

BEST-HANDLING CAR FOR LESS THAN \$30,000!

CAR **AND** DRIVER[®]

JUNE 1997 • CANADA \$4.50 UK £2.30 US \$3.50

'98 FIREBIRD TRANS AM **FORMED!**



Exclusive first test!

With the Corvette's LS1 V-8,
the new Trans Am runs 159 mph.

NEW: Audi A6, BMW's 317-hp M roadster, NASCAR Taurus.

SPECIALTIES: Ford Ka, V-8 Volvos, Speedtek 280-hp Eclipse.

MONTANABAHN: Just how fast is reasonable and prudent?



0 272851 7

The Best-Handling Car for Less Than \$30,000

Six savvy performers shed some light on an often-inscrutable automotive topic.

BY DON SCHROEDER

When asked to describe car handling, we're tempted to answer in the manner of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who, when asked to define pornography, veered clear of that one by simply responding that "I know it when I see it."

Handling may be equally difficult to define, but we know it when we're in the driver's seat. Our goal here was to find the car that handles best. For purposes of this test, we have taken a very broad view of handling, one that encompasses everything to do with a car's dynamic behavior outside of pure driveline functions.

The major focus in our handling evaluations is on a car's behavior on winding and twisting roads. How willingly and pre-

dictably does a car make the transition from the straight to a corner, particularly during heavy braking? How does it behave as we increase the cornering speed from a tire-howling to tire-sliding pace? How does the car respond as we apply the throttle or the brakes in midcorner? How efficiently does the car manage the transition from pure cornering to accelerating back onto a straight?

In addition to exploring these obvious handling questions, we also paid attention to peripheral issues that affect the driver's ability to extract the best handling from a car. Smooth throttle response, after all, makes a car much easier to control when one is balancing cornering and acceleration at the limit of the tires' adhesion. A grippy seat that holds the driver in place, combined



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DEWHURST

with well-located controls, makes it easier to initiate smooth, precise control inputs. Consistent, linear braking response similarly eases the touchy task of entering a corner while the car is still slowing down.

There are handling challenges even when the road is straight. How stable is the car at a variety of speeds over different road surfaces? How good a sense of straight-ahead does the steering wheel provide? How natural do small steering-wheel motions feel?

We did not concern ourselves with ride comfort, except when a suspension allowed bumps to reduce our ability to control the car. Nor were we the least bit concerned with maneuverability at parking-lot speeds, which is probably what the average American driver defines as handling.

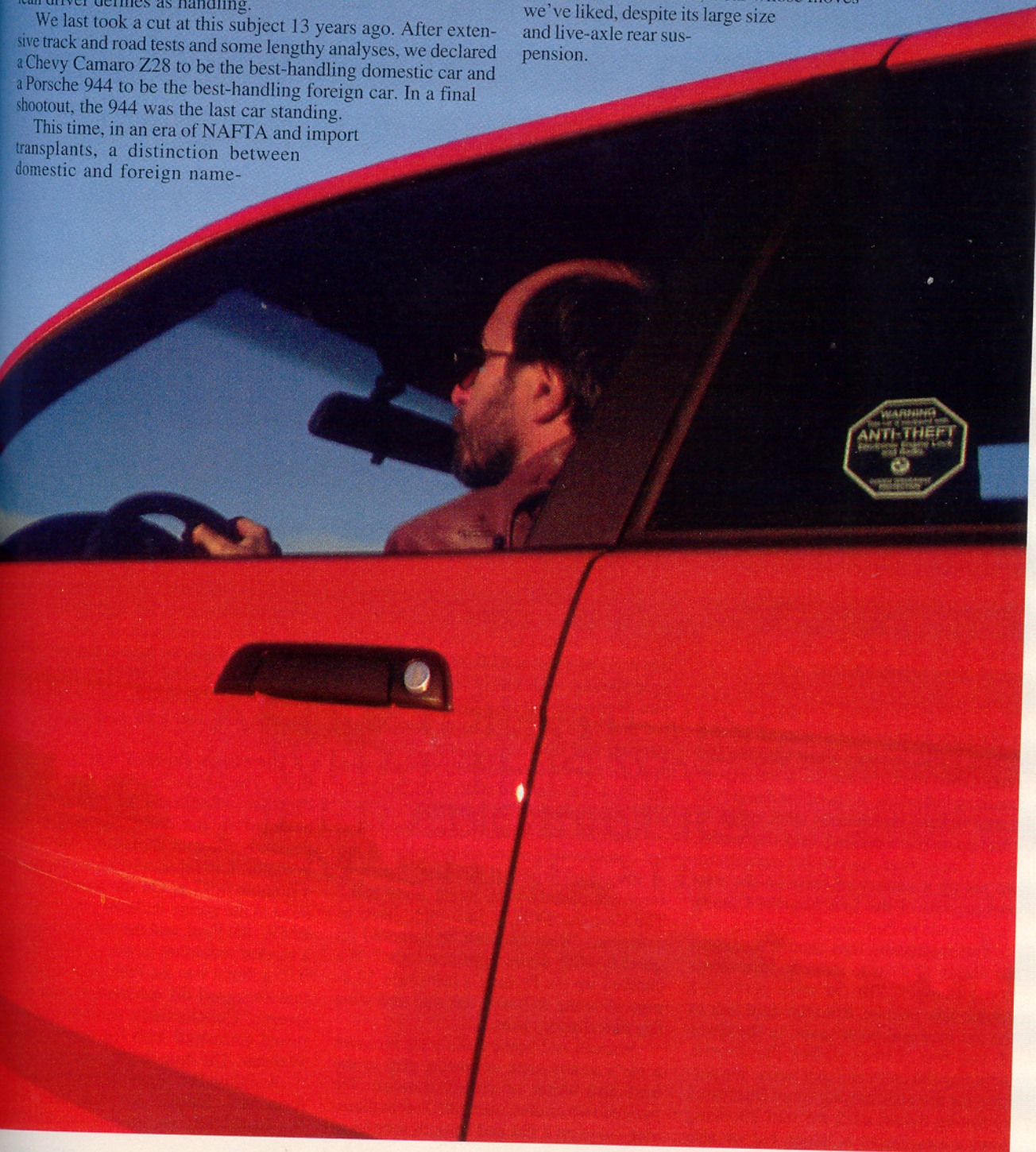
We last took a cut at this subject 13 years ago. After extensive track and road tests and some lengthy analyses, we declared a Chevy Camaro Z28 to be the best-handling domestic car and a Porsche 944 to be the best-handling foreign car. In a final shootout, the 944 was the last car standing.

