

Ballistic Missile!

Ian Stent reports.

I'm not going to look at the last feature I wrote on a Marlin until after I've finished writing this one as I strongly suspect that I may be in danger of repeating myself. Without checking, I think the last feature I did was a couple of years ago (a BMW-engined Cabrio with the company's original Ford-based suspension, if memory serves), but there are some distinctive traits that are fast becoming Marlin trademarks...



For 'some distinctive traits' you should in fact read 'two distinctive traits'. The first is the superb quality both in the build of the demonstrator and, more importantly, in the standard to which even the tiniest component is fabricated. At one stage during my most recent visit we put the Sportster up on a lift to examine the new rear suspension, but my eyes were drawn to the rear of the chassis and one of the engine mounts.

The bolt-on mount was perfectly fabricated, with immaculate welds and, despite the fact that it looked laser cut, it had been made in the workshop. Everywhere you looked, the attention to detail was spot-on and the level of craftsmanship beyond reproach. It was a lesson in the meticulous.

The other trademark that featured strongly in my day was the Marlin chassis. As I've already hinted, it is wonderfully presented, but much more impressive is its performance. I've always said that I think it's the best chassis in the traditional roadster market, but I came away from this drive with the feeling that it's actually one of the finest chassis in the business - period! This isn't meant as a challenge to every company in the industry to prove me wrong and, no, I'm not an engineer, but the Sportster chassis is a corker and, when allied to either the old Ford-based suspension or the new BMW components, it works wonders.

Phew! Having got that off my chest let's concentrate on why I'm here in the first place, and that is to drive the company's new all-BMW based Sportster. While a few such cars have already been dispatched to customers, this is the first factory demo car to feature the new set-up and Marlin has taken a big leap in faith to develop it.

Marlin's Mark Matthews has taken the opportunity to add an additional two inches to the chassis to increase interior space. Allied to a new rear bulkhead to accommodate the rear suspension, it actually translates into 3-inches of extra legroom in the car. While the existing Sportster was never short of space, Mark simply wanted to ensure that absolutely everyone would fit with ease, without exception.

While the front suspension uses the same pick-up points as the Ford-based car, there are new wishbones up front which locate the modified BMW uprights and standard hubs, discs and calipers. At the back is where the really significant changes have occurred, and where the benefits of the BMW kit really come into play. Here you'll find the Beemer's original diff carrier/subframe.

Bolted into the Marlin chassis, the carrier also locates the lower suspension links and pressed top trailing arms (which also form the location for the original springs). Two further cast trailing arms locate directly into the Marlin chassis and come back to form an integral hub carrier, once again using the original bearings, rear discs and calipers.

This particular demo car is the first the company has produced which accommodates the more modern E36 componentry and, as you'll no doubt have noticed, the engine looks a little on the

big side! Using a BMW M3 as a donor car may not be a regular occurrence, but it does give you almost 300bhp straight out of the box and a certain kudos when you open the bonnet.

Stand back from the newest Marlin to hit the streets and it certainly looks the part. Monster 17" rims house fat 235mm wide tyres at each corner and, bereft of any screen, the Sportster looks ultra low and mean. Mark's also chosen a cracking colour for this latest demo car - the BMW Daytona Violet looks just perfect.

I've already bored you with the build quality of these cars and you can take it as read that everything is up to scratch on the latest car. A steering wheel that looks like an extra from a Wild West movie is a light touch that reminds us not to take everything quite so seriously and that machines such as this are, after all, only meant for fun.

The extra length in the cockpit means that I'm bringing the seat forward perhaps four inches from the rear bulkhead, so I don't know who Mark had in mind when he added the extra length to the chassis, but they must breed 'em tall down in Devon! The standard Marlin pendulum pedals remain well spaced and easy to use in the new demo car, although the brakes were still bedding in for our test, resulting in slightly longer travel than might otherwise be expected.

