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*Motorfair
Preview*



First drive: Vauxhall's 4wd super-Cavalier



Exclusive club

The supercharged four-wheel-drive Golf Limited Edition is the fastest-ever road-going VW. It's also just about the most exclusive, with a production run limited to a mere 70. Ewen Page

with a top speed in excess of 140mph. drives it, photography by Peter Burn



VW MOTORSPORT WILL BE HAPPY merely to gain admission to Lancia's ballpark in 1990. It will bring the Hanover-based company great joy if a Golf Rallye regularly occupies one of the first three places in World Championship rallies next year. But is VW — which, after all, had the 1986 Driver's Champion in Kenneth Eriksson — setting its sights too low?

Delays in the production, sale and homologation of the Rallye have taken longer than expected. The car's debut on the RAC Rally in November has been postponed to a European event in March or April 1990. VW Motorsport claims extra time was needed to produce driveable, well-built homologation-special road cars. And although difficult to identify as a contributing factor, establishing a separate performance tuning and road car operation has also soaked up many hours. But these are mere excuses to the enthusiasts hoping VW can whip the pants off the rallying establishment.

"People must be fair, they must give us a chance," says VW Motorsport chief Klaus-Peter Rosorius. He acknowledges the tremendous pressure from within Germany for the Rallye to win events. He also knows that dusty, rugged rally victories will sell more competition parts to dusty, rugged privateers, and stimulate sales of leather-lined road cars to the Armani set.

The four-door Golf Limited Edition is the first example of Motorsport's drive into the hot road car market. Its significance lies not only in the fact that sales of all factory-tweaked cars and aftermarket performance work will help to finance the rally effort, but also because it is VW's fastest-ever car.

VW has plucked from the hat its first 16-valve, G60 supercharged, 1.8-litre engine producing 210bhp and combined it with the syncro four-wheel drive system. While the Limited Edition's specifications closely shadow the Rallye's, it's aimed at a different market. Luxury and high performance in a small car will attract the well heeled. So will its exclusivity — only 70 will be built and each is spoken for.

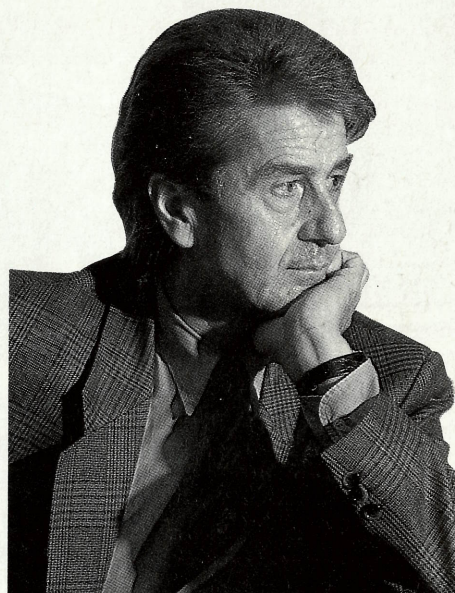
It makes sense for VW Motorsport to build limited-run road cars. The new factory has been designed to allow the competition and commercial activities to complement one another. The engine room is equipped with two dynos for testing race and rally powerplants, as well as developing and checking customer engines. The workshop is halved: one side for the factory-backed rally team, the other for assembly of road cars. Administration of both is handled under the one roof.

Some of the future product plans would ►



Syncro 4wd endows Limited Edition with stupendous handling, huge reserves of grip. Body treatment is understated, borrows from Rallye. New VW Motorsport factory caters for rally team (top) and road car assembly

Golf puts down 210bhp without drama, free of torque steer. VW Motorsport chief Rosorious (far right) says 230bhp is a possibility. 2-litre is on the way . . .



'On the autobahn, what was a pussycat slinking through town blossomed into a high-speed tourer with just one thing on its computerised brain: speed'

appear to be obvious. A two-door Limited Edition is in the pipeline, a 'worked' Passat syncro has been built and is undergoing tests and the next generation Polo (due to receive a G40 supercharger at launch) is also under scrutiny. But revving-up the chunky Corrado G60 — the most appropriate of the lot — is being made difficult by political conservatism.

The simplest conversion is to bolt in the Limited Edition's engine, but VW management is concerned about the average driver's ability to handle 210bhp through the front wheels. Four-wheel drive isn't an option at this stage, says Rosorious, because Karmann isn't in a position radically to alter its production schedules and capacity. But the spectre of the Vauxhall Calibra hangs heavy. It wouldn't be a great surprise if a super Corrado appeared once GM's coupe stabs a few marketing stomachs.