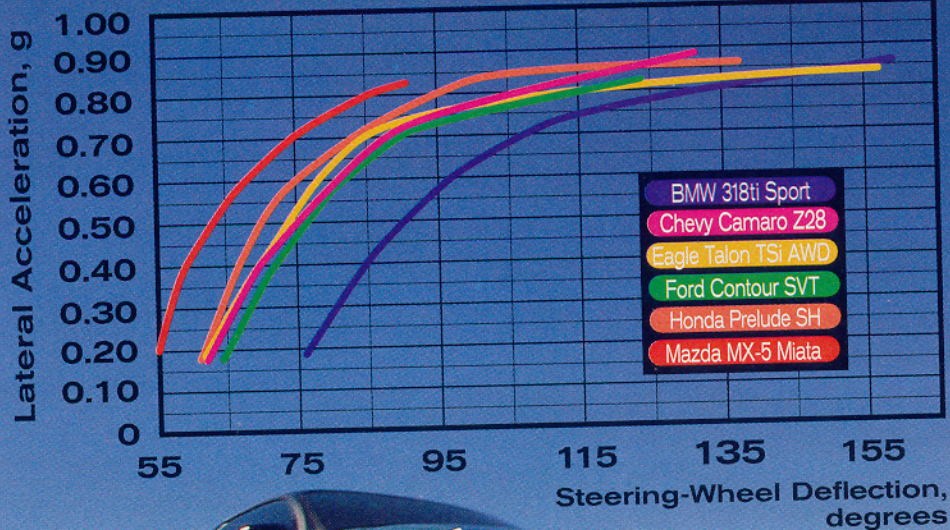
This time, in an era of NAFTA and import transplants, a distinction between domestic and foreign name-

plates seemed less relevant. Instead, we split up the best-handling contender list by price—more than and less than \$30,000—and as before, we selected contenders with diverse driveline configurations.

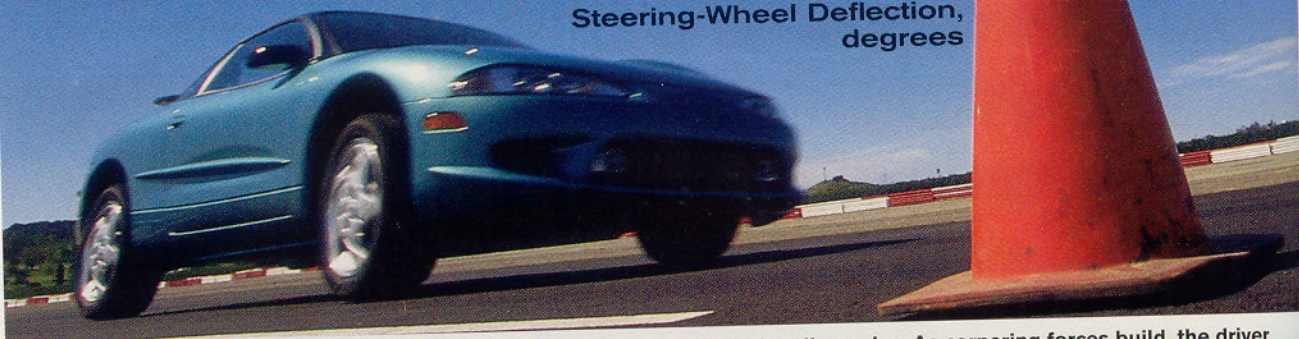
In this issue, we present the first of a two-part feature: the six-car, less-than-\$30K group. (The more-than-\$30K test will follow in a future issue.)

BMW's 3-series was a shoo-in, with the 318ti Sport fitting in comfortably under the \$30,000 bar. Mazda's MX-5 Miata, a lightweight, purpose-built roadster that has always been one of our handling favorites, was a natural for our list. Returning to the handling test one generation later was Chevy's powerful Camaro Z28, a car whose moves we've liked, despite its large size and live-axle rear suspension.





Steering Response



This graph illustrates the relationship between steering-wheel inputs and tire-slip angles. As cornering forces build, the driver must dial in more steering to compensate for the slipping front tires. The graph shows that the Miata's steering wheel required the least amount of turning to get the car to change direction. Readers should note that, although that sounds positive, we point out that the Miata's steering often felt twitchy and overly sensitive. Contrast that to the BMW, which requires the most physical turning of the wheel to change the car's direction. The Bimmer's steering occasionally felt too slow—but at the same time, it also felt more relaxed and composed. Of the cars between these extremes, note that the Prelude's steering was the quickest.

In addition to these three rear-drivers, we selected Honda's Prelude SH, which comes with a complex but trick electronically controlled, limited-slip front differential. Ford's Contour represented the front-drive sports-sedan contingent. Naturally, we selected the big-tired SVT model. The fleet-of-foot Eagle Talon TSi AWD rounded out our group as the only four-wheel-drive representative.

The Test Track

Test tracks have little to do with the real driving world, but they allow extreme and repeatable exploration of a variety of handling behaviors, without the dangers of traffic tickets, treacherous slick spots, or careless drivers pulling into our paths. With cones, chalk, and timing equipment, we set up a variety of tests on the vast parking lots of the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds in Pomona, California.

