

A 30-YEAR BMW ENTHUSIAST RENEWS HIS INTEREST BY FALLING FOR A CULT CUTIE.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STANLEY G. WOO

My first BMW was a Polaris Silver 320iS, and it hooked me on the brand. Other interesting BMWs followed: four E21 323i gray-market cars, a Dietel Alpina E21 333i, and a modified E28 535i. But after the birth of my first child, the joy of tinkering with the cars, researching BMW collectables—like many fellow members, I had quite an extensive model-BMW collection—and keeping current with BMW news was replaced with a new love: catering to the needs of my beautiful daughters. Instead of changing brake fluid, I was busy changing diapers. Instead of attending Club functions, I was attending school functions. But I never parted with one special 323i or my 535i; fortunately, these BMW classics are affordable to own and maintain.

Years passed. Then, in April 2010, the

LA Chapter hosted an event at BMW of Monrovia to celebrate the chapter's 40th anniversary. The event featured beautiful examples of BMWs old and new—one from every year of the chapter's existence, plus dozens more for display. There were 2002s, 3.0CS coupes, E30 M3s, a few Z1s and Z8s, 1 Series models, race cars, and more.

But even with the abundance of rare and special BMWs on display, I was drawn to one particular BMW: an E36 318ti in Alaska Blue, with BMW Lightweight wheels and M-Technic body components.

Though I had been aware of the 318ti—also known as the E36/5, the Compact, the Bobtail, or the hatchback—it was never high on my interest list. Yet something kept bringing me back to view this blue car; it was tastefully modified and in excellent condition. If

I could have owned any car from the event, it would have been that 318ti.

As months went by, I kept thinking about the ti. It really intrigued me: simplicity in a small three-door coupe, BMW design and quality, all while retaining a classic front-engine, rear-drive configuration. Viewed from the front, it displays the enduring and proven design of the E36 3 Series, but viewing the elegant C-pillar aft, some may be surprised to see a shortened tail. I love the short-overhang rear, and the well-engineered trunk hatch; the rear glass has no visible frame, so the whole glass and shortened tail lift as one unit, where other E36 trunk lids hinge at the base of the glass. This large opening, combined with rear fold-down seats, creates a cavernous space to load large cargo.

Obviously, this would be my next BMW.

I began researching information on the ti: years, differences, options, modifications. (There's a wealth of ti information on www.318ti.org.) I collected all known ti dealership brochures, even those from Europe.

For those unfamiliar with the model, the E36 ti—for *Touring International*—was imported to the U.S. during the second half of the 1990s, but for various reasons, it did not sell as well as BMW had hoped. There was little or no promotion of the model; I don't recall any U.S. television commercials or print ads featuring the ti. And sales personnel tended to promote the rest of the BMW lineup more aggressively than the ti, because as the entry-level BMW, its profit margin—and commissions—were smaller.

Disappointed with sales of the E36 ti, BMW did not certify the E46 version for U.S. import. Moreover, when asked about the possibility of bringing the 1 Series hatchbacks to America a decade later, BMW still clung to the notion that hatchbacks don't sell in the U.S. So these days, the BMW ti is a rare sighting. I can go several months without spotting an E36 ti on the road—quite a statement, because I work in Los Angeles and travel the freeways daily.

Its rarity makes the ti a coveted cult car among BMW CCA members. In Europe, there was a choice of engines in the E36 ti: 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, and 2.3 liters. Pick your pleasure: economy or performance. In the U.S., however we received the four-cylinder 1.8-liter M42 OBD-I engine in 1995 and the 1.9-liter M44 OBD-II engine from 1996 through 1999. Both carry dual overhead cams in a sixteen-valve head, producing 138 horsepower at 6,000 rpm. Until BMW began putting the N20 turbo four in the Z4, the 328i, and the 528i for U.S. consumption, the M44 was the last four-cylinder

engine powering BMWs in America.

