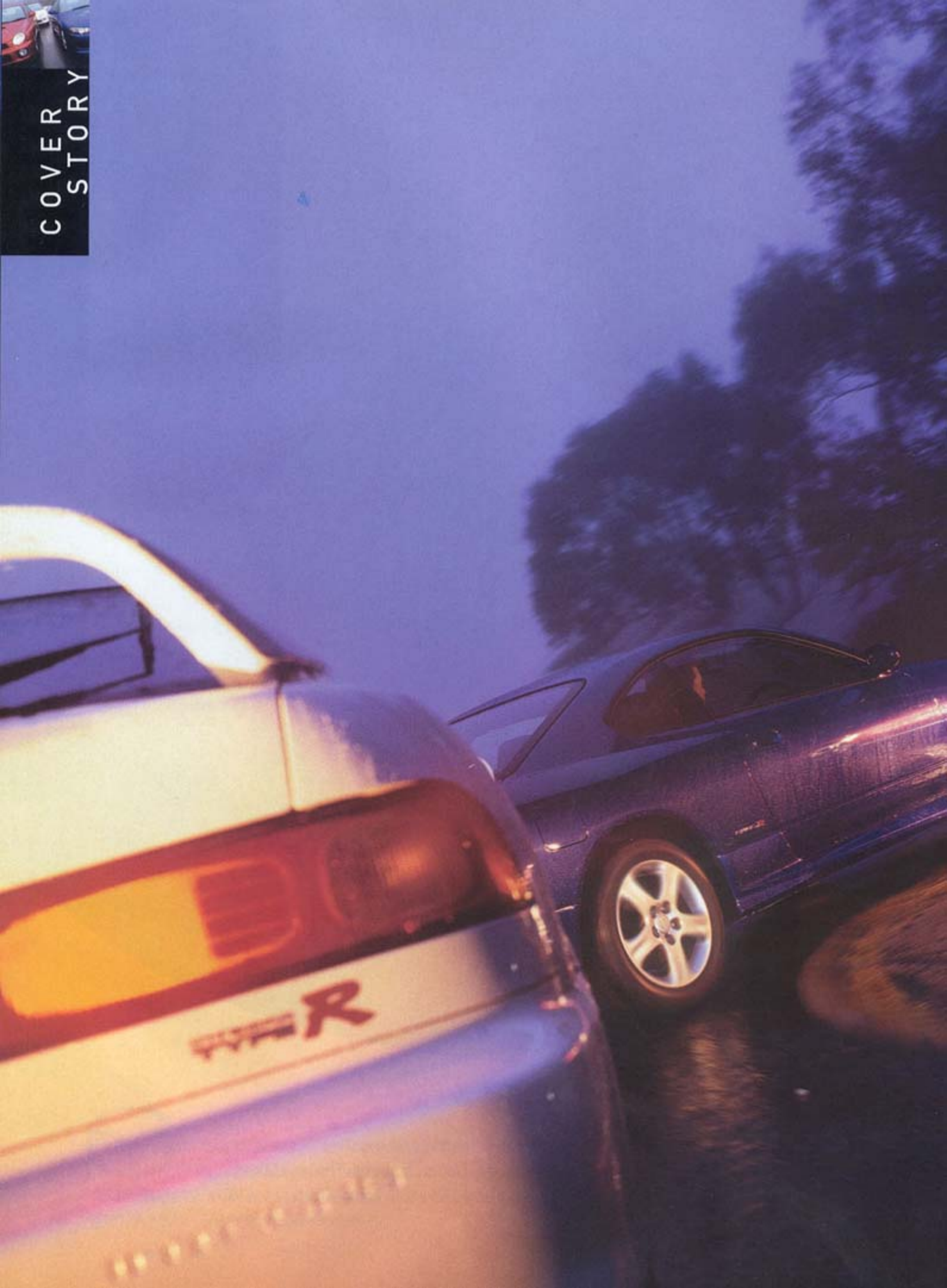


COVER  
STORY





STORY Michael Taylor PHOTOS Split Image

# Wild<sup>at</sup> heart

Department school tamed the Rex. But Honda still has a hothead and now Nissan's unleashed a turbo tearaway. Is the turbo-four King's grip slipping?

