

COVER STORY



● First hot-hatch Ford in seven years ● 170bhp 2.0-litre Zetec engine ● Priced against Civic Type-R and Corolla T Sport ● 220bhp RS model due next ● On sale now

THE FAST FORD LIVES AGAIN

Ford returns to its affordable fast fun roots with the Focus ST170. But it has to get past the reigning hot hatch champ, Honda's Civic Type-R. We put them head-to-head

STORY BEN OLIVER PHOTOGRAPHS PETE GIBSON

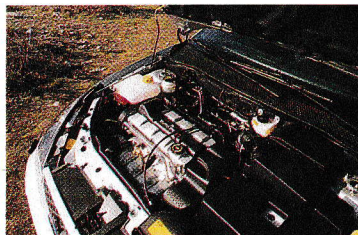


Allow us to reacquaint you with a concept you may have forgotten about; the affordable fast Ford. The RS and XR-badged Escorts of the '70s and '80s went harder than their cooking brethren, looked the part and, most important, were within reach of young blokes on average wages. They became a celebrated part of British motoring culture.

And then Ford lost the plot. Insurance costs spiralled, Ford got nervous about the yobbish image the cars attracted and no-one wanted a quick version of the dreadful Mk4 Escort. In the past few years the Racing Puma and the Mondeo ST200 proved Ford could still build edgy, exciting cars, but with sticker prices over £20,000 they were far from affordable.

We thought things would change when the Focus arrived in 1998. It redefined its class with its dynamics and made a dazzling world rally car. This was the recipe for the best fast Fords of old; start with a decent driver's car and add a dash of motor sport glamour. But we've had to wait nearly four years to see if Ford could do it again.

The wait is over. In exchange for your



Ford's 2.0 unit develops 170bhp; Type-R's can offer a cool 197bhp

£15,995 Ford gives you an ST170 with a 2.0-litre engine producing 170bhp at 7000rpm and 144lb ft of torque at 5500rpm. This is 41bhp and 16lb ft more than the standard 2.0 model and it is generated with the help of variable inlet valve timing and a new inlet manifold, cylinder head and exhaust. Ford claims it will get to 60mph in 7.9sec and top out at 134mph. A six-speed gearbox sends power to the front wheels. The suspension has been stiffened, the steering revised and brakes enlarged. And crucially it looks the business, with multi-spoke 17in wheels, low-profile rubber and a sharp if subtle new suit.

If this car had been launched three years ago we'd have been knocked out by these figures. But, in the meantime, the performance hatch market has been transformed. For £1000 less than the Focus, Seat will provide a Leon Cupra with 180bhp. The Toyota Corolla T Sport offers 189bhp and leaves £500 in your pocket. But the daddy of them all is the Honda Civic Type-R. For the same money as the Focus you get a 2.0-litre engine with 197bhp and a 0-60mph time of 6.7sec.

The last time there was a decent fast Ford, performance figures like these were the preserve of Porsches. The result of the Type-R's sudden appearance in this class seems to have the awful predictability of Lennox Lewis picking fights with middleweights. But Ford knows that the ST170 doesn't have the poke to beat the competition in a straight line, so it will sell the car as a refined, quick hatch, saving the performance rhetoric for the 220bhp Focus RS due by the end of this year. Yet however much Ford downplays the ST170's lack of power and pace, it is still the firm's entry in the hot hatch contest; the Civic Type-R is still the best and the two have to meet. But the qualities on which the Ford will lead are those on which the Honda is weakest. The ST170 and Civic Type-R are very different cars, but genuine rivals.

Parked next to each other their looks match their maker's intentions. The Ford's visual appeal is a tribute mainly to those gorgeous wheels; there's no deep front air dam, loud logos or macho spoiler. There are minor cosmetic changes but the restrained styling is a reminder of how well the Focus's basic architecture has survived the last four years. Starting with its odd, quasi-MPV proportions the Civic has to try much harder, but the transformation from shopper to show-stopper is impressive. It has the full complement of spoilers and logos and the gunmetal anodised alloys and black paint of our test car give it a suitably sinister air.

The Focus's restraint continues inside. Apart from the sports seats, the alloy-topped gearknob and the white dials, you'd struggle to tell the ST170 from a standard car. Again, the Civic makes its intentions clearer with winged and logoed sports seats as standard, a sports steering wheel and a titanium gearknob.