The Limited's power hike is the result of straightforward engineering, not radical re-tuning. Put simply, the 139bhp, non-catalyst GTI 16V engine receives a G60 blower with intercooler and shows its gratitude for improved intake and exhaust flow. Twin three-way cats are fitted. Rosorious says even more — in the region of 230bhp — is easily achievable. He isn't saying what the future-development G60, 16-valve, stretched-to-2-litres engine will deliver . . .

The 16-valve cylinder head is milled to increase compression to a higher 8.8 to one, still a relatively low figure to allow for the G60's maximum 22.62psi of intake pressure. The 'dirty' 16v GTI on sale in the UK uses slightly different camshaft profiles to those in the US-spec catalysed car. But while the Limited is fitted with convertors, it uses the non-cat cams. Rosorious says the difference is slight but the effect is obviously beneficial.

Increased power means more heat, so a large-capacity radiator is fitted. The new torque peak of 186lb ft (at 5000rpm) was considered too beefy for the regular transmission, so the Passat's five-speed is substituted — as it is in the Rallye. Ensuring that the Limited doesn't spit out gearbox internals at an embarrassing rate was important. So, too, was employing the syncro four-wheel drive system.

Its role is to deliver maximum traction with a minimum of unnecessary excitement. Causing pale-faced customers to dry clean their expensive, stylishly cut trousers regularly wasn't considered a strong selling point. Featuring a central viscous coupling and free-running rear hubs, the syncro system disengages drive to the rear wheels under braking. VW's patent on this and any system like it is the subject of a dispute with GM.

The value of putting all that power to the

ground evenly and without drama is evident after a few sharp accelerative bursts. You're left in no doubt that here is a car with more than ample power, but it all happens with reassuring poise. Dropping the progressive, light-feel clutch with 3000rpm on board merely tightens the steering, rather than sending man and machine off on a torque-steered tour through the shrubbery.

It's not hard to see why the late '80s have seen renewed interest in supercharging. Low-torque, small-capacity turbocharged engines are thrilling — but a real drag in certain situations. And while mechanical supercharging robs the engine of some power, the benefit of instant throttle response far outweighs the disadvantages. At least, it does in the Limited Edition.

The G60 acts as a pain killer for the driver, evening out the bottom end torque hollow occasionally present in high performance cars. From the 1000rpm tickover all the way to the 6750rpm redline, the Limited surges forward as though it were strapped to the front of a locomotive. Again, the sensation isn't one of stupefying G force, but something like a tap gradually being opened until the water pressure is at its maximum.

The heavy thrust from in front at 2500rpm slackens a little between 3500-4000rpm, ▶

◀ after which the 1.8 lifts its head and powers onwards once more. There's still plenty left when the tacho needle creeps into the red zone, but carrying the issue much farther brings in a rev-limited reminder that you're getting over excited. The engine would love to carry on, it seems, but the engineers know better . . .

This plateau-like torque curve cajoles the Limited into providing more than acceptable urban tractability. Crawling queues and repeated, short-duration acceleration are an unexpected joy, given that fun is pretty scarce under those conditions anyway. Shifting into fifth gear at a piffling 1200 revs brings nary a jerk of resistance and encourages the driver to be smooth and economical in the use of throttle, brakes and steering. Push the throttle hard, and there's still a degree of response.

The full extent of this schizophrenic nature was revealed on the autobahn. What was a pussy cat slinking through town blossomed into a high-speed tourer with one thing in its computerised brain: speed. VW Motorsport claims the Limited will top out at 142mph; we saw 137mph, still accelerating, and have little reason to doubt that the quoted velocity was

attainable. What really excites is the way the Limited storms the 100-135mph increment.

The downside to this impressive powerplant's performance is its lack of aural stimulation. Anyone expecting a romantic blower whistle will be sadly disappointed. The G60 sounds like a huge fan which, in reality, is exactly what it is. You would swear that the Limited was turning a multi-bladed air conditioning fan, so convincing is the G60's impersonation. It's efficient all right, but doesn't make the hairs on the back of your neck stand to attention.

Smooth progress up and down the gears is a function of the driver's timing of throttle, clutch and gearchange. The first to second change can be a little baulky under hard acceleration if the combination isn't quite right. It requires the slightest amount of throttle to be held on the way out of one gear as the next is quickly selected.

The Passat five-speed shares a slight notchiness with its Golf GTI cousin, but the weight and positive engagement of the shift is reassuring. It's not knife through butter stuff, but it can be very fast and is reassuringly solid.

The same can be said of the Limited's ride and handling.

In line with Rallye specifications, both springing and damping has been firmed, but you wouldn't know it in terms of ride. If anything, the Limited is free of the GTI's harshness across sharp imperfections. The car hunkers down nicely at speed, without allowing dips, rises and potholes to provoke a sudden temper tantrum. The usual Golf bump-thump still exists, as does a slight amount of kickback through the wheel on poor bitumen, but rarely does it grow to unpleasant proportions.

