

M Stands For Muscular

BMW M presents its new top-of-the-line **sports coupe** – breathtaking in its design, forward-looking in its technology.



Commanding presence: the new M3 strikes a perfectly elegant balance between performance and refinement



The first glance is
guaranteed to get
the adrenaline going

Distinctive details that
differ from the 3 Series:
side gill vents with the
M3 logo, and aerodynamic
side-view mirrors



TEXT RICHARD JOHN PIETSCHMANN

Fighting for meaningful face time with the latest edition of the world's most stimulating coupe meant flying to the new M3's American debut at the New York International Auto Show in April. Yes, the E46 M3 had been on view before, as a show car at the Frankfurt Auto Show in September 1999, and in final European pre-production configuration this March at the Geneva Auto Show. Aficionados paying close attention also knew it had been raced here this year, at Sebring and Charlotte. But this was the first time the even lustier M3 was appearing in actual street dress in the United States prior to the full-bore introduction here later this year. And American soil is pretty much M turf.

The sustained popularity of high-performance M cars is largely an American phenomenon. Quite remarkably, substantially more M models are bought in an average year here than in the rest of the world combined. "Depending on what year you look at, the U.S. has represented between 60 to 75 percent of worldwide M sales," said Tom Salkowsky, the M Brand Manager for BMW of North America. I later found him at the show circling the sports car hidden in a coupe body, with a look of undisguised pleasure on his face.

Last year, he said, nearly two-thirds of all M cars produced were delivered to the U.S. M3 coupes alone have sold at a clip of 3,000-4,000 annually, with a peak year of 5,800, to drivers consumed by the car's "wolf in sheep's clothing" magnetism. That's not much short of phenomenal, considering this is a vehicle purposely intended

for a limited audience of performance fiends willing to pay more for a subtle supercar. As a result of this success in the U.S., said a pleased Salkowsky, "we have a considerable voice in Munich."

Such clout was crucial to satisfying the American craving for an M3 tailored to our requirements. "I'm excited that the wish list that American M3 owners have asked for is being delivered," Tom said. "More power. More overall interior space. More rear-seat leg room, and differentiation from a 3 Series coupe. It's a great driving machine – supercar performance without being penalized by the usual sports car compromises. It's a vehicle you can drive every day. In the U.S., our wishes have come true. It's the best M3 we have ever brought to the United States."

Meanwhile, though, I had a problem. I had been assigned the big story on the third generation M3, but without being able to drive or even sit as a passenger in one. Just one of two existing pre-production models were being flown to New York for the auto show, and it would be coddled and protected with approximately the same zeal afforded Michael Jackson on his rare excursions into daylight. Then it would be whisked back to Germany as soon as it was done with its duties in New York.

Since experiencing the item one is writing about is a basic tenet of journalism, I was reasonably dismayed. I wouldn't even be able to hear an exhaust note.

In any event, my experience and guile kicked into high gear, and a plan soon emerged from the uncharted shoals of my



brain. If I couldn't drive the new M3, I reasoned, perhaps I could hang out with it at the show and with those who helped craft it.

And in the end they let me have my way.

First came the unveiling, at 11:56 a.m. on the morning of April 19, before a hushed throng of fellow ink-stained wretches. The chosen were seated several deep on folding chairs, while the rest of us groundlings pressed forward eagerly for whatever shard of history we could take away from such an occasion. Mentally, I compared it to the first viewing of Michaelangelo's "David" before the rapt cream of Florence nobility, seated on similar folding chairs (no doubt invented right down the street by DaVinci). In any event, at the appointed moment the crowd fell into silence and then into love as a BMW stalwart tenderly slipped the silk draping away.

Revealed was a sophisticated coupe, a metallic mustard yellow in color, holding a muscle pose. This was clearly a member of the new M Family, particularly with that sculpted chiaroscuro line hinting at a racing stripe, catching and playing with the light running along the flanks. Yet it was pumped. It seemed lower, harder, wider, more stripped for action and eager for it. I thought of a muscular sprinter in the blocks, waiting calmly for the starter's gun. Carl Lewis looked like that, and so does Michael Johnson. Tom Salkowsky later came up with the right words for how it appeared: "It's a predator."

The crowd buzzed appreciatively, strobe flashes erupted, video film crews elbowed

spindly print journalists aside. And then the M3's media crush ended as quickly as it had begun, for the third debut that morning (the 330xi sedan was the first) was a show-stopper. The covering was snapped from the Z9 Grand Touring concept car, and it was fired up and driven right up front. The fickle press instantly scuttled its adoration to the sexy newcomer.

That was fortunate for me, for I now had the M3 virtually to myself. I found Tom Salkowsky wandering with a beatific smile on his face, and steered the brand manager over to the object of his affection. If I couldn't find out for myself by driving it, I figured this was my chance to learn about the M3's insides. Tell me about it, I said.