The emergency lane change evaluates the ability of a car to make sudden directional changes. The car must perform a double-lane change, from the right lane to the left lane and back again, in the space of 160 feet. Cones define the course, including the entry and exit lanes. We perform the test at increasing speed (measured by timing lights) until we start knocking down cones. Faster is better, but we also

note how easily we negotiate the course.

At 63.0 mph, the Eagle Talon was the lane-change master. Its four-wheel drive seemed to keep the chassis composed better than the other cars'. "A no-brainer here," test honcho Don Schroeder wrote in a logbook of driver comments. "Composed and balanced, with no quirks to learn like in the other cars." Next up was the BMW 318ti Sport at 62.0 mph. "Light and agile-feeling, with lots of roll," we wrote. The Miata took third place at 60.1 mph, but that time was hard won. "Has quick steering and little roll control off-center, then the suspension suddenly firms up and the whole car starts to slide. Fast, but only after you figure out its handling."

The Z28 was a hair behind the Miata but considerably more controllable. "One of the easiest cars in this test. Steering responds cleanly with linear body roll." The Contour SVT, at 58.6 mph, liked to oversteer. "Rear end can be gathered up quickly with some opposite lock." We chalked up the Prelude's last-place 58.4-mph showing to heavy steering and what felt like slippery tires.

Smooth and bumpy skidpads measure a car's steady-state cornering grip in the best and worst of circumstances. We painted two circles, each 300 feet in diameter—one on a flat and smooth section of

parking lot and one on bumpy and broken pavement. Around each circle, we drove as quickly as possible without sliding across the painted line. Timing each lap allowed us to calculate lateral acceleration, which is a direct measure of cornering grip. Our primary concern was not so much ultimate grip, but rather how much grip would be reduced on bumpy pavement, something we face in the real world.

These cars were similarly capable on the smooth skidpad, all registering between 0.84 and 0.86 g of lateral acceleration.

The rough skidpad was a different story. The Miata finished last. With the shortest wheelbase of the group, it bounded up and down alarmingly. "Tail demands constant attention," wrote Larry Webster. Lateral acceleration dropped by a notable 0.07 g. On the rough skidpad, most of the group, including the Eagle, the BMW, the Ford, and the Chevy, displayed a modest reduction in grip of from 0.04 to 0.05 g, but it was the Prelude's suspension that shrugged off the bumps most effectively. "Unbelievably smooth and composed compared with the others," wrote Webster. The drop in grip was just 0.03 g.

A slalom is a series of rapid back-and-forth lane changes, but ours had a twist: We varied the cone spacings on our 1000-

TURN 5

| | Average lateral acceleration | Minimum corner speed |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| BMW 318ti Sport | 1.01 g | 54.3 mph |
| Chevy Camaro Z28 | 0.99 g | 58.8 mph |
| Eagle Talon TSi AWD | 0.93 g | 53.6 mph |
| Ford Contour SVT | 0.97 g | 55.4 mph |
| Honda Prelude SH | 1.01 g | 56.7 mph |
| Mazda MX-5 Miata | 0.99 g | 56.5 mph |

The banked curves at Willow allowed our test cars to generate more lateral acceleration than they could on the skidpad. Minimum corner speed indicates the highest speed each car was able to maintain at the slowest point in the curve. Entry and exit speeds were higher. The three corners we selected were the corner after the straightaway; a tight, downhill grinding turn; and a high-speed, decreasing-radius turn.

Willow Springs International Raceway, 2.5 Miles

TURN 1

| | Average lateral acceleration | Minimum corner speed |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| BMW 318ti Sport | 1.16 g | 76.1 mph |
| Chevy Camaro Z28 | 1.15 g | 71.6 mph |
| Eagle Talon TSi AWD | 1.21 g | 73.1 mph |
| Ford Contour SVT | 1.11 g | 73.0 mph |
| Honda Prelude SH | 1.17 g | 73.9 mph |
| Mazda MX-5 Miata | 1.09 g | 69.3 mph |

TURN 9

| | Average lateral acceleration | Minimum corner speed |
|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| BMW 318ti Sport | 1.04 g | 90.9 mph |
| Chevy Camaro Z28 | 1.08 g | 99.9 mph |
| Eagle Talon TSi AWD | 1.01 g | 92.4 mph |
| Ford Contour SVT | 1.04 g | 92.6 mph |
| Honda Prelude SH | 1.13 g | 95.5 mph |
| Mazda MX-5 Miata | 1.11 g | 87.2 mph |



foot-long, 14-turn course from 60 feet at one end to 20 feet at the other. Then we ran the course in both directions, trying to achieve the quickest time without mowing down the cones.

When entering the course from the end with the cones spaced farthest apart, the test gauged a car's ability to maintain stability while losing speed as it negotiated the progressively tighter gates. Entered from the end with the cones spaced closer together, the course reveals how well a car can accelerate while cutting from side to side as hard as possible.

Less than 4 mph separated the fastest from the slowest cars in either direction. Yet the cars revealed very different characteristics. The Prelude felt the most secure and turned in the best speed, 52.7 mph, in the decelerating direction. In the accelerating direction, it averaged 52.6 mph, making it the only car that was slower as it was accelerating through the course. Despite these times, the Prelude's steering occasionally felt unassisted and unnatural, as if the electronic differential were somehow interfering.

The Eagle posted a midpack combined average speed of 51.4 mph, but both testers noted turbo lag and a recalcitrant shifter that made the car more difficult to thread through the cones. The Ford's 49.5-mph run was the slowest in the decelerating direction, limited by oversteer and greasy-

feeling tires, especially when warm. "Don't feel this car is telling me all I need to know," Webster wrote. Similarly, the Mazda was held back by sensitive steering that didn't feel linear. "A touchy piece," said Csaba Csere in the accelerating slalom. "Twitchy," noted Webster of the steering, in the opposite direction.