**S**ome things you do with the heart, while others, like algebra, should be left to the head. The best stuff comes from a bit of both; too far one way gets you 1980s Volvos; too far the other an upper house of state parliament. Balanced people find little endearing about either.

So precisely where you place Honda's screaming Integra Type R, Nissan's softly-softly new 200SX and Subaru's agonisingly-awaited WRX on this scale is entirely up to your own world view.

But before you even drive these cars you first have to clamour over the philosophical head-v-heart stoush of what to call them. You could try to make sense of their relativities, but that'll soon addle the brain: front-drive, rear-drive, all-wheel drive; turbocharged, naturally-aspirated; in-line four, flat four; variable valve timing, solid camshafts; two-door liftback, conventional coupe, conventional sedan.

Whatever. The engines are all at the front, they're all pretty quick and they're all about the same money. To wit, the Type R is \$39,990, the WRX \$42,990 and the Spec R version of the 200SX \$43,990 (the lesser equipped Spec S lists at \$39,990).

Whatever you call 'em, we like the genre. They're fast, affordable and enjoyable enough to be on our 'Things We Like' list. Thanks very much. Trouble is, one of these cars is just not as fast as it used to be. The legend that was the WRX Impreza has found the strain of its predecessor's reputation – and an extra 120 kg – a bit too much to bear.

Pounding this trio at the same Bat-place on the same Bat-channel on the same Bat-day, the WRX could



Rex's crown is under siege. Integra's the class BFYB champ and 200SX is a star in the making



the  
acceleration  
silverware  
goes to  
Nissan's  
brand-new  
belter



manage only 15.16 seconds – a full second slower than the old car's best – for the 400-metre charge. That left it a mere tenth quicker than the front-driven Type R's best and a heap slower than the 200SX's 14.8-second surge. Yep, we've gone quicker (14.56) in a different Sube on a different day, but up against its competition, on the same track at the same time, we couldn't get close to matching its previous best. And believe us when we say we tried every trick in the arsenal.

That doesn't mean the new WRX has lost any of the launch prowess of the old car. It still explodes out of the starting blocks – but only if you launch it with all the subtlety of a Morley one-liner, after which it doesn't have top-end power to follow through.

It takes 0.65 seconds to 20 km/h (versus 0.99 for the rear-driven Nissan and 1.09 for the Honda), but by 60 km/h the 200SX has not only reeled it in, it's

stormed past in 3.09 seconds versus 3.14, while the peaky Honda at 3.62 is looking for a bit more road.

It's more of the same bad news for the Subaru to 100 km/h, by which time even the Type R has slipped by, its 7.34 seconds playing the Rex's 7.36. The Nissan's gone, cracking 6.90 and feeling like it could do it all day long. So the acceleration silverware goes to Nissan's brand-new belter. Sort of "brand new" anyway.