Roadholding is simply superb. The limits of adhesion take some time to find in the dry and, when overstepped, it takes little action from the cockpit to return to the safe side of daring. As you expect from VW, the Limited is predictable and above all else safe in the way it tracks through corners. The driver is put on notice that ultimate understeer is on its way well before guardrails and trees draw close.

Initial turn-in is accurate, without being too sharp. The steering is evenly weighted and doesn't tell lies, but to get the best from this car the driver must pay attention to how much steering and throttle input is applied. Wheeling on too much lock can provoke mid-corner understeer, and squeezing the right foot hard at the same time only exacerbates the situation.

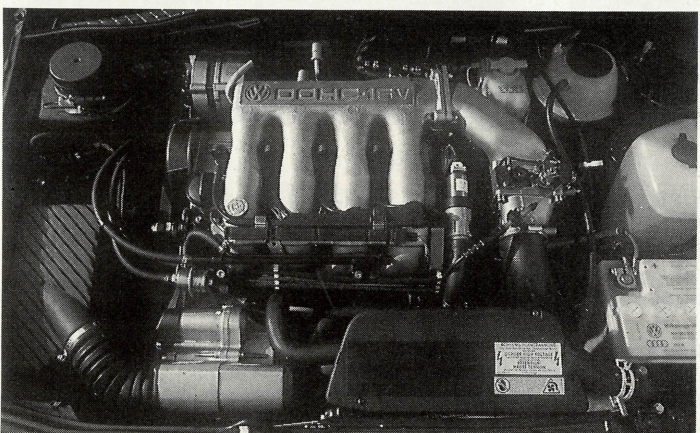
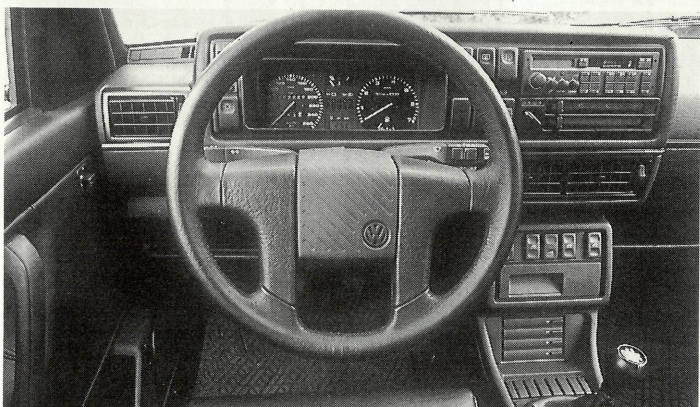
The car's most endearing trait is the way it will forgive entry speed indiscretions. While it isn't the way to go, tyre-scrubbing understeer is easily washed off by the usual mid-corner throttle lift. No dramas or mad oversteer, just a gentle nosing back onto line. Rally drivers would slide their left foot across to maintain the car's steady attitude, undoubtedly the quickest way to drive this car.

The syncro system really does make this a car for rushing like a tracer bullet out of one corner and into the next. Balancing on the throttle on fast sweepers loads the outside rear wheel and points the nose towards the apex, a source of immense driving pleasure. Distances are simply compressed by such impressive dynamic capabilities.

The Teves anti-lock brakes exhibit tremendous power, but we did detect a slight change in pedal height after a number of heavy applications through a mountain pass. Similarly, the engine started cutting out on idle after a solid 30 minutes of heavy acceleration and harsh braking.

Unashamedly aimed at the upper end of the market, the Limited offers leather-trimmed opulence, heated front seats, a sunroof, Digifiz onboard computer and a list of minor accessories that includes central locking. Its understated appearance, borrowing heavily from the Rallye without adopting such an aggressive pose, is all part of the Q-car philosophy. The Limited appears in one colour only — gunmetal grey — and costs £22,570 (DM68,500) in Germany.

But what champagne and caviar can't hide is the Golf's age. Road noise (from BBS 6.5J x 15 wheels and 195/50x15VR Pirelli P600 tyres) is intrusive on less than perfect surfaces. And wind roar from around the front pillars could become tiring on a long trip. But it's doubtful many Brits will get the chance to assess those minus points, because VAG UK expects only two or three Limited Editions to find their way across the Channel. Here's hoping the new-generation Golf borrows some of this car's mechanical packaging. ■



Facia is basically standard GTI but leather trim adds opulence. GTI 16V engine gets G60 supercharger with intercooler and twin three-way catalytic converters. Torque peak is raised to 186lb ft at 5000rpm