

FAMILY FEUD



Mazda MX-5 vs. Fiat 124 Spider: Comparing Track-Prepped Versions of Today's Favorite Sportsters

story and photos by tom suddard

No, you haven't already read this test in other magazines. Sure, you've seen the headline "Fiat 124 Spider vs. Mazda MX-5 Miata" in a million other places, but never like this.

We're not simply comparing showroom-stock examples of the platform-sharing roadsters. We're not going to comment on the Fiat's acoustic windshield or the Mazda's smaller trunk.

We're going to compare track cars on track, with real tires, real suspensions, and common engine modifications. When's the last time you've seen a bone-stock Miata at an autocross or track day? Exactly. Other outlets have written this headline. But they haven't written this story.

Tire Warming

A story like this doesn't start with calls to Fiat and Mazda. Instead, it started with a call to a racer, in this case Brian Goodwin, owner of Miata tuning firm Good-Win Racing and a fast driver himself.

He already owns examples of both cars, and was willing to prep them identically for our test. Even better: He's located near the Streets of Willow Springs, the twisty, hilly track located next to Southern California's Willow Springs Raceway.

We grabbed our driving gear, bought a plane ticket, and flew out to definitively answer the question: "Should you buy a Fiat or a Miata?"

Tech Inspection


"Identically modified" isn't something you can ask for a few hours before your session. It's something that takes weeks to achieve, and Good-Win put in the time to make sure it was done right on our test vehicles.

A full list of the modifications made to each car can be found at the end of this story, but overall we aimed for a setup that would roughly approximate that of a front-running Street Touring autocross car, albeit with a few track-focused additions, like the Blackbird Fabworx RZ roll bars.

The only differences came when it was time to modify the drivetrains, since propulsion is the primary mechanical difference between the two cars. The Fiat received a bevy of parts aimed at pumping up its turbocharged heart, while the Miata got a heavy dose of naturally aspirated breathing modifications.

Once each car was back from the shop, Good-Win Racing spent time with each on track and on the dyno, optimizing their suspension and engine tunes to ensure a fair fight. Each car was then given a fresh set of BFGoodrich g-Force Rival S tires, loaded into its trailer, and brought to Streets of Willow.

We checked tire pressures in the paddock, torqued the



Fiat or Miata? That's the question, and we teamed up with Good-Win Racing to finally answer it.

FEATURE: MAZDA MX-5 VS. FIAT SPIDER



To keep this fight fair, both our Fiat 124 Spider and Mazda MX-5 received identical upgrades: same aftermarket chassis hardware, same brake improvements, same wheels and tires. Due to the drivetrain layouts, though, the under-hood modifications differ. In the end, however, both cars posted nearly identical max horsepower and torque figures—although one car had a slight edge regarding lap times.

lugs, and rolled out for our first session. We split the driving duty with the team from Good-Win, giving everybody the chance to drive each car and ensuring that plenty of laps were put onto both chassis.

A coin toss determined that we'd spend our first session in the MX-5. Our goal? Get reacquainted with a chassis we've already got plenty of seat time in, and learn the bumpy, challenging track.

Mazda: Starting With the Benchmark

Although we've spent lots of time in the ND-chassis Mazda MX-5, we've never driven one this well composed, or with this much power from the factory, naturally aspirated engine.

Good-Win's fancy exhaust seemed to plump up the stock MX-5's powerband, making a broad, linear curve. We knew exactly what was under our right foot at every step around the track, and managing the car's oversteer was a breeze, even door-to-door with other cars on the unfamiliar circuit.

Clearly, Brian likes a bit of tail-happiness in his race cars. This was our first outing on the Öhlins coil-overs, and they avoided the common "ALL THE SPRING RATE" pitfall that Miata owners seem unable to avoid. The car was compliant around the bumpy track, and simply stuck.

We did have a few gripes. The only word we'd use to describe the steering and shifter feel is "dainty," which isn't exactly confidence-inspiring at 10/10ths. Brian says that the MX-5's steering actually gets lighter as tire grip increases, a byproduct of the electric rack trying its best to do its job.

