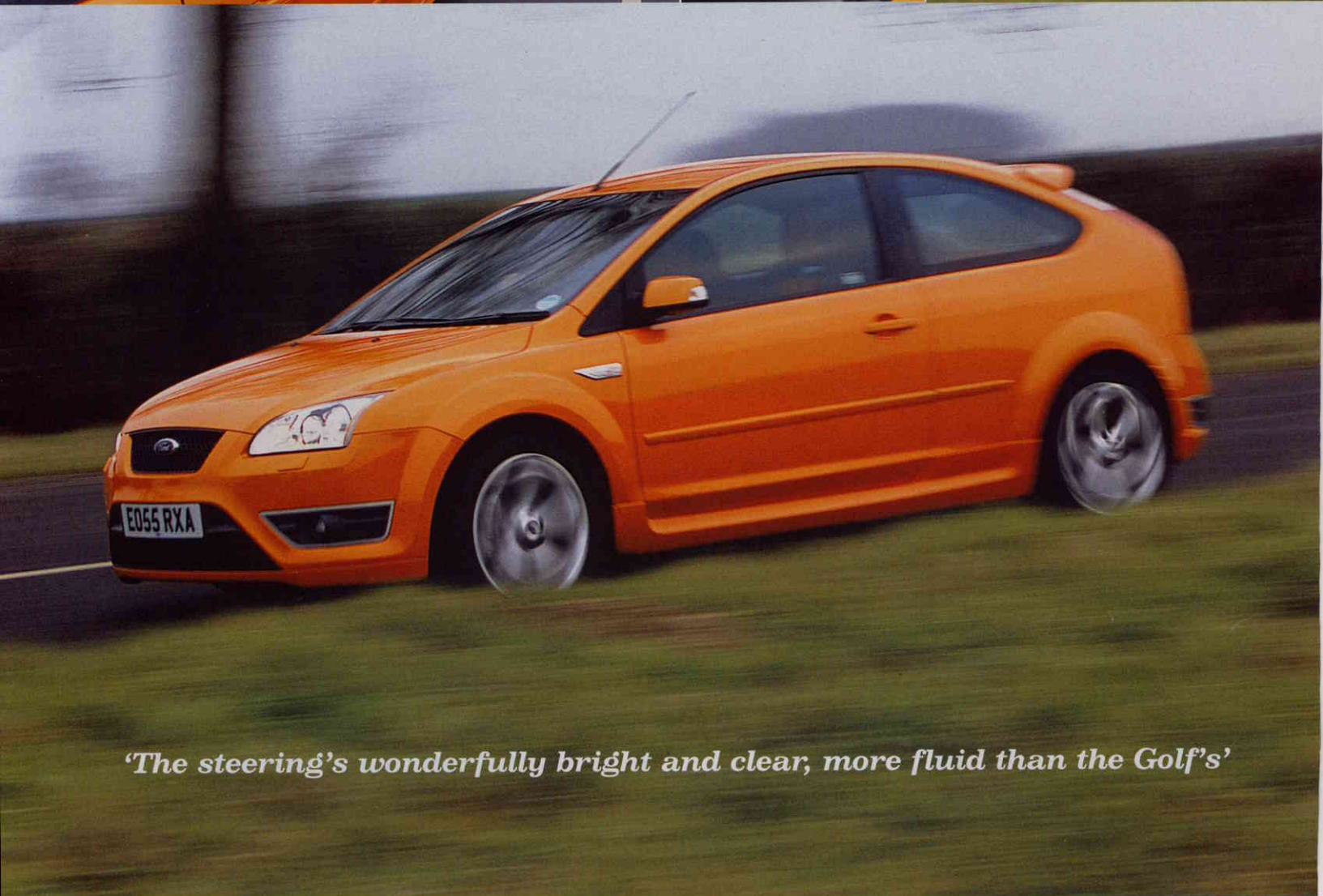


SHOW TIME

Ford's answer to the Golf GTI
is the dazzling, turbocharged
Focus ST. Has our favourite
hatch met its match? ➔





'The steering's wonderfully bright and clear, more fluid than the Golf's'

