

HONDA CIVIC Si VS. MINI COOPER S VS. VOLKSWAGEN GTI

ROAD
TEST

Battle

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Of the Badges

Three revitalized nameplates compete for newfound glory

BY KIM WOLFKILL » PHOTOS BY MARC URBANO



BACK IN THE DAY, THE GTI AND Si badges were must-haves in the world of fast rides and cheap eats. From the early Rabbit and Golf-based GTIs to the popular CRX and Civic Si's of the mid-'80s and early '90s, these two nameplates were synonymous with a romping good time in a quick and affordable package. Turn the clock back another two decades, and it was the original Austin Mini Cooper S that flew the feisty, front-drive flag, paving the way for a generation of hopped-up hatchbacks to follow.

Fast-forward to the present and the new Mini continues to keep the original Cooper S flame alive with its playful blend of personality, performance and style. Recent GTI's and Civic Si's, on the other hand, seem to have lost their way, getting softer, blander and less involving with each new model. So while the Cooper S has enjoyed almost universal praise from enthusiasts the world over, the last-generation GTI and Si left many flat, wondering why they weren't edgier and more interesting to drive.

Volkswagen and Honda clearly saw the error of their ways, as the all-new iterations represent a massive improvement over the cars they replace. Any luster lost from these icons has been faithfully restored with the 2006 models, the next-generation GTI and Civic Si reflecting the spirit of their forerunners with genuinely stirring performance and engaging, try-anything attitudes.

With that in mind, it's only fitting that we grab these two fresh faces, throw in a John Cooper Works-equipped Mini Cooper S and stage ourselves a front-drive showdown. While distinctly different in character, this trio is actually quite similar on paper—all are built on a sport-tuned, 2-door chassis, are powered by a 4-cylinder engine putting out roughly 200 bhp and start at around \$22,000. Better still, one's normally aspirated, one's supercharged and one's turbocharged. Let's see how they shake out.





3rd

MINI COOPER S

372.5 POINTS

IT'S PRETTY TOUGH TO DRIVE A MINI Cooper S and not enjoy yourself. The scrappy little hatch is always up for a good time and somehow manages to make any trip an adventure. Its compact, curve-hugging chassis and supercharged engine conspire to deliver one of the most entertaining driving experiences around.

Opt for the now factory-installed John Cooper Works (JCW) option package, previously a dealer-installed kit, and the Mini's fun factor goes through the roof. Horsepower jumps from 168 to 207 bhp and torque from 162 lb.-ft. to 180 lb.-ft., courtesy of an upgraded supercharger, high-performance cylinder head, new fuel injectors, reprogrammed ECU, high-flow induction system and a low-backpressure stainless-steel exhaust. The cost for all this fancy hardware is a heart-stopping \$6300, which put the as-tested price of our car over \$31,000.

Expensive as they may be, the impact of the JCW upgrades can be felt immediately. The increased power

hurls the 2620-lb. Cooper S down the road with renewed vigor, each trip up the tach generating noticeably better acceleration than a standard S. The supercharger whine and exhaust note are also more pronounced, adding to the JCW's sensation of going faster, which indeed it is. Good torque down low and the little 1.6-liter's free-revving nature make for a broad powerband, which, when combined with the Mini's light weight, endows it with the most responsive feel of our trio.

Looking at the test numbers, the Mini and the GTI are dead even to 60 mph (6.3 seconds) and just one-tenth of a second apart at the quarter mile, where the VW's 14.8 edges out the Mini's 14.9. The Cooper

