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## SPORTY CARS

### Personal picks: Consumer Reports drives dozens at IMPA track days, chooses favs

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Some days are better than others, especially if they are spent at a private test track with dozens of new cars. Several members of the Consumer Reports Cars team went to the Monticello Motor Club last week for the annual International Motor Press Association (IMPA) track days, sampling the latest cars on a 3.6-mile race track. Naturally, the staff found some favorites from among these high-speed first impressions.



The Monticello, NY, facility caters to a well-heeled clientele, providing a first-class track experience for its members. For two days this month, more than 100 automotive journalists descended on the high-octane playground to network and sample new models.

The Consumer Reports editors and engineers in attendance got to revisit some models and take a hot lap with high-performance cars that will not be bought for our test program. Collectively, we learned a lot on the twisty road course and had some fun along the way. Below, we share our personal picks among the cars we flogged, uh, drove.

**Liza Barth:** Looking at the practical side, I checked out some of the more mainstream models on the track. Yes, most expensive sporty cars will be fun driving fast, but what about models you drive every day? How would they fare on a challenging course? Recalling my experiences, I keep going back to the new Volkswagen Beetle, which I drove a few times on the rural roads and the track at Monticello. The Beetle is an easy car to live with and the turbo model is quick and fun to drive, aided by more power and the independent rear suspension. I was also surprised that it was quite comfortable inside, as well. Many of the recent small cars I've driven recently don't feel as supportive or roomy. The seats in the VW are wide and well padded, the cabin felt spacious (granted I didn't use the backseat), plus the touch-screen controls were easy to use. If I didn't have a family of four and needed more space, I would consider purchasing this fun, cute car. At least I can look forward to more time driving our [test Beetle](#) in the coming months.

**Jeff Bartlett:** Track day started in the rain, so cones were placed to help the attendees learn the long course and stay on the racing line. Given how close some cones were placed as gates, I choose a narrow ride to start with: [Mini Cooper John Cooper Works](#). Every media track event I attend, this car never fails to entertain. Remove all the real world considerations, such as passenger and cargo space, premium fuel requirement, and unnecessarily quirky controls, and you're left with an engaging hot hatch that makes most cars feel downright dull. It tracks wonderfully, enabling it to out-hustle far more powerful cars. At over \$30,000, it isn't cheap, especially if you measured value by the cubic foot. However, the base Mini Cooper is about \$10,000 less, it remains fun while being quite fuel-efficient. Not a bad compromise, really.

For high-performance thrills, the [Subaru WRX STI](#) was an absolute hoot in the wet. Staying deep in the revs, the four tires gripped the track tenaciously and remained forgiving when pushed past their adhesion limits. Ultimately, the [Ford Mustang](#) Boss 302 was the only car I waited in line to drive, and it was time well spent. A true modern legend, it drove exactly how one would imagine. Think Mustang GT that is better in every way, or Shelby GT500 that feels more responsive and less nose heavy, and you get a fair impression. Definitely memorable.

The other vehicle that stood out to me was the updated [Jeep Wrangler](#). In Rubicon trim, it handled the excellent off-road course with such acumen that it seemed effortless. The advanced trail would destroy or strand many so-called SUVs, but the Wrangler traversed this hostile terrain without fuss and provided greater comfort than ever

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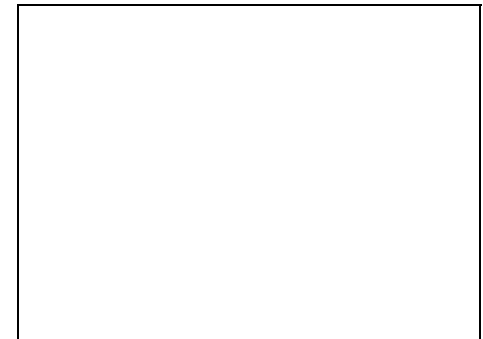
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## Nobody Tests Like We Do

before.

**David Champion:** I simply can't pick just one. So I'm not going to try.

*Lotus Evora:* A ride with resident hot-shoe Jake Fisher, CR's Automotive Web Content Manager, is always enjoyable, but in the Evora it even was better. The car has fabulous power delivery, a supple ride, phenomenal grip, and wonderful handling. If I could have only heard the engine noise over Jake's giggling, well, that would have added to the fun! The only disappointment was the interior, which looked much less like a kit car than the [Elise](#) we previously tested, but still had fit and finish issues that are not in keeping with the Evora's price. Would I put up with these demerits to have this car? Oh, YES!

*BMW 1 Series M:* The [135i](#) we tested was a blast; the M version is a blast on steroids. Great power and grip, and steering so much better than some of the numb BMWs I have driven recently. Overall, the car feels so much more nimble. And the seats and interior really cosset you in the exhilarating drive.

*Buick Regal GS:* A fun to drive Buick? Yes. The GS version has an extra 50 hp over the [Turbo version](#) we tested (and liked) a couple of months ago. Torque steer was well controlled and the balance of the car was neutral. The GS was fun to drive and surprisingly quick. Styling wise, I disliked the gaudy front grill openings that do not go with the car's styling.

*Jaguar XJ Supersport:* For a big car, the performance belies its size. The supercharged [XJ Supersport](#) has wonderful power and really nimble handling. The steering is still a bit light, but it does give feedback about what's going on. The transmission is responsive and offers a fun manual kick down using the paddle shifter. This is what the [BMW 7 Series](#) should be.

