

Tested through every turn

By Joe Sage

“With you through every turn” is the Sailun Tire slogan. We recently flew to Boston and shuttled down to Foxborough—halfway to Providence, Rhode Island, and home to the New England Patriots—to try out two new offerings from Sailun: one ultra-high performance all-season tire and one luxury crossover/SUV all-season tire.

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once quipped that being Canada—in the shadow of its giant neighbor to the south—is like sleeping with an elephant. Being a Canadian tire company may feel much the same way. Dynamic Tire Corporation (DTC) of Woodbridge, Ontario operates just across the lake from some giant US brands whose names you know by heart.

Sailun is imported to North America by DTC, who has some 15 brands in their portfolio, from high-performance passenger car to agricultural and heavy industrial tires. Their US marketing and distribution are managed through TBC Wholesale of Florida, who are aggressively expanding the Sailun brand.

Sailun Tire headquarters is in the booming Qingdao Economic and Technological Development Zone of Shandong province, China, just west of South Korea. Sailun is

sold in 125 countries on six continents, with five corporate offices worldwide.

Qingdao is dominated by tire manufacturing—with factories for Bridgestone, Goodyear, Michelin, Pirelli and other familiar major brands. Pirelli's largest factory is right across the street. The province is also home to talent resources like Qingdao University's unparalleled rubber engineering program. All these brands use the same basic raw materials and processes. Proprietary engineering details like tread design are where the differences lie.

With a second factory in Shenyang, China, and a third plant opening in Vietnam, Sailun's annual production capacity is 30 million tires per year.

That's a lot of tires

Volume is important when it comes to tire quality, pricing and brand recognition. The industry is generally defined in three tiers: Tier 1 (or National), Tier 2 and Tier 3 (or Value Tier). Who exactly falls into which tier is a subject of considerable discussion. Tier 1 in North America is generally considered to be Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin, based on their volume and OEM fitment share, brand recognition and higher profit margins.



Tier 2 includes such brands as BFGoodrich, Firestone, Hankook and Yokohama. Tier 3 includes Hercules, Uniroyal and many more, some familiar and some not.

What's generally agreed is that Tiers 2 & 3 are not lesser tires, but spend less on marketing and sell at lower profits. Some dispute the profit margin part (some big chains shave Tier 1 prices for still more volume). Add Firestone and BFGoodrich to the three Tier 1 brands, and you have the Big Five—yet 59 percent of sales are from all the other brands. No brand has more than 3 percent share.

Sailun is happy in the Value Tier. It helps underline their main selling point, value: Their prices are some 40 percent lower than comparable Tier 1 products.

Blind comparison drive time

When you do a tire comparison drive in Arizona, it is just about guaranteed you will need a tanker truck for the track portion, laying vast pools of water on part of the course so you can really test things in the wet. Not so on an August day in Mas-

sachusetts—it was pouring.

We were here to try two tires. One was the **Sailun Atrezzo Z4 + AS**, an ultra-high performance all-season tire engineered for speed, braking and cornering. Special silica blends maximize grip and handling in dry conditions, while maintaining excellent wear characteristics. The other was the **Sailun Terramax CVR**, a luxury all-season SUV and crossover tire engineered for exceptional handling and stability with uncompromised ride comfort and suitable for some off-road usage.

We shuttled over to Xfinity Center in Mansfield, home to a performance amphitheater—and a huge parking lot. It was raining so hard, they scrubbed an open highway component of the event—it would be redundant. Based on conditions on our ride over, this was good thinking.

Our group included a few members of the media, as well as dealers and distributors from the brand's expanding Northeast market, notably giant Sullivan Tire.

There were two courses set up, one for each tire, and we split into two groups. Our group started with the SUV tire, the Terramax CVR, fitted to a small fleet of Ford Escapes. The other group started with the Z4 + AS highway all-season tire, fitted to Ford Fusion midsize sedans.

Black Escapes were fitted with one tire and white Escapes another; ditto Fusions. Sidewall information was masked, and we were instructed (and careful) not to

look at the treads. This was to be a blind-fold test—eyes open, but without knowing which tire we were driving, when.

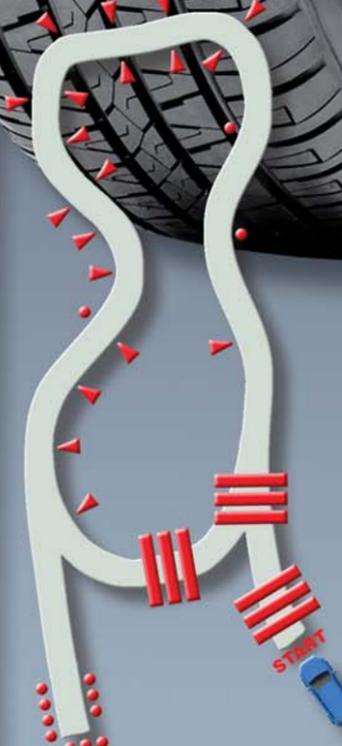
The Terramax-Escape course (lower right) included acceleration, slalom, braking and combinations of the above, testing general performance and the higher center of gravity of a crossover. From the finish box, we had the option of a second run, and we could do additional runs later.

We swapped courses midmorning. The Z4 + AS-Fusion course (page 57) started with extreme acceleration and immediate full braking, with five possible stop points for easy measuring. A double rapid lane change maneuver had a U-turn tossed in between, followed more acceleration, braking, and a lengthy slalom—in line with faster freeway and open highway driving challenges.

We drove all morning, scoring each vehicle on each course in a range of performance categories.

We contemplated subtle variables in play, on top of the direct comparison. Which vehicle did we drive first? Were we more confident or more wary of particular spots on either same course, the second time around? Was the subsequent shift to a

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different vehicle on a different course impacted by any of those intangibles? Were we wondering which tire was which and whether the vehicle colors were the same by brand on both tracks?

Be all that as it may, we scored the black Ford Escape noticeably higher than the white, and the two Fusions scored very close together. When all event participants' results were cumulatively tallied, numbers overall were very close. There is a special significance to this.

When a tie is a huge win

You might assume any tire manufacturer hopes to prove unbridled supremacy in a test like this. But as a Value Tier lineup with a huge price advantage, Sailun says, "We don't have to be better. We have to be 'good enough,' at this price point."

All the more impressive that our blind comparison rated the Terramax CVR considerably better than the other, and the Z4 + AS better, equal, or no more than about one tick lower, across its test range.

After our drives were completed, they revealed what was what. The black Escape—the one we rated considerably better and which was about equal among

the whole group—had the Sailun Terramax CVR tires, priced at \$112.80 at Sullivan Tire. The white competitor had \$194.27 Pirelli Scorpion Verde tires. The black Fusion—which we and the greater group rated about equal—had the \$94.40 Sailun Z4 + AS tires, while the white car was running \$153 Toyo Proxes tires.

Sailun and Sullivan agree that tire brand decisions are often made by the person behind the counter at the tire store. They clearly achieved their purpose at our comparo drive, which is to enable that person to say, "I drove them both, in extreme conditions, and I couldn't tell them apart from the expensive brand."

The tires have a 5-year warranty, which is always reassuring, and high initial quality ratings. Most importantly, the dealers say "we don't get warranty claims, and we don't get complaints."

There is talk of a US tariff being placed on import of Chinese tires. Even then, Sailun expects to maintain a significant price advantage. Or you could stock up right now. ■