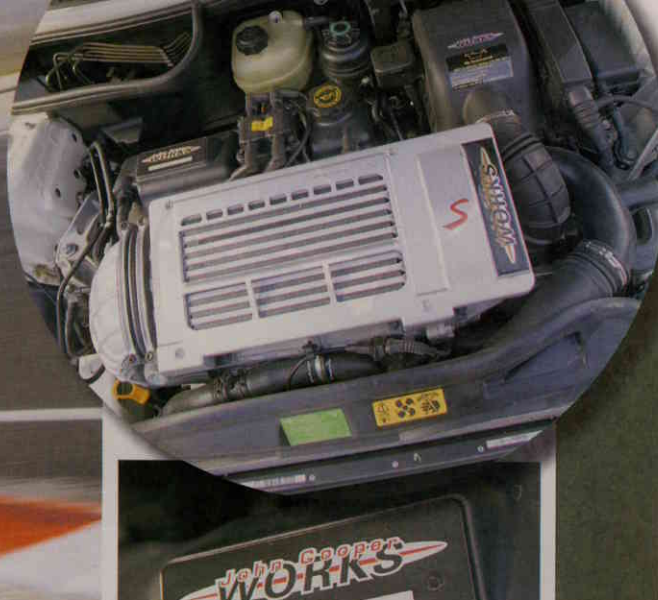
S still feels like it pulls marginally harder, and it might, but the GTI's seamless DSG shifts erase any time advantage the conventionally shifted Mini may enjoy. Both cars are barely quicker than the normally aspirated Civic Si (6.6 sec., 15.0 sec.), which gives away loads of torque to its supercharged and turbocharged compatriots.

Move to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch's 1.5-mile West Loop, however, and the Mini suddenly comes into its own. This is where the chassis shines, producing the biggest grins and the fastest lap times of the day. Compared with the Civic Si and especially the GTI, the Cooper S feels especially light on its feet and easy to position (and reposition) anywhere on

»Combining a little of yesterday with a lot of today, the Mini elicits smiles wherever it goes. The cabin, right, is just as entertaining, blending function with funky.



John Cooper
WORKS



» Of our three cars, the John Cooper Works-equipped Cooper S proves the fastest and most entertaining to drive at the racetrack, where its taut chassis, above, begs to be thrown around. Its upgraded 207-bhp engine, above right, delivers excellent throttle response, which when combined with a low 2620-lb. curb weight, also makes it feel the quickest. This extra performance does come at a cost; the JCW package adds \$6300 to the base price of the Cooper S.

the track.

Of our trio, the Mini's chassis is the most responsive to steering and throttle inputs. The ultra-quick steering ratio makes changing direction a snap, the front end reacting with excellent grip and minimal body roll. Rotating the car mid-turn is just as easy, with measured throttle modulation either tucking in the nose or rotating the tail. This makes it easier to adjust the Mini's attitude approaching the apex and get on the power sooner than with either the GTI or Si. The JCW's limited-slip differential also helps, reducing wheelspin and more effectively

pulling it through corners.

Away from the track, this hyper-reactive personality can be a double-edged sword. While a blast to throw around at anything above about seven-tenths, for more pedestrian everyday use, the Mini's short wheelbase and quick steering can make it a bit darty as a daily driver. Add to that its less-than-supple ride (especially with our test car's optional 18-in. wheels/tires) and the Cooper S loses points to the more refined Honda and Volkswagen. Also hurting it are quirky ergonomics and seats that aren't nearly as supportive or comfortable

as those of the other two.

Considering its retro-hip styling, compact dimensions and limpet-like handling, it's no surprise the Mini Cooper S has been a winner from the moment it hit the road. Now available with even more power, the JCW version adds extra performance to an already appealing package. That it ended up third in our test shows that despite its enormous appeal, being cute and quick doesn't necessarily guarantee a win. To finish on top in this group also requires refinement, versatility and everyday livability to go with that sparkling personality.

In My Opinion...



Mike Monticello, FEATURE EDITOR

» If you plan to do an occasional track day, or some serious back-road bombing, the Mini Cooper S is the best choice. Though slightly twitchy, it's the most responsive of the three and therefore the most fun; the harder you drive it the better it works. It would be my choice, despite its "too-cute" looks and ergonomically disastrous interior.

2nd

HONDA CIVIC Si

372.7 POINTS

The Civic faithful have waited a long time for the all-new sixth-generation Civic Si, a range-topping coupe developed specifically for the North American market. Picking up where the previous, less-than-thrilling Si left off, this latest incarnation has everything the last one didn't. It has style, substance and, above all else, performance.

