

Road beat: Sports car scores in nearly every category



Collaboration ends with a winning sports car.
Photos/Larry Weitzman

By Larry Weitzman and Mitchell Weitzman

This is one I've been waiting for a long time. Ever since its release a couple years ago as both the FR-S and Subaru BRZ (they're identical, save the badge and name), a joint sports car collaboration between Toyota and Subaru, I've wanted to drive one. Badly. The basic idea: longitudinal engine up front, rear-wheel drive, cheap, and a penchant for drifting.

The name FR-S does mean front rear sports, after all. So, when I finally had the keys to one thrown at me you could imagine it got my blood boiling a bit. It is, in design, a modern version of the heralded 1980's "Scarface"-era AE86 Corolla, a classic synonymous with drifting and the anime show "Initial

D". On paper, this is my kind of car. Does it live up to the ideal? Nearly.



Specifications

Engine

Horizontally opposed 2.0L,
DOHC, 16 valve four cylinder
200 hp @ 7,000 rpm
151 lb-ft of torque @ 6,400
rpm

Transmission

Six speed manual
Six speed torque converter
automatic

Configuration

Longitudinal front
engine/rear wheel drive

Dimensions

Wheelbase 101.2 inches
Length 166.7 inches
Width 69.9 in inches
Height 60.6 inches
Track (f/r) 59.8/60.6 inches
Ground clearance 4.9 inches
Turning circle 36.1 feet
Steering lock to lock 2.48
turns
Fuel capacity 13.2 gallons
Trunk capacity

Seats 4
Weight (m/t/a//t)
2,758//2,806 pounds
Wheels 17X7 inch alloys
Tires 215/45X17 Michelin
Primacy HP summer
Co-efficient of drag 0.27

Performance

0-60 mph 6.81 seconds
50-70 mph 3.82 seconds
50-70 mph up 6% grade 5.79
seconds
Top Speed Plenty fast (130
mph plus plus)
Fuel economy (MT//AT) EPA
rated 22/30/26//25/34/28
mpg. With the M/T expect 30
mpg in rural county driving
and 37 mpg on the highway at
legal speeds.

From the outside, things are off to a good start because in true sporting nature, this is a good looking car. It's small, measuring only 167-inches long, but gives generous interior room and actual four-seat capabilities with its long 101-inch wheelbase that belies the shrunken outside. It's also low and wide, giving a muscular and purposeful stance with pronounced haunches and tapered nose. As far as sports cars go, it makes a 370Z look cumbersome. Showing homage to the original 86, the FR-S boasts a side emblem with 86 emblazoned upon it. The inside is nicer than expected for the cheap price point, nearly matching its more expensive rivals from Japan and South Korea. If you spec the NAV system option, one of only a few options available, it will likely come pre-programmed with several addresses, including Laguna Seca and Sonoma Raceway (Sears Point).

Let's get the hard numbers out of the way. Laying low in the engine bay is a Subaru 2.0 liter flat four producing 200 ponies at 7,000 rpm and a 151 foot-pounds of torque at 6,400 rpm. Why a flat four? Because it's short, as is the nature of a boxer engine having the cylinders opposed, allowing the engine to sit lower and bring the center of gravity closer to the ground. And when I say it sits low in the chassis, I mean it. It's under there like a bomb shelter. But keep in mind this engine is no nuclear reactor, making its modest power quite high up in the rev range. However, the old AE86 was no firecracker either in terms of performance. The Scion, like the classic Toyota, is focused first and foremost on handling. The car only weighs just less than 2,800 pounds too, which, in the modern world of overweight supercars, is a godsend.

Acceleration runs reveal decent performance with 0-60 mph taking 6.81 seconds and 50-70 mph passing runs level and up a 6 percent grade requiring 3.82 and 5.89 seconds, respectively. Fuel economy is way above the EPA numbers of 22/30/25 and 25/34/28 mpg (manual/automatic). On the highway at 70 mph with the engine spinning 3,000 rpm the FR-S averaged 37 MPG and overall, including 50 miles of crawling traffic and performance testing, an astonishing 30 MPG was delivered. Maybe the EPA tests were done with the emergency brake on.