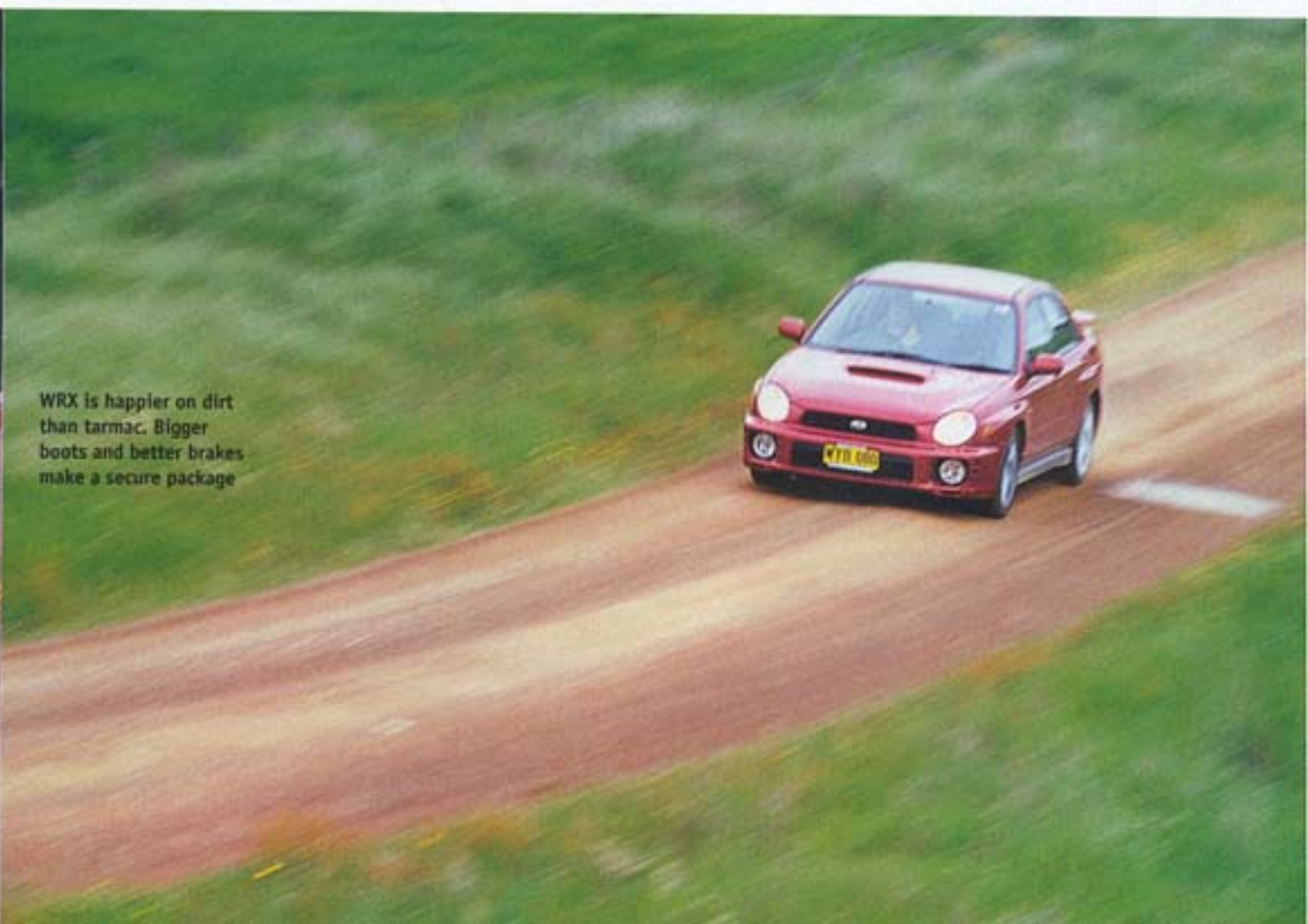
The 200SX is basically a new car with essentially the same engine producing the same power and torque – just like the new WRX. And like the WRX, 'our' 200SX doesn't get the Japanese model's 184 kW turbo four. Instead, it debuts with the same 147 kW and 265 Nm it had last time, via essentially the same hardware: small turbo inlet, big compressor, a 51 millisecond wastegate cycle, trusty SR20 block and variable inlet valve timing. The new stuff is basically an ignition

### WRX wraps

1. Reverse? Can anybody find reverse?
2. Fuel! We need fuel, now
3. The rear wiper's gone. Bugger!
4. Manual antenna's asking for trouble
5. That huge boot's a bonus
6. Five-up? No sweat



WRX is happier on dirt than tarmac. Bigger boots and better brakes make a secure package



## FAST FACTS

<b>body</b>
four-door sedan
<b>drive</b>
all-wheel
<b>engine</b>
front-mounted turbocharged intercooled horizontally-opposed 2.0-litre 16-valve DOHC four
<b>power</b>
160 kW @ 5600 rpm
<b>torque</b>
292 Nm @ 3600 rpm
<b>compression ratio</b>
8.0:1
<b>bore x stroke</b>
92.0 mm x 75.0 mm
<b>weight</b>
1390 kg
<b>weight/power</b>
8.7 kg/kW
<b>specific power</b>
80 kW/litre
<b>transmission</b>
five-speed manual
<b>final drive</b>
4.11:1
<b>suspension</b>
MacPherson-type struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar (f); independent by dual-link struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar (r)
<b>length/width/height</b>
4405/1730/1440 mm
<b>wheelbase</b>
2525 mm
<b>track</b>
1485 mm (f); 1475 mm (r)
<b>brakes</b>
292 mm ventilated discs, four-piston calipers (f); 288 mm ventilated discs, twin-piston calipers (r), ABS
<b>wheels</b>
17 x 7.0-inch (f&r), alloy
<b>tyres</b>
Bridgestone Potenza RE011, 215/45 R17 (f&r)
<b>fuel</b>
60 litres, PULP
<b>list price</b>
\$42,990