But both are embarrassed on kit by the rapid, refined Leon, which for £14,995 gives you climate control, side airbags and a CD multichanger, all absent in our two. Air-con is a necessary £950 option in the Honda, and when we added up the cost of the options on our test Focus

ST170 can muster plenty of speed, but the Civic has the extra dose of grunt a true hot hatch now needs



Civic cabin is a riot of Type-R logos, winged sports seats, titanium gearknob and sports wheel



"FORD KNOWS THE ST170 DOESN'T HAVE THE POKE TO BEAT THE OPPOSITION, SO IT WILL SELL THE CAR AS A QUICK, REFINED HATCH"

Factfile

FORD FOCUS ST170

Price	£15,995
On sale	Now
How fast?	
0-60mph	7.9sec
Top speed	134mph
How thirsty?	
Urban	22.8mpg
Extra urban	39.2mpg
Combined	31.0mpg
CO₂ emissions	218g/km
How big?	
Length	4150mm
Width	1912mm
Height	1430mm
Wheelbase	2530mm
Weight	1208kg
Fuel tank	55 litres

Engine

Layout 4 cyls in line, 1988cc

Max power 170bhp at 7000rpm

Max torque 144lb ft at 5500rpm

Specific output 85bhp per litre

Power to weight 141bhp per tonne

Installation Transverse, front, front-wheel drive

Bore/stroke 84.8/88.0mm

Made of Alloy head, iron block

Compression ratio 10.2:1

Valve gear 4 per cyl, dohc

Gearbox

Type 6-speed manual

Ratios/mpg per 1000rpm

1st 4.46/5.7 **2nd** 2.71/9.4

3rd 1.33/12.9 **4th** 1.09/15.8

5th 1.33/19.1 **6th** 1.09/23.3

Final drive 2.88 (1st, 2nd, 5th, 6th), 4.25 (3rd, 4th)

Suspension

Front MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear Multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Steering

Type Rack and pinion, power assisted

Lock to lock 2.9

Brakes

Front 300mm ventilated discs

Rear 280mm discs

Wheels and tyres

Size 7Jx17in **Made of** Alloy

Tyres 215/45 WR17 ContiSport Contact

All figures are manufacturer's claims

VERDICT

First fast Focus finally breaks cover; chassis shines but more power required



Focus interior is restrained; only sports seats and white dials hint at its sporting intentions



◆ – Recaros, stereo upgrade, metallic paint, xenon lamps, climate control, ESP stability control and a few other gadgets – the bill came to a staggering £19,495.

Turn the key in the Focus and the difference from the standard car is more apparent. The exhaust is loud, burbly and gives a pop when you back off. It's slightly at odds with the car's understated looks.

Select first and move off; you notice that the shift action is rather long and sometimes needs a firm push to engage. The throttle isn't particularly responsive, and together they can make smooth changes difficult. But despite the engine's considerably higher state of tune, as you trundle out of town you notice how tractable it is in traffic, pulling cleanly in tall gears from low revs. The power builds progressively; the exhaust gets boomy between 3000 and 4000rpm and the

it feels tougher, more sporting and gives a decent indication of the fun to come, but does so without being uncomfortable.

And there's plenty of fun on offer. The Ford's main dynamic quality is its ability to carry what speed it can muster. Going into a bend the brakes encourage you to use them late; they're big – 300mm at the front – and offer plenty of feel and progression. Getting the right gear quickly and smoothly might be a challenge; apart from the balkiness of the gearchange the throttle pedal is set a little too high for clean heel-and-toeing. But once you're there the steering is accurate, front-end grip tenacious, roll reined in; there's almost no understeer and the Focus has no trouble getting its power down through the front wheels as you exit. Fire off down the badly surfaced straight that follows and you rarely feel the need to back off – vertical movement through humps and crests is well-checked, as is roll through corners.

It's an impressive performance, particularly given that the anti-roll bars are unchanged from the standard car, the springs are only 10 percent firmer and the biggest change is the switch to 17in wheels and wider, 215-section tyres. It shows how capable the Focus chassis is and how much fun the RS is likely to be.

But it doesn't give the Ford a decisive advantage over the Honda. Barrel into the same bend and the Type-R will brake with marginally more assurance and let you change down with speed and precision that shame just about every other gearbox made. But the Civic's steering isn't as sharp as the Ford's, there isn't as much front-end grip and the inevitable consequence of the extra power is a degree of torque-steer as you shoot off down the straight. There, the Civic rides with a fluency to match the Focus.

This has been a closer fight than the Lewis analogy might have suggested. The Focus has the better chassis by a small margin, and the Civic can be hard work to hold above 6000rpm, which you must if you want to milk the banzai motor. But it's worth it, and the Type-R has to win here.

