

SPEC Miata



Will it rescue or ruin vintage racing?

One could call it a question for the ages. But the first generation Mazda Miata is here—it is vintage. Love them or hate them, they are eligible. Our writer gets a firsthand race weekend experience from behind the wheel, in a high-speed introduction to vintage racing's newest and most controversial marque.

BY TOM STAHLER

There are many ways to go racing. You could have been the fortunate son, whose parents treated karting like little league, and gone up the ladder. You could have developed a youthful interest, after putting a few bucks in your pocket, and went club racing. You could have had a lifelong love of the sport and finally broke down to try your hand at autocross or track days in your daily. No matter how, once the bug of speed bites, it is a really hard one to shake. Most claim it's a bug they never want to shake. The readers of *Vintage Motorsport* have developed their love and quest in the howl and growl of old cars. Of course so many of these old cars are special, collectible... sometimes priceless. But the barrier to enter this exclusive club has now been lowered. For Mazda, they are hopeful for substantial growth.

A Yen for Japanese Cars

We have seen a burgeoning number of Japanese racing cars enter vintage events. For years, the 2.5 Challenge and its Datsun 510s, have wowed crowds, going head-to-head with BMW 2002s and Alfa Romeo GTVs. Other fan favorites include the Datsun 240Z and 2000 Roadster, like the 510, put on the map by racing legends like John Morton and Peter Brock. The crop of Japanese race cars entertain at the biggest races, such as the Rolex Monterey Reunion, where the mighty, screaming, rotary-powered Mazda 787Bs have

thrilled fans, who recall the 1991 Le Mans 24 victory and subsequent outlawing of the R26B engine. As collectibles, the Toyota 2000GT was the first Japanese car to reach a bid of \$1 million at auction—and with vintage Skyline GTRs now coming on the market, these cars are fully vested in the culture.

For the weekend warrior, the Spec Miata has been one of the best value-driven ways to go club racing with sanctions like the SCCA or NASA. For nearly 30 years, the Japanese sports car that shifted a major paradigm in the car world, by recalling the great British sports cars of years gone by, has proven to be a great starting point—or full career—for many. Spec Miata has been the largest class in both SCCA and NASA. On any given weekend, as many as 80 cars will show up to contest an event.

Dean Case, Mazda North American press officer for Motorsports said, “We have sold nearly 3,000 Spec Miata kits over the years. Because the second-generation Miata with the 1.8-liter motor is much more competitive in SCCA and NASA races, most competitors lean towards the faster car.”



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This has left numerous 1.6-liter cars being unused, in many cases collecting dust in numerous garages around the U.S. Thankfully, the first generation Miata, at age 27, is now eligible for vintage racing. In so doing, new opportunities have now been created for these cars. Thanks to the plethora of cars available, competitors wanting to get into racing on a lower budget, or veteran racers who would like work on their racecraft or to provide driving opportunities for their offspring or grandchildren—without risking the Lister-Jaguar—can enter.

For Mazda, they see the right set of circumstances for a new generation of would-be racers to participate and learn racecraft. The SVRA was very happy to facilitate the five-race Mazda Heritage Cup series during their 18-race 2017 calendar. The five specific events include Auto Club Speedway, Road America, Mid-Ohio, Portland International and VIR.

During the recent SVRA Southern California Historic Sportscar Festival weekend at Auto Club Speedway, I got to try my hand behind the wheel, competing during a full race weekend. In what has been considered a “historic moment” in racing, my five competitors and I ran the very first Mazda Heritage Cup race. Not only was it a fantastic experience of getting to race these exuberant cars in anger, but to do so in a friendly, clubby environment—the great benefit of the vintage racing crowd.

The Pitch

Mazda North America director of communications Jeremy Barnes brought his own Spec Miata out for the inaugural vintage weekend. Barnes commented, “It’s easy to dismiss Spec Miata as a race car if you have never been in one. The guy who gets out of the high horsepower car will say, ‘well its only got 115 horsepower, how much fun can that be?’—plus, its a girl’s car,” he chuckles. “But the fact that you have 115 horsepower means you have nowhere to hide. You make a tiny mistake and it takes you a half a lap to get your momentum back. But beyond the stigma, there may not be a better car to get behind the wheel and train on.”