## FAST FIGURES

<b>0-10</b>	0.34
<b>0-20</b>	0.65
<b>0-30</b>	1.13
<b>0-40</b>	1.65
<b>0-50</b>	2.18
<b>0-60</b>	3.14
<b>0-70</b>	3.91
<b>0-80</b>	4.89
<b>0-90</b>	5.68
<b>0-100</b>	7.36
<b>0-110</b>	8.68
<b>0-120</b>	9.95
<b>0-130</b>	11.47
<b>0-140</b>	14.38
<b>0-400m</b>	15.16 @ 142.3 km/h



coil atop each plug, a dual-mass flywheel and a clutch *sans* hydraulic damping.

The big difference between the rebirth of the 200SX and that of the WRX, is the Nissan didn't stack on beef in the chrysalis. Weighing in at 1282 kg in heftier Spec R trim, it's actually dropped 8 kg compared to the S14 version.

The other car here, the Type R Integra, is a known quantity and a genuine Bang For Your Bucks hero. Completely lacking pretense, it's an unabashed hotshoe; capable straight out of the box of attacking tracks with the aplomb of a purpose-built racecar.

That it only carries 141 kW and a piddling 178 Nm shouldn't fool anybody. This thing's an angry ant and the Calder strip is never going to fully demonstrate its tautly-wound agility. Neither does it make much sense around town. It's too hard, too loud, too unforgiving.

But give it a corner (or, better yet, a series of them) and watch it fly. The thing's a scalpel. It's the fastest car here point-to-point and, just to make sure the Rex-Set is paying attention, that's in the rain as well.

Like nothing else within cheque-shot of this neck of the woods, the Type R is capable of taking any given bit of turf and turning it into your own tarmac special stage. And it's as safe as houses doing it.

The brakes stop it with bucket-loads of feel through the pedal, and absolutely no fade, regardless of how hard they're belted. It tells you when to turn into the corner and communicates with you through the steering even after it's all straightened up on the other side. Miscue and lift off? No drama, no histrionics, it just tugs its nose faithfully back towards the apex.

The weighting of the steering is glorious, the feel of the wheel rim superb and the chassis absolutely





Slick six-speed box contrasts with ageing Nissan mill, leaving plenty of potential for hot tuners

intuitive. It practically implores you to rip in and join the fun, allowing the driver to be an integral part of the experience. It's simultaneously, a tool and a toy, singing its song for you alone. It's sublime.

Thing is, it's got no right to be this good. Its brakes are tiny, with little on-paper prowess; its wheels are comparative toys; and its tyres too tall and thin. And this is where comparisons with the WRX, once so valid, start to look odd.

The WRX now carries about 300 more kilos than the Type R and sits visibly taller and wider. Yet it rides on a wheelbase that's 45 mm shorter at 2525 mm, and identical to the gap between the 200SX's axles.

A better chassis it may have, but the WRX has also had some of its key charms compromised, the added weight being one of the biggest contributors.

