

SECOND PLACE: MAZDA PROTÉGÉ

At a base price \$11,970, it is probably the one car here that deserves far more attention than it gets. Now, I will be the first to acknowledge that with 105 horsepower, it is easily the slowest car of this group. But Mazda has packed a whole lot of goodness into it. The Protégé is quite handsome. In fact, it looks far more expensive than it is.

"The Protégé is a refined and stylish sedan that delivers good value for the money. It deserves to be on more shopping lists," says Eisenstein.

Cross summed it up this way: "The new 99 Protégé is a knockout in form & function...It's as good as a Honda or a Toyota and it beats them both in price." Senior Editor Blair Walker says "to buy the Protégé is to buy peace of mind, given Mazda's reputation for bolting together dependable cars."



Indeed, Mazda has so much faith in the Protégé that they offer a 50,000-mile warranty. The Protégé also has the largest cabin in its class and a very long list of standard features. Again, it's a little on the slow side, but it will take you 30 miles on every gallon of gas you put in it, and, in my opinion, it's the best looking sedan here.

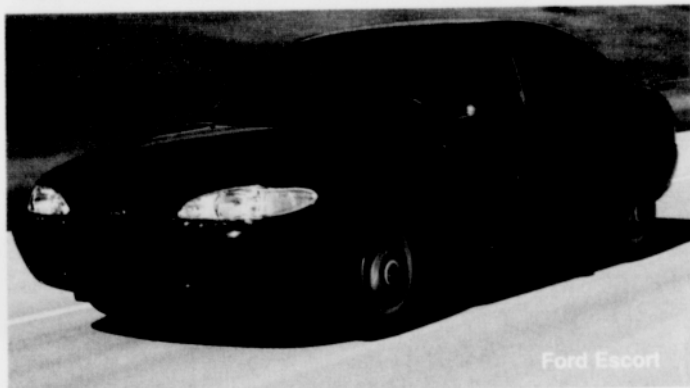
TIED FOR THIRD PLACE: DODGE/PLYMOUTH NEON AND FORD ESCORT

The \$12,890 Neon is all-new for 2000. You may recall that in Spring's First Impressions I wrote that the new Neon is more comfortable more spacious and quieter than the car it replaces. Neons are remarkable in that they manage to be a capable driver's car, while still providing excellent value as an economy car. The suspension clings tenaciously when cornering and provides a smooth, well-damped ride. The Neon is one of those rare cases in life where you can have your economy and enjoy it too.

Brown said The New Neon is "an excellent revision of an originally good idea (and) a knockout small car engine and transmission." Walker says the roomy Neon is the epitome of an econobox with attitude...what's not to love?"

Eisenstein says "the latest incarnation (of the Neon) suggests that DaimlerChrysler has done its homework. The car is quieter; more comfortable, more refined. It's not a breakthrough design, but sometimes evolution is better than revolution."

What's interesting about the 2000 Neon is how the company has "grown the car." The interior looks like it was taken from an LH sedan and sort of shrunk to fit the Neon. In fact, the same can be said for the overall look of the car. The new body brings the car more in line with the overall styling themes prevalent at DaimlerChrysler these days. To me that's a good



Ford Escort

thing: DaimlerChryslers are some of the most distinctive looking cars on the road.

Ford's Escort ZX2 is the sports car of our budget-minded group. Check out these numbers – the ZX2 goes from zero to 60 in 8.4 seconds; the BMW 318ti does it in 8.3 seconds. The slalom: Escort ZX2, 62.8 mph; BMW 318ti, 62.4 mph. Base price: Escort ZX2, \$11,610 – BMW 318ti, \$23,300.

Just something to think about.

"This is light years better than any other Escort ever made," says Cross. "It is a good blend of inexpensive stuff to make a livable, almost lovable sporty car."

No doubt, the Escort ZX2 is a must consider for anybody in this price range. It's fun to drive, has a zippy engine, distinctive style and it won't break you.

That truly is the ZX2's story. Basically, Ford was trying give people an alternative to the usual sedans and hatchbacks that you encounter shopping in this market. By combining off-the-shelf pieces with some innovative engineering, Ford was able to build a sports car for the rest of us. The ZX2's engine gives good performance over its entire range and it shuts the a/c compressor off when you accelerate the car hard (to help it keep up with that BMW). And, it delivers 30 MPG to boot.



Neon