford Mustang GT is how the interior designers were in on the retro theme. Jump behind the wheel and even hardened automotive critics unconsciously let out gasps of "So cool!" The Mustang's gauges are large and round with old-school chrome rings and the dash is styled like the enduringly popular 1967 and 1968 Mustangs. Still, we'd prefer more soft-touch surfaces and a little more in terms of quality materials.

Inside or out, this is a must-have car we would gladly park in our own garage. Like a great show, it keeps the Bic lighters burning all night. And it's available for a budget-friendly price.

Second Opinions:

Road Test Editor John DiPietro says:

If these three were all on the same team and I was the coach, I'd give the "Most Improved" award to the Mustang. Anyone who's driven a '99 to '04 and then this car knows what I'm talkin' about. Of course it's

the perfectly executed retro-themed styling that first grabs your attention, but there's a lot more to this quarter horse than a sleek coat.

Having been the editor who attended the [first drive event](#) on the '05 Mustang, I was already aware how much better the new car handles than the old one. And it soundly whips the old pony in all other areas such as ride quality, seating comfort and ergonomics. No longer do you sit propped up on a flat seat with no lateral support, now you settle into a proper bucket seat. And the reach to the gearshifter is now designed for humans, not orangutans.

Fire it up and one of the best exhaust soundtracks of the last 30 years greets your ears. Burn some rubber as you run it hard through the first three gears, preferably when you're blasting out of a toll booth, and I guarantee you'll grin like a high school kid who just got his first cool car. You'll also discover how much slicker the gear change is, even though they went from direct to cable linkage.

In short, I flat out loved this car. Yes, it wasn't as athletic as the Z or RX-8 on the racetrack. But in the real world, that muscular V8 and a nice ride and handling balance more than compensate. Throw in the dynamite looks, generous cargo space and bargain price tag and you can count me in among the many fans who think this horse is a sure winner.

Road Test Editor Dan Kahn says:

Let's get one thing straight. I love the new Mustang. I loved it when I drove the first press car in California for a quick photo shoot, and I got even more hot and bothered when I wrangled a week of seat time for a [full test](#) about a month later.

I think the new pony packs a perfect blend of nostalgic style and modern convenience in an affordable package that should appeal to high school hoodlums and middle-aged soccer moms alike. With that said, driving the Mustang back-to-back with the best Japan has to offer did give me some insight on a few of the car's flaws.

Interior materials are a bit drab-looking for my taste, especially in base-model GTs that aren't equipped with the aluminum trim package. The steering wheel is made out of the same hard textured plastic that I hate in the F-150, and getting a leather wrap necessitates ordering the cow hide treatment for the entire interior.

Going into corners the car has a tendency to understeer, and body roll is a bit excessive. On the racetrack the Mustang felt like a skater with weak ankles trying to keep up with the varsity hockey team, probably due to mediocre tires and suspension tuned for ride quality over all-out handling. However, it was the easiest car to drive and also the most fun. Simply push the big pony through the corner and then stand on the accelerator. The sweet sound of a V8 bellowing through dual exhaust can't be matched by a refined V6 or even a free-revving rotary.

Minor gripes aside, I think the 2005 Mustang is the best performance bargain available today. Steering feel is absolutely stellar, the 4.6 V8 pumps out gobs of power and the short-throw shifter is a drag racer's dream. Best of all is the car's super-low price, coming in \$5,000 less than the other two cars in this test. Throw in a usable (albeit cramped) backseat and drop-dead gorgeous looks, and it's easy to see why I put this pony at the top of my short list.

Stereo Evaluation: Ford Mustang

System Score: 7.5

Components:

The standard GT stereo is a radio with a single CD player. Two optional stereos are available at an additional cost but our car came equipped with the base GT audio system. The system comes with eight speakers and MP3 capability.

The controls are typical Ford which means it's not too exciting to look at but operation is simple and straightforward. We would like to see steering wheel-mounted audio controls and a display that matches the gauges in terms of a cool factor.

Performance:

This is a good-sounding system. The base stereo is no better and certainly no worse than a typical CD audio system in the average Ford or Toyota sedan. The one thing this Mustang stereo does well is that it can get very loud. The downside is that all the different sounds have a tendency to run together. Bass response is decent but not as sharp or tight as we'd prefer. The lack of a midrange control also makes most types of music sound slightly hollow.