The brakes are much, much stronger, though. They

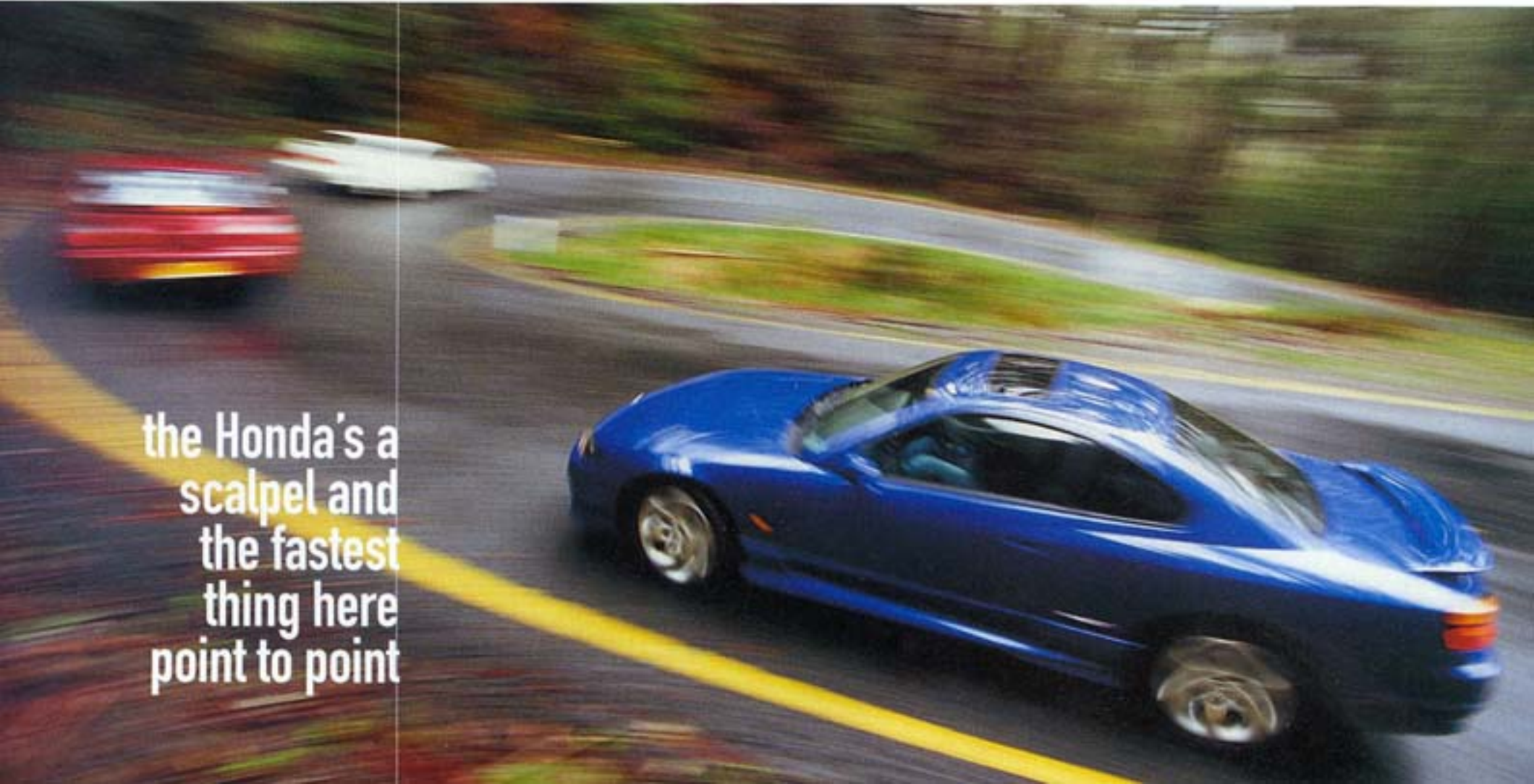
had to be, to cope with another skip-full of tin, but now they have an unstoppable feel that Rex's past were unable to approach. Four-piston calipers at the pointy end (two at the back), and what are by far the biggest disc rotors of the trio haul Subaru's charger down with remarkable assurance, time and again.

But where they pale in comparison with the others here is pedal feel. Very little comes back to the driver through the Subaru's middle pedal and, while the brakes will take astonishing punishment before heading south, the pedal feel is arcade-game hard.

The Nissan's rotors are significantly smaller (natch, they don't have as much mass to cope with), but provide more progressive pedal feel. They also have another little trick which Nissan calls Brake Assist; essentially a fancy name for what amounts to a twin-ratio brake pedal. When the pedal pressure gets to a

### Nissan notes

1. World's noisiest power windows
2. Console plastic marks easily
3. Sunroof for shorties only
4. Antenna-in-glass a great idea
5. High-beam light spread is ordinary
6. Looks better without the spoiler