As I left the office late on Friday evening, I was content that I had finally chosen a winner. It had been close, *sooo* close, but one of them had to win and the Golf was the one. By the time I'd driven the Focus the 20 miles home, however, I was in judicial turmoil once more. All the previous hours of solid reasoning, all the conclusions were scattered to the four winds like a manuscript in an office fan. The Focus does that to you. Its sheer character makes you forget rationality, logic and carefully weighed arguments. It's pearlescent orange, for crying out loud. The only other car that people buy in that sort of tangerine dream is a Lamborghini. And how many people have contemplated a Murciélago entirely rationally?

But let's go back to the beginning, when both cars arrived in the car park on a slightly misty January morning and see if we can't go through it all again, make sense of it, and finally arrive at a definitive conclusion.

Sitting in the slightly damp gloom, the Golf has an air of self-assurance, almost smugness about it. Some people, I suspect, would quite enjoy seeing the look of content wiped from its honeycomb grille. So far it has battled against all its rivals and emerged victorious, restoring the rightful lustre to the GTI badge. However, it hasn't won every heart. Too competent, too complete... *too boring*, some say.

Boring isn't a word that springs to mind when the Golf's latest challenger, the ST, hits you squarely between the eyes. Colour apart, it's a more interesting, less MPV-like shape than the Golf. The sloping rear disguises the car's bulk, while the lower skirts and grille suck it to the

tarmac. The wing on top of the rear window remains the right side of Max Power yet makes the Golf's nod in the general aerodynamic direction look a bit half-hearted. The Ford has some nice details too, such as the silver ST flashes on the front arches' epaulettes, that set it apart from its lesser siblings. The GTI has to make do with some menacing red piping and a rear badge, but then some people don't want the thumbs-up from every Nova they pass. This Golf's 17in wheels don't quite lend the fighting stance or visual appeal of the optional 18in items either, while the ST has deliciously designed 18in rims as standard...

If there's one thing VW can be guaranteed to do well, however, it's a quality interior. The blue glow from the dials, the reassuring clinch from the tartan sports seats, the perfectly sized semi-flat-bottomed steering wheel – it all feels like coming home after a long time away. Yet here



too the Focus has the Golf covered. The ST's dashboard is simple and yet the controls are pleasing to the touch. The piano black screen of the Sony stereo blends beautifully and even the three dash-top dials, which have the most potential for looking tacky, manage to avoid the Skyline image of technological excess. Also, if you're a sucker for labels, and it seems that just having the name Recaro stitched behind your shoulder-blades makes the seats hug a little tighter, then you'll feel very comfy in the ST. Or at least you would if the seats weren't so lofty. No matter what shape of road tester got into the ST, all instinctively tried to make the seat lower – and then looked to see how many magazines were stuck underneath when it refused to sink. It's especially obvious after you've enjoyed VW's fantastically adjustable position.

The B660 and its multitudinous tributaries snake away almost from our doorstep at Evo

Towers. It's a road network that has nigh on legendary status in the office and carries more stories of derring-do, close scrapes and simply brilliant drives than you could get through in an entire week of evenings in the pub. The open curves, tightening turns, fast crests and unsettling bumps seem to be built specifically for road testing, so that's where we're headed, me in the Focus, motoring editor Barker in the Golf.

The Ford's 2.5-litre turbocharged five-cylinder is wonderfully relaxed and tractable, its huge 236lb ft of torque providing seemingly any-gear urge. There's a warbling bass from the two tail-pipes too, a feathered throttle providing an accompanying series of whistles and sighs from the turbo.

A straight opens out and the Golf's bulbous rump follows the call of Barker's right foot so I let the ST have the full lot and give chase.

Above: long gone are the days when there was a gulf in quality between a VW and a Ford; today's Focus ST is more than able to stand comparison with the latest Golf GTI. Only flaw is that the Recaro seats are set too high. Opposite page: the cars are well-matched for cross-country pace, too

There's a momentary pause at lower revs as the turbo rouses itself, then all 222bhp gallop their way to the front tyres. The leather-trimmed steering wheel writhes in your hands as the Continentals struggle to contain the power, but it's more an indication of the forces at work than an incitement to back off. As we notch another ratio (the Focus's gearbox has a longer throw than the stubby gearlever would suggest, but it's not averse to being hustled and the last small snick as it engages is very satisfying) there's an encouraging pop from the exhaust on the overrun and the Golf's slender advantage has been wiped out.