*Chrysler 300C SRT8:* What a difference this version is compared to the original 300C. We just finished testing our [V8 300C](#)--we're especially impressed with its improved steering and handling--but add the SRT8's huge tires, stiffer suspension, and more power, and you get a car that's a serious blast. Unfortunately, I felt some driveline vibration under power and exhaust boom in this well-used press car.

*Mini Cooper S John Cooper Works:* I always enjoy driving Minis. Reminds me that, in many ways, it's more fun to drive a relatively slow car fast than a fast car slow. But the JCW edition also has plenty of power, though the transmission shifter made it easy to miss gears. The nice thing about all the Minis I've driven is that you rarely have to lift off in the corners; the JCW was just so.

**Eric Evarts:** Since we have our own test track and buy our own test cars, a key reason to attend the annual event is to sample cars that fall outside the scope of our test program. This year it was two of those cars that captured my heart.

First, the [Volkswagen Golf R](#). The R (nee R20) will be the replacement for the long-departed V6-powered R32 as VW's performance halo car when it goes on sale in the United States next spring. (It's been available in Europe for a few years already.) Unlike the R32, which some of our testers found dull back in 2008, this wicked GTI feels lively with its four-cylinder turbo dialed up to 11. As with the R32, all-wheel drive is just what the GTI needed to boost winter practicality and racetrack grip. Think of it as a European WRX that feels as comfortable and poised as an Audi on the highway-almost.

For more mature tastes, I also sampled the [Audi A7](#), a gorgeously muscular, feline hatchback that I couldn't take my eyes off of when it made its U.S. debut at this year's New York International Auto Show. Based on the excellent Audi A6 sedan, the driving experience didn't disappoint. For me, the handy hatchback only adds to its appeal. Low sales projections combined with its similarity to the A6 mean we don't plan on testing one any time soon, so I relished this opportunity to take the wheel.

**Mike Leung:** The [Porsche Cayman R](#) and the Lotus Evora S were both the most special cars I got to drive at the Monticello Motor Club track. Both were more raw and focused on the driving experience than comfort. The Porsche experience was heightened with racecar driver David Donohue in the passenger seat giving tips and hints on how to extract more from the car and track. The rest of the cars I drove? All much more pedestrian.

The ride I wish I had experienced was the familiarization lap with Brian Redman (track designer and former F1 driver) in the CTS-V. First lap of the day, he apparently drove so fast and smoothly (on the track tour lap) in the pouring rain that it was a small glimpse into a world of the highest levels of motorsports driving ability.

**Gabe Shenhar:** I'm still trying to decide if my pick of the day was the Lotus Evora or the Porsche Cayman R.

The Evora was amazing with its immediate and precise turn-in response. The steering was totally alive and full of feedback. Plus, that lack of body roll that you get only with mid-engine cars made the car utterly enjoyable. With perfect body control, wonderful brake pedal feel, and a gradual and controllable breakaway at the limits, the Evora was just inch-perfect on the challenging Monticello track.

But what a drive in the Cayman R! The sound was music to my ears; the automated manual was seemingly telepathic in Sport Plus mode. Steering, braking, throttle response, and cornering grip were just perfectly executed.

Two other spectacular cars were the BMW 1 Series M and the M3. Each one displayed terrific steering, tractable power delivery, an amazing level of front-end grip, and suspension performance that shrugged off undulations and elevations. Oodles of braking power for those fast approaching tight corners boosted confidence, not to mention the awesome soundtrack. What a day!



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**Rick Small:** The best part of my day was the track orientation lap with Sir Brian Redman who showed a few of my colleagues and me around in a [Cadillac CTS-V](#). It was still raining some and there were puddles on the track when he took off. He headed into the first turn so fast that we all thought it was going to be our last. As it turns out, we felt that way the rest of the lap, too, as he seemed to almost defy the laws of physics. All the time he was talking, joking and downshifting and powering through the course so smoothly, like a routine Sunday drive.

It was so thrilling we just sat there giggling with big smiles on our faces. Afterward, I said I couldn't believe how fast we were going--both my coworkers were glad to hear me say that. They didn't think that I would feel that way being one of the CR test track drivers. Redman's driving skills are seriously impressive. I could have gone home right then and would have been completely happy. Later I saw Sir Redman and thanked him again for the great ride; he said he got in trouble with the track officials for going way too fast and was told to slow down. He just smiled.

Otherwise, the best car of the day for me was the Ford Mustang Boss 302. It has tons of power and grip, and reminded me of the Ford GT supercar--but more comfortable. The Boss was very easy to drive fast, the steering had excellent feel and response, and the car was so easy to place. The engine was very powerful, sounded great and felt very refined even up to its redline. With all this power and speed it was comforting that the brakes were fabulous as well.

**Mike Quincy:** I, too, am totally smitten with the Boss 302. To me, it seems the perfect balance between the already really good Mustang GT and the more powerful--but heavy and expensive--Shelby GT500. The soft-grip steering wheel felt great in my hands, and it helped send the front end's feedback to me with laser-like certainty. The V8's exhaust note, especially when you're backing off in a lower gear, is simply intoxicating and worth the price of admission. If I were ever so fortunate to be able to join the Monticello Motor Club, I would want this as my track car. Or everyday car. In orange.

I'd be remiss, though, not mentioning a few worthy runner-ups. The Buick Regal GS impressed me with its precise steering and ample power. I can't think of another Buick over the last 25 years I'd ever consider buying; this GS is a no-joke driver's car. But it's only initially available with a manual transmission, so I don't think it's going to be flying off showroom floors. I also really liked the [Chevrolet Corvette](#) Grand Sport, which delivered amazing speed and grip, sounded fabulous and looked great doing it. The modern Corvette truly is an automotive supercar bargain.

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