The Chevy surprised us with its calm predictability despite its considerable size, with a 52.7-mph combined average speed that tied the score of the smaller Prelude. The BMW felt most at home between the cones. Its sharp steering and buttoned-down control, even at the limit, gave it the highest combined average speed of 52.9 mph. "Steering remains solid and responsive under power," remarked Csere. "Wow. Grip level is high, and once it breaks away, it's easily recoverable," wrote Webster.

The Racetrack

If the various skidpad, slalom, and lane-change measurements are quizzes in the handling curriculum, then the racetrack is the midterm examination. Here, a car's individual proficiencies are measured as a whole. Willow Springs International Raceway in Rosamond, California, with its nine low- and high-speed turns draped over 2.5 miles of hilly pavement, provided the ideal test venue.

A racetrack, of course, is an artificial

environment without the unexpected oil slicks and deceptive decreasing-radius corners that can stop your heart on a winding public road. But that predictability is what makes the track the proper place for exploring the hairy edge and beyond.

One downside of a racetrack, however, is the corrupting influence of power. Therefore, a simple lap time cannot yield an accurate handling grade.

To focus on handling more, we fitted each test car with a Datron Technology M2 microwave speed sensor and an Advanced Data Acquisition A-DAT FES-33 gyrostabilized accelerometer, which allowed us to measure lateral acceleration independently of body roll—a feat not easily accomplished. With these sensors (see the racetrack chart above), we were able to monitor each car's speed and cornering force at various places around the track.

Not surprisingly, the Camaro Z28, with its 285-horsepower V-8, was quickest, averaging 88.5 mph around Willow. But that speed came on the straightaways. The Z28's cornering performance was mid-pack.

The big Camaro felt heavy and ungainly. Its steering was not very communicative, its brakes felt spongy, and its seats provided the least lateral support of this group. It was not tricky to drive, however, with stable understeer everywhere except in the slowish Turn Three, where

you could easily swing the tail out with power. But hustling the Z28 around was more work than play.

The Eagle Talon was second quickest, about 3 mph slower than the Camaro, thanks to the unshakable stability provided by its four-wheel-drive chassis. The Talon simply never threatened to lose its grip unexpectedly on the pavement.

That's a good thing because the Talon's suspension lets its body bounce so much that our helmeted heads were tagging the roof. This soft suspension required a sensitive foot on the brake pedal to prevent the nose from plunging toward the pavement at the entrance to every corner. Add the strong steering kickback, and it's easy to conclude that the Talon's stable chassis would benefit from further refinement.

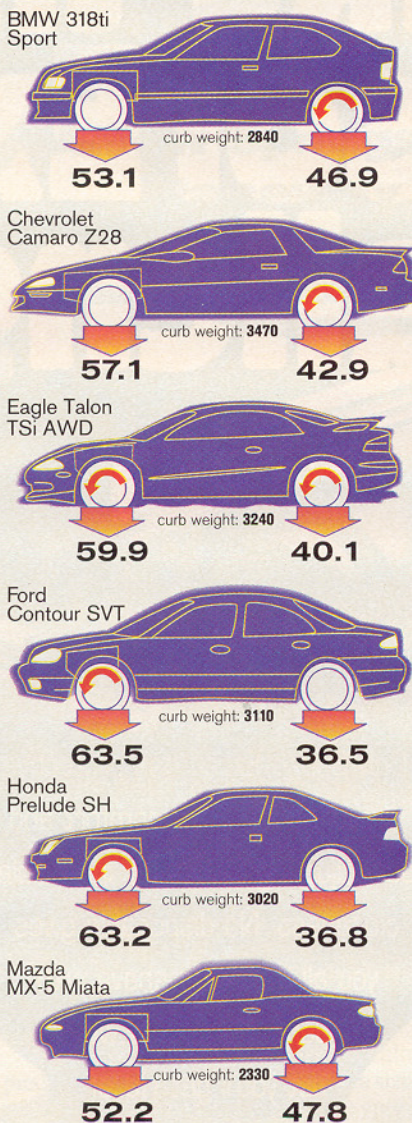
Just 0.1 mph behind the Eagle came the Contour SVT, an excellent performance for an upright four-door sedan. The instrumentation revealed no hidden SVT magic on the track—it was simply easy and entertaining to drive.

Despite its tall driving position, the SVT was agile and responsive. Carving a precise line was intuitive and natural; thanks to accurate steering, linear brakes, and excellent handling balance that allowed the driver to comfortably drift the tail out by easing off the accelerator. Interestingly enough, although the SVT moves as much as the Talon on its suspension, the motions were so fluid and smooth that we weren't at all disturbed.

The Prelude nearly tied the SVT on the track and displayed a similar portfolio of qualities, even though its trick electronic differential stopped operating before we completed our track laps.

With a tauter suspension than the Contour's, the Prelude felt equally stable and put its power down with very little understeer for such a fast, front-drive car—even without the trick differential. With its tires

Weight, Distribution, and Driven Wheels



virtually locked to the track, only a slight lack of steering feel kept the Prelude from being our favorite.

About 1 mph back came the BMW 318ti Sport, a car definitely handicapped by its shortage of power. From the right-angle Turn One to the fast, sweaty-palms, decreasing-radius Turn Nine, the BMW maintained the highest cornering speeds.

That's because the BMW was the most stable and confidence inspiring of the group. Although its steering felt soft and slow, we could position the 318 with great precision. There's enough understeer to maintain stability in the turns without ever overburdening the front tires. Indeed, the car rotates nicely if you lift off the gas in midcorner. And the cornering behavior isn't upset by the brakes, which are powerful and consistent. The 318 is a handling overachiever in need of some ponies.