The sun's starting to burn off the early mist ➔

[Ford Focus ST v VW Golf GTI]

Golf feels more precise than Focus, keeps body-roll more firmly in check, but both cars huge fun. GTI interior (below) still impressive, turbo 'four' delivers solid urge. Octavia (right) uses GTI mechanicals



now and it's threatening to turn into a bright winter's day. The roads are still a little greasy as we exit a village but the Focus is turning through the first shallow sweeps with a keenness I doubt even the Golf can match. The steering is wonderfully bright and clear, more fluid than the VW's tightly controlled helm. The reaction to any movements either side of the dead-ahead is instantaneous, making even seven-tenths progress a wonderfully absorbing process. The road's troughs, cambers and bumps tend to tug and distract the ST's nose but it all enlivens the experience while the ride remains remarkably



composed and comfortable throughout. The tighter the turns become and the harder you go into them, the more the ST begins to roll on its supple set-up. The lean makes the centre of gravity feel relatively high and towards the front of the car, and understeer arrives earlier than you expect. On a track you can chuck it in, lift off and get the rear working, happily holding big slides. On the road, where there isn't room for those sort of antics, it's best to play the throttle to tease out more front-end grip until the apex, then feed in the power as the corner opens and the front wheels straighten, the well-judged ESP allowing a fraction of wheelspin, all to the accompaniment of that wonderfully gargling soundtrack. Time to give the Golf a blast.

The diesel-like clatter as you twist the key isn't a great start, but once you're up and running you soon remember what a remarkable, almost un-turbo-like engine this is. The in-line four can't match the five's Quattro-esque beat, but it does have a pleasingly hard-edged, free-revving bark to it and it fizzles through its mid-range. As pace increases, all the controls seem just a touch more precise and incisive in their actions. Meanwhile, the whole chassis is jiggling over the bumps and reading the road's Braille where it was merely the steering wheel talking in the Focus. The feedback reveals a tautness that wasn't present in the Ford's set-up and yet the GTI's remarkable suspension never crashes. It appears to have all its mass underneath you, inches off the road; through one particularly brutal section of the six-sixty the Golf feels absolutely nailed to the tarmac.

You attack in the GTI, slamming through apexes, flying over bumps and crests, the low-speed jiggling now translating into big confidence at speed. It's an intense experience, and you get sucked further and further in. It's not as malleable as the Focus, but the cornering stance is still throttle-adjustable; the difference is that in the Golf you're trimming your lines rather counteracting understeer.

We thrap down to Millbrook to extract the figures. The Focus realises we're doing a standing start and extends its rev-range by 500rpm to 7000rpm, which is thoughtful, but both hit 60mph in an impressive 6.7 seconds. Above third gear it isn't worth wringing the final 500rpm from the Golf, whereas the Focus thrives on its top-end power; as a result the GTI is ➔

OCTAVIA VRS: A BARGAIN GTI?

This is a good car. The Focus ST in front isn't getting away and, earlier in the day, the Golf GTI was working hard to stay in touch. Not surprising given that the engine beneath the bonnet of this Skoda is the same as that in the Golf – the 197bhp, light-pressure-turbo 2-litre unit. The Octavia vRS shares the VW's underpinnings and floorpan too, so is, in effect, a GTI incognito. Sure, it doesn't have the badge, but there are compensations beyond five doors and a cavernous boot, principally a price of £17,500 – almost £2500 less than the three-door GTI.

There's got to be a catch, and there is. It's not that the Octavia looks frumpy in profile, or has a wide, laid-back chrome grille that makes it look like a VW Jetta Vanden Plas. You'd expect to see Octavias delivering minor delegates to a European

parliament conference,' opined young Catchpole, astutely. Still, you could see its unsporting stance and young-fogey styling as the perfect 'stealth' trim.