the Honda's a scalpel and the fastest thing here point to point

## FAST FACTS

<b>body</b>
two-door coupe
<b>drive</b>
rear-wheel
<b>engine</b>
front-mounted turbocharged, intercooled 2.0-litre 16-valve DOHC in-line four with VVT variable valve timing
<b>power</b>
147 kW @ 6500 rpm
<b>torque</b>
265 Nm @ 4800 rpm
<b>compression ratio</b>
8.5:1
<b>bore x stroke</b>
86 mm x 86 mm
<b>weight</b>
1282 kg
<b>weight/power</b>
8.7 kg/kW
<b>specific power</b>
73.6 kW/litre
<b>transmission</b>
six-speed manual
<b>final drive</b>
3.692:1
<b>suspension</b>
MacPherson-type struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar (f); multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar (r)
<b>length/width/height</b>
4445/1695/1285 mm
<b>wheelbase</b>
2525 mm
<b>track</b>
1470 mm (f); 1460 mm (r)
<b>brakes</b>
280 mm ventilated discs, four-piston calipers (f); 258 mm solid discs, single-piston calipers (r), ABS
<b>wheels</b>
17 x 7.0-inch (f&r), alloy
<b>tyres</b>
Bridgestone Potenza RE010, 205/55 R16 (f&r)
<b>fuel</b>
65 litres, PULP
<b>list price</b>
\$43,990

## FAST FIGURES

<b>0-10</b>	0.51
<b>0-20</b>	0.99
<b>0-30</b>	1.41
<b>0-40</b>	1.81
<b>0-50</b>	2.35
<b>0-60</b>	3.06
<b>0-70</b>	4.04
<b>0-80</b>	4.83
<b>0-90</b>	5.69
<b>0-100</b>	6.90
<b>0-110</b>	7.88
<b>0-120</b>	9.10
<b>0-130</b>	10.44
<b>0-140</b>	12.49
<b>0-150</b>	14.02
<b>0-400m</b>	14.80 @ 156.3 km/h



Front-drive fans can discover a whole new world in 200SX: Helloooo throttle control!



off-centre feel to take advantage of it.

Not so the 200SX. If the chassis balance in the wet is good, in the dry it's sensational. Softer at heart than the Type R, its steering weight and feedback are just brilliant and a pointed reminder to Japanese car makers of what a front suspension is capable of when asked only to steer.

Front-drive-bred milksops might find it a bit spooky initially, but trust its instincts and it'll do the convincing. Much of this comes down to the way the 200SX puts its power down – through the same helical limited-slip diff as the monstrous Skyline GTR. It absolutely refuses to spin up the inside wheel and it's a far more progressive operator than the fluid-filled diff in the old car.

Nissan's tricky diff helps the car's balance by providing a more direct-drive feel than anything else here. Subsequently, with minuscule turbo lag, anything you do with your feet arrives at the wheels at about the same time and just the way you wanted.

And that's where the steering comes to the fore. Push the 200SX hard and its back-end, though stiffer than the old car, still squirms about a bit as it's squeezed by all that torque. The diff soon gets that sorted though, and then – and only then – does the front-end begin to run out of grip. But it does so beautifully, with a series of tiny, almost-reflexive nibbles at the fingertips.

The back-end won't break away in the quick stuff, either, while in the slow stuff it can really only be provoked towards the exit, where it all seems like fun anyhow. The diff and the Potenzas use so much of the urge to generate speed that there's little left in reserve for shits and giggles.

There's no real problems with excessive engine noise either. The pity is that it's coarse everywhere and is beginning to feel fairly agricultural. Rip into it and all the turbo four offers up to accompany its many virtues is a flat, boring drone.

If the engine note is a disappointment (and hordes of tuners will happily fix that), the gearbox is a highlight. Every cog is useful and it means that the car's got a gear for every corner.

preset point, Nissan's boffins figure you'll be needing everything you can muster, and so it cranks up the booster output-to-pedal pressure ratio.

Surprisingly, given their larger rubber, neither of the turbo terrors can match the little Honda for mid-corner grip. Mind you, the Rex has never been about maintaining speed mid-corner. It's traditionally been at its best stopping, turning and then being fired out the other end, all four boots tearing at the road grit.

While the more powerful Japanese-spec Rex is happy to take any corner set you please – neutral, understeer, oversteer, it's not fussed – the Australian car isn't so blessed with choice. The power shortfall has rendered it, like its predecessor, pretty much a tarmac neutral-to-understeerer.

Nevertheless, its high-speed cornering behaviour is better than it used to be and there's plenty of places where the extra weight helps indefinitely. Crunch a lumpy bit in a third or fourth gear sweeper these days and it'll just hunker down and get on with the business.

