

GROUP P C

There's fire in the belly of the new M3 Evolution Sport. This, along with predictable Bavarian

CLASSY ACT AS IT IS, THE 3-SERIES BMW range hasn't exactly sent hard-driving enthusiasts dizzy with delight until now. Ideals such as silkiness, refinement, build quality and perceived image are all very well but, when projected with an image of studied Bavarian understatement, they make a package that's just a touch predictable and forgettable if what you're really after is a nugget of genuine excitement.

Hardly the breeding-ground, you might suppose, for one of the world's all-time great sporting saloons. But the M3, BMW Motorsport's most successful and intensively developed model to date, is just that: the wild card which, in recent years, has blasted some much needed fire into the soft underbelly of the 3-series range. And, if it comes as no great shock that the £34,500 Evolution Sport is the best M3 yet, I'm sure that you can work

out the broader implications for yourself.

Based on the regular 215bhp Evolution, the Sport is powered by a bored-and-stroked big-valve version of BMW's delectable 16-valve 'M-Power' four which, for this application, swells to 2.3 litres and develops an impressive 238bhp at 7000rpm. Torque, on the other hand, remains more or less the same: just 71lb up 150rpm later making 177lb ft at 4600rpm.

In line with its extra muscle, the Sport has fatter, squatter (225/45 section) tyres on 16ins alloy rims, more bulbous body blisters to accommodate them, slightly lower front suspension and a deeper chin spoiler which, along with that which forms the lid of the boot, is adjustable. This is just a homologation trick, which can be of little practical benefit to the driver, since it involves much knee-scraping activity outside the car with an Allen key.

With so much power at its disposal, the Sport

turns in a fiery performance that, while lagging a little behind original Sierra Sapphire Cosworth pace, nevertheless puts most 'saloons' in the shade. A top speed of 151mph and 0-60mph time of 6.3secs are firmly in junior league supercar territory, as is the 6.7secs fourth gear 50-70mph time. Try the same thing between 30 and 50mph and it takes 6.4secs — still good, but indicative of the modest low-speed torque.

It's beautifully easy to use, though. The short-throw gearchange is light, quick and precise and, if you're in the mood, the lever can be sliced through the well-defined gate with improbable haste. That said, and mild bottom-end lugging power notwithstanding, you don't *have* to. With its sabre-sharp throttle response, urgently hard, crackling engine note and smooth, fabulously free-revving power delivery, this M3 is happy enough to play racers. Yet its fairly short, close gearing and excellent



A P T A I N

finement and quality, makes it the best 3-series car yet. David Vivian is dizzy with delight

tractability means it will lope along in fourth or fifth and still pull cleanly.

More good news. With an overall fuel consumption of 22.8mpg, the Sport is more economical than its vivid performance would lead you to expect. A sympathetic right foot should reap 25mpg or more.

The fatter and squatter rubber has contributed grip but not harshness to the BMW's brilliantly-sorted chassis. The ride is firm but outstandingly good for a car that corners so hard and with such little body roll, not only in its control at speed but in its small-bump absorption around town.

The handling has gained bite and precision, displaying the sort of responsiveness in a straight line that was once the preserve of track cars. Turn-in involves no appreciable understeer until the driver gets really serious, whereupon the M3 offers it, in increasing

measure, as a sensible alternative to leaving the tarmac tail first. Lifting off restores neutrality. As with the previous Evolution, steering weight increases slightly with speed, but continues to feed back useful information and never becomes hard work.

The Sport Evolution, if not a revelation, is certainly the best M3. In addition to the small but significant dynamic gains wrought by the bigger engine, fatter tyres and revised suspension, it looks subtly smarter on the road. It boasts a better-equipped cabin with terrifically good leather bucket seats in the front. Add to that the established 3-series virtues of practicality, build quality and attention to details and you have a package of great potency and flair.

Not all 3-series are like this, of course, but so long as you recognise the Evolution Sport's deeper air dam, at least you can see this one coming. ■



With a bigger, more powerful engine, fatter tyres, revised suspension, and better equipped cabin, the BMW M3 Evolution Sport is without doubt the leader of the 3-series pack

BMW M3 EVOLUTION SPORT

LAYOUT

Longitudinal front engine/rear-wheel drive

ENGINE

Capacity 2467cc, 4 cylinders in line.

Bore 95mm, **stroke** 87mm.

Compression ratio 10.2 to 1.

Head/block al alloy/cast iron.

Valve gear dohc per bank, 4 valves per cylinder.

Fuel and Ignition Electronic ignition, Bosch DME fuel injection.

Max power 238bhp (PS-Din) (178kW ISO) at 7000rpm. **Max torque** 177lb ft (240 Nm) at 4750rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Five-speed manual.

Ratios top 1.00, 4th 1.26, 3rd 1.77, 2nd 2.40, 1st 3.72.

Final drive ratio 3.15, limited slip differential.

SUSPENSION

Front, MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar.

Rear, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar.

STEERING

Rack and pinion, 3.6 turns lock to lock, power assisted.

BRAKES

Front ventilated discs.

Rear discs. Anti-lock standard.

WHEELS AND TYRES

Cast aluminium alloy, 7½x16ins rims, 225/45ZR16 Michelin MXX tyres.

DIMENSIONS

Length 171ins (4345mm)

Width 66ins (1680mm)

Height 54ins (1370mm)

Wheelbase 101ins (2565mm)

Weight 2764lbs (1255kg)

PERFORMANCE (claimed)

0-60mph 6.3secs

Maximum speed 151mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION (mpg)

22.8 test, 22.6 urban, 45.6 constant 56mph, 36.1 constant 75mph.

PRICE

Total (in UK) £34,500