The vRS rarely puts a wheel wrong on a demanding road, riding firmly but with decent suppleness, rolling a little more than expected in the corners but biting through dampness to deliver confident turn-in. And yet after a couple of hours of brisk driving, you're losing interest.

There's a special quality that

makes the best fast hatches shine and it's hard-won by engineers concentrating on refining the nuances of steering feel and response, chassis poise and adjustability. The Octavia's engineers have instead chased unflappable, secure handling, easy operation and long-distance comfort, which is absolutely right because this is a family car, and a very good one, a very German one. It's not an absorbing, characterful or passionate fast hatch, though.

John Barker

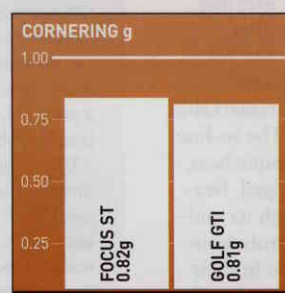


Out of leftfield comes an intriguing alternative to Focus and Golf: the £17,500 Octavia vRS five-door hatch

+ ROAD TEST DATA +

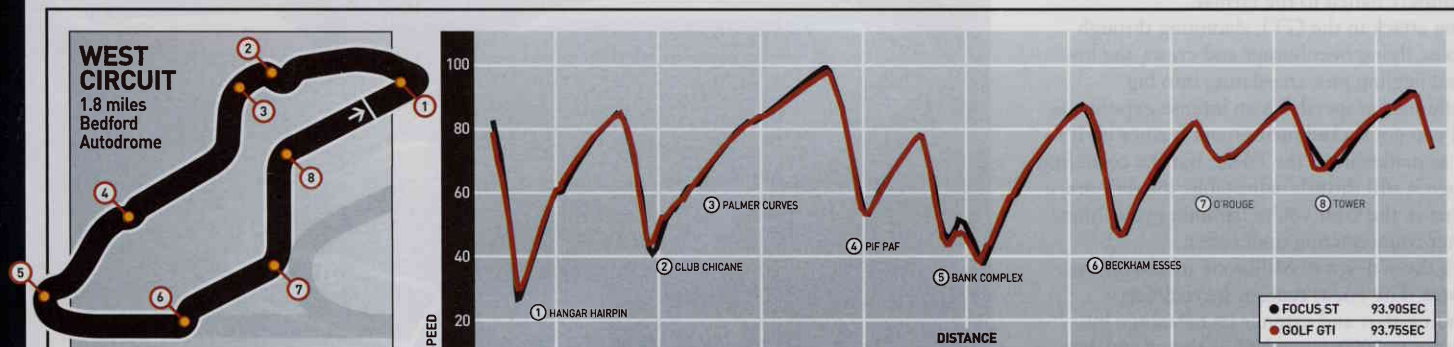
SPECIFICATION

	FOCUS ST	GOLF GTI
Engine	In-line 5-cyl	In-line 4-cyl
Location	Front, transverse	Front, transverse
Displacement	2522cc	1984cc
Bore x stroke	83.0mm x 93.2mm	82.5mm x 92.8mm
Cylinder block	Aluminium alloy	Aluminium alloy
Cylinder head	Aluminium alloy, dohc, four valves per cylinder	Aluminium alloy, dohc, four valves per cylinder
Fuel and ignition	Electronic engine management, multipoint sequential fuel injection, turbo	Electronic engine management, direct petrol injection, turbo
Max power	222bhp @ 6000rpm	197bhp @ 5100rpm
Max torque	236lb ft @ 1600rpm	207bhp @ 1800rpm
Transmission	Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive	Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
Front suspension	MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear Suspension	Independent 'short-long arm' control blade multi-link system	Independent four-link system, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, PAS	Rack and pinion, PAS
Brakes	Ventilated discs front, solid rear (320mm fr, 280mm rear) ABS, EBD, EBA and ESP	Ventilated discs front and rear (312mm front, 286mm rear) ABS, EBD and ESP
Wheels	8 x 18in, aluminium alloy	7.5 x 17in, aluminium alloy
Tyres	225/40 R18 Continental SportContact2	225/45 R17 Bridgestone Potenza RE050
Weight (kerb)	1392kg	1336kg
Power-to-weight	162bhp per ton	150bhp per ton
Basic price	£17,495	£20,335
Price as tested	£19,190	£22,350
Extras fitted	ST2 pack (Xenons, 6CD hi-fi, etc £1000), Elec Orange paint (£695)	Satnav (£1655), multi-function steering wheel (£350)
Insurance group	17	17
On sale	Now	Now