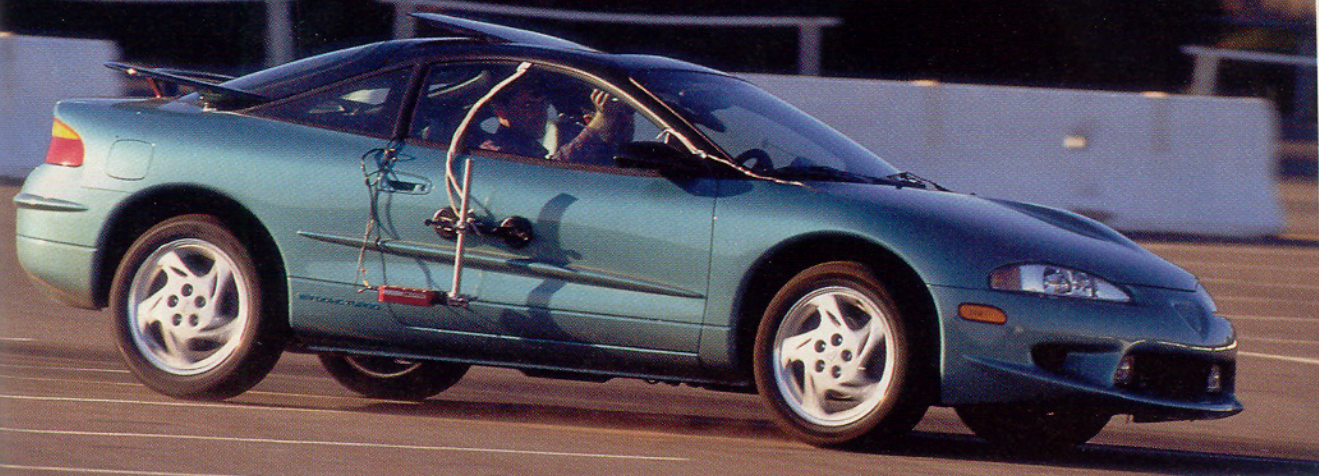
Four mph behind the BMW was the Miata, the least powerful car of the group and, consequently, the slowest on the straights. Unlike the 318, the Miata did not recoup this disadvantage in the corners.

The Mazda roadster has a two-step steering response that's very sensitive on-center but gets softer as you turn the wheel farther. Combined with a dislike of simultaneous braking and turning, the Miata raised our blood pressure as we searched for higher corner-entry speeds. After entering a turn, the Miata felt stable enough, with decent balance that could be altered with the throttle. But the overly sensitive steering made the Miata the most difficult car to position accurately on the track.

The 0.8-mile-long Streets of Willow infield track (adjacent to the large raceway) came in handy. Power is less of a factor on this shorter, tighter course. So negotiating turns and straightaways requires more abrupt maneuvering and heavier braking.

Vital Statistics

| | price, base/as tested | engine/transmission | suspension | | dimensions, inches | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|---|--------------------|--------|-------|--------|
| | | | front | rear | wheel-base | length | width | height |
| BMW 318ti SPORT | \$21,960/ \$24,900 | 1.9-liter DOHC 4-in-line, 138 bhp/ 5-speed manual | ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar | ind, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar | 106.3 | 165.7 | 66.9 | 54.8 |
| CHEVROLET CAMARO Z28 | \$20,640/ \$24,096 | 5.7-liter pushrod V-8, 285 bhp/ 6-speed manual | ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar | rigid axle located by 2 trailing links, 1 torque arm, and a Panhard rod; coil springs; anti-roll bar | 101.1 | 193.2 | 74.1 | 51.3 |
| EAGLE TALON TSi AWD | \$20,806/ \$24,990 | turbocharged 2.0-liter DOHC 4-in-line, 210 bhp/ 5-speed manual | ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar | ind; upper control arm with 1 lateral link, 1 trailing link, and 1 toe-control link per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar | 98.8 | 172.2 | 68.3 | 51.0 |
| FORD CONTOUR SVT | \$22,900/ \$23,635 | 2.5-liter DOHC V-6, 195 bhp/ 5-speed manual | ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar | ind, strut located by 2 lateral links and 1 trailing link, coil springs, anti-roll bar | 106.5 | 183.9 | 69.1 | 54.5 |
| HONDA PRELUDE SH | \$26,095/ \$26,095 | 2.2-liter DOHC 4-in-line, 195 bhp/ 5-speed manual | ind; 1 trailing link, 1 lateral link, and 1 control arm per side; coil springs; anti-roll bar | ind; 1 trailing link, 2 lateral links, and 1 control arm per side; coil springs, anti-roll bar | 101.8 | 178.0 | 69.0 | 51.8 |
| MAZDA MX-5 MIATA | \$19,575/ \$21,575 | 1.8-liter DOHC 4-in-line, 133 bhp/ 5-speed manual | ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar | ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar | 89.2 | 155.4 | 65.9 | 48.2 |



A-DAT's red box on the left became our magic box. It measured lateral acceleration independently of roll—not something every accelerometer can do. This feature allowed direct comparison between the Miata, with its noticeable body roll, and the flat-cornering Prelude. Datron's optical sensor provided the speed measurement, and the laptop computer was used to log in data.

| steering ratio:1/turns lock-to-lock | brakes, front/rear | tires |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 16.8/3.4 | vented disc/disc; anti-lock control | Dunlop SP Sport 2000, 225/50ZR-16 |
| 14.4/2.4 | vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control | Goodyear Eagle GS-C, P245/50ZR-16 |
| 14.6/3.2 | vented disc/disc; anti-lock control | Goodyear Eagle RS-A, 215/50VR-17 |
| 14.5/2.8 | vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control | Goodyear Eagle GS-C, P205/55ZR-16 |
| 15.6/2.8 | vented disc/disc; anti-lock control | Bridgestone Potenza RE92, 205/50VR-16 |
| 15.1/3.6 | vented disc/disc | Dunlop SP Sport D89, P185/60HR-14 |

Even on this tighter course, the Z28 once again trounced all the others. Its best lap of 50.3 mph was 2 mph quicker than the second-place cars'. "Generally an understeerer," wrote Schroeder, "but compensated somewhat by the available power oversteer."