The smile turned into a grin. "It's fantastic," he rhapsodized, able to speak only in bullets. "A phenomenal car. Extremely high performance."

"What juices you the most?," I prodded.

His smile again turned into a grin. "The engine," he beamed.

What's under the hood and hidden from view has always been an enormous part of what an M car is all about. However, in the past, the M3 engine sent to the U.S. was a compromise that sacrificed horsepower for the low-end torque that American driving conditions – stoplight driving and rapid acceleration – demand. As a result, the E36 M3 had a different engine than the rest of the world – ours was 240 hp, while theirs was a far more robust 321 hp. (Comparative horsepower figures are somewhat distorted because the DIN standard used in Europe to measure horsepower and the SAE standard used here result in different numbers for



Visual differences proclaim the M3's independence

Revised body work reflects the thoroughbred athlete more clearly than its forerunner.
Left: The 6-speed manual transmission



The sports car feel is reinforced inside the cockpit

Newly designed sport seats combine lateral support with high comfort; the new-style multi-function sport steering wheel



the same engine. This means European figures are invariably higher, a difference compounded when U.S. emissions standards steal a few more horsepower.)

This yawning power gap produced some grumbling among American M3 owners, who felt cheated. "Bring us the good stuff, namely the engine," is what Salkowsky heard from the American owners.

And that's what they're about to get. For the first time, the United States is getting the full load with this M3 – the same six-cylinder, 24-valve, 3.2-liter engine as the rest of the world. While it is still being tested, it is estimated to produce 330 hp. The horsepower gap has been closed.

"This new motor is a huge increase for us," Salkowsky said. "We've jumped an estimated 90 horsepower, along with increasing torque and engine technology, but with the same displacement as the last engine."

As usual, the engineering wizards of Garching accomplished this without resorting to the dreaded huffing and puffing of turbocharging. This immensely high-speed engine (7900 rpm at maximum horsepower) snaps to attention the instant the gas pedal is tickled. Used for the first time in the M3, the brand new S54 "world engine" attains the seemingly contradictory goals of high horsepower AND a fat torque band.

For that, thank the same Double-VANOS continuously variable valve timing system used in the M5. That makes the M3's engine both powerful and quick. "This powerplant offers over 100 horsepower per

liter, a rare accomplishment for a naturally aspirated engine," Salkowsky said.

The think-tank's worth of recently developed handling and performance technology that comes standard in the new M3 includes Dynamic Stability Control; an M variable differential lock, exclusive to the M3, that measures wheel rotation instead of torque for faster off-the-line acceleration as well as more precise traction; and the vaunted "Sport Button" (Driving Dynamics Control) introduced in the M5 last year. This last item allows the driver to toggle between Sport and Normal driving modes, which adjusts the response time of the electronic butterfly throttle on each cylinder. In Sport setting, the engine reacts to pedal pressure in an eye-blink-quick 120 milliseconds.

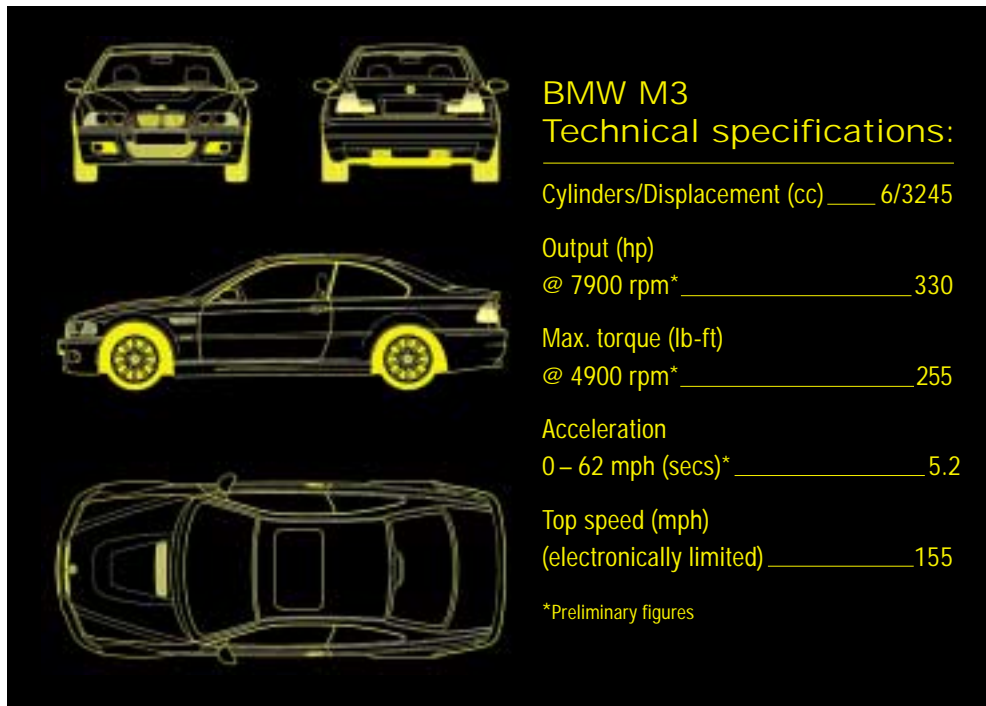
All this, coupled with the stiffer new 3 Series chassis and the M3's now-standard six-speed manual transmission (up from the previous M3's five-speed), results in one ferocious driver's package.

