

The Zoom Zoom Road Rally:

Subaru Impreza and the Mitsubishi Lancer

By Roger Witherspoon

Sometimes, looks can be deceiving.

For the most part, \$20,000 compact cars with four cylinder engines are considered basic transport, and provide varying amounts of comfort and amenities and styling that is more attractive than functional. Spoilers on the rear and aggressive looking fronts tend to be playful appeals to those who wish they had sports sedans rather than indications of real speed and performance.

So I wasn't expecting all that much from the Subaru Impreza WRX, the \$30,000, turbocharged sport model of the more sedate Impreza sedan which usually competes with the Toyota Corolla and Mitsubishi Lancer. But the WRX was intended to bump up against the Audi A-4 and grab the Zoom-Zoom from both Mazda and Mitsubishi.

That was a tall order. The guys with Subaru's crayons got into the spirit of sport competition, crafting a short, stubby, sharp-sloping front with a working turbo scoop which looks as aggressive as the average crouching tiger. The WRX sedan has a short, stubby rear with a hint of a cat's powerful haunches topped by a sloping spoiler that looks as if it might actually be functional. The 18-inch, 10-spoke aluminum alloy wheels complete the aesthetic transformation from a car intended to haul groceries to one designed to run with the big dogs.

The WRX does not look like the everyday compact on the inside, either. The dash has the double curve cockpit look associated with more upscale sports models, and the two-tone, adjustable, heated bucket seats lend more panache than one would have expected. A CD and MP3 player were expected, but the touch-screen navigation system was a surprise and the 10-speaker audio system provided the envelope of sound one associated with high speed rides.

A touch of the accelerator made it clear that the WRX was not a run of the mill anything. The turbos kicked in immediately and the car fairly leapt from the curb. In fact, the WRX rushes from 0 to 60 miles per hour in just under six seconds, a respectable speed for a sport sedan, and a surprise on a compact.

What was more of a surprise was tooling at 125 through New England and realizing that the spoiler was actually a working piece of equipment as the WRX, with its all wheel drive, hugged the highway as tightly as an NFL draftee hugs his first bonus signing check. The turbo-charged engine cranks out 224 horsepower –giving a kick to the light weight compact sedan which carries a top speed of 140 miles per hour. The big dogs will eventually leave the WRX behind, but they will have to work up a serious sweat to do so.

In crafting the Impreza WRX, Subaru has blended its upscale, road racing technology into a small package which doubles as an everyday commuting and grocery-hauling vehicle and competes very well with the zoom-zoom crowd.

And then, there is Mitsubishi's Lancer GTS. The standard Lancer is a comfortable, attractive, sedate car with a sticker just above \$20,000 which is aimed at the Corolla and Honda Civic crowd. But the Mitsubishi was not about to let the zoom-zoom

crowd go unchallenged, and crafted a GTS version of the compact sedan to run with the pint-sized pack.

The guys with the Lancer's crayons shied away from Subaru's pugnacious look when they designed the GTS, and opted for a long, sleek, slim, slowly sloping front, narrow grill and unbroken, slim line to the trunk reminiscent of the style of Mercedes' sport sedans.

They also shied away from the bulk power of the WRX, and opted for a more standard, 152-horsepower engine. But Mitsubishi focused on the quality of the ride and driving experience, and added a manual mode to their automatic transmission with tightly wound, instantly responsive paddle shifts behind the leather steering wheel. The result is a compact sedan which takes a bit longer to get up to speed, but is still tuned to provide enjoyment for those looking for sports car performance.

The Lancer GTS, riding on 18-inch wheels, takes 7.7 seconds for the speedometer to hit 60, and it tops out at only 120 miles per hour – around the top speed of the much costlier Lincoln Zephyr. That is 20 miles an hour slower than the top speed of the WRX, but then the Lancer GTS costs about \$7,000 less than its turbo charged competitor. In addition, there is rarely an opportunity or need for most folks to drive at those speeds on the open road. The low riding, quiet, ground-hugging Lancer GTS, though it cannot keep up with the WRX or the really big dogs, easily provides the adrenaline antidote to the standard daily commute.

Inside, Mitsubishi's creators put a lot into a \$22,000 package. Like the Subaru WRX, the Lancer GTS also offers AM/FM and Sirius satellite radio, but boosts the audio with a 650-watt, 10-speaker Rockford-Fosgate surround system which would be at home in a car costing three times as much. The GTS is also loaded with a powered sun roof, Bluetooth cell phone connection, and a satellite-driven navigation system with a seven-inch touch screen.

Whether one opts to make an aggressive statement with the Subaru WRX, or a more sublime one with the Lancer GTS, the two sports sedans prove to be fast paced options to the compact commuting blahs.

2008 Subaru Impreza WRX

MSRP:		\$29,833
EPA Mileage:	19 MPG City	24 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:

0 – 60 MPH	5.9 Seconds
¼ Mile	14.5 Seconds at 94 MPH
Top Speed:	140 MPH

2.5-Liter DOHC 4-cylinder turbocharged engine with functional full hood scoop producing 224 horsepower and 226 pound-feet of torque; symmetrical all-wheel drive; 5-speed manual transmission; 4-wheel disc brakes; vehicle dynamics control; double

wishbone rear suspension; sport tuned independent suspension; 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels; dual front air bags; front seat side impact air bags; side curtain air bags.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM Sirius satellite radio; CD and MP3 player with 10 speaker sound system; touch-screen GPS navigation system; tilt & telescope, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio and cruise controls; heated front seats;

2008 Mitsubishi Lancer GTS

MSRP:		\$22,615
EPA Mileage:	22 MPG City	29 MPG Highway

Performance/ Safety:		
	0 – 60 MPH	7.7 Seconds
	¼ Mile	15.85 Seconds at 96 MPH
	Top Speed:	120 MPH

2.0-Liter DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 152 horsepower and 146 pound-feet of torque; automatic transmission with paddle-shift manual mode; rack & pinion steering; sport tuned suspension; 4-wheel disc brakes; front and rear stabilizer bars; dual front air bags; front seat mounted side air bags; side curtain airbags; driver’s knee airbag; daytime running lights; 18-inch aluminum alloy wheels; fog lights; halogen headlights.

Comfort/ Interior:

AM/FM Sirius satellite radio; CD & MP3 player; 650-watt Rockford-Fosgate sound system with 9 speakers and subwoofer; satellite-based navigation system; power sunroof; tilt steering wheel with fingertip cruise and audio controls; Bluetooth cell phone connection.