The steering doesn't do it any favours though – a fact exacerbated by the quality of this field. It feels too light and the wheel too bulky. So, while the chassis is better at speed, the steering lacks the



Mountain passes transform the Honda into a scalpel, belying skinny rubber and its old body



It's right up there for shift quality as well. The throws are short and direct, the three straight gates simple and it mates to a clutch pedal full of feel.

Still, it ain't enough feel to slug it out shift-for-shift with a Type R. Changes here are little more than a flicked finger away and, where the Nissan's got an '80s-spec leather knob, the Honda boasts titanium.

And if a dull engine noise is not to your aural tastes, the Honda's throttle pedal is as good a conducting baton as four-pot symphonies have. The noise this little hand grenade generates is every bit as astonishing as the way it attacks a winding road. It howls to a redline a full 2000 revs above either of its rivals, rising to a crescendo that feels like it'll never stop.

Yet for all the revs it demands, it doesn't drink much. We averaged 12.3 litres/100 km while absolutely wringing its little neck. Of the turbos, the Nissan used 13.2 litres/100 km while the WRX shocked us by gulping down 15.3 litres/100 km.

The gearbox in the new WRX is better than the baulky unit of its forebear, but it's up against transmissions from Nissan and Honda that are a generation further advanced. Reverse is still a lottery, and it's significantly slower on each of the diagonal

throws. The ratios are identical to those in the old car, but it now feels like the spacing's a bit wide; maybe it's the bigger boots? Plus there's still that irksome delay as the boost returns after each upshift.

The chassis improvements have made the car ride better over big bumps and mid-sized strikes alike, but the 45-profile rubber – which has less sidewall flex – hasn't done it any favours over baby road bites.

Features-wise, the WRX is equipped at least as well as anything else here: a six-CD stacker is standard (as with the 200SX), and it's the only car with driving lights, seatbelt height adjustment, climate controlled air *and* a large, practical boot. Plus, there's five seats.

Surprisingly, the Type R's actually got more rear room than the 200SX, but that's about it for extra bits (unless it's chassis bracing or brilliant boy-racer seats).

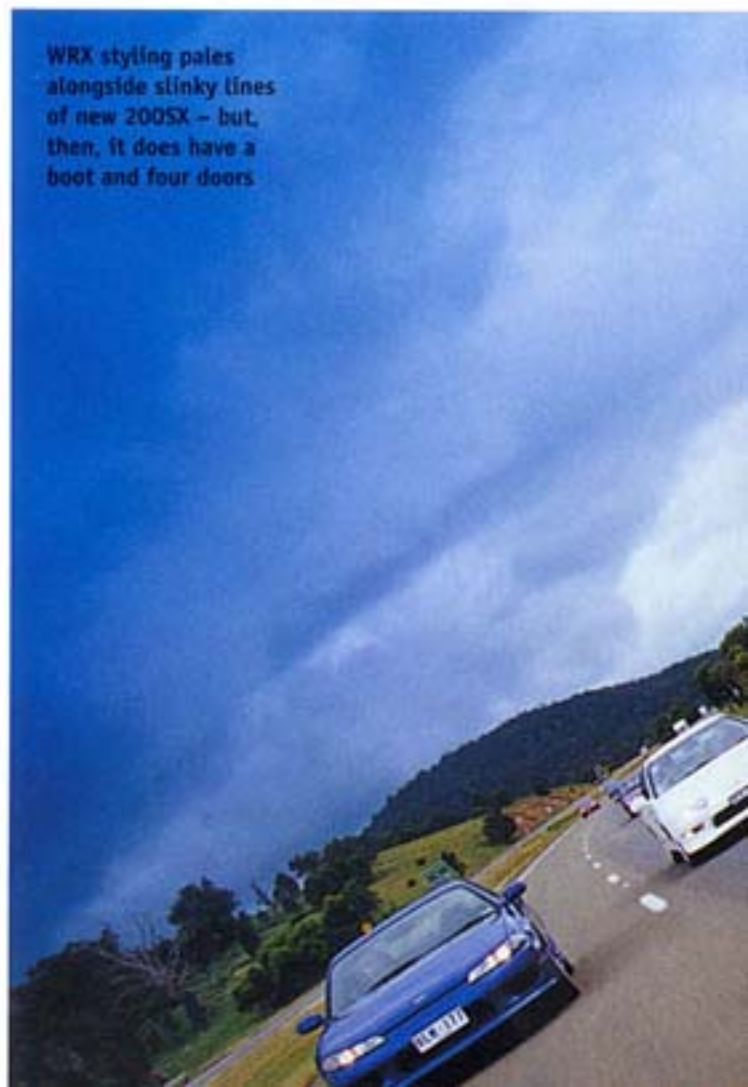
The 200SX might not boast seats with the obvious