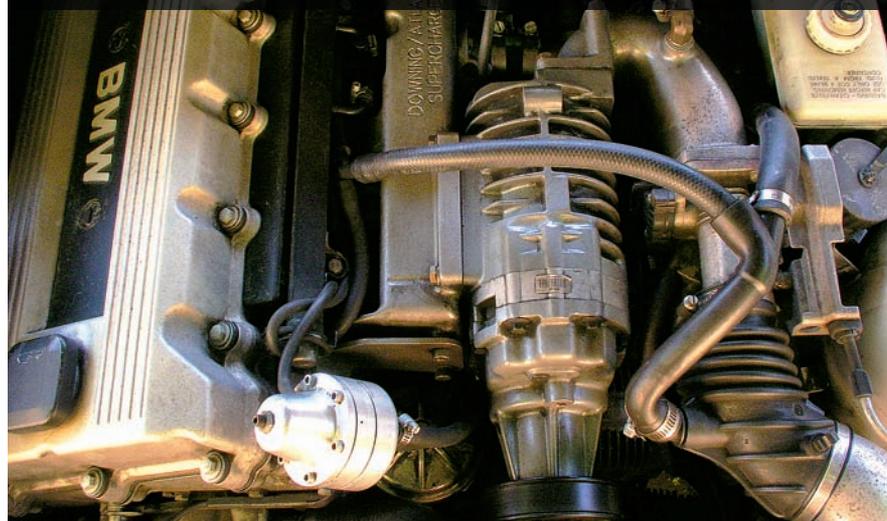
However, everything forward of the A-pillar is essentially the same on a ti versus its sedan counterpart, so it allows relatively easy engine conversions. With plenty of room under the hood, many U.S. owners have swapped six cylinders for the four. Another significant boost in power on a U.S. ti could be obtained with a supercharger, the preferred unit being the Downing Atlanta supercharger kit. This kit replaces the stock intake manifold and features a boost-sensitive fuel-pressure regulator—and it's California Emission Standards compliant. Performance figures from Downing Atlanta put the horsepower over 200, with no weight gain, and essentially unchanged fuel mileage, attributable to a unique bypass system.

Two electric sunroof styles were available on the ti, a two-way sliding steel panel or the canvas California roof starting in 1998. The California roof has twin slide mechanisms that move and pleat the cover

to the rear of the roof, creating a very large opening—it almost gives the feel of convertible top-down driving.

According to the 1995 318ti press kit, at the ti's \$19,900 base price, standard equipment included ABS, four-wheel disc brakes, dual airbags, seatbelt tensioners, power steering, body-colored power/heated outside mirrors, rear-window washer/wiper, body-colored bumpers, height-adjustable driver's seat, center console with cup holders, power front windows, air conditioning, ventilation microfilter, and pre-wiring for both a BMW CD changer and a keyless-entry security system. With the Active Package, bringing the price up to \$22,300, 318ti customers also received cruise control, 15"x7" alloy wheels with 205/60 tires, a remote keyless-entry security system, leather-trimmed steering wheel and shifter, an onboard computer, and the two-way power sunroof. Active Package equipment could be enhanced by individually optional features: limited-slip differential, leather upholstery, premium ten-

The Downing Atlanta supercharger boosts the M44 engine's 138 horsepower to over 200.



Stan Woo's ti has classic bookends, a 323i and a 535i.



speaker audio system, dealer-installed CD changer, and BMW cellular phone.

Also at \$22,300, the 318ti Sport Package had a sport suspension (firmer springs, shock absorbers, and anti-roll bars), alloy wheels, fog lights, leather-and-cloth upholstery with the same leather trim items as the Active, plus cloth door inserts, and sport front seats with adjustable thigh support. As with the Active Package, a limited-slip differential and the premium audio system could be ordered separately with the Sport Package, along with the two-way power sunroof, keyless-entry security system, CD changer, and phone. Base and Sport models could have Cruise Control ordered optionally, and all ti models were available with automatic transmissions featuring Economy, Sport, and Manual shift modes. Starting in 1996, the Sport Package added front and rear M-Technic bumpers.

