

R32 *Versus* GTI



It's the most eagerly awaited prize-fight of the year, but which Mk5 will come out on top: the back road blitzin' GTI or the howlin' über cruisin' R32? Seconds out, round one...!

These are amazing times for Golf enthusiasts. After 13 years of unsatisfying GTIs we've finally been given a car worthy of the famous moniker. A car unashamedly lauded across the board as the true successor to the legendary Mk1 and 2 models. And that's not all...

Because it seems Wolfsburg has finally got the big capacity Golf formula right. After the VR6's disappointing debut in the Mk3 Golf, followed by the dreadful Mk4 V6 4Motion, VW V6 cars seemed to be a lost cause – the cracking Corrado aside. But then along came the first generation R32. How good was it?

Good enough to have VW nuts everywhere salivating at the prospect of the Mk5 version.

Which leaves something of a delicious conundrum. Four or six cylinders, Sir? Forced induction or natural aspiration? Fizz-bang aggression or deep chested thump? And finally, is two or four-wheel drive the best real world option? They're questions that'll be asked for years to come, but for now we've taken both cars and put them head-to-head on a test track in Surrey, then opened up the new R32 on a continent-crushing cruise across Europe. Can the newbie really impress more than the brilliant GTI on both counts?

It'll have its work cut out. With the Mk5's improved steering and multi-link rear suspension hooked up to the potent 197bhp 2.0-litre TFSI four, the GTI accelerates and corners with true gusto. From 1800rpm the surge of power is almost unrelenting, the extra kick at 4000rpm through to 7000 seeing the 1336kg hatch laying waste to all but the most potent machinery. It's quick, make no mistake, and a hoot round Chobham.

Backed up by a keen, gruff exhaust note reminiscent of the original Mk1 you feel every bit the competitive road racer, the six-speed gearbox slotting home with a precision almost as positive as the perfectly weighted steering (evoking memories of the Corrado VR6's deft helm). Simply choose a gear, pick a line through the corner, turn in and smile – the GTI



Golf R32

Engine: 3189cc V6 24 valve

Power: 246bhp@6300rpm

Torque: 236lb.ft@2500rpm

Weight: 1510kg

Power to weight ratio: 163bhp per tonne

0-62mph: 6.3 seconds (two up, three quarter tank)

Max speed: 155mph (claimed)

Basic price: £23,745

Brakes: 345mm (front) 310mm (rear)

Wheels: 8x18 inch Zolder alloys, 225/40ZR18 Michelin Pilot Exaltos

Golf GTI

Engine: 1984cc FSI Turbo 20 valve

Power: 197bhp@5100rpm

Torque: 207lb.ft@1800rpm

Weight: 1336kg

Power to weight ratio: 147bhp per tonne

0-62mph: 7.0 seconds (one up, half tank)

Max speed: 135mph (claimed)

Basic price: £19,995

Brakes: 312mm (front) 286mm (rear)

Wheels: 8x18 inch Monza II alloys, 225/40ZR18 Conti Sport Contact IIs



Above: clearly related, but which Golf is best? **Below:** mixed grille – but can R32 ever beat the legend?



will dig in and stick to its line every time.

Okay, our car's fitted with VW's optional Monza II alloys, which bring a little Lambo-style flair to the profile, yet though the big 18s undoubtedly enhance grip they also take some of the subtlety out of the GTI's ride. It's never nervous or fidgety, but you feel every road imperfection and the Conti Sport Contacts aren't the quietest when it comes to road noise. Still, it all adds to the GTI's 'connected' feel and endows the car with a real 'take me by the scruff of the neck' attitude.

Which makes back road blitzing and test tracks the GTI's natural stomping grounds, though long motorway journeys are less enjoyable. Don't get us wrong, this isn't overly-hard-coilover uncomfortable, it's just that it always wants to be let off its leash and attack a corner at full pelt, which can be a little tiring.

Which is where the R32 enters the fray. At first glance you instinctively know the exec-looking Golf will be more cruiser than terrier, the chrome detailing enthusing a more mature approach to the GTI's sportier red trim. It's cheeky upstart versus worldly-wise 30-something, yet the factory styling, as always, is subjective – anyway, we all know what can be done with a little imagination and effort.

But those neatly spaced fat tail-pipes are definitely a hit, the rear view probably the R32's strong point and the GTI's weakest. Still, give



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us the latter's alloys over the R32's overly fussy Zolder 18s any day, though we'd swap the GTI's Contis for the R's Michelins in an instant.

It's not a grip issue – both brands perform well and it's an unfair comparison given the six-pot's 4wd advantage – but rather that road noise concern. Whether it's the GTI's harder spring set-up or just the tyres themselves we're unsure, but the only sound you'll concern yourself with in the R is from those frankly bellowing tail-pipes.

So you thought the first generation R32 sounded good huh? Forget it, the new car is the closest thing to a NASCAR racer we've heard, a fierce muscle car cacophony that screams to 4000 revs then hits a swansong a highly tuned V8 would be proud of to the redline. Pulling into car parks you find yourself childishly prodding the accelerator, and long tunnels with the windows down are out of this world.

But can it match the GTI's cross-country ability? Well, yes and no. Firstly it's 174kg heavier, but to be honest you're hard pushed to notice most of the time. And despite the big engine there isn't a hint of understeer, even pushing hard into a bend. Indeed, the R32 just grips and grips, and yes, you can manhandle it just as much as the GTI, even if it does go about its business in a slightly more artificial way. Still, on a daily basis the R32's ride just trumps the GTI's – it's just as accomplished at

containing body roll and passing information to the driver, but absorbs road imperfections more convincingly.