	FORD FOCUS ST	VW GOLF GTI
PERFORMANCE		
ACCELERATION TIMES		
0-30	2.7	2.8
0-40	4.0	4.0
0-50	5.2	5.2
0-60	6.7	6.7
0-70	8.7	9.0
0-80	10.7	11.2
0-90	13.3	14.5
0-100	16.3	18.2
0-110	19.8	23.5
0-120	25.1	31.5
1/4 MILE		
secs	15.2	15.4
speed	96.3	92.6
IN-GEAR TIMES		
3rd		
20-40	3.0	3.3
30-50	2.9	3.1
40-60	3.1	3.3
50-70	3.4	3.6
4th		
30-50	3.8	4.2
40-60	3.9	4.4
50-70	4.1	4.7
60-80	4.5	5.0
70-90	4.9	5.5
80-100	5.7	6.6
90-110	6.8	8.7
5th		
30-50	5.1	5.9
40-60	5.0	5.6
50-70	5.2	6.1
60-80	5.6	6.6
70-90	6.0	7.3
80-100	6.6	8.2
6th		
40-60	6.7	7.9
50-70	6.8	7.4
60-80	7.2	8.3
70-90	8.0	9.4
80-100	8.9	11.1
BRAKING		
100-0	4.6	4.4
dist. ft	320	320
TOP SPEED		
Average	143	135

0-100-0



▲ Not that surprising how similar the lap times are, the Golf felt as it did on the road – positive, but without much adjustability. The Focus gets looser and squidgier under pressure but hits higher speeds. The ESP could be turned off completely on the Focus, but even if you strangled the Golf's nanny it would still trigger if you trail-braked into O'Rouge or Tower.



Above: circuit laps found Golf and Focus as well-matched as they were on the road, though the Ford was significantly more playful – the GTI's electronic nanny was always lurking in the background. Right: ST's turbo 'five' packs a muscular 222bhp

lagging behind at the end of the mile straight, topping out at 124mph where the ST hits 130.

Hauling down from high speeds, the brakes of both cars display curious traits. The Golf's feel fine until you really push them, when it feels as though there's suddenly a block under the pedal obstructing the last third of the travel. The Focus's middle pedal has a slightly longer action and again is fine until you push for the final bite, when the over-sensitive emergency braking mode kicks in. Both cars' systems stand up well, however, when we charge back up to Bedford Autodrome and put them round the West circuit at the end of the afternoon.

So, now that we've reached the point where the sunset is bathing the sky above the B660 in layers of red and orange and we have to make a decision, is it any clearer which car wins? The Focus has a wonderful way of getting under your skin; here at last is an ST model that lives up to the sporting brand that Ford has been working so hard to establish. The (£695 extra) Electric Orange paint will appeal to the extrovert, the sonorous five-pot and discounted prices (Google revealed at least £2K off any of the three trim levels) will appeal to all. It's relaxed and enjoyable at speeds where the Golf's detractors brand the GTI as boring. But then you find yourself attacking a deserted road in the VW and you revel in the sheer brilliance that its fantastically well-resolved chassis is capable of. At pace the GTI is anything but boring. Despite the ST's emotional appeal to the jury on the drive home, the GTI still wins (and gets half a star more for its brilliant chassis), but if you're buying a hot hatch in 2006 we'd quite understand if the Focus seduced you.



'The Focus gets under your skin. Here at last is an ST model that lives up to the sporting brand'



EVO RATING

Ford Focus ST

★★★★1/2

VW Golf GTI

★★★★★