This all means almost nothing though. What matters with the Scion, and any sports car, is how it drives. This is a driver's car, one designed for the enthusiast. So does it deliver? Yes, for the most part. On the road, the chassis feel is superb; the super quick, almost race car steering (2.48 turns lock-to-lock) has a little more weight than expected given the car's mass, but it feels spot-on. Steering responses are very sharp and quick too, giving the sense of supreme agility with sublime feedback coming from both the front (MacPherson struts) and the rear double wishbone setup behind. The six-speed manual, an increasing uncommon sight in cars now

(49 percent of FR-S have the manual thankfully), is a welcome addition, giving a positive if notchy feel with a slight overly sprung clutch. It's not bad, just takes a little adjusting. A few miles in and heel-toes become a legal obligation. The driving position itself is perfect too, sitting low with great support from the super comfortable bucket seats.

Grip is huge, despite the diminutive 215-width rubber worn. Understeer is non-existent and the trademark oversteer is there when seriously provoked. I was expecting the tires to slip early, but it needs to be pushed very hard still. The best bet is to literally chuck it into a corner and pin the power. Do that, and you can hold slides until your next paycheck, which will be surely spent on new Michelin Primacy HPs. Mid-corner adjustability is fantastic too, being able to tighten or broaden your line with ease without any kicks from the rear that vintage 911 owners will tell you horror stories about. The engineers did their homework here for sure.

Even with its stiletto-sharp handling, the ride is quite compliant and extremely smooth on the highway. Being such a lightweight machine, it benefits from not needing to be oversprung or with stiff shocks to control the mass. The result is a smoother ride. And at light throttle pressures, it is reasonably quiet, too. It was a great road car for a 300-mile road trip to San Francisco until traffic came to a mandated dead stop 30 miles too soon. It's why I don't live there.



Comfort has not been compromised.

Yes, there is a but, and it's a rather large one: that engine. An appliance might be a better word actually since it sounds and feels like a blender with the cap off. It's not so much a power issue as it is a character and smoothness factor. A car like this doesn't need a cavalry of horsepower anyway, as it would dilute the precision of its chassis. Down low in the revs it's never gutless either thanks to short gearing, but from 4,000-5,000 RPM there seems to be a flat spot in the powerband in what should be the meat of its midrange and key accomplice in mountain tackling. From there on it picks up again, but by 6,500 it feels all out of breath with another 1,000 RPM to go, such is the unpleasantness of the noise and roughness. It doesn't race to the redline the way an inline-4 from the Civic SI does, a smoother and much more exciting motor that offers the same power from the same displacement. Most probably won't notice, but though the engine doubtlessly aids in the FR-S' supreme cornering ability, it's largely humdrum and uncultured, and without a noise worthy of its drifting talents. Maybe the help of an aftermarket exhaust or intake will help mask and cover up the sound, but the engine I can see as being a deal breaker for some. Years of driving a silk-weaving smooth inline 6 have perhaps spoiled me.

All together, the FR-S is a great car. It's inexpensive (sticker for this well equipped FR-S is \$24,900 plus \$770 for destination, auto will add \$1,100), fun to drive, gets great gas mileage, and it looks ace too. The FR-S is all about the

chassis though, and it shines brightly in the evening sky. However, it's the engine that almost spoils the party. Hopefully it might have just been this particular example, showing wear from its time relegated as an abused press car by other journos. Advice? Absolutely give it a try. If you want one of the most focused and uncompromised sports cars on sale today, you just might love it.

Larry Weitzman has been into cars since he was 5 years old. At 8 he could recite from memory the hp of every car made in the U.S. He has put in thousands of laps on racetracks all over the Western United States. Mitchell Weitzman has been around cars most of his life, and has hundreds of hours of lap track experience. He is a recent graduate of UC Santa Barbara, with a degree in English.