

Dodge Caliber SRT4

The hot hatch war heats up.

INDIANAPOLIS A year ago, the hot hatchback segment barely existed in the United States, and now we have three four-door examples of the genre: the new Dodge Caliber SRT4, the Volkswagen GTI, and the Mazdaspeed 3. The VW and the Mazda are based on really good cars—the Rabbit and the Mazda 3. Unfortunately, the basic Dodge Caliber is saddled with a coarse engine, cheap-looking interior plastics, and a poorly tuned suspension. Chrysler's in-house performance division, SRT, certainly had its work cut out for it to convert the subpar Caliber into a competitive player.

Horsepower compensates for a lot of sins, however, so SRT gave the Caliber the best power rating in the category and installed the beefy front brake calipers from the 4100-pound Dodge Charger R/T. An aggressive body kit is nicely matched to five-spoke, nineteen-inch wheels. At \$22,995, the price is right, too.

High horsepower is nice and all—the 285-hp Caliber SRT4 is very fast, and Dodge says it will top out at 155 mph and hit 60 mph in about six seconds—but sending all those horses through the front wheels results in frustrating torque steer, even at high speeds. Moreover, the steering itself is numb. Since there is no limited-slip

differential, the ABS works the big calipers overtime to help juggle the torque between the front wheels. The Caliber has a surprisingly decent ride, but there's only so much the dampers can do for body and wheel control when the gigantic wheel/tire combination at each corner weighs more than fifty pounds. Our lumpy, bumpy test route quickly overwhelmed the SRT4 and revealed that the Dodge is not as cohesive and fluid as the GTI. The SRT4 is closer to the hot-rod spirit of the Mazdaspeed 3, but it's unable to match the Japanese car's balance of speed, grip, and refinement—and the Mazdaspeed is hardly what we call refined.

The recipe for such a car is pretty simple: increase power, tweak the

suspension and chassis, and embellish the bodywork. But as any good chef can tell you, the end product is a reflection of the quality of the ingredients. In this case, Chrysler handed the SRT team a can of Spam, and they doctored it the best they could and cooked up a very good Caliber. Unfortunately, you'll never get a world-class meal when you start with Spam, and neither will you get a world-class hot hatch when you start with a Caliber. **Marc Noordeeloos**

SPECIFICATIONS

On sale: Now **Base price:** \$22,995

Engine: Turbocharged 2.4L I-4, 285 hp, 265 lb-ft

Drive: Front-wheel