### Type R tidbits

1. Still no remote locking
2. Crap boot carpet slides everywhere
3. Just the one exhaust tip
4. Gun headlights
5. No seat belt height adjustment
6. Surprising rear legroom



WRX styling pales alongside sleek lines of new 200SX – but, then, it does have a boot and four doors





HONDA INTEGRA TYPE R

FAST FACTS

<b>body</b>	two-door liftback
<b>drive</b>	front-wheel
<b>engine</b>	front-mounted 1.8-litre 16-valve DOHC in-line four with V-TEC variable valve timing
<b>power</b>	141 kW @ 7900 rpm
<b>torque</b>	178 Nm @ 6300 rpm
<b>compression ratio</b>	11.1:1
<b>bore x stroke</b>	81 mm x 87.2 mm
<b>weight</b>	1087 kg
<b>weight/power</b>	7.7 kg/kW
<b>specific power</b>	78.5 kW/litre
<b>transmission</b>	five-speed manual
<b>final drive</b>	4.4:1
<b>suspension</b>	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar (f); Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar (r)
<b>length/width/height</b>	4395/1695/1320 mm
<b>wheelbase</b>	2570 mm
<b>track</b>	1480 mm (f); 1475 mm (r)
<b>brakes</b>	282 mm ventilated discs, single-piston calipers (f); 260 mm solid discs, single-piston calipers (r), ABS
<b>wheels</b>	15 x 6.0-inch (f&r), alloy
<b>tyres</b>	Bridgestone Potenza R011, 195/55 R15 (f&r)
<b>fuel</b>	50 litres, PULP
<b>list price</b>	\$39,990

sporting pretensions of the others but, for most body sizes, they're gonna be better over the long haul. As a compromise, they just work bloody well.

And that's why it's a reasonably clear winner here – in spite of its engine. It can't stay with a hard-driven Type R – neither can the WRX these days – but it comes close and offers up a-l-m-o-s-t as much fun, just in a rear-wheel drive kinda way.

It's forgiving, it's entertaining and the chassis is a gem. It does nothing wrong as a driver's car and it's probably the easiest thing to live with for the working week, while also being rewarding enough on weekends.

That the Rex is now aimed at a broader audience is obvious. At the heart of its performance quandary is the fact that, in spite of some impressive chassis development, it's still a stop-it, squirt-it proposition – just a bit less obviously so. The extra weight means

you now have to start stopping it earlier and it doesn't squirt with the incandescence it once did.

This, combined with a quieter engine, means that while it's still very, very rapid, the WRX hasn't quite got that glint in its eye any more. It's still a very fast car over the right piece of road, but it's turned into a fast, safe car for people who don't really enjoy driving.

For most people, the Type R is a bit too far in the other direction. If you don't live to rip the tacho needle to the limiter on mountain passes, then you'll never actually get it. You'll just regard it as a noisy, hard-riding thing with a set of cogs too short for cruising. Honda doesn't much care: it's got a lesser, softer Integra it can slot you into.

The Type R they quite obviously built with their hearts, the Subaru they built with their heads. The 200SX? It got just the right dose of both. **EA**



FAST FIGURES

<b>0-10</b>	0.56
<b>0-20</b>	1.09
<b>0-30</b>	1.57
<b>0-40</b>	2.13
<b>0-50</b>	2.78
<b>0-60</b>	3.62
<b>0-70</b>	4.39
<b>0-80</b>	5.13
<b>0-90</b>	6.21
<b>0-100</b>	7.34
<b>0-110</b>	8.47
<b>0-120</b>	9.65
<b>0-130</b>	11.34
<b>0-140</b>	13.27
<b>0-400m</b>	15.27 @ 148.6 km/h

