

The Zen of Buffing

October 2011

Suprise

All things come to an end, good or not. Sometimes we get to choose; sometimes we don't know that we're doing something for the last time until it's over. In this case, I've chosen this to be my last regularly scheduled article for our club newsletter. You can read more in the accompanying article elsewhere in this issue.

So... yet another article about buffing paint? Well yeah, actually. I got the opportunity to do some serious buffing and polishing on someone's Miata recently and I took some pictures along the way to show you what's possible... and what's not. I'll do my best to not bore you. Perhaps you can see what's possible with your own car!

First, a little background about the car: a 2001 Emerald Green Mica. It was repainted early in its life, but the color and softness of the paint is very much like it came from Mazda. The car has some high miles and has been treated very well mechanically, but suffered the usual chips, swirls and scratches of a daily driver with +100K miles.

Let's start with some **before** pictures:

Exhibit 1 – Scraped nose & lower lip

As you can see in the picture above, the nose had seen some wear and scratching from a few bumps to the lower lip below the license plate. This is a great time to say that if the scratch is into the metal, or plastic in this case, you aren't going to eliminate it entirely by buffing. However, you might be surprised what little is left to be touched up!

Exhibit 2 – Scratching and swirls on the top of the left front fender.

I used the trouble light to highlight the swirls and scratches common to most of the car. If you can't catch you fingernail in the scratches, chances are they'll come out entirely. The key here is the right compound.

Exhibit 3 – Lots of scratching on the trunk lid.

These scratches weren't deep enough to catch a fingernail, but they were in multiple directions. Scratching like this usually comes from sitting objects on the paint, especially when the paint is dirty and you get grit trapped between the object and the paint.

The process:

After a thorough wash, I began claying the car with a Meguiars Clay Bar. I think this was one of the bars I bought from Ed Parsons. I used car wash solution for the lube. The dark spots in the clay are embedded dirt removed from the paint, even AFTER it was washed! See below:

Exhibit 4 – Clay bar pulling the dirt out of the paint

Once the washing and claying was completed, it was time to start the buffing process. I used painters tape and taped off a section of the left front fender so I could test the compound and pad I planned to use on the paint. In this case, I used Meguiars Ultimate Compound on a cutting pad, followed by their Ultimate Polish on a polishing pad. I can't recommend those items highly enough... and they work just as well by hand.

You can easily see the difference in the picture below. It was even more pronounced in person! It literally looked as if we'd peeled a layer of grayness off the paint. This is a great method to use to test what you plan to do so you can see the result. After you're all done, it's hard to remember what it looked like when you started.

Exhibit 5 – Taped and a little "test" polishing

Next up was doing the whole car, a panel at a time. It's great to see the results so quickly and to make such a difference. Some areas require more polishing time, or multiple passes to remove the oxidation, scratches and swirling. Don't forget to do the headlights and taillights (I forgot to take pictures of those). The difference in the headlights was almost as big as you see with the paint.

Once the car was completely polished, I applied 2 coats of Collinite Insulator Wax, available locally at The Andersons. It's a nice long-lasting wax that goes on and off really easy... as long as you apply it THIN.

Of course, the headlights and taillights were done along with the door jams. Interestingly, I couldn't do anything with the side mirrors. The side mirrors on the early NBs were not clear coated from the factory. Don't ask me why. If your side mirrors are dull and don't polish up, they are likely base-coated without clear coat. A little clear coat spray from the local auto parts store will gloss them up like the rest of the paint. Later NBs don't have this issue.

So how long did this take? I recall having about 12-14 hours in it from the washing, claying, polishing and waxing. Not to mention I cleaned up the engine bay and did some light work on the interior.

Now for the **after** pictures...

Remember that left front fender? Everything came out as smooth as could be. See the picture below. Notice those nice reflections? :O)

Exhibit 6 – Left front fender after polishing

Next up is that trunk lid. Admittedly, it took quite a few passes to get cleared up. Just in case you wouldn't believe the difference, I taped off a square so it would show up in the after pictures.

Exhibit 7 – Polished trunk with a little of the original condition showing

Here's another "after" picture of the trunk lid, this time from the same angle as the "before" picture. Gotta love the reflections and color.

Exhibit 8 – Trunk lid after polish and wax

Lastly, here's the nose and lower lip after all the polishing. Most of it came out, but certainly there's some left that are just too deep for polishing to remove. At least it looks much better. At this point, you can see exactly what would need to be touched up to hide the original damage.

Exhibit 9 – The nose and lower lip after polishing

As you can see, a lot is possible. There's no reason not to address the condition of your car's paint if you want to. The process does take time, but isn't beyond the limits of most do-it-yourselfers. And while power tools and pads are a great help, elbow grease can do the same job most of the time, it just takes longer.

I hope these articles have been of some help or enjoyment, with perhaps a chuckle or two along the way. Thanks for indulging my writing habit, I've enjoyed it – and still may on occasion. You never know when you might find another article from me on these pages... :O)

Disclaimer: You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find... that you get what you need. – Mick Jagger & the Rolling Stones