

E12 M535i v E28 M535i

Shark Attack

Two old Motorsport rivals stand ready for battle.
Which one will be dead in the water?

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Photography Craig Pusey







E28 is the more modern car of the two, but also the least exciting in M535i format. Writer Everett prefers the Five to come without the bodykit. Interior (below) is cohesive.



OK, hands up if you really don't like the new Bangle-era BMWs. Maybe you think BMW has lost its way, though you could rightly say that it's making its best ever cars right now. A gloss black 530d manual on 19 inch rims for me, please.

During the '70s, many people believed BMW had lost the plot — the 2002 was replaced by the bigger and softer 3-Series, the well-respected E3 saloon supplanted by the wobbly 7-Series 'Mercedes beater'

(it was nothing of the sort) and the E12 5-Series was really just an upmarket Cortina. Seemingly, BMW had gone from making well-regarded drivers' cars to glossy mediocrity; a situation not helped by the underwhelming early 6-Series. The '80s saw a return to form with cars like the first M3.

The E12 5-Series in particular badly needed help. What had started out as a pretty good 2-litre 520i morphed into a range of thirsty, undergeared and rather noisy saloons that suffered from terrible wind noise, iffy reliability and very tricky on-limit handling. I think we can get away with saying that the E12 was a pretty awful car and very wide of the mark, compared to cars like the Opel Senator and Rover 3500. Not BMW's finest hour.

As far back as 1974 though, BMW Motorsport had been handbuilding hot rod 530i specials for a few select customers like Paddy Hopkirk and Jonathan Sieff, heir to the Marks and Spencer fortune. Motorsport basically took a plodding 525 saloon and

fitted the engine, gearbox and limited-slip diff from the 3-litre CSL, adding some proper suspension, wider wheels and Recaro seats.

Following the success of the 1978 635 CSi in lifting the battered reputation of the 6-Series, BMW followed suit in 1980 to give the E12 a final boost before the long-awaited and vastly improved E28 took over the following year. The company was fortunate because the 635 CSi was based on an E12 platform, so all the bits fit straight in on the production line, with no special workforce training or assembly disruption. The M535i was the first Motorsport series production car if you discount the M1, and production began in mid 1980, finishing in June 1981.

As you would expect, the M535i was a revelation. The thicker anti-roll bars, Bilstein gas shocks and lower, tougher springs with the limited-slip diff had transformed the 528i from a wallowing barge into something more like a CSL. It could still be a bit scary on the limit and on 195/70VR14 Michelins, you had

to tread lightly in the wet. But overall, it was a really fun car to drive hard. A proper BMW in other words, and not a motorised sofa.

The second generation M535i appeared almost four years later and like the E12, its brief was to try and plug the slow puncture in 5-Series sales in Germany. Although the E28 shared a similar outline to the E12, it is in fact a totally different car and nothing apart from the door skins and screen was carried over — a shame they didn't go the whole hog and totally restyle it. By the time it was four years old, the E28 looked like something out of the scriptures and the excellent new W124 Mercedes kicked the 5-Series right where it hurt.

The second M535i and its plain steel bumpered 535i brother used the same recipe of 3.5 cooking motor, Bilstein suspension and an LSD to improve on what was now a much more acceptable 528i. The E28 was lighter than the E12 by some 100 kilos model-for-model, because the E12's underpinnings were seemingly designed and built in a shipyard, and the completely redesigned suspension made it a decent driver's car at long last. Even so, BMW saw fit to blight the poor thing with the square-shouldered TRX tyre, with which the semi-trailing arm suspension couldn't really cope. Sales of E28 body panels must have been pretty strong after this one appeared.

History records the E12 M535i as being a legend and the second E28 version a bit of a let down — but is this true? Is the E12 really faster and more entertaining? It's time to find out.