The first Generation MX-5 came to the U.S. equipped with a dohc 1598cc, inline-4, producing about 110hp. The car itself weighed approximately 2,300 lbs. and the two-seat, front-engine, rear wheel drive layout gave a nod to the Lotus Elan and the MGB. Naturally, and almost immediately, the cars were finding their way to the grid in regional SCCA and NASA races. While the first “Spec Miata” class races were not held until 2000, the cars themselves ran in the Showroom Stock and Improved Touring Classes to that point.

Like then, my No. 65 1990 Mazda Spec Miata was a fully race prepped machine—the prep is not, however, as involved as some other racing machines out there. It does not have a fuel cell, keeping the original gas tank—and runs on 91 octane pump gas. It does



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however, have an improved cold air intake and exhaust, essentially bumping the power to about 118hp. The brakes stay stock—but have improved pads and rotors. The interior is stripped and has a simple fire extinguisher (not a fire system), a full welded roll cage, a racing seat and a removable steering wheel.

We wondered about the lack of a fuel cell. Barnes eased our mind on safely as he described a nighttime racing crash at the 25

Hours of Thunderhill. “At Thunderhill, about four years ago, one of our factory racing cars hit a stationary Spec Miata at 80 miles per hour. It moved the right front wheel of this 3,400 pound Mazda 6 about a third of the way into the passenger door. It put the Spec Miata’s tail lights back into the cabin. They had to cut the driver out of the Miata, but he walked to the ambulance. There was no fire. They are exceedingly safe cars.”

Essentially a donor car can still be used and Mazda still has 1.6 kits that include Eibach springs and sway bars along with Bilstein Shocks. In the build, what is needed? Simply cold air intake and the left front turn signal can be hollowed for more cold air, a catalytic converter delete, updated exhaust, air conditioning delete, power steering delete. Obviously, a seat, belts, cage and a hardtop are all required. With most of the parasitic drag removed and better flowing exhaust, the car makes about 118hp—and feels very racy. Most of the parts are available from Mazdaspeed, and Barnes also recommends Advanced Autosport and roll cage manufacturer Miata Cage.



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Bang for the Buck

To say that the “bang for the buck” factor is “thrilling” might just be the understatement of the year. The cars handle exceptionally, have a relatively bulletproof engine and gearbox—making them very reliable—and parts readily available from Mazda and a few assorted aftermarket retailers. Don’t want to build one? A race-prepped Gen One 1.6-liter Spec Miata can be acquired for as little as \$7,000 and the SVRA’s current Spec Miata-class entry fee is under \$300 per event. On his own Spec Miata, Barnes said the only major replacement was a gearbox during his 27 race weekends on the car.

