

FORD FOCUS RS

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KICKINGRS

After five years, an iconic Ford badge is back in the form of the Focus RS. But does it have the driving and engineering quality to satisfy hardcore fans? We take it, and its creators, to the test track

Story by Allan Muir

Photography by Anton Watts

**'The RS
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SOME 10-15 YEARS AGO, MAINSTREAM PERFORMANCE cars were Ford's stomping ground, nowhere more so than in the UK. Britain's love affair with fast Fords can be traced all the way back to the London-to-Mexico Rally, Roger Clark winning the RAC Rally and a succession of incredible performance bargains, from the RS Escorts of the '70s through the Escort XR3i, RS Turbo and latterly the Sierra and Escort RS Cosworths.

Ironically it was the success of the Cossies, and the legendary insurance premiums resulting from their popularity with car thieves and joyriders, that forced Ford to abandon that whole area of the market. There hasn't been an RS model on Ford's books since the last Escort RS2000, sales of which petered out after the end of 1996. It seemed worryingly possible that a badge as evocative as 'RS' would never again appear on a Ford product.

But the market has turned around completely since those mad boom-and-bust times. Better car security has made insurance attainable, encouraging a resurgence in the popularity of high-performance cars, again led by the UK. And Ford has found itself sorely under-represented in a playground it once dominated.

When Martin Leach moved from Mazda to Ford of Europe at the end of 1999 to take up a post as head of product development, one of his first moves was to go and see Malcolm Wilson at M Sport, his new base at Dovenby Hall in Cumbria, home of Ford's world rally team. They had already been playing around with a road-going Focus fitted with the bodywork from the WRC car. Leach didn't beat about the bush. 'Let's just do it,' he said.

RS Focus is a very ambitiously timed programme, especially for a big company like Ford. The green light was formally turned on in April 2000, and the target for launch is October this year – just 16 months from start to finish. 'I come from a culture where doing things quickly is a way of life,' says Leach. 'Japanese product-development pace is incredible. One of the things I'm driving the team hard on is time to market.'

'The only limitation was that we didn't have time to develop an all-new four-wheel-drive system, because the Focus platform didn't have it. So we conceived the Focus RS idea: a product with the edgy appeal that some of our earlier performance products had, that was close to the race/rally experience but suitable for the road. The objective is to have an enthusiast's car, that offers a much more adventurous driving experience. Although driving on a race track is very different from driving on the road, that's the experience we want to give people.'

Not everyone, especially within Ford, was convinced that a front-wheel-drive Focus with 'just' 200bhp was going to be enough to do justice to the RS badge. But managing expectations has been a big task for Leach and the 'core team of like-minded enthusiasts' who are driving the RS project. The idealised goal in many people's mind is a 300bhp, four-wheel-drive super-hatch with active differentials and other parts lifted straight from the WRC Focus. Anything less would be a letdown. Such a car, bearing a Cosworth badge, might still happen, but Leach's priority is to plug the gaping hole in Ford's current range.

'We've got much more of an across-car-line performance



Even at this relatively early stage of its development, the degree of traction available to a 200bhp front-drive car is quite staggering, and all down to a clever Quaife mechanical diff

FORD FOCUS RS



Martin Leach was never tempted to downplay the quality of the front-driven RS in case he overshadowed a possible 300bhp Cosworth edition. He reasoned the better the RS, the better a Cosworth would have to be to beat it...

strategy than we've ever had,' he says. 'It signals that we're back in that business.' By which he means that as well as the RS Focus there will be a full range of ST models – Fiesta, Focus and Mondeo – with a more broad-based appeal, offering distinctive styling, better performance and more responsive steering and handling, but still very much part of the mainstream way of life.

In dreaming up the RS, Leach is not consciously making room for a Focus Cosworth, though. 'My philosophy is do the best you can; don't hold back because there's something else coming along. If you make the RS as good as it can be, it forces you to make the vehicle beyond that even better.'