The MX-5 also lacked low-end torque. That's not normally a problem on a high-revving track car, but we caught ourselves downshifting to second in a time-wasting attempt to keep the engine in its power band.

Fiat: Bringing a Turbo to the Table

We had learned the track. And we had learned what the newest Miata felt like in Street Touring trim. Time to see if the challenger from across the pond (though 124 Spiders are actually assembled in Japan) would hold its own.

Now, time for a disclaimer: We've driven the 124 a lot in stock trim, and stock for stock, all-season tires and all, some of us in the office would pick the Fiat over the Miata in a heartbeat. This opinion hasn't made our group super-popular among the GRM staff, but those who like the Fiat stand by that choice, pointing out the fact that the boost simply makes the car more fun.

FEATURE: MAZDA MX-5 VS. FIAT SPIDER

Sorry to spoil the surprise, but that opinion didn't change on track. Sure, our laps started off with a sad realization: Pressing the gas in the MX-5 is like ordering a lightning strike, while pressing it in the 124 is like ordering a flood. There's definitely some turbo lag here, but after a lap or two we learned to keep our foot down and the turbo spooled.

With that problem solved, we hit the next obstacle: 6000 rpm, and not a tick past it. Sure, the Fiat would rev that high, but why bother? After a session spent trying our best to throw the MX-5's pistons through the hood, the Fiat asked us to drive it more like a diesel truck.

Fine. After a few more laps of adjustment, we wondered how we'd ever go back. Sure, we noticed the Fiat's extra weight (not quite as much as a passenger riding shotgun), but we were no longer worried about that split-second of extra time changing direction. The MX-5 demanded absolute precision and planning, but the Fiat was more like a little muscle car, with torque and power the MX-5 would never even dream of at 4500 rpm and exactly as much mechanical grip once you steered it into the corner.

Bonus: The Fiat's steering is heavier, thanks to different programming for the MX-5's too-light rack. The shifter feels better, too, which makes sense: 124 Spiders use the transmission from the earlier NC-chassis Miata, meaning meatier throws and better longevity, at least if the anecdotes from racers are true.

Oh, and can we talk about the sound? Wow. The Fiat sounds like a bull snorting wasabi, and everybody knows turbo noises are cool, too.



Our test vehicles were different colors, but they rode on identical 17x9-inch 949 Racing wheels shod with 245/40R17 BFGoodrich g-Force Rival S 1.5 tires bearing identical date codes. Before our test, each set of tires was scrubbed in and heat cycled.



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Picking a Winner: Mazda or Fiat?

We spent the rest of the day rotating between the two cars, and were well sunburned for our flight home. Those hours of track time backed up our initial impressions: The MX-5 in race trim is the finely sharpened scalpel it's always been, while the Fiat 124 is like that scalpel with a cool flame job on it—and maybe the surgeon drank an energy drink on his way to the O.R. It's the Miata, but more Italian (though you already knew that).

This story isn't just about touchy-feely driving impressions, though: It's about lap times. We left that answer for the end of the day, after we'd written down our driving impressions. Then we pulled the AiM data loggers out of each car, and discovered that the numbers backed up our subjective analysis: The Fiat posted a best time of 1:26.07, while the MX-5 turned a 1:27.14 fast lap. That was no fluke, either, as we saw consistently faster times from the Fiat.

Case closed, album finished, video wrapped. We're calling this one a win for the Fiat 124 Spider, at least on the open track. On a tight autocross course, the answer may be different, owing primarily to the Fiat's extra weight and turbo lag.

But that answer will have to wait until next time.