It was a close race for the next four places. The Prelude's rock-solid body control helped it tie the Eagle for second place at 48.3 mph. "Terrific in tight transitions, with more grip than you would expect from the front," wrote Schroeder. The Eagle didn't exhibit the Honda's stiff-lipped composure: "Lots of grip and brakes pay off on the Streets. Four-wheel drive deftly pulls you through tight corners."

The Contour took fourth place, clocking 48.2 mph in spite of its soft suspension. "Body easily upset in tight transitions, which makes putting the power down in corners difficult," wrote one driver. The BMW felt more at ease than the Contour, with "light but accurate steering and easily controlled drifts." It was nonetheless slightly slower, perhaps hindered by its 57 fewer horsepower. The Lilliputian Miata once again brought up the rear, but not by such a yawning gap from the others as it did on the road course. "Tidy size makes it easy to plant properly. Feels purposely built for tight, grinding turns like these."

After objectively measuring the performance of our best-handling candidates on our four test courses and two racetracks, we had a good idea of each car's strengths and weaknesses. But the final examination would take place where these cars spend most of their lives: the real world. Our route took us north of Los Angeles, then west of Bakersfield—where the laser-straight Highway 58 allowed triple-digit speeds—to just north of Ojai, with its tight, grinding loops and switchbacks.

In pondering the following results,

keep in mind that we're ranking handling alone. Styling, acceleration, interior room, and the dozens of other issues normally factored into our comparison tests aren't even along for the ride. As usual, finish order is from last place to first.

Eagle Talon TSi AWD
Impressive machinery that needs polish.

With its four-wheel drive, four-corner independent suspension, and DOHC turbocharged engine, the Eagle Talon TSi AWD's technology is second to none in this group. Making all this hardware work together is another story. In the handling department, at least, the Talon could use more work.

For starters, the steering felt nervous and required constant correction in turns. Understeer was chronic yet hard to predict. "It's uncommunicative and requires a bit of sawing to point the car around," wrote Barry Winfield.

The shocks were another problem. Body control seemed insufficient because of a lack of damping. The brakes grabbed too eagerly, amplifying brake dive as well. Compensating for all these problems demanded concentration. "The chassis doesn't settle down readily. It demands very smooth control inputs to prevent massive brake dive and body roll. It's as if the shocks didn't do anything for the first inch





of travel," wrote Csere.

The Talon's handling certainly wasn't a total loss. The Eagle could make quick work of tight curves, using its traction advantage to blast into and out of corners with aplomb. "Tight stuff is great," wrote Webster. "Just mash the gas as soon as you turn in." Nor did it hold up the group. "You can make the Talon go quickly if you grab it by the scruff of the neck and force it," wrote Csere.

This car's test-track performance demonstrates its potential for excellent handling, but road testing shows there's far more to handling than track tests can reveal. If the Talon had more steering, brake, shock-absorber, and anti-roll-bar refinement, the driver could expend less effort controlling the car and more on exploring its limits. Contributor Jon Thompson put it this way: "This car feels like it works as well as it does almost by accident, by virtue of four-wheel drive, track, and large footprint." As for handling, at least, technology alone will take you just so far.

Ford Contour SVT Soft, but still secure.

"SVT" stands for Ford's Special Vehicle Team, the company's in-house performance arm that created this highest-performance Contour. Even so, this is a tallish sedan, at least compared with the

other contenders, with a relatively soft suspension.

But the SVT also proves that suspension softness and spry handling are not mutually exclusive. In tighter curves, the shocks and the springs kept the body buttoned down sufficiently. "Soft, but well controlled," wrote Csere. "Never bobs, bounces, or pogos around." The Contour would dive into corners eagerly, take a set, and hold on tenaciously right to the hairy, tire-squealing edge. Even in that mode, minute changes in the car's direction were still possible with the throttle. "Very entertaining once you get used to it," remarked Schroeder.

There was a rough side to the Contour. We would have preferred less understeer. Sometimes, in grinding switchbacks, the unloaded inside front tire would spin helplessly under power. And as speeds increased, the Contour occasionally felt fidgety, bounding around on its pillow springs. "Doesn't take a nice set, and I'm never totally at ease," mentioned Csere. Schroeder added, "Too eager to change direction at high speeds, making it difficult to plant right."

The cockpit received mixed reviews. Most drivers liked the seats, but slim-Jim Schroeder found their side bolsters useless. Webster thought the steering wheel was too distant, and Csere found it difficult to heel-and-toe.

The Contour SVT is a pleasure at lower speeds, but on faster corners, its soft suspension becomes a liability. We'll concede this car's need for a supple ride, given the Contour's four-door duties, but the Contour is up against purpose-built performance cars without such practicality constraints. In the handling war, it bows to them.

Chevrolet Camaro Z28 Big, brutal, and better than expected.