At the heart of the new Si is its rev-happy 2.0-liter 197-bhp 4-cylinder engine and slick, 6-speed manual gearbox. Feeling like a smoother, slightly less powerful version of the S2000's 2.2-liter mill, it's happiest when the i-VTEC is in full attack





mode between 6000 and 8000 rpm. Below that, it generates little in the way of low-end torque, requiring a quick downshift or two for most serious passing maneuvers. This is a non-issue at the track, where the Si's engine feels the raciest and most performance-focused, but hurts its daily drivability compared with the other two.

Normally aspirated though it may be, in the upper reaches of the powerband, the Si pulls with the same conviction as the GTI and Mini. A quick look at the acceleration numbers shows all three neck-and-neck through the quarter-mile, with the Civic actually pulling ahead to the 110-mph mark. This could be largely due to aerodynamics, but still shows that as speed climbs into triple digits, the Si is a willing and very capable partner.

While it would be easy to say the biggest improvement is the Si's engine, there's more to the story than just that. Good as

it is, the secret to the Si's success is how well its engine and chassis work together. The chassis' poise, in particular, stands above the others, seemingly unruffled by anything thrown its way. Unlike the Mini, which is at its best on track, or the GTI, which excels in town but requires more attention at track speeds, the Si's chassis dynamics remain consistent under all driving conditions. Whether it's carving up a canyon or blasting over a fast off-camber racetrack turn, the Honda handles each with equal aplomb.

This all-around versatility (and its lack of torque—just 139 lb.-ft.) hurts the Si slightly at the track, where it's neither as tossable as the Mini nor as powerful as the GTI. But it by no means embarrasses itself, lapping just 0.3 sec. off the *much* torquier GTI (1:30.6) and 0.7 sec. behind the more narrowly focused Mini (1:30.2). Its limited-slip differential remains the class of the

field, allowing the Civic to put its power to the ground more effectively than the other two. If it was a little more willing to rotate on demand, there's a good chance it would have picked up a few tenths and possibly lapped faster than the GTI.

The Honda strikes a happy medium in other areas as well. Its ride quality is significantly better than that of the Cooper S and right there with the GTI's. The styling is sport-compact racy, without being as fanciful as the Mini or conservative as the GTI. Its cabin has a typically Honda quality about it, coming off as less busy and ergonomically challenged than the Cooper S, but not quite as refined as the Volkswagen. As expected, everything falls easily to hand, the seats are both comfortable and stylish, and the fit/finish is second to only, well, the GTI. Our navigation-equipped test car represents the screaming deal of the three, coming in at \$22,490,

» The Civic Si is all very Honda, meaning it looks good, works well and gets the job done. The cabin, above, has a clean, sporty feel with supportive seats and simple, easy-to-use controls.



thousands less than the more option-laden Volkswagen and Mini.

It looks good, drives even better and represents the best value of the bunch. The Civic Si finished up second because it did everything well, but didn't do enough *really* well to knock off the GTI. While undoubtedly the most balanced and versatile handler, its lack of torque cost it tenths at the test track(s) and affected its flexibility around town. For those who appreciate Honda's VTEC approach to 4-cylinder power, none of this may matter, as the '06 Si still possesses one gem of an engine powering the company's best-ever front-drive chassis.



» Rather than relying on forced induction to generate its power, the Civic Si's engine, right, utilizes Honda's proven i-VTEC technology to squeeze 197 normally-aspirated horses out of its high-revving 2.0-liter four.



In My Opinion...



Kim Wolfkill, SENIOR EDITOR

» For real-world driving in real-world conditions, I'm hard-pressed to think of a reason why I wouldn't want to spend my days behind the wheel of the GTI. Between its torque-happy engine, sensational DSG transmission and sporty yet compliant chassis, it's tough not to like Volkswagen's newest sport compact star.

1st

VOLKSWAGEN GTI

386.4 POINTS

The last few generations of GTI's (R32 notwithstanding), while certainly pleasant cars, have done little to enhance the marque's performance image. They've generally been soft, heavy, underpowered and lacking in excitement. The 2006 GTI changes all that with an all-new chassis, VW/Audi's killer 2.0-liter turbo-4 and the slickest gearbox in the business. It's the best GTI in years and ready to make up for lost time.

