Check out our fast foursome. Each is a new generation of hot hatches and sports sedans, built to quicken the pulse and ‘twitch the hip pocket nerve.’ And one of the best ways to do this is to carry and the MINI feels lithe, though well planted.

Our test car came with optional sports suspension, and the action of the six-speed manual gearbox is not just slick and precise, but the ratios bring out the best in the 147kW/240Nm, 1.6-litre turbo engine and six-speed EDC (dual-clutch auto) does justice to the rest of this hot hatch’s accomplished package.

With launch control and a ‘Race’ mode to optimise performance, the Clio RS is quick out of the blocks. From 0-60km/h, only the WRX bested it. But lack of comparative torque in this company means you need to work the six-speed manual to get to 1250-4750rpm.

At 1160kg – the lightest of our quartet – there’s little weight twitch the hip pocket nerve.

The Cooper S rode best of the bunch. The leather and cloth front sports seats support well and are comfortable, though rear seat passengers will find space tight despite the new MINI’s larger dimensions. The leather and cloth front seats support well and are comfortable, though rear seat passengers will find space tight despite the new MINI’s larger dimensions.

ABBREVIATIONS: ABS (anti-lock brakes), AC (air-conditioning), ACC (climate-control air-conditioning), ACCD (dual-zone climate-control), AL (anti-theft alarm), ASI (auto stop-start), AW (alloy wheel and size in inches), BA (brake assist), CC (cruise control), DFCSCA (dual front/front side/curtain airbags), DKA (driver’s knee airbag), EBD (electronic brakeforce distribution), ESC (electronic stability control), HDC (hill descent control), HFS (heated front seats), HSA (hill start assist), KE (keyless entry), LT (leather trim), MLP (Manufacturer’s List Price), NAV (satellite navigation), PS (parking sensors), RC (reversing camera), RSW (rain-sensing wipers), SBPT (seat belt pre-tensioner), TC (traction control), TSR (seat belt pre-tensioner), TC (traction control).
SKODA OCTAVIA RS 162 TSI

No prizes for guessing that the Octavia is the ‘space ship’ among our gathering – a cursory look will tell you that. Passengers will find the rear seats particularly accommodating and the boot opens up to a gargantuan 568 litres. Some 100 litres more than next best, the WRX. But don’t confuse ‘spacey’ with ‘lardy’.

The Skoda weighs in about 70kg lighter than the Subaru, and it is deceptively athletic. Though down 35kW comparatively, its 2.0-litre turbo-four pipped the WRX from 0-100km/h on the way to 400m.

The ride, though stiff, is markedly more compliant than the Subaru.

The interior is stylish, comfortable and well thought-out. Offering the advantage of lumber adjustment, the front sports seats are firm, but supportive, and the Octavia RS has no ergonomic inefficiencies.

The standard equipment inventory is as impressive as it is comprehensive. Tick the boxes for front/rear parking sensors, tyre pressure monitor, driver fatigue detection, voice control, driving mode selection, rear ventilation and touch screen with swipe function for accessing different functions/systems.

Our test produced an average of 8.2 litres/100km, 1.6 above the ADR combined fuel figure.

SUMMARY: CONSUMMATE ALL-ROUNDER

FOR: Second-highest power, equal best torque, biggest interior and boot, lowest insurance.

AGAINST: Third-highest price, third-weightiest, third-best economy, worst resale.

SUBARU WRX

Along with Mitsubishi’s Evo, Subaru’s WRX has set the standard for four-cylinder sport sedans going back 20 years. So how does this latest iteration shape up?

It doesn’t have the space, or everyday practicality, of the Octavia RS and the ride is way less compliant around town and over our patchwork quiet roads, but the WRX’s ability to engage its driver never wavers. From the time you slip into the driver’s, rib-ripping sport seats and thumb the starter button, the ‘Rex’ feels like it means business.

Gone is the combination of 2.5-litre, turbo engine and five-speed manual, replaced by a more fuel-efficient 2.0-litre unit driving through six-speeds. On test, the WRX got closest to its ADR combined fuel figure, averaging 9.8 litres/100km, just 0.6 higher.

The new engine might boast best-on-test 197kW/350Nm power and torque, but the turbo needs to be ‘spooled up’ to avoid lag. Matching the right gear to the rev range is imperative. We couldn’t quite replicate the maker’s claimed 0-100km/h time of 6.0 seconds, but the WRX still showed the quickest set of wheels in three of our six acceleration tests and matched the Skoda over 400m.

Traction and drive thresholds are prodigious – the product of good rubber, a chassis endowed with stiffened cross-members and greater rigidity (up 40 percent), Subaru’s fabled all-wheel-drive and torque vectoring system.

The grip is resolve, but not overwhelming, and drivers will derive satisfaction from matching small increments of steering input with throttle application to have the ‘Rex’ surf through a series of bends.

SUMMARY: HARD-CORE HERO

FOR: Most power and torque, second-most room and boot space.

AGAINST: Highest price, insurance, heaviest, shortest servicing schedules (6mths/12,500km).

COSTS & RATINGS

Price

Environmental rating

ANCAP safety rating

Annual insurance costs**

Capped price servicing

MINI COOPER S

$38,790

4

4

N/A

$1582.54

$436 (average per service over 5yrs)

RENAULT CLIO RS 200 CUP

$31,790

4

4

N/A

$1056.02

$299 (per service over 3yrs/30,000km)

Subaru WRX

Price

Environmental rating

ANCAP safety rating

Annual insurance costs**

Capped price servicing

$38,990

4

4

N/A

$1582.54

$436 (average per service over 5yrs)

CONCLUSION

Unlike our usual comparisons that focus on a particular new car segment, this one was more about highlighting the choice that there is among new sports models. And what a choice.

Take your pick of the body style that best suits you (five-door sedan or three-door or five-door hatch), size (Light, Small or Mid-sized), transmission (all but the Clio RS have a choice of auto or manual) and hard-edged (WRX, Clio RS) or more-rounded (Octavia RS, Cooper S) performance.

We would recommend each of our test quarter without hesitation. From a keen driver’s perspective, there are no duds and all deliver a highly-engaging, sporty drive. But after several days driving and crunching the numbers across some 20 criteria, our test panel placed the field:

1.WRX 2.Clio RS = 3.MINI, Octavia RS.

That makes it two wins apiece for the Octavia RS and WRX, but apply the obvious points scoring table of four, three, two, one and the winner is the Subaru.