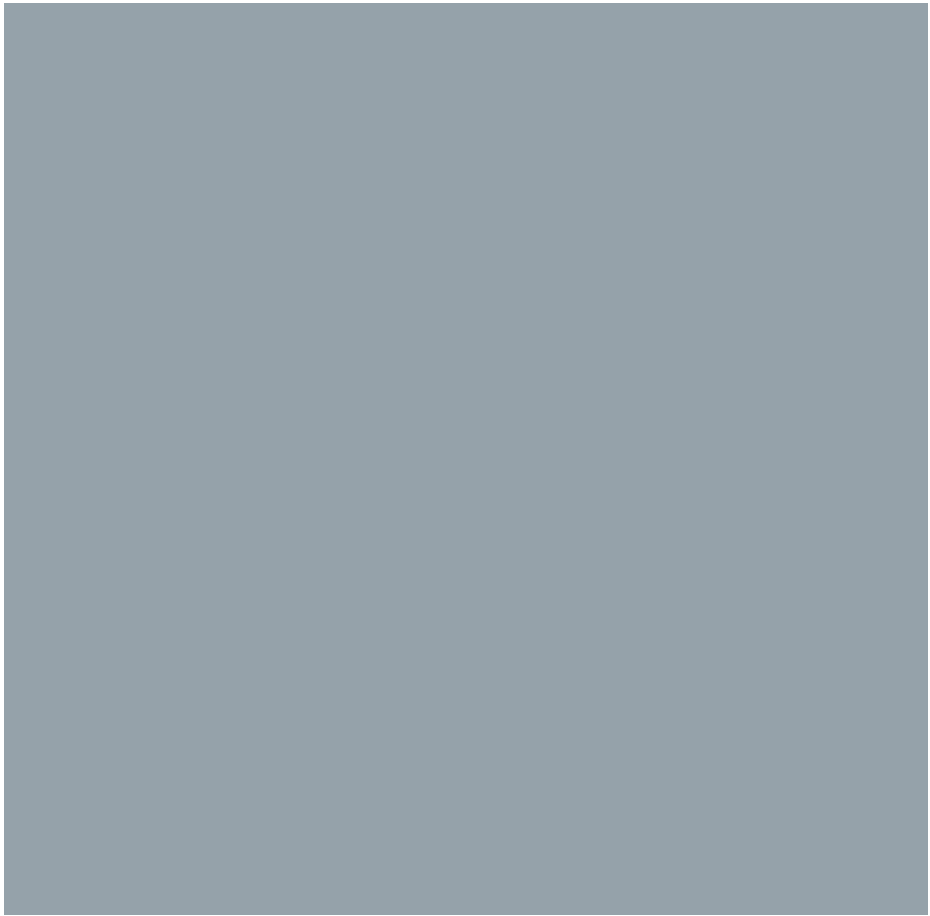
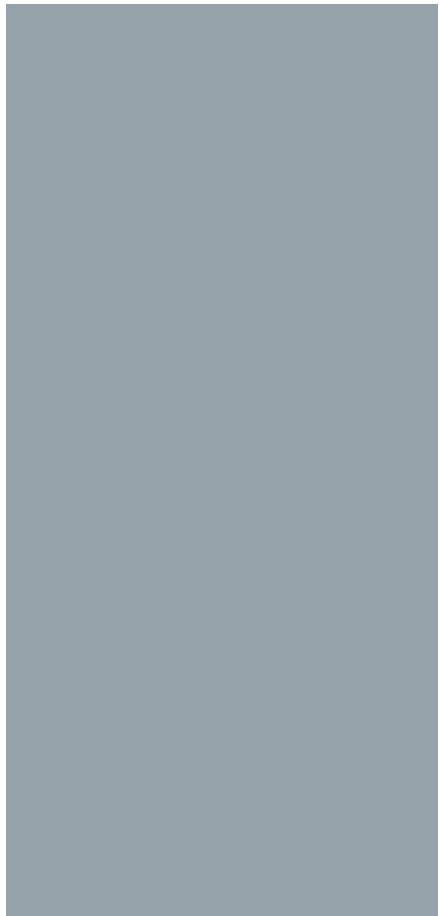
The biggest issue among the “vintage racing-set” is clearly the fear of the car. Not to race the car but rather to race against the car. This is why vintage racing had largely frowned on the Miata being allowed. It may sound snobby however, many in the hobby had good reason for the fear. The Miata as a class, throughout its illustrious run, has been one built upon inexpensive racing—and contact. The reputation of the drivers, known for their use of the “chrome horn” in bump drafting and using each other’s doors to get around corners, and dive-bombing into the corners, has given the guy with a



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901 series Porsche or a 1960 MGA a reason for pause. It is the leading reason that Miatas, despite the first gen's eligibility as a "25-year-old car," has caused a rift among vintage racers. The concern is real. Entrants with pricey, crisp cars don't want to be part of the mayhem. However, because of the "no touching rule" in vintage, using the "chrome horn," bump drafting and other collisions are generally high crimes—met with penalties, disqualifications or suspensions. This might also be the reason that SVRA decided to give the cars their own class.