It might not have four-wheel drive, but like its predecessors the RS Focus can claim a very strong and direct tie-in with motorsport. 'That's part of its credibility,' says Leach. 'It isn't essential, provided the product has the characteristics that define an RS, but we've been fairly faithful to the RS name over the years, and here there's a clear link to the world rally championship. A rally car has to be dependable, and that's one of the key attributes we want Ford to be known for.' The list of suppliers that appears down the sides of Colin McRae's world rally car is barely any shorter for the road-going Focus. 'It has to be genuine,' says Leach. 'Customers for products of this type are very knowledgeable.' The all-important automatic torque-biasing front differential is courtesy of Quaife. The dampers, with their race-honed valving, are Sachs. Brembo brakes, Sparco seats, OZ Racing alloys, Garrett turbocharger, AP clutch... it's a veritable who's who of the race and rally world. This isn't a nip-and-tuck cosmetic exercise. It's all the real thing.

The visual similarity to the world rally car is equally important. With its sharply flared wheel arches, wider tracks, surprisingly modest roof spoiler and deep front airdam, with its huge mesh-covered air intakes, the RS is an aggressive and purposeful machine on the road. Especially in the context of the standard Focus, which isn't exactly a boring-looking car to begin with, but suddenly takes on the narrow, slab-sided stance of an MPV next to the squat RS.

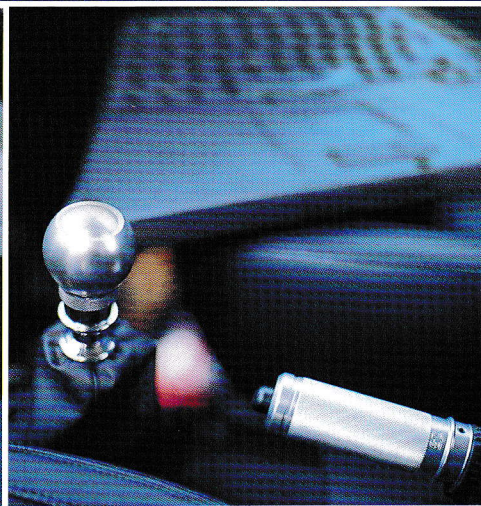
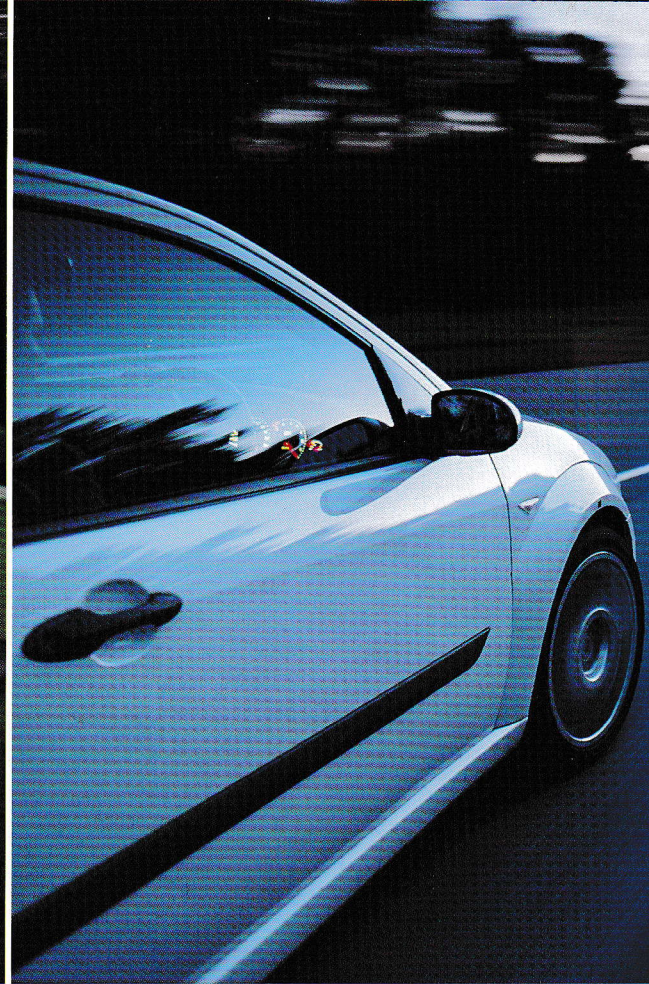
But again, this is not the Escort Cosworth reborn. There's no sign of the ludicrous tea-tray rear wing that helped make the Escort Cossie such a target. The rally car doesn't have one, so why should the road car?