One particularly rare ti sold in the U.S. was the 1995-only Club Sport model, with M Sport suspension, sixteen-inch round-spoke alloy wheels with 205/50 tires, sport seats, an interior in red millpoint cloth and black leather, along with M Sport side mirrors, bumpers, and rocker sill moldings. Available in Jet Black or Bright Red, the Club Sport was produced in a limited edition of fewer than 300.

But the rarest ti of all is a one-off built by BMW M GmbH, honoring the 50th birthday of German *Auto Motor und Sport* magazine. This red beauty has the six-cylinder S50 M3 European engine, a Getrag six-speed, special quad-tip exhaust, M-tuned suspension, M3 brakes, M-Technic aero package and mirrors, clear lenses, M3 instrumentation, Recaro racing seats, four-point seatbelts, and an Alcantara-wrapped wheel and shifter.

That car was obviously out of the question, and Club Sports are quite rare, too, so I narrowed my preferred-features list and began my search for a white five-speed Sport Package ti, preferably with low mileage. Having two black BMWs already, I wanted something different. Automatics are great—that’s what my daily driver has, to ease my stop-and-go commute—but a five-speed ti would allow me to enjoy some heel-and-toe downshifts on weekends. As for the Sport model, well, you’ve got to love those bumpers, sport seats, and stiffened suspension.

I started monitoring classified ads to get a feel for the ti market. When my search became serious, I considered a few cars located out of town, but dreaded the thought of airfare and the long solo trek home, or having to pay for an auto-transport service. Eventually, I came upon an appealing ti for sale locally: Alpine white, black leather and

gray cloth interior, five-speed, limited-slip, with M front bumper and mirrors, M side skirts, M double-spoke wheels, modified suspension, a sunroof, and keyless entry—and it was super clean throughout. The mileage was average, and the rear bumper wasn’t an M-Tech, but this ti had definitely been loved and cared for, and it showed.

Oh, and then there was the Downing Atlanta supercharger....

The owner was a BMW enthusiast—perfect! Of all the times I’ve bought or sold cars, the time spent with this seller was the most enjoyable. It was hours of camaraderie, appreciation of the marque, learning all the pros and cons of this particular car, and spirited test drives, giving the suspension and supercharger a workout. A mutual friend had test-driven the ti and taken it to a trusted mechanic for evaluation. Fortunately, my friend was more enchanted with a rare M-Technic E30, leaving the ti available—and supplying the favorable mechanic’s report.

The car came with the original alloy wheels, intake manifold, body parts, Bentley manual, and a thick folder of this ti’s history: past owners’ registrations, smog checks, maintenance records, receipts, the installation guide for the supercharger, dynamometer reports, and so on. Sweet!

Since owning the ti, I’ve made a few changes and upgrades to the interior and rear of the car. Except for paint, I performed all modifications and installations myself—a tireless endeavor. Except for an overly-loud exhaust muffler sans resonator, all the prior modifications to the ti—changes that I would have made anyway—were to my liking, so I left them intact. I’m happy with the supercharged engine—

ample power for a car weighing only 2,734 pounds. The Eibach springs and adjustable Koni shocks provide spirited handling, and the car is surprisingly comfortable for one that sits lower than average.

The audio system was halfway there—Alpine AM/FM/CD head unit with iPod connection and upgraded rear speakers—but a front speaker began to buzz, and there was no noticeable bass, since ti speaker housings cannot accommodate speakers of a reasonable size to produce low frequencies. Upgraded front speakers and a powered subwoofer solved the problem.

I consider my ti as a therapeutic channel and hobby—something to keep me motivated. After years of no expressive outlet, nor anything to be passionate about—except my kids, of course—I’ve reignited my passion for BMW in the E36 ti. My enthusiasm for this “entry level” BMW is so great that it has renewed my interest in BMW models. I found one cartoonish toy ti, three in 1:43 scale, and ten in 1:87—a rainbow of ti’s! Counting the full-size model, now I own fifteen ti’s!

Life is good again. No: Life is fantastic! ♦



The interior features an Alcantara-clad wheel and upgraded sound system.