"Sounds likes it's pretty fast," I said to Salkowsky. Innocently, of course.

Tom shot me a wary look, knowing that U.S. testing had not yet occurred and wouldn't until sometime this summer. "Well," he said carefully, "in German testing, the 0 to 120 kilometer acceleration time was 5.2 seconds."

Zero to 120 kph in the 330-hp M3 is 0-62 mph. In comparison, the 394-hp M5 giddyups to 60 in 4.8 seconds. On a power-to-speed basis, the M3 totally delivers.

Steeped in the BMW tradition, however, the M3's safety is equally amped. There are



BMW M3
Technical specifications:

Cylinders/Displacement (cc)	6/3245
Output (hp)	
@ 7900 rpm*	330
Max. torque (lb-ft)	
@ 4900 rpm*	255
Acceleration	
0-62 mph (secs)*	5.2
Top speed (mph)	
(electronically limited)	155

*Preliminary figures

front two-stage smart airbags, side airbags and front head protection airbags, automatic front safety belt tensioners with force limiters, and a battery safety terminal. And the braking power is enormous. The ventilated discs on all four wheels are massive: the rotor diameter is 12.8 inches in front, 12.9 inches in the rear – the same size as the M5's in back. "It was hard to find race cars with 13-inch brakes just a few years ago," Tom marveled.

While I was on a roll, I figured I might as well ask about those other two forbidden subjects, on-sale date and price. While the price really won't be set until sometime this summer, Tom did offer the German pricing as a rough guideline – about DM100,000, currently \$50,000-\$51,000.

"There's considerably more cost in this engine, which means the M3's price will go up," said Richard Brekus, (Tom's boss) at BMW North America. "But we think that the price increase will be modest in comparison to the performance increase."

The M3's visual and physical attributes have also been burnished. Salkowsky called it "polishing the gem." And here, too, a concern of M3 owners was addressed, specifically that they wanted a more distinctive differentiation in appearance compared to a 3 Series coupe. "The previous M3 was very understated," Salkowsky said. "You really had to look closely to see the subtle styling cues."

Physically, it is almost three inches wider, and has numerous visual differences that proclaim the M3's independence from the rest of the 3 Series. Pronounced-flair wheel arches are filled to the brim with super-wide 225/45ZR-18 front and 255/40ZR-18 rear tires on big 18-inch light alloy wheels with a

special 10 Spoke design and an exclusive Chrome Shadow finish. A "power dome" hood seems like an aluminum muscle shirt with the engine rippling through from beneath. Also eye-catching are quad stainless steel exhaust pipes, "shark gills" slatted just behind the front wheel wells, a reinterpreted kidney grille that's a little wider and has chrome slats, aerodynamic side-view mirrors, and a low, menacing front spoiler with large intakes for engine and brake cooling and bullet-style foglights.

All business – but beautiful business. It absolutely isn't your father's M3.

"We all agreed that it would be good for this M3 to be a little bit more aggressive looking than the E36 M3, but not a boy racer," Rich Brekus said. "The car definitely has a different stance. It comes across stronger."

But don't think the M3's interior is as buff as its exterior, for things are tactfully plush indeed inside. Particularly the new, supremely comfortable, M3-unique ergonomic sport seats covered with soft Nappa leather. They have electronic lumbar and lateral support adjustments as well as a high support extension.

But flair is what energizes this new M3, even in the available exterior colors. There are the traditional BMW colors, of course, but also that Phoenix Yellow that I thought of as mustard yellow and Laguna Seca Blue, which Tom describes as "a cool blue."

With style and sizzle, we Americans are finally getting the M3 that we've wished for. This new M3, scheduled for U.S. delivery later this year, is the dream car that promises to make a profound statement at the same time it scorches America's roads. ■

PHOTOS: BMW



**With a 330-hp engine,
the newest M3 is
pure driving performance**

Born to be fast: the M3 sports extra-wide tires, four exhaust tailpipes and an aerodynamically honed rear apron