Nonetheless the steering, brakes and ride are seriously well sorted on both cars, so in essence it comes down to engine preference – oh, and that cruising question. During our 850 mile round trip to the Essen Show in Germany the R32 was the perfect long distance travelling companion. At a steady 90mph in

sixth all it took was a gentle squeeze on the accelerator and 110mph was an instant reality, the exhaust's bellow only making its presence known when asked.

And on our run back to Calais a prolonged stint at 145mph on the Autobahn had the range-topper feeling absolutely rock solid, the big 345mm front brakes effortlessly wiping off speed. Add in a total reluctance to lose grip even when hitting the snow that punctuated



Above: if this was just about the wheels then the Monza 11 alloys (right) of the GTI would be our choice



Above: we reckon the R32 has the best looking stern. **Below:** Interior's are very similar (R32 top)



our return through Belgium and it represents a seriously accomplished package.

But then so does the GTI, albeit slightly more abrasive and peppier in its execution. The sensible side of you would opt for the factory 17s then languish in its supreme cornering abilities without compromising the ride slightly, but if that's what you crave you'd probably buy an R32 in the first place. Whereby the GTI demands fun 100 per cent of the time the R32 can bide its time before playtime, and that's the key difference.

After that the next move is obvious. More boost for the GTI is an obvious draw or a turbo

kit for the R32 perhaps? Whichever you choose you're in for the ride of your life. Guaranteed.

Round Two

So, a split decision then. Time to get another judge in: step forward Mr James Wallace...

We've had our Mk5 GTI on *The Golf+* fleet for the last eight months now and have clocked over 12,500 miles in that time, including 12 laps of the Nürburgring. There's no two ways about it, we're massive fans. And although the car was crying out for its first 10,000-mile service at the time of our comparison with the R32 it

wasn't disgraced by any means.

By casting aside the rubberiness of the Mk4 and blessing the GTI's electro pneumatic steering with more feel and better feedback than the conventional Mk5, the GTI remains the hot hatch benchmark despite stiff competition emerging from both Ford and Vauxhall. The steering and suspension feel eager yet forgiving across all sorts of terrain, positively demanding to be driven at a frenzied pace along every B-road, country lane, motorway and inner city ring road. The grippy, confidence inspiring front end with sharp, insistent turn-in is complemented by a lenient ESP traction control system that doesn't cut the fun unnecessarily – especially in the dry. On the frosty, greasy roads of wintertime November, however, scrabbling for grip adds a playful sense of menace to both tight second gear corners and standing starts (we clocked 0-60 in 7.09secs). The GTI wants to be a frantic yob all of the time, a perfect hot hatch in other words.

In fact, it feels a touch ill at ease when not driven at full commitment. Mind you, it's still far removed from the rigid ride quality of aftermarket lowered and uprated set-



ups, despite the optional 18in alloys. The aggressive, deep mesh filled bumper, red pin striped grille and those striking optional alloys, seem to steal the styling kudos gong from the more refined and mature looking R32. Short of ticking the option box for the Recaro seats in the R32 (£2345) the tartan cloth of the GTI has a poignant, timeless appeal that forges another important link with the original hot hatch. Without doubt the Mk5 GTI is a focused, capable driver's car wrapped in perfectly usable everyday packaging. But that gung ho nature means it's not quite as exploitable or usable as its bigger brother...

Walk around the R32 for the first time and you can't help but feel a little downhearted by its styling. Aside from the twin centre exit tailpipes it seems to have lost that factory one-off feel that the Mk4 R32 used as a major selling point. Its individuality is guaranteed though, as Volkswagen has already sold all of the first year's supply of 450 examples.

"Handling wise the R32 is every bit the equal of the GTI, and then some"

With a £4000 price premium over the GTI it really is in a hatchback class of its own. Open the door, squeeze into the supportive, optional leather seats (£645) of our test car and the only internal detail separating it from the GTI is the turned aluminium trim that occupies the centre console and door panel recesses

and the 'R' insignia on the identical, flat-bottomed and chunky steering wheel.

Twist the key though, and everything becomes

much clearer. This is more than a Volkswagen Golf, it's an event! The aural talent and soul of the 247bhp, 3.2-litre 24-valve V6 engine is worth the price premium alone. You just can't help but blip the throttle as you change down.

Handling wise it's every bit the equal of the GTI, and then some. The Haldex, multiplate clutch and 4WD system is simply amazing and considering the increased mass of the R32 it launches from the line with explosive vigour, while remaining nimble and alert through the twisty sections. ESP on or off wheel spin and

torquesteer is non-existent. It feels even more committed and confidence inspiring than the GTI. Granted that planted, unbreakable traction is a huge bonus, but it somehow makes the R32 slightly less entertaining.

The six-pot is undoubtedly quicker across country in the right hands, but something about the flow and feel of the GTI makes it more challenging and raw. If you've got the bottle to unstick the R, on public roads, you'll be travelling so fast that you'll probably be asking for trouble. But you'd have to be extremely committed to push that far beyond its abilities.

So, which one? If I wanted an everyday, junior supercar with rock solid dynamics and kudos by the bucketload the R32 is hard to argue with. But if I was going to tune it, then the GTI would certainly get the thumbs up. Cost effective 270+bhp conversions already exist with 300bhp possible for less than 3k, but that four-cylinder lump will never rival the presence and character of the R32's six-pot war cry. Only trouble is V6 tuning doesn't come cheap and neither does the base spec R32 at £23,745. It's horses for courses really, but either way you'll end up with a satisfied grin on your face.



Above: the GTI engine is buzzy and rewarding to drive. **Below:** R32 six-pot is aurally awesome





Photography: Dan Pullen



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