'The world has moved on in terms of what constitutes the outer envelope of design for performance vehicles,' says Leach. 'The wing we have on the car is very effective. We backed off on that a bit, but you get a lot of downforce. That's more WRC-inspired, because we want the higher speeds [that the small wing allows] for the road, and you don't want the drag trade-off.'

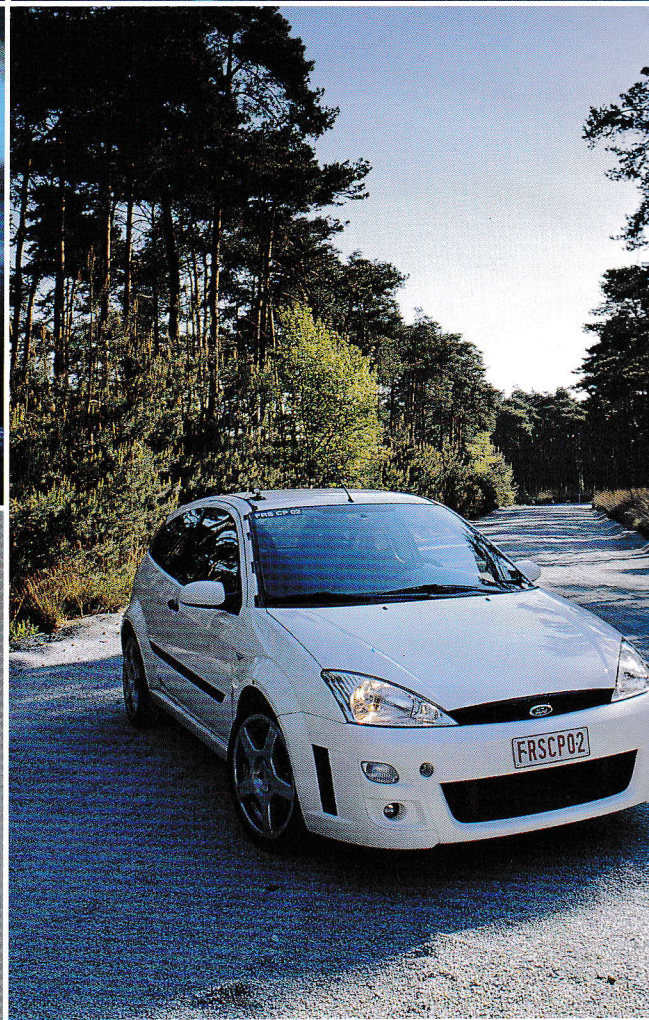
YOU COULDN'T WISH FOR A MORE ACCOMPLISHED starting point for a hot hatch than the standard Focus, dynamically still the benchmark in its class, despite the arrival of several new rivals such as the Peugeot 307 and Honda Civic. But that hasn't stopped the RS team from modifying 70 percent of the car in order to cope with the greatly increased loads the RS's



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The interior will reflect the driver's-car credentials of the rest of the package, concentrating on the wheel, a short-throw gearshift and optimum driving position



components will have to endure – and to guarantee that the RS is capable of redefining the hot-hatch market in the same way the Lotus Elise rewrote the rulebook for affordable sports cars.

Given that the world rally car is powered by a turbocharged version of Ford's 2.0-litre Zetec engine (to be renamed Duratec), it is only fitting that the RS road car should have something similar, forced induction being a characteristic that defines RS products in Leach's eyes. He's also a big fan of the torque and driveability boosting attributes of turbochargers, happily setting aside variable camshaft timing, and other technology more suited to high-revving normally aspirated engines, for when the ST Focus comes along. The RS engine, with its highly efficient WRC-inspired, water-to-air intercooler, puts out in the vicinity of 200bhp and 235lb ft of torque, in what promises to be a spectacularly flexible, responsive, easy-to-drive package. And sizzlingly quick, of course.