A Camaro Z28 won our first handling test in 1984. Of the four other cars the



C/D Test-Track Results

| | accelerating slalom, mph | decelerating slalom, mph | emergency lane change, mph | roadholding, 300-foot bumpy skidpad, g | roadholding, 300-foot smooth skidpad, g | Willow Springs raceway, minutes:seconds/average mph | Streets of Willow road course, seconds/average mph |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| BMW 318ti SPORT | 53.4 | 52.3 | 62.0 | 0.82 | 0.86 | 1:46.8/84.3 | 58.4/47.9 |
| CHEVROLET CAMARO Z28 | 53.1 | 52.3 | 60.0 | 0.81 | 0.85 | 1:41.7/88.5 | 55.6/50.3 |
| EAGLE TALON TSi AWD | 51.6 | 51.1 | 63.0 | 0.79 | 0.84 | 1:45.1/85.6 | 57.9/48.3 |
| FORD CONTOUR SVT | 52.3 | 49.5 | 58.6 | 0.80 | 0.84 | 1:45.3/85.5 | 58.0/48.2 |
| HONDA PRELUDE SH | 52.6 | 52.7 | 58.4 | 0.83 | 0.86 | 1:45.4/85.4 | 57.9/48.3 |
| MAZDA MX-5 MIATA | 51.7 | 50.1 | 60.1 | 0.78 | 0.85 | 1:52.1/80.3 | 59.0/47.4 |
| TEST AVERAGE | 52.5 | 51.3 | 60.4 | 0.81 | 0.85 | 1:46.1/84.9 | 57.8/48.4 |



Chevy faced in that test, only two had independent rear suspensions, and none had the sophistication—suspension or otherwise—of even the last-place finisher in *this* test. Thirteen years later, the Camaro is not any smaller or lighter and is still saddled with a solid rear axle. And all of its competitors have independent suspensions. Frankly, we expected a wash-out this time around.

We were pleasantly surprised. The steering was precise, roll control was adequate, and the grip of the big Goodyears was very manageable. Csere wrote, "This car has enormous size, but it copes with that very well. The steering is fast, direct, and accurate, grip is plentiful, and controllable power oversteer is always available to help the car rotate in tight corners." We'll say. We were constantly aware of the Z28's 285-horsepower V-8 lurking in the shadows, ready to leap out and shove the Camaro's tail around at any moment. Treated with respect, it was a rewarding handling partner.

The bulk of this car is ever-present, though. The expansive cockpit makes it feel much wider than the other test cars, and the front corners of the Z28 can't be seen by even tall drivers. "You feel like you're piloting some huge contraption," wrote Webster. The driver's seat, which lacked fore-and-aft and lateral support, merely amplified the big-car blues.

Overall, the Chevy earned handling accolades, albeit sometimes grudgingly. Winfield wrote, "A big old thing, essentially, but with enough tire, spring, and bar to keep it on the road." Schroeder was more sanguine: "Kind of a balancing act out there, understeer versus power oversteer, but not difficult to balance. Chevy's made the best of this live-axle setup, it seems."



Top: Track test speeds were obtained with timing lights. Below: Testers compare notes after grueling laps at Willow.



Although we savored the Z28's moves, an aftertaste made us wonder if we could improve the recipe. "Make the overall package smaller and lighter, and this car would be awesome," wrote Webster. "Right now, it's impressive." Impressive enough to earn an 88, a midpack score in this competitive field.

Mazda MX-5 Miata Nimble by nature.

As a stark contrast to the heavy Camaro, the tiny Miata skips into this handling square-off with natural advantages. It's the lightest and smallest car here, which bodes well for its handling. Yet a third-place showing indicates that there's more to handling than just fly-weight maneuverability.

Like the Contour, the Miata seemed more at home on the road than on the track. The jerky, two-stage suspension responses and hyperactive steering we noticed in track testing seemed to disappear. "On the road, none of the Miata's twitchy handling is apparent," noted Csere.

The Miata's maneuverability was unbeatable, at lower speeds anyway. The tiny roadster affords excellent visibility, and with the quickest steering response of any car here (see the Steering Response graph), drivers were able to slice up tight corners with surgical precision. This carve-'em-up agility made the Miata feel like an amusement park on wheels. "A bundle of fun," insisted Winfield.

The Miata made full use of its rear tires. Oversteer was easily managed with just a brush of the throttle or a nudge of the brakes. Schroeder commented: "I can't remember using this much oversteer successfully on a public road." Few drivers lamented the lack of anti-lock brakes because the pedal feel and the braking mod-

ulation were so intuitive.

That was at lower speeds. When the curves straightened and the speeds climbed, though, the Miata began to feel restless once more. Pavement variations and wind tossed the car about, making it feel untired and occasionally *too* light. Csere wrote: "The almost telepathic response that this car produces in slower turns has faded away."

Some drivers found legroom too tight for proper pedal control. The ride was choppy, not a surprise in a car with an 89.2-inch wheelbase.

This is a delightful handler, particularly when the curves come one right after the other. At higher speeds, though, the Miata can drive like a pedal boat trying to cross Lake Superior. Still, it earns an A in handling and would take the top spot if not for two other competitors with even wider-ranging handling talents.

BMW 318ti Sport
Alive with pleasure, filtered for your enjoyment.

High hopes were pinned to the BMW 3-series representative in this test. After all, various 3-series models have been *Car*



and *Driver Ten Best* winners since their introduction in 1992. The hot-rod \$40,000 M3 is considered an automotive Holy Grail by some *C/D* staffers.

The 318ti Sport has a trailing-arm rear suspension that is less sophisticated than the other 3-series cars', but you would never know that from the way it handles. This car can cut flawless arcs through nearly every curve. Bumps and off-camber upsets fail to distract it. It also covers for your mistakes. Overcook a corner? Add

brakes, and the rear end steps expertly sideways, tightening your cornering line. Is the curve tightening up unexpectedly? Just dial in more steering, and the 318ti decelerates, tucking itself in. "Plenty of warning when the limit is near—and accurate steering. Goes where you point it," wrote Webster.

The BMW displayed this benign behavior at all speeds. "Very stable in fast corners. Not much different from how it handles in slow corners," noted Webster. Csere wrote, "In large-radius sweepers, it is absolutely secure and completely unflustered by bumps. Same with decreasing-radius turns. A wonderful high-speed cruiser."