More Fun Than a Ferrari?

Here's the entertainment factor: The Spec Miata class produces some of the closest and most exciting racing on any given weekend. At the SCCA and NASA events, the paddock generally clears to the fences to watch these cars. Generally in vintage, the 2-5 Challenge has wowed many, but Spec Miata adds another class of racing that fans—and competitors "up the grid"—will clamor to the fences to watch and enjoy.

Barnes is a seasoned club and vintage racer himself. He club races Spec Miata and during the Rolex Monterey Reunion, runs the iconic IMSA RX-7 GTO. "Club racing is dog-eat-dog—especially in Spec Miata. When you get a 30-car field and the whole field is separated by seven or eight seconds from the front to the back and the front 12 cars are in the same second it is a lot more cut and thrust—and touching does happen. I don't mind if it happens because we were fighting for that last inch on the track. However, I have an issue when someone runs you off the track because they refuse to give you that inch of track," said Barnes, who clearly gets the apprehension.

However he is also optimistic about the Miata's future as a vintage race car. "I believe it will 'rescue' vintage racing, the same way it has rescued club racing and autocrossing. You can have a \$25 million Ferrari and arguably have as much, or more, fun in the Spec Miata as the risk is significantly different. If you can go quickly in a 'slow car,' you can really excel in a fast car. If you can win in a Spec Miata, I almost guarantee you can win in almost anything. It is that strong of a training ground."

For many racers across the spectrum, Mazda is the absolute best OEM for racing support. The cars and parts are readily available, and the manufacturer themselves are among the biggest enthusiasts. Just about anywhere Mazdas are being raced, there are "involved" personnel who lend support, parts, technical support and morale. This is what has made Mazda what it is today with the racing-set.



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Barnes explains, “We are just below two percent in road car sales — but have a 55 percent market share in club racing. Spec Miata is the single most road raced nameplate in the world. Our very generous racing support program is nearly self-supporting—because we take the money we make on parts sales and put it back into contingency programs.”

The Experience

Okay, so now you have heard Mazda’s and a sanctioning body’s sales pitch. Is it all that? Time for me to try it on first-hand. With race weekends and drives in everything from a Lola T-160 to the Tony Adamowicz U27 Trans-Am car to my own Porsche 968 race car and several others, it was time to experience a weekend racing a 1.6 liter Spec Miata.

Having never sat in a Spec Miata, let alone driven one, four practice sessions on the Friday of the weekend proved essential to learning the car and its limits. The practice sessions were mixed with three other classes that included Datsuns, Formula Vees and a really slow Can-Am car (was undoubtedly the driver). Starting relatively slow and building up speed gradually was key. Fortunately, having previously seen racing on Auto Club Speedway’s “Roval”—a combination of half the banked oval and an infield road course—before, but never having driven the track, I spent a half day at CXC Simulations in El Segundo, CA driving the circuit and learning the braking points, entries, apexes and exits of the course. This—and the subsequent weekend of racing—was done under the watchful eye of my enlisted driver coach, Mitch Perry. Perry, beyond his day job as one of LA’s most sought after rock guitar players, was a Skip Barber Formula Mazda winner and former Dale Jarrett Racing School instructor. He has an very keen eye for techniques and places to find speed.

First Impressions

My first impressions of the car was utter amazement! It was a tight squeeze—but the typical bending and contorting to slide into the seat gave way to a relatively roomy cockpit where a six-point harness and a stripped interior, save the original tach and speedo that looked back at me. The removable steering wheel made for relatively easier access. Once strapped in, with the window and interior nets up, it was pure racer. The roll cage was installed so where the bottom met the chassis was essentially against my left ankle. That required keeping my foot on the clutch pedal all the time. But the pedal itself had a lot of play at the top of



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the curve.

