

## THE SPECS

## Lithe and athletic Honda Civic Si takes on lovable knockout Ford Mustang GT

2006 DRIVING AWARDS:  
SPORTS/PERFORMANCE CAR

# Sophistication v. knuckle-dragging

By Graeme Fletcher

The shootout for the best new sports/performance car pits the Ford Mustang — last year's champ and overall 2006 Canadian Car of the Year according to the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada — against the 2006 category winner, the Honda Civic Si.

One thing in this comparison is very easy to nail down — the only things the two have in common are two doors and a virtually useless back seat. Beyond this, the two share absolutely nothing, including cost. The base V6-powered Mustang just does not cut the mustard and so it is the GT that is pitted against the Civic Si.

Lift the hood and the differences stream to the fore. The Mustang uses a 4.6-litre V8 that relies on displacement rather than technology to deliver its goods. It uses a single overhead cam layout to push 300 horsepower and 320 pound-feet of torque to the rear wheels through a five-speed manual gearbox and limited-slip differential. Generally, the lot hooks up nicely and is strong enough to propel the GT to 100 kilometres an hour in 5.6 seconds and from 80 to 100 km/h in 4.6 seconds.

The engine also delivers a delightfully guttural roar whenever the gas pedal is pushed, with the slightest enthusiasm. Likewise, its size means it is extremely flex-

ible, pulling strongly from 1,200 rpm even when in top gear. This proves there is merit to the old adage about there being no substitute for cubic inches.

There is a problem with the car's mechanical cacophony. There is an unseemly amount of drivetrain backlash — unless you're real smooth, the driverless tend to clunk its way off the line — and gear whine from both the gearbox and rear axle. At times, it almost sounds as though there's a bad bearing somewhere. Likewise, the clutch is on the heavy side and the gearbox has to be stirred deliberately to prevent it from balking.

The Civic Si uses a 2.0L four and Honda's i-VTEC to deliver 197 hp. The lot is related to the road through a six-speed manual transmission, limited-slip differential and the front wheels. If there is a drawback, it's due to the Civic Si's 129 lb-ft of torque. Until the engine has come over its belt, it really does feel rather ordinary. However, once past 3,000 rpm, the Si takes off and, once through 6,000 rpm, the variable valve lift kicks in and the Si runs for all its worth. This split personality shows up in the numbers — the Si takes 7.8 seconds to get to 100 km/h, but it needs only 5.2 seconds to bridge the 80-120 km/h gap.

Unlike the GT, the Si's clutch is light and progressive, and the transmission is one of the easiest to shift. Even when grabbing

**Unanimous choice** Honda Civic Si  
**Engine** 2.0L DOHC four-cylinder  
**Power** 197 hp @ 7,800 rpm; 139 lb-ft @ 6,200 rpm  
**Transmission** Six-speed

**manual**  
**Brakes** Four-wheel disc with ABS  
**Price: base/as tested** \$25,880/same  
**Fuel economy L/100 km** 10.7 city, 7.6 hwy.

**Contender** Ford Mustang GT  
**Engine** 4.6L single overhead cam V8  
**Power** 300 hp @ 5,750 rpm; 320 lb-ft @ 4,500 rpm  
**Transmission** Five-speed

**manual**  
**Brakes** Four-wheel disc with ABS  
**Price: base/as tested** \$32,999/same  
**Fuel economy L/100 km** 14.0 city, 8.8 hwy.



GRAEME FLETCHER FOR NATIONAL POST

The Honda Civic Si's engine feels rather ordinary until it hits 3,000 rpm — and takes off. Past 6,000 rpm, the Si runs for all its worth.

gears as quickly as possible, it meshes without hanging up, which really makes the car a pleasure to drive.

There are similar inequities in the suspension and subsequent handling. While the Mustang earns an independent front suspension (MacPherson struts), the rear end rests on a rather antiquated solid rear axle. The setup does control body movement well; however, when pushed — especially on a rough road — the back end feels as though it is about to skate out. This is exacerbated whenever the driver gets on the gas mid-corner. Basically, the Stang is only too willing to jump into oversteer, which it does so with little notice. That stated, the fun of powersliding

the GT through a corner is something a Civic driver can only dream about.

The Si rides on a fully independent system (struts up front and double wishbones in back) that effectively controls body motion. More impressive is the fact that despite having 61% of the vehicle's mass over the front wheels, it takes quite a lot to get the Civic to understeer. This means the feel is remarkably neutral and the response to steering input is fast without being twitchy — even at the limit. Factor in the oversized 215/45R17 tires and challenging a fast on-ramp becomes something to cherish.

When it comes to scrubbing off speed, the Si betters the Mustang by almost a metre (40.7 to

41.5 m from 100 km/h). It also has a crisper pedal feel, which makes it easier to modulate.

As for the rest, the Mustang is attractively attired and features a fit and finish that is only marginally behind that of the Civic's. Where the GT enjoys an edge, at least in my book, is the manner in which the information is relayed to the driver. The Mustang uses an attractive set of regular dials, while the Si features a digital speedo that flashes so frequently it becomes an irritant (showing every kilometre an hour change in speed tends to do that). Both also come with comfortable bucket seats — the edge goes to the Si as its bolstering is a tad more aggressive, so it delivers better lateral support. Both also have

little more than token trunks — the Mustang measures 13.1 cubic feet, the Civic just 11.5.

An apt analogy for this comparison is to liken it to the Muhammad Ali/Joe Frazier fight. Ali, played by the Civic, is lithe, athletic and sophisticated. The Frazier-like Mustang is a lovable knuckle-dragger that lives and dies by its knockout punch.

As with the storied fights between the boxers, the Si/GT shootout proves to be very close. However, my scorecard sees the Civic Si's technology and the manner in which the car engages the driver out-point the Stang's brute force (i.e., tire-smoking fun) and wonderful exhaust note.

CanWest News Service  
automotive@sympatico.ca