For those familiar with the 200-bhp turbo-charged-4 found in a variety of Audi and Volkswagen models, this smooth, torquey and vice-free engine needs little introduc-

tion. It generates maximum torque from 1800–5000 rpm, pulls without hesitation and when combined with the Direct Shift Gearbox (DSG), makes for one of the industry's sweetest powertrains. In the GTI, it doesn't disappoint, helping deliver the test's best 0–60-mph (tied with the Mini) and quarter-mile numbers, in addition to the most tractable in-town manners of our group.

Part of the credit also goes to our tester's optional DSG, which bangs off shifts faster and more accurately than any human ever could. While there are some purists who still prefer to do their own clutching/heel-and-toe downshifting (a 6-speed manual comes standard), even they struggle to argue with DSG's efficiency. At the track, it proves 100-percent idiot-proof, freeing up



» The GTI's interior, above, has a more up-market feel than the Mini or Honda, which adds considerably to its everyday appeal.





» A competent handler at the track, the GTI is really in its element on winding back roads, where its chassis delivers comfort, compliance and composure. Much credit for its strong performance numbers goes to the 200-bhp 2.0-liter turbocharged four, above, which enjoys the broadest powerband of our trio, plus the advantage of quick and seamless shifts from the optional 6-speed DSG transmission. The hatchback styling, left, may not be especially inspiring, but its functionality is tough to beat.

much-needed brainpower to concentrate on braking points, turn-in and staying pointed in the right direction. In heavy traffic, unlike most sequential-manual systems, it mimics a good torque-converter automatic nearly flawlessly.

Past GTI's have had decent powertrains let down by an average chassis. The new car suffers no such fate, graced with a solid, accommodating platform that proves a worthy match for the potent engine/gear-box combo. Compared with the Mini and Civic, it's definitely on the portly side (3170 lb. vs. 2880 lb. for the Si and 2620 lb. for the Cooper S), a factor that isn't felt so much under normal driving conditions, but definitely plays a role in how tossable it is at the track. Compared with the other two, it's just a hair less responsive and once the chassis has taken a set in a turn, it isn't particularly receptive to changing

its attitude midway through. In the slalom, however, it was fastest, aided by the test's widest and stickiest tires (Continental SportContact 2, 225/40R-18).

Regardless of how they've performed, modern Volkswagens have seldom failed to score well in the area of interior materials and ergonomics. The GTI carries on this tradition, exuding a cabin quality that's in a different league than the Mini, and to a lesser degree, the Civic. Maybe that's where some of the weight comes from, but even if it is, it could be argued it's worth it. Driven on a daily basis, that extra level of quality pays dividends, especially if you intend to spend the majority of your time driving in the real world rather than bombing around racetracks.

Also much appreciated is the GTI's highly compliant suspension tuning. Even with the optional 18-in. wheels and ultra-

low-profile tires, the GTI still manages to smooth out all but the most jarring bumps, delivering a slightly better ride than the Si and comfort the Mini can only dream of. So even though it's not as hard-edged as the Mini or as on-track/off-track flexible as the Civic, the GTI's chassis strikes a good compromise that will likely work best for the broadest range of driving conditions.

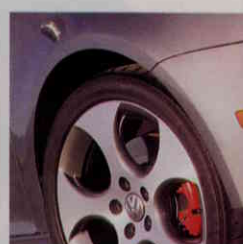
Long awaited and much anticipated, the new GTI has the goods to make its popular predecessors proud. It rushes headlong into the sport compact battle with a solid mechanical foundation backed up by Volkswagen's high-quality look and feel. Its top ranking is the result of consistently strong performances in just about every category. It's the car two out of three of us picked as our personal choice. Not because we didn't like the others, but because it's that good and that fun to drive.

In My Opinion...



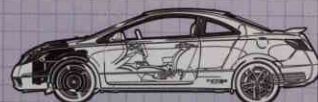
Douglas Kott, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

» Useful day-to-day yet wicked fun to drive...the words rang true for the Rabbit GTI in 1982 ("Street racer in a bunny suit") and apply equally well to the fifth-gen GTI. Tractable turbo power, a clever DSG transmission and Volkswagen's best Golf interior to date give new life to the car that coined the term "hot hatch" in America.



