Sound testing of the WRX STI performed by DPS Technical, Inc. for Subaru Performance Tuning (SPT).
AFFLUENT MAN-CHILD GROWS UP

Subaru’s new STI may not be kinder and gentler, but it’s easier to live with in the morning

BY J.P. VETTRAINE

In the product highlights published for its 2008 Impreza WRX STI, Subaru notes that the cargo area accommodates “two Tour-size golf bags with rear seatbacks up.” Transporting golf clubs apparently has become an STI selling point, so we assume the Affluent Man-Child plays golf.

“Affluent Man-Child” is Subie speak for the guys who buy 3500 STIs annually—the same guys who have turned the rally-bred STI into a cult idol. The AMC is 31, married, no kids. He earns $100,000-plus in a “creative job.” We’d guess he has at least a couple of tattoos and some Evo kill stickers on his gym bag. If he’s ready to trade snowboarding for the links, then the new-gen STI makes a whole lot of sense.

Those hoping Subaru would stay the course and avoid the softer, more refined tack Mitsubishi has taken with the STI’s archrival—the recently launched Lancer Evolution X—could be disappointed. This 305-hp STI is at least as fast as ever, but it’s also smoother, quieter, more understated and easier to drive quickly. It reeks of refinement, compared with the STI that first landed in North America in 2004.

Nearly every mechanical system in the 2008 STI is unique and upgraded from the standard Impreza WRX. Yet the STI remains an Impreza, based on a new platform introduced last summer. It’s 2.2 inches wider, and its wheelbase increases 3.9 inches to 103.3. The new dimensions take some of the chop out of the STI’s ride and increase interior volume, and Subaru will build its über-Impreza only in the line’s most practical body style, the five-door hatchback.

Compared with other Imprezas, the STI unibody has more high-strength steel in key structural elements. Engine mounts are solid to minimize powertrain movement, and its hood is stamped from aluminum. This five-door STI, with more airbags and standard equipment, weighs 3395 pounds, or 22 pounds more than the 2007 STI sedan.

Power comes from a variation on Subaru’s familiar 2.5-liter, horizontally opposed four, now with fully variable valve operation. Intercooler capacity has increased, and so has boost pressure, to 14.7 psi. The result is 12 hp more than the ’07 STI, peaking at 6000 rpm. Maximum torque remains 290 lb-ft, though the 4000-rpm peak is 400 revs lower than before. The STI now features SI-Drive, which was introduced in Subaru’s Legacy Spec B. It allows the driver to choose three different throttle maps, from commute-grade to extra-aggressive.

The most important concession not made to the golfing set is the transmission. The only choice is a conventional six-speed manual, with a driver-operated clutch and no microchip to do the rev matching.

The all-wheel-drive system allows more adjustment than ever, thanks to a driver-controlled center differential (DCCD) with three automatic modes and six selectable lock points. The base Auto setting is the
same as in the last STI, with center diff in free mode. A new Auto (↑) Sport setting shifts the torque bias to the rear but leaves the limited-slip center diff open to adjust as traction dictates. An Auto (↓) setting tightens the center diff with a bias toward the front, for low-friction surfaces such as snow.

The STI’s all-wheel drive now integrates the stability and traction electronics under a single control program. The stability control has choices: standard, off and performance, which allows enough wheelslip to slide the car.

The electronics work with a substantially revised suspension, using forged-aluminum A-arms and a new double-wishbone design in back [helping to explain the space for two bags]. The brakes are supplied by Brembo, with fixed four-piston calipers in front, two-piston in the rear and larger rotors all around (13.0-inch front/12.6 rear—slightly smaller than the Evo—behind 18-inch rims). The ABS software apportions brake force side-to-side as well as front-to-rear. The optional forged BBS wheels, still available in gold, may be the STI’s most overtly flashy item.

Even the cabin is more subdued; those who don’t need embroidered logos to remind themselves that they are in a very capable machine will probably prefer it. The dash is clean, simple and attractive, and the finish and materials make it immediately clear that you’re in a nicer car.

As do the sounds, at idle, full throttle or cruising speed. Where the old STI had the low, reverberating sound associated with race cars, this one generates noise and vibration on par with a BMW 3 Series, though not for any lack of fury.

The STI is still a very quick little car, if not appreciably quicker than its predecessor (0 to 60 mph in 4.9 seconds), and power delivery is more linear, even in the most aggressive throttle mode. The weakest link may be the shifter—nice weight and resistance, with just a hint of stretch when it slots in—but it’s better than the old one and easy to get used to.

The steering is pretty good, certainly communicative if you’re okay with the weight. Is the ride softer? Probably. It’s missing the cruder, teeth-chattering shocks of the first STI, but it’s not as compliant as early WRXs, either. We’ll call it controlled compliance, with some give in the Euroblaster fashion: damping lean and pitch firmly [though perhaps less firmly than before], allowing the car to settle smoothly after big bumps, protecting those inside from uncomfortable jolts or repeating annoying oscillations, but depriving the driver of nothing he really needs to evaluate what’s happening under his seat or to build confidence in the car’s behavior.

This more refined STI might merit the label “unflappable” and might be the perfect car for a beginner’s intro to the very fast, deceptively simple [or simply deceptive] road course at Laguna Seca. Its brakes and the stability tuned into its electronics might be the difference between embarrassment and disaster when the newbie crests the hill, drops into the Corkscrew and realizes the next apex isn’t where he thought it was.

On the track, there’s an inclination toward understeer, but less than with the typical small front-drive car—even a well-tuned one. With the DCCD in Auto (↑) Sport, the gas pedal can get the front end tucked in. During appropriate braking or in panic mode, the electronics work to keep as much tire down as possible. The STI stays planted under rough, heavy-handed inputs. In short, it takes care of the hack without stranłąing the joy out for the skilled, and it lets the exceptionally skilled turn everything off.

The 2008 STI debuts after the first of the year, at $35,640. With relatively small volume and 80 percent of sales concentrated in 10 metro markets, it’s obviously an image car, probably a better one than it used to be.

This more grown-up STI is still a blast to drive, with as much bang as ever. Steps toward refinement—dare we say sophistication—will gain some buyers on one end without losing as many on the other.

The truly hard-core men-children will head straight for the tuner anyway.