No screen on this car means we're looking for a good set of goggles, although the company's folding screen will fit, as will aero screens and just about any other combination in between. For more regular use, there's little getting away from a full screen, especially on the basis that it can be folded flat for those wild blasts to impress the hell out of your friends.

The big 3-litre M3 engine starts on the button and settles into a smooth thrum via a twin exiting exhaust system. Moving off and guiding the car through town is an easy and effortless task, without a hint of the sledgehammer performance ready to pounce from under the bonnet. Indeed, it's yet another advantage of the M3 option - none of the all-or-nothing characteristics of most highly tuned aftermarket units. Here's a giant-killing engine designed to take you to the shops on a Saturday without a murmur of complaint.

When the first bit of open road materialises it's time to unleash the beast within, and it's only now that you're reminded of just what this machine can really do. Up to this point I've been happily pottering along, but now I need to concentrate because we're entering a new performance dimension. Weighing in at around 800kg gives the Sportster a cool 400bhp/tonne, but the figures are immaterial when you're in the driver's seat and the pedal is buried into the Wilton.

This Sportster is quick to its very core — as you hit the engine's peak power zone (from around 3500rpm upwards) the exhaust note changes completely into a baritone snarl of almost V-twin motorbike proportions. When the Marlin is hammered down the road with brutal power it feels like a tiny car encasing an earth-shatteringly powerful engine - and that's not far from the truth. It is heart-stoppingly quick.

But the reality is the Sportster is no tiny slip of a thing. This is not a little Lotus Seven-inspired roadster, but instead a car of generous proportions. Piloting such a beast quickly down Devon lanes is not for the faint-hearted and larger sweeping A-roads are really its stamping ground. And stamping is most definitely the word. The Sportster crushes anything that gets in its way.

Despite virtually everything about the running gear being standard M3, the gearing feels long in the Sportster - third being the main power gear, with tighter corners despatched in second, and fifth being very much an overdrive option (albeit a powerful one). Top speed will no doubt be limited to whether or not you wish to retain your head in it's original position, and at the back of your mind you can't help feeling that the M3 engine is only playing. There's never a hint of stress here and I doubt it's even breaking into a sweat delivering this level of brutal performance. All of which brings me back to the worth of the BMW as a modern donor car. It may be offering ultra performance, but with off-the-shelf components.

And while the grunt isn't exactly shabby, the ride of this latest Marlin is also well up to the mark. In fairness, the standard Ford-based car is extremely well sorted, and this set-up certainly

matches it and may well improve on it. Marlins have always been endowed with a controlled yet relaxed ride - one that soaks up the bumps without losing composure. Reasonable suspension travel is part of the equation, allied to spring and damper rates that work a treat.

All I need on the Dallas-inspired steering wheel are a pair of cow horns, but it seems to suit the slightly OTT nature of this particular Sportster Original BMW column stalks work easily, while the rack itself is a Marlin item used in all its various model incarnations. Initial impression is that the gearing is a little too slow for such a performance machine, the car tending to wash a little wide through the bends simply because you've not dialled in enough lock. Mark admits it's a personal preference and he's not a great fan of quick racks. As with previous Marlins, there's no hint of bump steer here and I don't think a quicker rack would feel overly heavy. That said, once you're used to the current set-up then everything soon falls into place.

As we take the action shots there's a chance to watch the Sportster as it prowls along behind us, and it certainly looks the part. Devoid of any screen, it appears glued to the ground and supercar wide. Quite frankly, it looks a bit insane - a roman chariot for the new millennium. Very cool.

And what's the final verdict on the BMW Sportster? This car takes no prisoners. The rear suspension looks wonderfully neat and add in the engine and gearbox and you end up with a truly exotic performance package for peanuts money. When you take into consideration the quality of the package and the supercar performance of the test car's engine, gearbox, suspension and braking components, it's a totally unique offer and stunningly impressive value. We like it a lot!

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