



ALTHOUGH THE MR2 IS A CAR THAT HANDLES WELL IN STANDARD TRIM, WE FOUND THAT THE MODIFICATIONS MADE BY WHITELINE DRAMATICALLY IMPROVED FEEL AND HANDLING ON THE STREET. CONSEQUENTLY, CORNER SPEED CAN BE SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED

DRIVING IMPRESSIONS

I have driven many rear/mid engine cars over the years including a number of the older shape MR2s, so I had a fair idea as to what to expect regarding the handling characteristics of the new generation vehicle. The ZZW30 chassis MR2 features a 43/57 percent front to rear weight distribution ratio, which although not being optimal is at least an improvement over previous models. Older rear engine cars had a tendency to oversteer quite dramatically with a savage bite at the limit meaning that a loss of control for inexperienced drivers or those not expecting such behaviour was common. I have witnessed many drivers overcook their rear/mid engine vehicle on the track thinking that the handling was beyond any fault whatsoever. The reality is that no matter how competent the factory suspension package may be, significant improvements can still be made.

Interestingly, Drift King Keiichi Tsuchiya demonstrates in his 'Drift Bible' DVD that an MR2 can even be drifted quite competently once the owner comes to terms with the correct inputs required to engender some sliding action. A recent conversation with Toyota guru Paul Brell from BD4s in Sydney reinforced the fact that the MR2 can be a blisteringly fast track weapon with the correct suspension modifications and the input of a competent driver.

I had the opportunity to drive the MR2 from the first day that we collected the vehicle from the dealership and as expected there were both positives and negatives to the standard suspension package. Given that Toyota have to manufacture the MR2 with a wide variety of driving conditions in mind and with a strong emphasis on comfort,

certain sporting characteristics (such as an extremely stiff, taught ride) are not provided. The comfort factor of the MR2 was excellent with the very firm chassis soaking up the ruts and bumps served up by nasty Sydney roads with ease. The chassis is exceptionally stiff for a convertible and the quality of the ride was high. The payoff is a slightly spongy feel to the suspension. In regards to cruising without pushing the car, the standard handling is more than acceptable.

Our handling expectations were somewhat different however and I found that when pushing the MR2 hard into a corner (particularly a long sweeping bend for example) there was a very strong tendency for the car to oversteer quite heavily. I could feel the rear of the car wanting to step out, and while the traction control system keeps loss of control to a minimum, this instability was a characteristic that had to go. The nose was diving into the corner and the shift of weight was upsetting the car and washing off considerable speed mid corner making for a tardy exit. We wanted to improve the handling significantly, but still keep the MR2 at a legal ride height to ensure that the new owner can cruise without any hassles.

After collecting the MR2 from Whiteline I found that the handling was far more neutral and flat, with corner speed increased through greatly improved balance and rigidity. The chunkier sway bars have made a huge difference to the feel of the car mid corner (particularly steering feel), and while it is still apparent that the car can oversteer at the limit, corner speed is now increased markedly with no significant loss of balance. Corners can now

be taken with much more speed and assurance. Basically the new system ensures a greater level of confidence in the driver.

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the new suspension geometry is the fact that OEM levels of ride comfort and bump compliance have been retained. The progressive rate springs ensure a comfortable ride even over the harshest of road surfaces. The end result is a car that feels completely different under spirited driving conditions, yet is still a practical and useable every day driver.

The use of standard shocks with uprated springs and swaybars is not ideal but as the factory shocks were near new and the car is not being used for track work, Whiteline left these unchanged. They do however offer sport rated adjustable shocks matched to suit the other components and the guys at Whiteline advise that this would be an essential addition for anyone interested in any sort of track work or more serious performance outcomes. It would become particularly important after a few kilometres of wear and tear.

Put simply, modifiers should spend the time and money to improve the factory suspension set-up. With the main emphasis for most modifiers being placed on huge power increases, many overlook the improvements that can be made in their vehicle's handling. Although the MR2 still possesses a factory stock engine and driveline, the improvements in suspension geometry made for a much more fun and engaging drive with an obvious increase in safety on the limit.

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