The balance was 50/50 which made the car very maneuverable and forgiving. The low center of gravity gave me a very nice sensation of speed and handling as I sawed at the wheel. My early times were not over the top impressive, however the time spent on the CXC simulator allowed good reference to already know the course and be working on the physics of the car, rather than figuring my way around the track while working on speed. The turn-in was

responsive and the slight understeer through the corners allowed me to drift the car slightly while hammering at the throttle earlier and earlier through the apexes.

The Auto Club Speedway “Roval” is fairly typical of speedway road circuits. Slightly less than two-thirds of the banked oval are used and a hard left-right complex, half way down the backstretch throws you onto the infield portion. Braking hard, two downshifts from 5th and back on the throttle for the turn in left then immediate

right, exits you wide as you sail back towards the right hand side of the track for a tight radius carousel. I would learn to exit wide—and past the rumble strip, keeping my foot in it for the upshift to 4th for a fast chicane and then a decreasing radius hairpin, with two bangs down to 2nd and immediately back on the loud pedal.

The two-three shift was the major difficulty. There was only one place to engage 2nd gear—in the hairpin. Coming off a very fast part of the circuit, the decreasing radius hairpin gave way to a fast left-right chicane down a straight, then a hard right-left complex. The throttle gets feathered through the corner then on the exit—then full throttle for the long left hander leading to the banked straightaway. In the early sessions, coming out of the hairpin, I struggled a bit with the 2-3 upshift—sometimes making an accidental push up to 5th—and quickly corrected with a flick of the wrist. But a missed shift hurts the momentous speed for the back straight. This happened more than once throughout the weekend. For the rest of the event and sessions, that was a thinking point—to grab the right gear. It meant consciously putting the lever from 2nd to 3rd.

Because we were our own run group (and a tiny one, at that), Barnes suggested that the Saturday afternoon qualifying session and the two Sunday sessions, including the trophy race, should all be treated as races. But here is the kicker: The top three finishers from the Saturday race would be inverted for the start of the first race on Sunday, then the entire field would be inverted for the start of the trophy race from the Sunday morning result. So in essence, Ricky Bobby would be wrong as “Last would be first!”

We drew our starting positions from a hat for the Saturday race—and wouldn't you know it? I drew pole position! Now it should also be noted that there were only



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six starters for the event all weekend—so naturally no matter what happened I was going to get a top-10. After all, I was just the journalist they invited to come experience the new series, right?

My competitors would be Jeremy Barnes, the Mazda executive; Mike Allen the director of dealer technical support for Mazda—both brought their own beautifully prepared Spec Miata race cars; a privateer who normally raced NASA and SCCA, Carl Johnk, who was intrigued by the new series; Saturday SVRA president Tony Parella got behind the wheel of the other Mazda provided “rental” and Peter Reed, a regular vintage racer who was trying out his “new-old” Spec Miata for the first time; and lastly, a recent Spec Miata owner, Andy Weiss, joined the field on Sunday.

Using the “Draft”

Racing round the familiar banking at Auto Club Speedway where so many great NASCAR and Indy car races happened is an absolute thrill. Not doing 200 mph, but 115-120 is still quite quick with your butt low in the seat. It also allows you to use some well-known techniques. Utilizing “the draft” and getting two cars past the leader—

by adding another 10 miles per hour to the top speed—is fun driving! Needless to say, in my past racing experiences, I have had zero time on a banked oval. But everything you have seen on TV in regards to “the draft” is absolutely correct!

I was able to incorporate this technique twice during the weekend's races. At one point, during the first and second races, we went three wide into the banking inches apart—it was insane! I am pleased to report, that with some serious dicing, I came away with the victory in that first race. Allen and Barnes had drafted past me on the banking, but I had stayed on Barnes' tail through the infield. When he made a move on Allen in the right-left complex at the end of the back straight, I stayed on his tail and we both went through. A rare mistaken missed shift by Barnes, entering the banking again, allowed me through— with nothing ahead of me but the checker! Wow! that is a feeling!