Best Feature: Bass response.

Worst feature: Lack of separation.

Conclusion: A better than average stereo considering it's the base system in a \$25,000 performance coupe. Pick one of the two optional systems if you're a real music lover. — *Brian Moody*

Final Rankings and Scoring Explanation

Final Rankings

Final Rankings

	Ford Mustang GT	Mazda RX-8	Nissan 350Z
Personal Rating (10% of score)	100	44.4	55.6
Recommended Rating (10% of score)	100	66.7	33.3
Evaluation Score (20% of score)	81.7	79.0	74.0
Feature Content (20% of score)	63.3	56.7	40
Performance (20% of score)	92.0	72.0	92.0
Price (20% of score)	100	73.3	72.8
Total Score	87.4	67.3	64.7
Final Ranking	1	2	3
Scoring Explanation			

Personal Rating: Purely subjective. After the test, each participating editor was asked to rank the vehicles in order of preference based on which he or she would buy if money were no object.

Recommended Rating: After the test, each participating editor was asked to rank the vehicles in order of preference based on which he or she thought would be best for the *average consumer shopping in this segment*.

20-Point Evaluation: Each participating editor ranked every vehicle based on a comprehensive 20-point evaluation. The evaluation covered everything from exterior design to cupholders. Scoring was

calculated on a point system, and the scores listed are averages based on all test participants' evaluations.

Feature Content: For this category, the editors picked the top 10 features they thought would be most beneficial to the consumer shopping in this segment. For each vehicle, the score was based on the amount of actual features it had versus the total possible (10). Standard and optional equipment were taken into consideration.

Performance Testing: Each car was subjected to a set of performance tests that measure acceleration, braking and speed through a 600-foot slalom course. Scores were calculated by giving the best coupe in each category 100 percent. Subsequent vehicles were awarded points based on how close they came to the best performing car's score.

Price: The numbers listed were the result of a simple percentage calculation based on the least expensive vehicle in the comparison test. Using the "as-tested" prices of the actual evaluation vehicles, the least expensive vehicle received a score of 100, with the remaining vehicles receiving lesser scores based on how much each one costs.

Consumer Commentary

2005 Ford Mustang

"Love this car. Last car was a '97 Mitsu Eclipse convertible turbo. This one feels large and substantial and better attached to the road. Oh yeah, and so much faster it's crazy. :) I have the standard interior, but I think it looks great anyway. The dash is black with subtle metallic flecks that help add a touch of depth. It roars down the road with confidence." — *Vroom, Nov. 28, 2004*

"It's a déjà vu into the past for me. The 'Stangs were invented when I first began driving. Ford has given us all a wonderful rebirth of the original 'Stangs. The roar of the engine when you turn the key. The original air vents, speedometer & tach." — *Back in the saddle, Dec. 1, 2004*

"This car is tight, has outstanding handling, awesome performance and torque. The style is old-school muscle car. Comfortable and stylish interior. Takes off like a rocket." — *Scott Thomas, Nov. 23, 2004*

2005 Mazda RX-8

"Amazing car to drive hard. Very smooth, makes you look like you are a better driver than you are. Love the lights, auto-dimming mirror, red & black leather interior, exotic looks, usable backseat, short-throw shifter, no brake cornering, 9,500 rpm redline, steering feel so light and direct." — *Zokkhon, Oct. 3, 2004*

"This car is FUN! It is responsive and tight in the turns. It accelerates off the line fast enough for me! This is a lot of car for the price." — *Birdy, Oct. 25, 2004*

"I love this car. It is a blast to drive and I can take my kids to school in it. It attracts attention everywhere I go. People who are not 'into' cars stare at it and ask what it is and gearheads want to talk about the rotary engine. I was going to buy a 3 Series BMW but EVERYONE has one of those. The RX-8 is cheaper and a lot more fun." — *PATMATDEC, Oct. 2, 2004*

2005 Nissan 350Z

"Flawless performance and reliability packaged in what has to be one of the best-looking cars on the road at any price. I've always been a 'bang for the buck' kind of buyer and I would recommend this car to anyone. The six-speed is the way to go in a roadster." — *AMX, Nov. 30, 2004*