**GOOD-WIN RACING
MAZDA MX-5**

chassis
949 Racing 6UL 17x9-in. wheels
BFGoodrich g-Force Rival S 1.5 tires, size 245/40R17
Ohlins Road & Track DFV coil-overs (9kg/5kg)
Spherical bearing top mounts
Progress anti-roll bar combo
RoadsterSport anti-roll bar end links
RoadsterSport underbody four-piece aluminum brace kit
RoadsterSport front and rear shock tower braces
engine
PPE Stainless longtube header and midpipe
RoadsterSport Super Q twin tip muffler
EcuTek Software with OrangeVirus tune
Winding Road/Enco transmission gear set
RoadsterSport ultralight battery kit
brakes
RoadsterSport front 12.88-in. six-piston big brake kit
RoadsterSport rear four-piston brake caliper kit
RoadsterSport rear two-piece rotors
Porterfield R4-1 brake pads front and rear
body
DG Motorsports front urethane chin spoiler
Blackbird Fabworx RZ roll bar
RoadsterSport tow hook/GoPro mount
weight
2330 lbs.

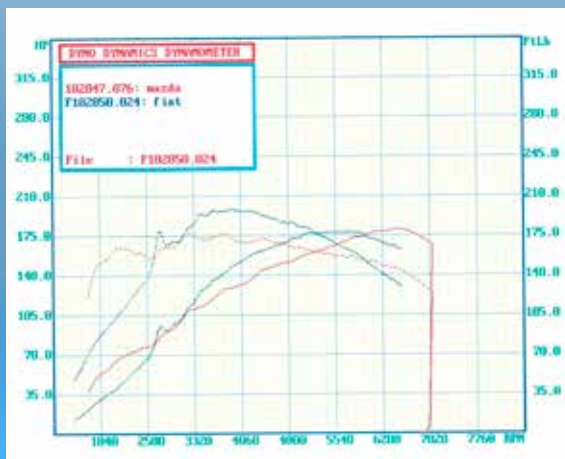
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chassis
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Spherical bearing top mounts
Progress anti-roll bar combo
RoadsterSport anti-roll bar end links
RoadsterSport underbody four-piece aluminum brace kit
RoadsterSport front and rear shock tower braces
engine
RoadsterSport downpipe
RoadsterSport exhaust combo:
RoadsterSport crossover pipe
RoadsterSport midpipe
RoadsterSport quad-tip muffler delete
Madness Autoworks piggyback ECU
Go Fast Bits DV+ diverter valve
Eurocompulsion V1 air induction kit
RoadsterSport ultralight battery kit
brakes
RoadsterSport front 12.88-in. six-piston big brake kit
RoadsterSport rear four-piston brake caliper kit
RoadsterSport rear two-piece rotors
Porterfield R4-1 R4-1 brake pads front and rear
body
Blackbird Fabworx RZ roll bar
RoadsterSport tow hook/GoPro mount
weight
2430 lbs.

LAP TIMES

Brian
Fiat 124 Spider: 1:26.07
Mazda MX-5: 1:27.14
Tom
Fiat 124 Spider: 1:28.76
Mazda MX-5: 1:30.54

Interesting note: Whether the driver had lots of laps at this track or was visiting for the first time, the Fiat clearly turned the better times.



Though both cars make nearly the same peak horsepower, the Fiat clearly has the edge for 99 percent of the powerband.



EXPERIENCING EXTREME SPEED WITH EXTREME SPEED TRACK EVENTS

Where's the fun in racing without anybody to race against? We did our roadster test as part of an Extreme Speed Track Events track day. While we claimed one session for ourselves in order to get clean laps in each car, we also ran in the organization's Roadster Cup, a Miata-only time trial racing series focused on friendly, easy competition in mildly modified cars. Cages aren't required, but four-point roll bars are mandatory in every Miata—or, well, 124 Spider.

And it. Was. Awesome.

Sure, the lack of safety gear gave us pause at first—we were competing for trophies in a T-shirt—but that was quickly forgotten as we found ourselves racing in a group that felt like Spec Miata, but with a wider range of car prep and driving experience. It was like a video game, only we could do it in our daily driver.

Even better: Actual prizes, though you'll struggle to find anything with more than about a \$50 value. It's not pro racing and it's not a hyper-competitive Spec Miata field. It's fun, and for most people, that's what counts.



SOURCE

Extreme Speed Track Events
extremespeedtrackevents.com

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