



■ The Mini nimbly elbows between two tailgating giants.

Mini-Barbarians at the Gate

Don't be fooled by its itty-bitty size and cheery demeanor. The Mini Cooper convertible just might be the meanest tailgating vehicle ever made. **BY EZRA DYER**



I'LL HAVE TO CONSULT William Safire on this, but I'd wager that the primary definition of the word *tailgate* no longer concerns the appendage at the rear end of a pickup truck. Somewhere along the line, the tailgate went from a part to a party, and with that displacement arose a subculture devoted to the black art of the pre-sporting event bacchanalia. These people drive big trucks, wear oversize sports jerseys, and drink lots and lots of beer. They know the rules of the tailgate. And rule number one is, Get your pansy-ass Honda Civic away from my grill!

You ever see one of those luckless, gateless schmoes peeking out from under a smoked-glass SUV hatch, like a mollusk who happens to really admire Michael Vick? His face says, "Yeah, this works." But the guys with the F-150's and Silverados know better. To them, the idea of tailgating with no tailgate is like eating a burger made out of vegetables. It's a giant neon billboard that reads, *AMATEUR HOUR IN PROGRESS*.

Fair enough. But what if you don't want to sacrifice sporty driving for football-themed debauchery? What if you parallel park more often than you haul construction equipment while listening to Toby Keith? What if you want a tailgate without the truck?

FIVE TAILGATING ESSENTIALS

You have but one choice: the Mini Cooper convertible. Yes, it's the type of urban-chic accessory you'd expect to see parked outside secondhand bookstores and MIT sorority houses. But behind the drop-top Mini's cheery facade, there lies an inner meathead aching to escape: an honest-to-goodness tailgate, just above the rear bumper. It's a by-product of the convertible design's truncated hatchback. And it could be non-truck enthusiasts' only hope for partaking in the hedonistic pregame ritual with dignity intact.

But does its Mini-gate truly measure up? I headed to a Patriots game at Gillette Stadium to find out.

As I merge onto I-93 toward Foxboro, it's clear that the base Mini isn't intended to win any drag races. With only 115 horsepower under the hood, you need to flog it like a mule to get anywhere. Yet even with fifteen-inch wheels and relatively unaggressive tires, behind the wheel you still feel as if you could stay with a Mustang on a twisty road. Yes, illusion is everything. But this misses the point. Because the Mini's forte, even in its more powerful supercharged guises, isn't outright speed but agile, precise handling. As we roll past the orange cones delineating the temporary lanes on Route 1 near the stadium, the Mini says, "How about we slalom?" The biggest downer is the motor homes and 4x4's that blot out the sunshine.

While I consider myself a knowledgeable tailgater, I recognize that an evaluation such as this should involve a specialist, an authority with the experience necessary to inject the proceedings with the proper gravitas. So I recruit Kerry Byrne. Founder of the Web site ColdHardFootballFacts.com, Byrne drives a Ford Ranger with a license plate that reads, *PIGSKN*. His tailgating buddies call themselves the "225 Club," so named for the weight of the smallest member. Just how serious is Byrne about his tailgating? "I probably shouldn't admit the extent of my depravity," he says, "but I've tailgated at a summer scrimmage before." We convoy into the parking lot a full four hours before game time, the Mini flanked by Byrne's Ranger and his mother's hulking four-door F-150.

It must be said that tailgating with a Mini forces some tough decisions on the equipment front. (Its trunk is only 5.8 cubic



■ The Mini's tailgate opens from below the drop top. Closed, it serves as a trunk. Open, it's a party platform.

But go for the supercharged Cooper S with the John Cooper Works Tuning Kit and you're talking more than \$32,000.

But why shell out thousands of dollars for more power when the convertible's staid personality is so attuned to chillin'? With the top down and music blaring through the Harman Kardon sound system, the little guy puts out the kind of wel-

coming vibe that encourages passersby to join the party. A sort of what's-mine-is-yours chumminess seems to waft over lot P10. One fellow Pats fan swings by our table, stares at the Mini, snags a chunk of kangaroo off the grill, and washes it down with a gulp of El Toro tequila, which I bought not for its quality but because its cap is shaped like a sombrero.

By the time kickoff approaches, the little car has become as much a part of the scene as the pickups that dominate the parking lot. The Mini is like the little brother who begs to play in a pickup basketball game, makes a few shots, and wins the begrudging respect of the big kids. But the problem with playing against the big boys is that when Little Brother gets treated like a peer, eventually he's gonna get hurt.

In our case, that moment comes when we decide to see if the tailgate weight warning is accurate. The notice says that the maximum load is 176 pounds, which, as a seating option, essentially relegates it to women and Europeans. Nonetheless, I gingerly rest my 190 pounds on the tailgate, kick my feet out, and brace for something bad to happen. My seat holds fast. Score one for the Mini.

Our ride seems invincible. In fact, I'll bet that wussy warning was dreamed up by lawyers to keep people from falling off and filing lawsuits. So we decide to push it further—a lot further. Kerry and my buddy Murph squeeze their combined 470 pounds onto the Mini's poor tailgate.

It doesn't take long—perhaps a tenth of a second. Snap! The support cable blows like a tendon.

Mini, you may have heart, but in the end, you just weren't meant to play in this league. 🐾

feet.) So I've brought only the bare minimum: a small propane grill (which only fit on the backseat), a soft-sided cooler, a souvenir-sized football to toss around, and a selection of strange meats and sausages—kangaroo, anyone?

While Byrne sets up his four-foot grill, turkey fryer, eight-foot table, four-foot table, chairs, cooler, second cooler, cast-iron skillets, and condiment bar, I meekly place my propane grill on the Mini's tailgate. It's a perfect fit. Soon enough, Kerry is walking around with plates of buffalo-fried turkey, buffalo kangaroo, and buffalo quail. I decide to match him by throwing a two-foot long kielbasa on my grill. All is going well until I realize that the plastic lining of the Mini's tailgate seems to be getting hot. Quite hot. The Mini may be able to hang with the big boys, but apparently, it can't grill with them.

I decide to leave the grilling to the 225 Club and focus on what I do best—throwing the football around and eating their food. Meanwhile, at the other end of the car, Byrne's mother, Nancy, takes a seat behind the wheel. Within a couple minutes, she's speculating about making a trip to the Mini dealership. The Mini's cheeky joviality does that to you, even if you've grown up on American muscle cars. (Nancy allows that she learned how to drive on a four-speed Hemi 'Cuda.) The whimsical interior detailing—the giant, cartoonish speedometer, the exterior-colored trim, the row of airplane-style toggle switches for the interior controls—helps the Mini convince you it's a racy toy, when under the skin it's that most solemn of conveyances: an economy car designed by Germans (BMW) to look British. The convertible starts at a reasonable \$22,600.



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