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## Baldi's basics play for free

Keep up with the latest daily buzz with the BuzzFeed Daily newsletter! Ten cars were invited to this three-day test. Six showed up, and four survived. We ate lunch at a Taco Bell on the first day, got stuck in a raging desert sandstorm the second, and had to rent a U-Haul to drag one of the cars back to Los Angeles on day three. Our ambitious test was star-crossed from the get-go. But we worked through the frustration and found some enlightenment. The idea was simple enough: Gather up hot-rod-ded four-cylinder production cars to survey developments in the evolving art of making them quick. On the West Coast, where it seems every Honda has a ham-size exhaust tip, zero suspension travel, and a driver's seat in permanent recline, the current mania is obvious. It was even more evident at last November's SEMA aftermarket trade show in Las Vegas, where the aisles were clogged with tiny cars sporting everything from exotic turbo systems and carbon-fiber bodywork to absurdly oversized brakes and shockingly tasteless graphics. In the aftermarket at a drive, small cars rule the earth. Because they're so popular, we could have invited 10 tweaked Hondas to the test. But the depth of this craze extends beyond that single make to everything from Dodge Neons to Mercedes SLKs. So we recruited a diverse field, inviting companies both familiar and obscure with vehicles ranging from accessible to exotic. Then as our test approached, cars started dropping out. Greddy Performance couldn't have either its turbocharged Honda Civic or Acura Integra available for our test in early December. Jackson Racing pulled its supercharged Honda Prelude out when owner Oscar Jackson felt he needed more time to optimize the fuel map. Just a week before our test, DC Sports was working the bugs out of the Honda S2000 at the Willow Springs track outside Los Angeles when the S2000 was punted in the left-rear wheel by a Formula Ford. And the turbocharged Ford Focus coming from Borla picked the morning of our event to have its computer experience a nervous breakdown. Hey, so we'll have a six-car test! That's enough, right? The plan was to meet at Willow Springs on the first day and then play catch with the cars along roads in the foothills surrounding Tehachapi. The second day would be spent producing performance numbers on the 7.5-mile oval at the Honda Proving Center of California (HPC) in the Mojave Desert. And the third day we'd return to Willow Springs for some time-laps of the Streets of Willow course. Simple. All we asked of the participants was that each car show up wearing enough equipment to plausibly pass a visual emissions inspection, run on 92-octane fuel, and have a reasonably quiet exhaust and 5/22nds of an inch of tread on each tire. What did turn up for our test was a handling-intensive Mazda Miata from Racing Beat, Neuspeed's first shot at modifying the Audi TT Quattro coupe, King Motorsports' near-race Acura Integra Type R, the Honda Civic Si on which Vortech is developing its supercharger system, HK's turbocharged Subaru Impreza 2.5RS, and T.C. Kline's ProSpec-massaged Honda S2000. There were no limits on what could be done to any car since this was not to be a comparison test, but none of the cars was constructed from a bottomless bank account. These aren't exotic machines; they're within reach of average car nuts with a few extra bucks, a reasonable collection of tools, and weekends to burn. Each company brought a car that it felt represented its talents and products well. Theoretically, we'd wind up with a survey of the possibilities out there. Not a very broad survey, but a survey. Except for chaluha-induced gurglings, day one went well. The cars were impressive and the roads perfect except for the occasional sloppy cattle drive across them, and the only damage suffered was a dinged wheel on the Quattro when one doofus freerlander drove it over a rock. Optimism spread that the mechanically fragile cars had been winnowed from the field and the rest of the test would go just as well. So it was off to HPCC the next morning. Straight-line performance measurements would take place on the Honda track, but the