"It handles superbly and accelerates off the line faster than anything that's ever tried to beat me at a red light. I love it." — *Ed Coyle, Nov. 29, 2004*

"Excellent car for price/performance ratio. Very comfortable ride for a 'Sport' coupe, the automatic has the ability to use Tiptronic shifting to get max rpm if you really want them." — *Dave in FL, Nov. 28, 2004*

Top 10 Features

Sport coupes typically have two goals, to go fast and look cool. Even so, we compiled a short list of features we feel a sport coupe should have. Many of these cars are available with a long list of comfort or performance-enhancing options but those tend to drive the price up. In order to keep the cars similar in performance and price our cars have, for the most part, few options.

Features

Features

	Ford Mustang	Nissan 350Z	Mazda RX-8
ABS	S	S	S
CD Changer	O	O	O
Folding Rear Seats	S	N/A	N/A
One-Touch Up/Down Windows	S	S	N/A
Power Seat	S	O	O
Rear Seat	S	N/A	S
Steering Wheel-Mounted Audio Controls	N/A	O	S
Satellite Radio	N/A	O	O
Tire-Pressure Monitor	N/A	S	S
Traction Control	S	S	O

Key:

S: Standard

O: Optional

N/A: Not Available

ABS: Antilock brakes are a must on any car, especially one you intend to drive fast.

CD Changer: A multi-CD changer will help keep your hands on the wheel. Listening to your collection one CD at a time is a hassle.

Folding Rear Seat: Most rear seats fold down making the trunk that much larger. It's a utility feature that only the Mustang has in this comparison test.

One-Touch Up/Down Windows: Many cars offer a one-touch down feature on the driver side but two of our comparison cars have one-touch up and down for both front windows. It will help you stay on top of shifting and steering.

Power Seat: A power driver seat adds an extra bit of luxury and convenience.

Rear Seat: On the off chance you want to carry more than two people, a rear seat can be a huge help.

Steering Wheel-Mounted Audio Controls: Want to listen to music without taking your eyes off the road? Stereo controls at your fingertips can add to both safety and convenience.

Satellite Radio: The perfect companion to a sport coupe road trip.

Tire-Pressure Monitor: Spirited driving requires proper tire inflation. An onboard monitor can be a life-saving feature.

Traction Control: Driving hard is fun but traction control can help you enjoy your car more by controlling the powerful engines that typically accompany these types of cars.

Stereo Evaluation

[Ford Mustang GT](#)

[Mazda RX-8](#)

[Nissan 350Z](#)

2005 Mazda RX-8

System Score: 8.0

Components:

This RX-8 came with the Grand Touring package which includes an upgraded Bose stereo. The optional system is good for 300 watts, nine speakers and has a single CD player. Mazda's Pilot noise compensating system is also included in the deal.

The controls are arranged in a large circle on the center stack and it's not the most user-friendly layout we've seen. Our car has a single CD player but controls for a CD changer are incorporated into the head unit. Buttons for "load" and "disc up/disc down" usually indicate a *CD changer* but on our car they seem to do nothing. There is a separate knob for tuning the radio manually, a feature we like. But it is placed away from the rest of the controls. Thankfully, the RX-8 has steering wheel-mounted audio controls so we rarely had to even touch the dash-mounted buttons.

Performance:

This upgraded Bose system is the best-sounding stereo of the three comparison cars we've assembled. The bass is warm and sharp and the highs are clear as well. Occasionally when listening at higher volumes, the speaker would squeak but the stereo sounds very good overall.

Best Feature: Sharp, clean sound quality.

Worst Feature: Somewhat busy interface on the dash.

Conclusion: A very good stereo worthy of a \$30,000 sports car.

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2005 Ford Mustang GT

System Score: 7.5

Components:

The standard GT stereo is a radio with a single CD player. Two optional stereos are available at an additional cost but our car came equipped with the base GT audio system. The system comes with eight speakers and MP3 capability.

The controls are typical Ford which means it's not too exciting to look at but operation is simple and straightforward. We would like to see steering wheel-mounted audio controls and a display that matches the gauges in terms of a cool factor.