During Sunday's trophy race, on lap 4, we entered the banked straightaway at about 90mph. I had built up quite a head of steam through the long left hander—flat in 3rd gear. The bump of changing camber from flat to banked surface had now become familiar as I upshifted to 4th in the redline powerband and headed towards the flag stand in the bottom lane. Looking ahead, about four car lengths, was the leader, Mike Allen. A glance in my mirrors revealed a hard-charging Jeremy Barnes in 3rd place, right on my bumper.

I put up my right hand and pointed right, then circled my finger forward. I was not pointing Barnes by, as is sometimes signaled in racing—but asking him to stay on my bumper as I took the high lane—incorporating “the draft.” Barnes, understood and I made the gradual move upward to the higher line. Typically, in our own air, the car would top out around 115mph around the banking. The g-forces would make a novice want to slightly lift—



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but I looked deep into the corner and kept my foot in it each lap. Lifting would actually unsettle the car and could prove disastrous.

Barnes stayed on the bumper as the shared air allowed him to stay in place at about half throttle as he pushed me past the leader at about 125mph. I was leading the very first Mazda Heritage Cup Trophy race! We came down the back straight and banged down two gears into a hard left and right comple—into the infield road course. We then moved to the right outside lane and braked hard for the entrance to the carousel—a double apex left hander with a wide exit—past the rumble strips. We then upshifted to 4th again, foot flat on the floor through a fast left-right chicane then braked hard and banged the gears down to 2nd for the tight, decreasing radius, right hand hairpin.

We came down the back straight with me leading. The hard left to right 90-degree corners lay ahead. I knew my braking point, but was watching the mirrors and hit the brakes and turned in a tad early—with disastrous consequence. The car swung right as I grappled with the wheel the rear then corrected and went right—the sound of stones pegging the wheelwells made me realize I was in the grass—fortunately it was dry and not terribly slick. I corrected and corrected again with a concrete and tire-laden wall to my left, managed to catch it and drive right back on the circuit. But I had just given up the lead to Barnes and Allen who headed to the carousel ahead.

Having lost all that momentum, I would never get close again during the next four laps. A teachable moment, for sure. In momentum cars, you must be fast in and out. He who carries that one mile per hour faster through the corners, will be your winner. Regardless, the smile factor has no ceiling. Through it all, I was second fastest the entire weekend—and improved nearly 12 seconds from my first session Friday to the last race on Sunday—gratifying to say the least. It was truly pleasing that I exhibited fabulous car control all weekend—or could it be that the Spec Miata was just a very forgiving car?

The Verdict

Ruin or Rescue? Consider the following: The Spec Miata is, in fact, a vintage car. The Gen One meets the criteria for vintage racing. At age 27, they will have more provenance than many of the “newer vintage” race cars that show up across the sanctioning spectrum. Many of the Spec Miata cars that are entered will have significant racing history—not necessarily in the big pro series like IMSA and WEC, but like many of

the racing sports cars, a solid club past.

The Spec Miata has its own class. Bang for the buck and entertainment value to a vintage race weekend will make for great racing. For those who want to join the fray, it provides a cost-efficient learning tool that conceivably be the “gateway drug” to the faster and more valuable cars that vintage racing has to offer. Let’s face it: vintage race drivers are not getting any younger—and this provides a great opportunity to inject a younger competitor to many race weekends. There are a great number of these Gen One cars available. Further, the OEM provides unprecedented support for any Mazda that

is racing. Parts are readily available, factory support is there, and acquiring one of these cars is significantly easier. These are not “drifters” coming to play—they are serious hobbyists who want to join and be enamored with the beauty and camaraderie that any vintage race weekend provides.

Barnes reflected, “The cars are so perfect for racing. They are easy to drive—yet difficult to drive fast. They are plentiful. They are inexpensive. We have a great support program through Mazda Motorsports. It works because it just works.”

Our verdict is simple: Welcome Spec Miata! Where have you been? 🏁