The Focus is a very fine car, but you feel that too much has been held back for the RS. You're teased with the potential of the chassis but not given the grunt to exploit it. The Civic Type-R, however, delivers the full experience. To the current generation of car-obsessed twenty-somethings, Type-R means what fast Ford used to. The ST170 won't change that, and against the Civic, even the RS may struggle to win them back. ●



Focus (top) has 17in multi-spoke wheels; Civic alloys look tough

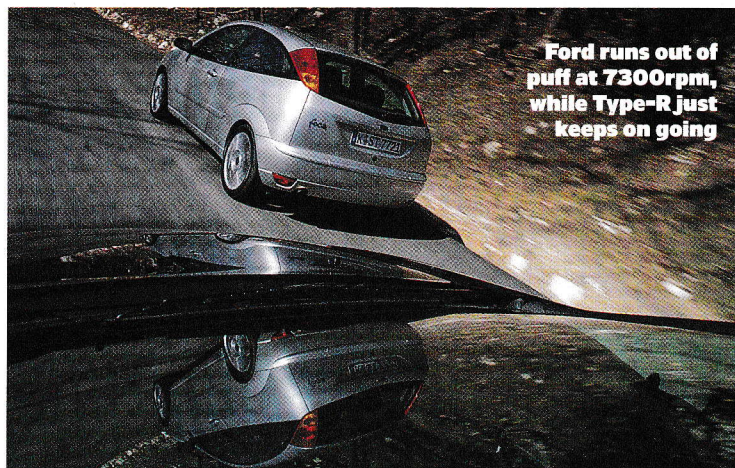
engine does its best work between 6000rpm and the 7350rpm red line, though the extra urge is matched by noise and vibration that are absent elsewhere.

Is it fast? It certainly feels as quick as Ford claims, and quick enough to keep most people entertained. But just as the Focus is starting to expire the Civic is waking up and starting to really accelerate; it makes peak power almost exactly where the Focus hits the limiter and there's still another 1000rpm to come. If velocity is your guiding principle the Focus doesn't stand a chance.

But speed is less than half the story. On that trundle out of town you notice that the Ford's ride doesn't suffer unduly for the bigger wheels and stiffer springs;



"THE CIVIC'S STEERING ISN'T AS SHARP AS THE FORD'S, AND THERE ISN'T AS MUCH GRIP"



Ford runs out of puff at 7300rpm, while Type-R just keeps on going

STEVE CROPLEY'S FAVOURITE FAST FORDS



Lotus Cortina Brilliant twin-cam performance and fine handling. Showed how body mods could make an ordinary car desirable



Escort RS1600 Lotus Cortina recipe in compact, agile, pretty Escort body. Engine was Cosworth's race-bred 120bhp BDA



Capri 2.8i Well-honed coupé, notable for torquey 160bhp V6, rear-driven chassis balance. Topped 130mph, 7.9sec 0-60mph



Sierra RS Cosworth Rear-drive chassis and meaty new eight-valve twin-cam turbo four. Could beat 140mph in standard form



Escort RS Cosworth 4x4 Sierra Cossie 4x4 under-bits packed into lighter Escort body at huge cost. Ferrari-fast in standard form



Honda's excellent gearbox beats balky Ford transmission hands-down

Factfile

HONDA CIVIC TYPE-R

Price	£15,995
On sale	Now
How fast?	
0-60mph	6.7sec
Top speed	146mph
How thirsty?	
Urban	23.0mpg
Extra urban	40.4mpg
Combined	31.7mpg
CO₂ emissions	212g/km
How big?	
Length	4140mm
Width	2005mm
Height	1420mm
Wheelbase	2570mm
Weight	1204kg
Fuel tank	50 litres

Engine

Layout 4 cyls in line, 1998cc

Max power 197bhp at 7400rpm

Max torque 144lb ft at 5900rpm

Specific output 99bhp per litre

Power to weight 164bhp per tonne

Installation Transverse, front, front-wheel drive

Bore/stroke 86.0/86.0mm

Made of Alloy head and block

Compression ratio 11.0:1

Valve gear 4 per cyl, dohc

Gearbox

Type 6-speed manual

Ratios/rev per 1000rpm

1st 3.27/4.5 **2nd** 2.13/7.0

3rd 1.52/9.8 **4th** 1.15/12.9

5th 0.92/16.1 **6th** 0.74/20.0

Final drive 4.76

Suspension

Front MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Steering

Type Rack and pinion, power assisted

Lock to lock 2.7 turns

Brakes

Front 300mm ventilated discs

Rear 260mm discs

Wheels and tyres

Size 7JJx17in **Made of** Alloy

Tyres 205/45 VR17 Bridgestone RE040

VERDICT

Incredible drivetrain, sharp chassis, strong image and value. Current hot hatch king



Understeer virtually non-existent on ST170; ride is sporting but not uncomfortable