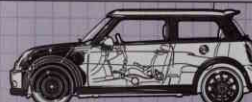
Honda Civic Si

American Honda Motor Company, Inc., 1919 Torrance Blvd., Torrance, Calif. 90501; www.honda.com



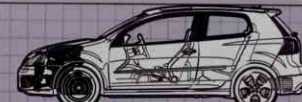
Mini Cooper S

Mini USA, 300 Chestnut Ridge Rd., Woodcliff Lake, N.J. 07677; www.mini.com



Volkswagen GTI 2.0T

Volkswagen of America, Inc., 3800 Hamlin Rd., Auburn Hills, Mich. 48326; www.vw.com



Honda Civic Si

Mini Cooper S

Volkswagen GTI 2.0T

GENERAL DATA

List price	\$19,990	\$20,600	\$21,990
Price as tested	\$22,490	\$31,376	\$29,405
	Price as tested incl std equip. (ABS, front, side & side curtain airbags, AM/FM/CD/XM ready, air conditioning, cruise control, leather-wrapped steering wheel w/tilt/telescope, power windows, mirrors & door locks), Honda Navigation System w/voice recognition and three months XM radio (\$1750), summer tires (\$200), dest charge (\$550).	Price as tested incl std equip. (ABS, front, side airbags, yaw & traction control, AM/FM/CD), John Cooper Works package (enhanced supercharger & cyl head, reprog ECU, fuel injectors, induction sys, exhaust, upgraded brakes, limited-slip diff) \$6300, Sport Package (Dynamic Stability Control, xenon headlights w/powerwashers, foglights, hood stripes) \$1400, 18-in. high-performance wheels/tires (\$2526), dest charge (\$550).	Price as tested incl std equip. (ABS, front, side & side curtain airbags, traction control, xenon headlights, AM/FM/CD), package 2 (sunroof, Sirius radio, dual-zone climate control, heated leather sport seats, heated washer nozzles) \$3160, navigation system & 6-disc CD changer (\$1800), 6-speed Direct Shift Gearbox (\$1075), 18-in. alloy wheels w/summer tires (\$750), dest charge (\$630).
Curb weight	2880 lb	2620 lb	3170 lb
Test weight	3060 lb	2810 lb	3360 lb
Weight dist (with driver), f/r, %	61/39	59/41	61/39
Wheelbase	104.3 in.	97.1 in.	101.5 in.
Track, f/r	59.0 in./60.1 in.	57.2 in./57.5 in.	60.4 in./59.7 in.
Length	174.8 in.	143.9 in.	165.8 in.
Width	68.9 in.	66.5 in.	69.3 in.
Height	53.5 in.	55.8 in.	58.4 in.

ENGINE

Type	dohc 4-valve/cyl I-4	sohc 4-valve/cyl I-4 supercharged	dohc 4-valve/cyl I-4 turbocharged
Displacement	1998 cc	1598 cc	1984 cc
Bore x stroke	86.0 x 86.0 mm	77.0 x 85.8 mm	82.5 x 92.8 mm
Compression ratio	11.0:1	8.3:1	10.3:1
Horsepower (SAE)	197 bhp @ 7800 rpm	207 bhp @ 6950 rpm	200 bhp @ 5100-6000 rpm
Torque	139 lb-ft @ 6200 rpm	180 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm	207 lb-ft @ 1800-5000 rpm
Redline/limiter	8000/8300 rpm	na/6950 rpm	6500/7000 rpm
Fuel injection	elect. sequential port	elect. sequential port	elect. sequential direct
Rec fuel	premium unleaded	premium unleaded	premium unleaded

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout	front engine/fwd	front engine/fwd	front engine/fwd
Body/frame	unit steel	unit steel	unit steel
Brakes Front:	11.8-in. vented discs/1-piston sliding calipers	10.9-in. vented discs/1-piston sliding calipers	12.3-in. vented discs/1-piston sliding calipers
Rear:	10.2-in. discs/1-piston sliding calipers; vac assist, ABS	10.2-in. discs/1-piston sliding calipers; vac assist, ABS	11.3-in. discs/1-piston sliding calipers; vac assist, ABS
Wheels	cast alloy, 17x7J	cast alloy, 18 x 7	cast alloy, 18 x 7 1/2 J
Tires	Michelin Pilot Exalto PE2, 215/45ZR-17 91W	Dunlop SP Sport 01 DSST, 205/40R-18 82W	Continental SportContact 2, 225/40R-18 92Y
Steering	rack & pinion, electric power assist	rack & pinion, vari power assist	rack & pinion, electric power assist
Steering ratio	14.6:1	13.4:1	16.1:1
Turns lock to lock	2.7	2.5	3.0
Suspension, f/r	MacPherson struts, lower A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar/upper & lower A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, lower A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar/multilink, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar/multilink, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar

