



Subtle rear end enhances D-car appeal. Gains hatch spoiler, bumper, 95mm exhaust

3 MPS packs its firepower into a gloriously chubby zone that doesn't let up for 3500 revs

front-drive, 200kg-lighter hatch. There's less turbo lag down low, a more progressive build-up of torque as the turbo starts spooling hard above 2000rpm, and a slightly lessened falling-off-a-cliff effect as the DISI's power fades away above 6000rpm. Initial throttle response is excellent and there's little trace of the light-switch-style clutch take-up and torque delivery that makes smooth hill starts in the 6 MPS a continual challenge.

Torque starts building from 1500rpm in the 3, though it's above two-grand that the front-driver really starts to haul. By 2500rpm, torque has swelled to near full capacity, and from there the 3 MPS explodes into action, packing its unrelenting firepower into a gloriously chubby zone that doesn't let up for the next 3500 revs. Combining the MPS's tremendous mid-range pull with tightly spaced gearing and a short-throw, sweet-shifting six-speed gearbox is a union made in heaven – delivering maximum (meaning neck-straining) thrust from what equates to 33km/h in second gear, 48 in third, 63 in fourth, 80 in fifth, and a wonderfully useable 102 in sixth. For overtaking ease in top gear, the 3 MPS is a hot-hatch without peer.

It doesn't sound quite like you'd expect, though. The Mazda's direct-injection turbo sounds a little Golf GTI-like at small throttle openings – mildly rorty, though much less so than the naturally aspirated SP23. But flatten

its metal accelerator pedal and, once max boost arrives, the MPS signals full steam ahead with a rowdy, jet-like whooshing from its fat rear pipe. It's not an entirely unpleasant one, but not necessarily an addictive one, either.

Much higher on the 3 MPS's excitement scale is the way it blends tyre-frying grunt with a finely balanced, supremely grippy chassis. True, its chunky 215/45R18 Bridgestone Potenza will scrabble for grip if you ask for too much thrust, too soon (with the standard stability control switched off), but the hot 3 features both a torque-sensing limited-slip front diff and clever 'torque control' management to limit excessive wheelspin, torque steer and power-on understeer.

Throttle position and boost pressure are both electronically controlled in first and second gears to ensure that torque builds smoothly, not abruptly, and only to a certain level. In the bottom two gears, the torque-control also links to a steering-angle sensor so that in tight corners requiring large steering inputs, torque is again restricted to a manageable level.

In reality, it all works very well. The 3 will power-understeer if you flatten the throttle right at the apex, but all that's required is a slight lift of your right foot, and a little more progressive application of power, to keep the MPS balanced and super-quick. You can feel the torque-control working if you try and overdrive the MPS, but it will whip through



most corners in third gear, meaning throttle control is generally up to the driver ... with DSC off. Leave the stability control on and you'll be surprised how subtly it operates and how tightly balanced it makes the 3 MPS feel.

Not that its character alters greatly when electronically unimpeded. The 3 MPS simply becomes a little more feral, and more fun. Exiting 35km/h corners (in third gear, mind you), the MPS will lay two extrovert black lines straight up the road, and yet does so with surprisingly little torque steer – providing you don't ask for max attack until the front wheels are almost pointed straight.

It's surprising how well the MPS gets its power down (in the dry, at least), and how

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