first test would be the toughest: top speed. Aftermarket tuners almost always test on a drag strip, but few have access to facilities where they can run flat-out. And running at wide-open throttle for an extended period often reveals unexpected stress points. Case in point: Insufficient fuel flow burned a piston in the Vortech Civic Si, and suddenly we were down to five cars. Then the winds came, big cross-Mojave sandblasters that had us huddled inside a building at the track waiting for them to subside. After a couple of hours stuck in that room, it was starting to feel like a setup for an Outer Limits episode. At any moment, someone would remove a baseball cap to reveal a third eye in the forehead, or a prehensile tail would bolt out the back of somebody's Dockers. Fortunately, the winds died before anyone started on a crying jag. Back at Willow Springs for the third day, the HKS Subaru resolutely refused to move under its own power. A proper diagnosis of the problem proved elusive. Hey, we're down to four cars! Perfect! To their credit, those four cars would survive repeated laps of the Streets and make it home at the end of the day under their own power. We decided to write about all six cars that showed up, even though little or no measured performance data are available for the Vortech Civic or the HKS Impreza. Kids getting their first driver's licenses now were born in the mid-'80s. They'll never own a new car with a carburetor, they grew up being ferried in Camrys and Accords, and they are unencumbered by loyalty to archaic notions of performance such as gut-busting V-8s. In an era of relaxed consumer credit, a time when kids get signing bonuses for part-time pizza chauffeuring, a new small car often isn't bought before their means. So, naturally, there's an obsession with improving small-engine performance. These are, after all, the cars they own. But extracting that performance always comes at a price beyond the cost of the parts. Maybe it's just a little more ride harshness or a louder exhaust note. Or it can be fragility in a car whose warranty has been voided. If you're going to get the most out of making a small car faster with aftermarket components, the challenge is balancing youthful enthusiasm with adult expectations. So with that in mind, we donned our baggiest pants, reclined our seatbacks, and headed for the high desert. Here, in alphabetical order, are our findings. Only two shows on Speedvision are truly mesmerizing: the ancient Car and Track series with Bud Lindeman and coverage of the FIA World Rally Championship. You'll need a seance to hang with Lindeman, but HKS will help approximate Subaru's series-slaying WRX WRC car for you by bolting a turbocharger system to the Impreza 2.5RS. If only it had been ambulatory on the test's third day. Fitting HKS's T-25 turbo to the 2.5RS engine is no small matter. There's the turbo itself and the xylophone-like air-to-air intercooler that stretches out over the 2.5-liter flat-four. Then there are the auxiliary waste gate, the two injectors that squirt extra fuel into the throttle body, and add-on controllers for both systems. Throw in a new clutch, high-flow intake and exhaust systems, and enough plumbing to floodrate Liza Superior, and the total powertrain tab is a hefty \$3766 including \$2000 for labor. But for two days it worked well in conjunction with the Subaru's all-wheel-drive system. Chassis tweaks are limited to \$3599 worth of 12.1-inch-diameter Brembo front disc brakes, HKS lowering springs, and P215/45ZR-17 Toyo Proxes T Plus tires on 7.5-by-17-inch Volk Racing wheels. The interior got Sparco racing seats, Schroth five-point harnesses, and a gauge package fit for Colin McRae. As for the driving experience, the blowoff valve sure isn't silent, but the engine takes to the turbo gracefully with progressive throttle response, little apparent lag, and a distinctive flat-motor exhaust note. With its all-wheel-driven manners, the car remained steadfast on the mountain roads with almost no squawking from the tires and gentle understeer when diving into corners. Some additional rear roll stiffness would balance the chassis a bit better, but this is an easy car in which to go really fast. On the Honda