ACCOMMODATIONS

Seating capacity	5	4	5
Head room, f/r	36.3 in./33.5 in.	39.0 in./36.0 in.	38.8 in./37.8 in.
Front-seat leg room	43.3 in.	44.8 in.	44.8 in.
Rear-seat knee room	23.0 in.	19.8 in.	22.8 in.
Trunk space	11.5 cu ft	5.8 cu ft	15.1 cu ft

Honda Civic Si

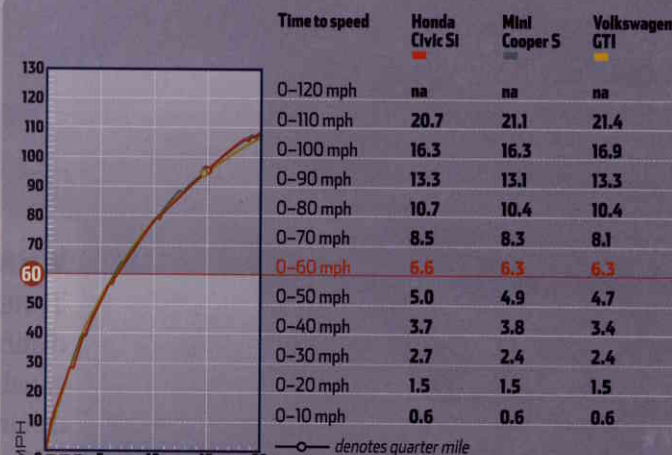
Mini Cooper S

Volkswagen GTI 2.0T

ACCELERATION

Time to distance, seconds

0-1320 ft (1/4 mile) 15.0 @ 95.6 mph 14.9 @ 95.6 mph 14.8 @ 94.6 mph



TEST CONDITIONS

Temperature	81° F
Humidity	13%
Elevation	350 ft
Wind	calm
Location	Irvine, California

Test Notes: ACCELERATION

The GTI has a distinct advantage with its foolproof DSG transmission. The Si and JCW are trickier to launch, but can clearly hold their own. Without boost, the Si lacks the torque to keep up.

BRAKING

Minimum stopping distance			
From 60 mph	128 ft	122 ft	120 ft
From 80 mph	236 ft	226 ft	211 ft
Total swept area	409 sq in.	375 sq in.	518 sq in.
Swept area per ton	284 sq in.	286 sq in.	327 sq in.

HANDLING

Lateral accel *	0.87g	0.86g	0.88g
Balance	mild understeer	moderate understeer	moderate understeer
Slalom speed**	66.8 mph	66.2 mph	67.2 mph
Balance	mild understeer	mild understeer	moderate understeer

*200-ft skidpad; **700-ft slalom, 100-ft spacing.

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission	6-speed manual	6-speed manual	6-sp. paddle-shift manual
Gear/Ratio/Overall/(Rpm) Mph			
1st, :1	3.27/15.60/(8300) 36	4.46/12.79/(6950) 39	3.46/14.05/(6750) 37
2nd, :1	2.13/10.16/(8300) 56	2.71/7.79/(6950) 64	2.15/8.73/(6750) 60
3rd, :1	1.52/7.25/(8300) 78	1.33/5.65/(6950) 88	1.46/5.93/(6750) 88
4th, :1	1.15/5.49/(8300) 103	1.09/4.62/(6950) 108	1.08/4.38/(6750) 119
5th, :1	0.92/4.39/est (8300) 129	1.33/3.83/(6950) 130	1.09/3.42/est (5800) 130**
6th, :1	0.66/3.15/na*	1.09/3.13/est (6250) 143	0.92/2.89/est (4900) 130**
Final drive ratio	4.77:1	2.87:1 (1,2,5,6), 4.24:1 (3,4)	4.06:1 (1-4), 3.14:1 (5-6)
Engine rpm @ 60 mph			
In top gear	2800 rpm	2500 rpm	2250 rpm

*Top speed reached in 5th. **Electronically limited.