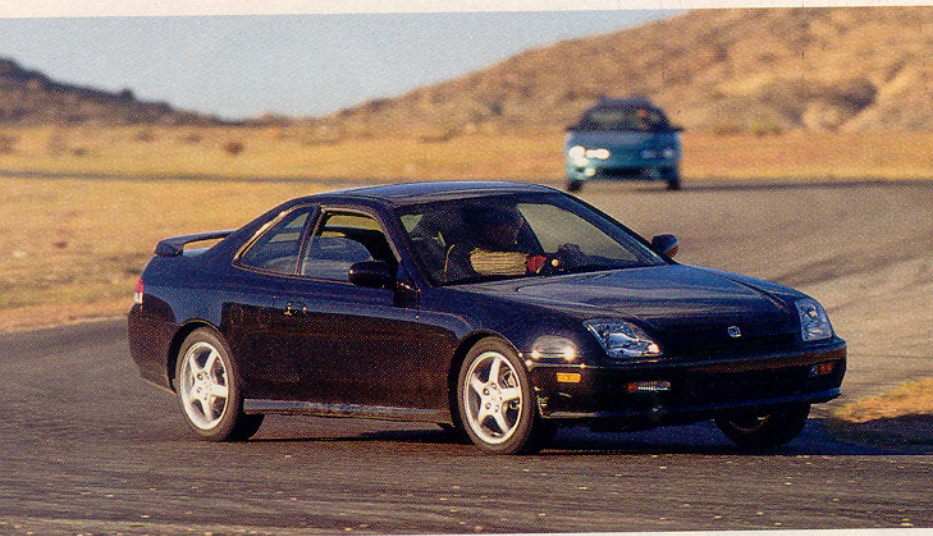
The tall, stubby body rolls considerably, but at least the seats are heavily bolstered and offer many adjustments. Heel-and-toe shifting was a cinch. The relatively long clutch and shifter throws were annoying only when frequent shifting was required—when carving up switchbacks, for example.

We all would have preferred quicker steering. "Lots of wheel motion negotiating a succession of turns," wrote Fred Gregory. The 318ti had the most sluggish-responding steering, according to our test.

We also noticed that the BMW didn't feel telepathically connected like the Miata. More than one driver identified a slight numbness to the steering and controls—a filter of sorts—that seemed to eliminate driveline and suspension harshness, but at a slight cost to sensitivity. It seemed an issue hardly worth mentioning, except that we noticed nothing of the sort in the Prelude.

Honda Prelude SH
Spirited, predictable, utterly unflappable.

Honda Preludes have been known for excellent handling since the second-generation model made its debut 14 years ago. We looked forward to sizing up the new Active Torque Transfer System of the fifth-generation car in our handling



Editors' Ratings

| | ergo-nomics | driver's seat | steering feel | directional stability | ride | cornering under | | agility | path accuracy | brakes | confidence factor |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|-----------------|--------------|---------|---------------|--------|-------------------|
| | | | | | | braking | acceleration | | | | |
| BMW 318ti SPORT | 9 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| CHEVROLET CAMARO Z28 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| EAGLE TALON TSi AWD | 8 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| FORD CONTOUR SVT | 8 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| HONDA PRELUDE SH | 9 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| MAZDA MX-5 MIATA | 9 | 8 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 9 | 9 |

HOW IT WORKS: Editors rate vehicles from 1 to 10 (10 being best) in each category, then scores are collected and averaged, resulting in the numbers shown above.
*The overall rating is not the total of those numbers. Rather, it is an independent judgment (on a 1-to-100 scale) that includes other factors—even personal preferences—not easily categorized.



shootout. Unfortunately, the spiffy setup decided it had had enough after the race-track laps and signaled its surrender with a warning light that refused to go out. We pressed on anyway and quickly discovered that whatever it was we were missing we weren't missing much.

The Prelude holds a Ph.D. in precision. The steering was sharp at all speeds, in all curves. Body roll was minimal, and squat and dive barely perceptible. Understeer was prevalent but so subtle we had to think about it. "A precise tool on these roads," wrote Csere. "Very precise, very stable," added Winfield.

Other chassis inputs were processed expertly. Application of the throttle or brakes resulted in incremental changes in

cornering attitude. Correction was required only over big bumps; other road imperfections were dispatched as if they weren't even there. Gregory wrote, "The suspension absorbs the irregularities while keeping the tires firmly in contact. There's no hop or bounce or any loss of traction."

The feel is one of remarkable sophistication. Schroeder testified, "This thing drives like it looks—dapper and composed, without a vulgar or abrupt move in its résumé." The payoff for the driver was obvious. On hair-raising roads, with washouts and blind corners, the Prelude produced the least amount of worry. Wrote Webster, "Not a drop of sweat on my palms after tight, downhill, you-screw-up-you-die curves. So confident."

The cockpit is a handling catalyst. Drivers liked the precise shifter and the heel-and-toe pedals and how easy it was to see the front corners of the car.

The Prelude wins with an untouchable combination of steering precision and suspension stability. It also proves that "excellent handling" and "fun" are not one and the same. The Miata is the amusement-park ride; this Honda feels more duty bound. "Simply does what you want, no questions asked," read one logbook entry. Call it the "good dog" approach: The best-handling car for less than \$30,000 is, it seems, one that obeys.

In an upcoming issue, we'll see if the same can be said of the more-than-\$30,000 handling winner. ●

| fun to drive | low-speed cornering | high-speed cornering | OVERALL HANDLING RATING* |
|--------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 9 | 9 | 9 | 95 |
| 9 | 8 | 8 | 88 |
| 7 | 8 | 7 | 82 |
| 7 | 8 | 8 | 87 |
| 9 | 9 | 9 | 96 |
| 10 | 9 | 8 | 91 |