oval, the Impreza hauled itself to 135 mph -- a hefty 8 mph faster than stock, which suggests that there may be some truth to HKS's claim of 195 horsepower from the turbo motor. HKS says it has put this car in the hands of slam-fodder journalists for more than a year with few problems, but on our third test day at Willow Springs, it idled but wouldn't move under its own power. HKS's explanation was that the mass-air sensor spontaneously committed hara-ki during the cold night; a problem it says is unrelated to its modifications and not uncommon on virginial Subaru. Whatever, it ruined our day. A new Impreza is due next year, and rumor has it that North America will finally get turbocharged models. If they run as the HKS car did on days one and two, that will be exciting. - JPH VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 2-door sedan PRICE, STOCK/MODIFIED: \$19,790/\$39,261 ENGINE TYPE: turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 16- valve flat-4, aluminum block and heads, Subaru engine-control system with portfuel injection MODIFICATIONS (all parts made by HKS unless otherwise noted): Engine and transmission: T-25 turbo, \$1275; air-to-air intercooler, \$975; auxiliary throttle-body injectors and controller, \$795; boost controller, \$599; cat-back exhaust system, \$599; lightweight flywheel, \$520; Exedy clutch, \$458; auxiliary waste gate, \$215; intake system, \$140; racing spark plugs, \$50; labor, \$2000 Suspension: 7.5 x 17-in Volk Racing TE37 aluminum wheels, \$2260; 215/45ZR-17 Toyo Proxes T Plus tires, \$600; Tokico shocks, \$516; coil springs, \$275; labor, \$600 Brakes: Brembo front-brake kit (includes stainless-steel brake lines, 12.1-inch front calipers, and Brembo four-piston calipers), \$3599; labor, \$600 Appearance and interior modifications: Sparco seats, \$1190; gauges, \$850; data logger, \$495; Schroth four-point harnesses, \$450; turbo timer, \$110; labor, \$3000 Displacement: 150 cc in, 2457ccPower (SAE net) stock: 165 bhp @ 5600 rpmPower (SAE net) modified: 195 bhp @ 6000 rpm TRANSMISSION: 5-speed manual DIMENSIONS:Wheelbase: 99.2 in Length: 172.2 inCurb weight: 2890 lb PERFORMANCE: STOCK / MODIFIED Zero to 60 mph: 8.2 sec / DNf Zero to 100 mph: 27.3 sec / DNf Street start, 5-60 mph: 8.9 sec / DNf Standing 1/4-mile: 16.3 sec @ 84 mph / DNf Top-gear passing time, 30-50 mph: 10.0 sec / DNf 50-70 mph: 11.1 sec / DNf Top speed (drag limited): 127 mph / 135 mph Braking, 70-0 mph: 191 ft / DNf Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad: 0.81 g / DNf Emergency-lane-change maneuver, mph: DNfRoad-course lap, min:sec: DNf VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 2-door sedan PRICE, STOCK/MODIFIED: \$19,790/\$39,261 ENGINE TYPE: turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 16- valve flat-4, aluminum block and heads, Subaru engine-control system with portfuel injection MODIFICATIONS (all parts made by HKS unless otherwise noted): Engine and transmission: T-25 turbo, \$1275; air-to-air intercooler, \$975; auxiliary throttle-body injectors and controller, \$795; boost controller, \$599; cat-back exhaust system, \$599; lightweight flywheel, \$520; Exedy clutch, \$458; auxiliary waste gate, \$215; intake system, \$140; racing spark plugs, \$50; labor, \$2000 Suspension: 7.5 x 17-in Volk Racing TE37 aluminum wheels, \$2260; 215/45ZR-17 Toyo Proxes T Plus tires, \$600; Tokico shocks, \$516; coil springs, \$275; labor, \$600 Brakes: Brembo front-brake kit (includes stainless-steel brake lines, 12.1-inch front calipers, and Brembo four-piston calipers), \$3599; labor, \$600 Appearance and interior modifications: Sparco seats, \$1190; gauges, \$850; data logger, \$495; Schroth four-point harnesses, \$450; turbo timer, \$110; labor, \$3000 Displacement: 150 cc in, 2457ccPower (SAE net) stock: 165 bhp @ 5600 rpmPower (SAE net) modified: 195 bhp @ 6000 rpm TRANSMISSION: 5-speed manual DIMENSIONS:Wheelbase: 99.2 in Length: 172.2 inCurb weight: 2890 lb PERFORMANCE: STOCK / MODIFIED Zero to 60 mph: 8.2 sec / DNf Zero to 100 mph: 27.3 sec / DNf Street start, 5-60 mph: 8.9 sec / DNf Standing 1/4-mile: 16.3 sec @ 84 mph / DNf Top-gear passing time, 30-50 mph: 10.0 sec / DNf 50-70 mph: 11.1 sec / DNf Top speed (drag limited): 127 mph / 135 mph Braking, 70-0 mph: 191 ft / DNf Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad: 0.81 g / DNf Emergency-lane-change maneuver, mph: DNfRoad-course lap, min:sec: DNf Today, the name Mugen means as much to Honda tuners as Holley and Edelbrock once meant to street rodders. Mugen's been building go-fast Honda parts for years. Last year, Mugen flexed its technical know-how in the course of supplying engines to the Jordan Formula 1 team. Mugen was started by Hiroshi Honda, son of the founder of the Honda Motor Company, which helps explain the close ties with Honda. The exclusive distributor of Mugen parts in North America is King Motorsports Unlimited, of Sullivan, Wisconsin. The pairing of a Midwestern race shop and a Japanese tuner has been an uncommonly successful one. King-built cars spent last summer shattering track records in the SCCA ITA class, and King's Motorsport cars are regular top-runners. For this test, King Motorsports owner Scott Zellner didn't even blink when asked which car he'd like to bring, and after piloting his Integra Type R, we can see why. His modifications turned the boy-racer Type R into a darningly quick street and track car. Starting with the engine, Zellner whipped up a brew of Mugen parts to increase available revs and breathing efficiency. First, he removed the engine and transmission. New valve springs and a Mugen engine computer allow a hair-raising 9000-rpm redline. While the engine is removed, Zellner checks for proper tolerances and reinstalls the engine with stiffer motor mounts. The stock limited-slip differential gets swapped for a Mugen piece that Zellner says does a better job of getting the power to the wheel with the most traction. For the exhaust, a free-breathing Mugen header is joined to the stock catalytic converter and a Mugen muffler. The result: 220 hp, for \$9355. Zellner replaced the shocks, springs, anti-roll bars, wheels, and tires. He set up the car with greater rear roll stiffness than is found in the front, which, he says, "takes away a front-drive car's tendency to push wide through turns and actually lets it rotate a bit." Altogether, these changes tally \$19,213, but the transformed car is an absolute blast to drive. The motor rip's urgently to the redline, and the stocker's kringled, almost harmful-sounding engine note is replaced with one of the best engine notes this side of a Ferrari. The King/Mugen Integra also trounced the stocker to 60 mph, performing the feat in 5.8 seconds, nearly a full second quicker. Top speed rose 3 mph, even though the King/Mugen car had a larger, drag-inducing rear wing. On the track, the King/Mugen car certainly did not push; rather, the rear end would predictably step out on turn-in and allow the driver to get back on the gas sooner. Grip was up only 0.04 g, but it should be noted that Zellner chose full-tread street tires for our test, whereas some of the other cars were wearing DOT-legal racing rubber. Better tires would have dramatically lowered lap times and upped skidpad grip. The whole package had just enough raciness to make everyday driving thrilling -- and without a backboard-stiff ride. If you have to own one car to haul groceries, blast out morning cowbells, and go on weekend track forays, few do it better. -Larry Webster VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 3-door coupe PRICE, STOCK/MODIFIED: \$24,805/\$44,018 ENGINE TYPE: DOHC 16-valve 4-in-line, aluminum block and head, Honda/Mugen N-1 engine-control system with port fuel injection MODIFICATIONS (all parts made by Mugen unless otherwise noted): Engine and transmission: limited-slip differential, \$1320; engine computer, \$1300; cat-back exhaust system, \$975; header pipe, \$975; clutch, \$599; valve-spring set, \$460; engine mounts, \$399; lightweight flywheel, \$350; high-compression head gasket, \$129; low-temp thermostat, \$69; high-pressure radiator cap, \$29; labor, \$2750 Suspension: 7.0 x 16-in forged aluminum wheels, \$2200; adjustable shocks and springs, \$1400; 225/45ZR-16 Bridgestone S0-2 tires, \$800; 21mm front anti-roll bar, \$370; 26mm rear anti-roll bar, \$370; front shock-tower brace, \$285; 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