

Honda Accord beats Ford Fusion and Mazda 6 in Miami

By brickell honda

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Watch who wins the battle between these three sedans in Miami

2010 Ford Fusion SE- Third Place

The updated Fusion has already made headlines, thanks to the achievement of its new hybrid version, rated tops among mid-size gasoline-electrics by us ["Long Rangers," February 2009], as well as the EPA (41 mpg city/36 highway). The boring old gasoline Fusion has no similar claim to greatness and is overshadowed in this comparo by two best-in-classers.

Nevertheless, functional updates such as 15 additional horsepower from a new 175-hp, 2.5-liter Duratec four, an engine that is shared with the Mazda, make this face-lifted Ford—it still has the blades to make your legs silky smooth—more pleasant to live with than its predecessor and put it several rungs higher on the mid-size ladder.

Note the word functional. We think Ford's designers didn't do the Fusion any favors with their latest cosmetic decisions. The bright three-bar grille that became Ford's new design face has, for example, increased in size and acquired winglets that extend over its new headlights. With the possible exception of beluga caviar, more of a good thing inevitably becomes too much, as this new grille demonstrates.

The front bucket seats deliver the best lateral support of the three cars, although we think Ford's power-seat policy—it retains manual adjustability for the seatback—is the wrong place to save money. In back, the Fusion offers good room for two adults, although it's knees up, owing to a low H-point. It's tight for three, but that's the case, in varying degrees, for all mid-size sedans. The trunk space is 17 cubic feet, same as the Mazda's, both of them bigger than the Honda's 14 cubes.

Dynamically, the Fusion got our vote for the car to be in when you're stuck on 40 miles of bad road. Easy does it. The suspension tuning was the softest of this trio, and hard cornering produced more up-and-down motions. A little more rebound damping might improve the Fusion's responses without sacrificing much of its smooth ride. On the other hand, the steering was nearly as good as the best in this group, and the car was absolutely devoid of nasty surprises.

But as good as it is, the Fusion doesn't register a high score on our fun meter. "A perfectly decent car," concluded one crew member. "But it's soft for intense motoring and might be better suited to someone whose needs include quiet operation and a softer ride."

Second Place: 2009 Mazda 6 i touring

Behold the four-door RX-8, says the new Mazda 6 with its styling. Right. Behold the plus-size Mazda 3, we say after driving it. Either way you call it, the new Mazda 6 continues to be the rowdy, spirited stud of the mid-size pack.

For all its rousing spirit, the previous Mazda 6 lagged in sales a bit, primarily because it was perceived to be a little small by mid-size-sedan standards. Mazda addressed that perception with its 2009 redesign, which is bigger in every dimension. (The Accord is still bigger, though just barely.) The key question here is whether that size increase has diluted the esprit that made the previous car an enthusiast favorite.

We'll get to that in a minute. First, let's take a look at the nondynamic elements. Styling, for example. Although we were far from unanimity on some elements of the scoring in this test, there were no arguments about which car would win in a beauty contest. There's a hint of RX-8 in the front fenders, the fast rear roofline and backlight suggest speed, and the sheetmetal is wrapped tightly around the 17-inch aluminum alloy wheels. The previous Mazda 6 was a wallflower. This new one is a rose.

The good looks don't stop at the door. The Mazda's interior design is clean and elegantly simple, enhanced by quality materials, although the flimsy inside rearview mirror is out of step on this score. We can't say we're sold on the look of the major gauges, with their pulsing blue halos, and we were a little surprised that the bolstering on the front seats wasn't more aggressive, considering the sporty message conveyed by the

exterior. Short bottom cushions, too.

On the other hand, the Mazda has a nifty touch we haven't seen anywhere else in this class: a three-position switch for adjusting headlight level—ideal for occasions when you've filled the trunk with heavy stuff such as cement bags or your mother-in-law.

First Place: 2009 Honda Accord EX-L

And the Accord was the biggest car in this test, but not by much—less than a half-inch more than the mega-Mazda in any dimension. It wasn't heaviest—the Mazda and the Fusion scaled in 20 pounds higher. That weight distinction is obviously academic, but here's the point: The bigger Accord doesn't drive big. It's at least as agile as its predecessor—smooth, unflappable, and polished—with suggestions of an inner tiger when the revs spool north of six grand.

Before we get to the Accord's dynamic credits, we must list some demerits. As noted, the Accord wins this one on a split decision, and the dissenting crew member marked it down severely for a couple of what seemed to him to be unforgivable laws. "Too big," he complained, displaying a keen eye for tiny dimensional disparities. "And it's ugly," he added.

On this second point, the majority voters didn't argue with much vehemence. Okay, perhaps "ugly" is much too strong. Let's say it's mildly misshapen in the same way that North Dakota is mildly flat.

A bigger black mark goes to the transmission. Not for function—like other Honda manuals, the Accord's is a pleasure to use, with crisp engagements and a sweet clutch. But it's short one gear—this five-speed should be a six. Power from the Accord's 190-hp 2.4-liter is robust, and its screaming 7100-rpm redline was highest of the group, but there's a significant hole in the gearing between fourth and the very tall fifth, and acceleration in fifth is languid at best.

Our test car might have been hobbled a bit by newness—just over 100 miles on the odo when we picked it up, a last-minute substitute for the car originally scheduled (which cost \$4000 less). New engines generally perform better once they've accumulated a little mileage. But even so, the Accord was tops in standing-start acceleration, a half-second quicker than the next best to 60 mph, and tied the Ford for fuel consumption during the test (25 mpg overall). It was so-so on the skidpad at 0.82 g, but it was quickest in the emergency-lane-change exercise, partially because its stability control could be disabled completely.

The Accord scored well in expected areas—fit and finish, front seats, and ergonomics, that battalion of center dashboard buttons notwithstanding. And as we also expected, its rear cabin felt bigger—in head, leg, and shoulder room—than those of its rivals.

If the steering was a little light, it was also as precise as laser surgery. One logbook comment summed it up best, citing the Accord's "intuitive path control—you can place the car with complete confidence, right up to the limits of adhesion." In a very close finish, it was the Accord's willingness to unwind a winding road that prevailed.

We're talking subtle distinctions here. Brake-pedal feel, for example, wasn't quite as positive as in the Accord. The Mazda turned in readily, the Accord decisively. The Mazda's freeway ride was good, but it verged on harsh when we operated on patchy pavement. Its suspension tuning was more overtly sporty than the Accord's, but the Honda held a tangible edge in transient response while delivering a more supple ride on just about any surface.

It came down to a question of refinement, and after three decades and eight generations, the Accord has more of it.

For more information on the Honda Accord in the Miami area, contact Brickell Honda online at <http://www.brickellhonda.com>

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