Performance:

This is a good-sounding system. The base stereo is no better and certainly no worse than a typical CD audio system in the average Ford or Toyota sedan. The one thing this Mustang stereo does well is that it can get very loud. The downside is that all the different sounds have a tendency to run together. Bass response is decent but not as sharp or tight as we'd prefer. The lack of a midrange control also makes most types of music sound slightly hollow.

Best Feature: Bass response.

Worst feature: Lack of separation.

Conclusion: A better than average stereo considering it's the base system in a \$25,000 performance coupe. Pick one of the two optional systems if you're a real music lover. — *Brian Moody*

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2005 Nissan 350Z

System Score: 7.0

Components

Simple and clean. That's the best way to describe how the 350Z incorporates the Bose head unit into its swoopy dash area. There is one minor complaint — while the overall look and feel are very pleasant, the "load" button for the CD changer seems to be placed rather far from the buttons one must use to choose which slot you want to load a CD into. Otherwise, everything is just where you'd expect, and changing functions or skipping tracks is very intuitive. Given the high-performance nature of the Z, we'd like to see the addition of steering wheel-mounted audio controls — especially on the Performance and Touring models.

Nissan uses two door-mounted speakers that are complemented by two tweeters mounted high on the doors plus two larger speakers mounted behind the only two seats. Those speakers are driven by a 240-watt Bose system.

Performance

Bass response is great no matter what you're listening to, while a boost of +4 or +5 delivers a nice punch and doesn't overwhelm the speakers thanks to the rear-mounted subwoofer. The sound quality is

not great but neither is it terrible. The highs are too high and the mids are all over the place with very little separation or clarity. Volume is the one thing this stereo can do well.

Best Feature: Straightforward controls and nice bass.

Worst Feature: Lack of midrange.

Conclusion: The 350Z doesn't exactly provide the ideal listening environment for hard-core audiophiles, but the Bose system does make a nice companion to the sweet exhaust note that seems to come in just above the music as you're running through the gears. In short, a slightly better than average system. — *Brian Moody*

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Speed Read

Featured Specs

- 3.5-liter V6
- 6-speed close ratio transmission
- 18-inch wheels

What Works

Stellar handling, strong and willing V6.

What Needs Work

Harsh ride, noisy interior, cheap interior bits.

Bottom Line

An excellent sports car if you just want to go fast and corner like a spec racer, but living with the Z every day would be tough.

Speed Read

Featured Specs

- 300-hp V8/li>
- Cool-looking inside and out
- Flashy color choices

What Works

Excellent engine with a rewarding exhaust note, great ride, quiet cabin, stellar exterior styling.

Speed Read

Featured Specs

- 1.3-liter engine
- 238 hp
- 50/50 weight distribution
- excellent Bose stereo

What Works

Clamshell doors and real backseat, excellent Bose stereo, sweet rotary engine.

What Needs Work

Driver seat is too high, lacks low-end torque, very little trunk space and no fold-down rear seats.

Bottom Line

A good car that offers a healthy dose of performance and a dash of practicality.

Specs and Performance

Vehicle

Model year	2005
Make	Ford
Model	Mustang GT

Drivetrain

Engine type	V8
Displacement (cc/cu-in)	4.6
Horsepower (hp @ rpm)	300 @ 5750

Wheelbase (in.)	107.1
Legroom, front (in.)	42.7
Legroom, rear (in.)	31
Headroom, front (in.)	38.6
Headroom, rear (in.)	35

Warranty

Bumper-to-bumper	3 years/36,000 miles
Powertrain	3 years/36,000 miles
Corrosion	5 years/unlimited miles
Roadside assistance	3 years/36,000 miles

Wheelbase (in.)	106.4
Legroom, front (in.)	42.7
Legroom, rear (in.)	32.3
Headroom, front (in.)	38.2
Headroom, rear (in.)	36.8

Warranty

Bumper-to-bumper	4 years/50,000 miles
Powertrain	4 years/50,000 miles
Corrosion	5 years/unlimited miles
Roadside assistance	4 years/50,000 miles

Wheelbase (in.)	104.3
Legroom, front (in.)	42.6
Legroom, rear (in.)	N/A
Headroom, front (in.)	38.2
Headroom, rear (in.)	N/A

Warranty

Bumper-to-bumper	3 years/36,000 miles
Powertrain	5 years/60,000 miles

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