Here we are, parked up in a lay-by off the A14 near Bury St Edmunds looking at a pair of M535i motors, nose-to-nose, scowling at each other with the kind of 'you lookin' at me?' attitude BMWs haven't had for a long time. The E12 shape is not entirely successful — viewed from the rear three-quarters, it has the same saggy-arsed tail styling that blighted the E23 7-Series, but the M535i hides it with the fat tail spoiler. The wheels >





This was the top performance model E12 and it's more aggressive than the E28; colour is fine but it would look better in black or white. Interior is very '70s, with nice Recaros.



are well inset into the arches and the front spoiler looks like the add-on that it is. For all that though, the E12 M535i looks quite tough, but would look tougher still in black or white with the tri-colour Motorsport stripes, as opposed to the rare and classy Reseda Green of Paul Hill's pristine example.

The E28 seems to be re-emerging from a £50 auction banger, as the E34 takes over the mantle of cheap smoker. The M535i



bodykit splits opinions, but overall I still prefer a dechromed car with body colour steel bumpers. The E28 is much better balanced as a shape than the E12 with squarer shoulders; the tail is more manly, the bonnet and grille much neater and the bigger outer headlamps and squatter grille improve it further. It's not as 'pretty' as an E34, but has stood the test of time and has an appeal of its own. Sat on genuine M5 BBS wheels — the original Metric M535i wheels should only be used as plant pots — the bodykitted E28 looks mean and muscular. The later interior is also a big improvement with a much more cohesive look, although it doesn't feel as airy as the older car.

Time to drive the cars then, and separate fact from fiction. First off is the E12. This used proper Recaro seats that are excellent and give you a commanding view over the bonnet. The first M535i initially feels a bit tippy-toed; the steering wheel feels a long way from the dash and it feels really old.



But after negotiating the first roundabout, you plant the throttle and off it goes with an eagerness, sound and fury you'll only find in a new M3 and it makes an E60 feel rather dull. I've never liked the dogleg gearbox, though. Compared to the standard five-speed overdrive, the shift feels vague and until you really get used to it, you have to be very careful not to hammer it into the wrong slot — fourth to third at 6000 rpm is not a good plan.

Handling in the wet is scary and it's a car you drive gingerly in bad conditions. In the dry though, it corners with moderate roll and the precise steering lets you turn into a roundabout exit and boot it, in the knowledge you'll get it back if it steps out — this one didn't and it felt small, light and chuckable. Brakes are powerful four-pot front callipers and the engine sings at 5000 rpm with real muscle all the way from 1000 rpm. In fact, there's little point in taking it much further than 5000 rpm, because the close ratio 'box



Both M535is develop 218 bhp but despite the urban myths, the E12 is not faster than the E28. E12 is more exciting, but the E28 is probably the better ownership proposition.

lets you keep it on the boil. It's quite noisy, but driving this car is always an occasion.

After the E12, the E28 feels much more refined and luxurious. The surprise though is that this later Motronic engine is even better than the old one, with just as much poke but sweeter revving. This one sang all the way to the redline in a way the older one wouldn't have liked. Despite the bar room legend though, the E12 is no faster than the later car. With identical 218 bhp, the same gearing, lighter weight but slightly bigger overall wheel/tyre diameter, this E28 had the edge over the older car in a straight drag race, though an E28 with the more common overdrive 'box might have struggled.

During our shoot, an E34 535i Sport turned up and tried to race us. Big mistake, because the two oldies marched away from it, and an Alpina B9 would have been faster still. Without the nasty Metric tyres, the second M535i is a superb handling car. It does roll more than the E12 and could do with stiffer anti-roll bars from the M5. Also, despite the fancy hydraulic servo, E28 brakes aren't as good as the old E12 set-up — ultimate stopping power is just as good, but the older brakes feel better.

Our verdict? The E12 looks and feels more special because really, it's a throwback from the '70s and feels more like a saloon 3-litre CSL than an M5. It's deservedly found a place in BMW's hall of fame because it's really good. The trouble would be finding one now that's fit for anything other than landfill. Most of them have taken their last swing on a scrapyards crane and many of those that are left are in dire condition — and before you ask, this pristine one isn't for sale.

The E28 is a better proposition and as they were built so much better, your chances of finding a good one are higher. Parts are everywhere, it's a nicer car to live with and it's something you could use regularly. With performance to match an E30 M3 and prices around £2000 for a good one, you'd need a pretty compelling reason not to buy the next best thing to sliced bread... or an M5. ○