FUEL ECONOMY

Our driving	24.8 mpg	23.3 mpg	21.4 mpg
EPA city/highway	23/32 mpg	25/32 mpg	25/31 mpg
Cruise range	303 miles	284 miles	289 miles
Fuel capacity	13.2 gal.	13.2 gal.	14.5 gal.

INTERIOR NOISE

Idle in neutral	45 dBA	50 dBA	45 dBA
Maximum, 1st gear	78 dBA	80 dBA	77 dBA
Constant 50 mph	69 dBA	71 dBA	69 dBA
Constant 70 mph	72 dBA	74 dBA	74 dBA

THE Results

PERFORMANCE

Performance points based on proportional scale (normalization).

		Honda Civic Si	Mini Cooper S	Volkswagen GTI
0-60 mph time	30 pts	28.6	30.0	30.0
0-1/4 mile time	30 pts	29.6	29.8	30.0
Slalom	30 pts	29.8	29.6	30.0
Skidpad	30 pts	29.7	29.3	30.0
Braking, 60-0 mph	30 pts	28.6	30.0	28.8
Braking, 80-0 mph	30 pts	28.2	29.5	30.0
Fuel economy, EPA	20 pts	18.6	20.0	19.6
SUBTOTAL	200 pts	193.1	198.2	198.4

SUBJECTIVE

Subjective ratings based on points awarded in each of 12 categories by editors and scored based on a proportional scale.

Driving excitement	20 pts	16.0	20.0	17.4
Engine	20 pts	15.4	18.0	20.0
Gearbox	20 pts	19.4	20.0	20.0
Steering	20 pts	20.0	15.4	17.4
Brakes	20 pts	20.0	18.6	16.5
Ride	20 pts	17.4	12.6	20.0
Handling	20 pts	19.4	20.0	17.2
Exterior styling	15 pts	14.5	15.0	14.5
Interior styling	15 pts	10.5	13.1	15.0
Seats	10 pts	9.3	7.3	10.0
Ergonomics/controls	10 pts	8.7	7.3	10.0
Luggage space	10 pts	9.0	7.0	10.0
SUBTOTAL	200 pts	179.6	174.3	188.0

TOTAL POINTS (Price independent)	400 pts	372.7	372.5	386.4
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Final Standings

2 Honda Civic Si	3 Mini Cooper S	1 Volkswagen GTI
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STANDINGS, PRICE DEPENDENT

Points based on a proportional scale; points range based on percentage of top price.

Price as tested	200 pts	200.0	187.5	188.5
		\$22,490	\$30,015	\$29,405
Price-sensitive total points		572.7	560.0	574.9
Price-sensitive standings		2	3	1



WHAT'S IT ALL MEAN?

THREE CARS, THREE DIFFERENT 4-CYLINDER ENGINES AND THREE distinct personalities. Each quick, entertaining and extremely capable. Each representing a storied nameplate with a history of driving enjoyment.

Despite its rough ride and twitchy in-town manners, the Mini Cooper S is a hoot that many hard-core enthusiasts would still give the nod over the other two. Its excellent power and light weight make it the purist performer of the bunch, but too many little quirks hurt its overall appeal. Help is on the way in the form of an all-new 2007 Mini, which could turn the tide.

One drive in the new Civic Si will quickly erase all thoughts of last year's underpowered effort. It's faster, more refined and sportier in every category. In the company of the Mini and GTI, it's nearly as good just about everywhere, proving to be the most versatile handler of the test, but also the one hampered by its engine's narrow powerband. More torque might have put it over the top.

A solid chassis backed up by an even more impressive powertrain make the GTI a hard act to follow. It won most every performance category that matters, building up a lead that the second-place Civic couldn't overcome. That it also has the best ride, coolest gearbox and swankiest cabin certainly doesn't hurt this excellent all-around performer. Welcome back, GTI.

