

Winner of a lot of awards, for a lot of reasons



By Barbara and Bill Schaffer



The Hollywood Foreign Press Golden Globes and the Academy Award Oscars are two of the biggest honors a movie can receive. In the automotive world, the *Motor Trend* Car of the Year Award and the North American Car of the Year presented at the Detroit auto show are two of the biggies. For 2006, the Honda Civic nabbed both prestigious awards and then went on to win the truck of the year awards from both organizations, making Honda the first company to ever win both awards in the same year.

The Civic has always been one of Honda's bread and butter cars, usually ranking in, or near, the top 10 in US sales, generally behind the mid-size Accord. As the Civic started to near the end of its last five-year product cycle, its luster was dulled by newer, more innovative and better-performing competitive compacts.

A few months ago, we attended the introduction of the full Civic model lineup and drove all the new Civic family, including the coupe, sedan, Hybrid and racy Si coupe. Now we've finally had a chance to drive the EX sedan on our home turf to see how it handles our day to day driving challenges. The Civic sedan heads a bit more upscale and is a bit larger than the previous model. Sliding behind the wheel for the first time, the most obvious

change we noticed was the sophisticated level of interior appointments. The dash appears higher in the cabin, but is set back far from the front seats, making the passenger compartment feel much more open. The instrument cluster is split, with the tachometer and some indicators mounted conventionally behind the wheel, while a large digital speedometer and two gauges can be seen in the area just over the wheel and below windshield level. This adds up to the most convenient instrument panels we've ever seen.

The Civic sedan and coupe get a new generation 1.8-liter inline four-cylinder engine producing 140 horsepower (up 13 from the previous generation) with a standard five-speed manual transmission, or optional new five-speed automatic. The engine gets a new version of the i-VTEC "intelligent" valve control system and moves up a step to the ultra low ULEV-2 emissions level.

Acceleration times for the Civic sedan are about 8.6 seconds from 0 to 60 mph. The EPA rates fuel economy at 30 mpg city and 40 mpg highway. We averaged 32.7 mpg during our week of testing.

The gasoline powered Civic sedan comes in three model levels: DX, LX and EX, each with a choice of manual or automatic transmission.



OUR DRIVE: CIVIC Si COUPE

The Civic Si coupe has been a darling of the import tuner set for years, with its superlative suspension, higher-output engine, and the general adaptability and affordability of the basic car. Honda took some heat a couple of years ago for simplifying the Si's chassis, but it was still not only a vehicle worth adapting for extra performance, but a solid step above the standard issue Civic for a stock buyer. The whole Civic lineup has been upgraded so much this year that any performance gaps are narrowed further, and the Si coupe is the one in the lineup that gets our attention.

The Si starts with chassis modifications which include high performance springs, dampers and sway bars (front and rear), larger 17-inch alloy wheels, Michelin Pilot HX 215/45 R17 tires (with an Exalto PE2 high performance package available), 11.8-inch ventilated front disc brakes, and 10.2-inch solid rear disc brakes. The Civic Si engine is an all-aluminum DOHC 2.0-liter inline four-cylinder with 16 valves, a high-performance version of the i-VTEC system and a specially tuned high-volume intake manifold. The Civic Si produces 197 horsepower at 7800 rpm, and 139 lb-ft. of torque at 6200 rpm. At nearly 100 horsepower per liter, it has one of the highest specific outputs of any production engine in the world. Plus, it meets strict Low Emission Vehicle-2 (LEV-2) tailpipe emissions standards.

add to the aerodynamics with small wheel openings, minimum gap between tire and body, and ultra-tight body panel fit.

Honda safety engineers went the extra distance on the Civic by including front and side airbags, side curtain airbags, three-point belts with automatic tensioning, and active head restraints, in addition to all the regular safety equipment. It all fits into a high-energy absorbing frame structure made up of 50 percent high-tensile strength steel.

As part of Honda's new four-car suite of Civics, the sedan is expected to make up about 54 percent of the Honda's ambitious 300,000-unit sales projections for the first year. The coupe makes up 28 percent, the hybrid about 9 percent and the sporty Si should round out the sales with about 5 percent of the total. At the February Chicago Show, Honda also introduced an Si performance sedan, scheduled to arrive in the late fall.

The Civic sedan is one of the most refined economy cars we've driven. It left the impression of a much larger and more substantial car its size would indicate. The new Civics will raise the standard for entry-level cars. It will be interesting to see how the other manufacturers will try to beat out the Civic this time. We think the Civic will be back on top once again. ■

We drove the EX sedan with automatic, and it had a long list of standard equipment including moonroof, keyless entry, electronic brake distribution and brake assist. For the driver and passengers, major features include air conditioning with filtration, power windows and locks, tilt and telescoping wheel, AM/FM/CD and XM-ready audio system with speed sensitive volume control, and many more convenience and comfort features.

Sedan prices start at \$15,110, including destination charge, for the DX with manual transmission, and go up to \$19,610 for the EX with automatic. Other than color, the only option available is the navigation system for the EX model, for an additional \$1,500.

Long known for its solid construction, ride quality and precision handling, the Civic Sedan is better than ever with an enhanced four-wheel independent suspension geometry, longer wheelbase, larger wheels and tires and new generation four-channel brakes.

The Civic body has a futuristic, high-tech "Advanced Personal Compact" design theme incorporating a sweeping roofline, ultra-sleek windshield angle and exceptionally aerodynamic shape. It also introduces Advance Compatibility Engineering™ Body Structure with innovations that