Impressions from the passenger's seat bear this out. Not only does the engine feel wonderfully lag-free and responsive, but it also has a rorty, mechanical noise to it that is reminiscent of the late, great Lancia Delta Integrale. Like the Italian car, the Focus engine doesn't really feel or sound turbocharged at all, the only hint being the ease with which the car fires out of tight corners in third gear.

Although the ST Focus will get a six-speed gearbox, the RS sticks with the standard five-speed MTX75 'box used in the standard Focus; there's no need for six ratios with the torque levels the turbo engine is putting out. However, the gearbox's internals have been uprated to cope with the extra power and torque, and the shift itself is shorter and quicker than standard, courtesy of a quick-shift.

With that level of tractive effort going through the front wheels, even one with the outstanding fundamentals of the Focus, traction was always going to be an issue. Focus RS engineering manager Neill Briggs claims that one of the big successes on this programme is the amount of traction the car has, and credit lies squarely at the feet of the Quaife mechanical diff (as opposed to a torsen diff or a viscous coupling). 'We've been able to tune the diff to come up with the ultimate compromise between minimising torque-steer effects and giving maximum tractive effort out of corners,' he says. 'A mechanical diff doesn't rely on preload to work properly, whereas the torsen diff and viscous coupling do. We don't want to have to run any preload at all, so a mechanical diff is a good solution.'

Riding first with Leach and then Briggs around the challenging Road Seven handling circuit at the Lommel proving ground in Belgium, traction – even at this relatively early, prototype stage – is indeed astonishing. There's no sign of wheelspin or a wayward nose as the car rockets out of the hairpins under generous throttle, and the steering wheel remains steady in the driver's hands. It just goes to show: you don't always need four-wheel drive to get a lot of power to the tarmac. In fact, Briggs reckons: 'We have the same grip levels as a four-wheel-drive car; what you don't have with front drive is traction. If you can avoid spinning the wheels, then it's not so much of an issue. I honestly don't think the product is lacking because it's not four-wheel drive.'

Briggs is also proud of the Brembo brakes – four-pot calipers clamping 325mm ventilated discs at the front. 'We'd like to think

we've learnt some lessons from handling days you guys have done with some of our other products, Mondeo ST200 being one, when the brakes disappeared after two or three laps. You won't be able to do that in this car. We've done lap after lap around the Nürburgring, which is a real killer on brakes, and had no issue with fade at all. We've also done 112mph-to-zero stops in the region of 4.5 or 4.6sec, which is 911 territory.'

While the suspension remains fundamentally the same as the standard car's, the demands of higher loads and class-leading dynamics have led to – among other things – the tracks being stretched to WRC tarmac specification and the Control Blade multi-link rear suspension being beefed up for greater durability. The Sachs dampers use valving technology taken straight from the track. 'We can maintain acceptable ride quality, but also have the levels of aggression and handling required for an RS,' says Briggs.

Leach's main reason for being at Lommel with us is to see for himself the progress made on the RS since he last drove it in March. Back then, he had issues with torque steer, steering precision and the brakes. 'We've actually got quite a refined car now, and we're talking about dialling a bit more edge back in. I'm going to make it a bit noisier, put a bit more exhaust into the sound. We might change the acoustic balance.

'These days a Ford is famous for on-centre steering feel and precision and torque build-up working off-centre. We're going to get a little more precision around the centre area. We've eliminated the torque steer we had, and the brakes are really superb. I'm looking for a little more turn-in bite as well. We can dial in quite a bit more yaw response and won't have any problems with stability. The car's very neutral, and rear grip is superb, so it's very safe – no oversteer.'

Sitting beside Leach, the development RS feels taut, finely balanced and agile as he throws it around Road Seven again, the front end biting hard and the rear going light over the more evil mid-corner crests but never threatening to step out. There seems to be grip in abundance. They claim to be able to keep up with BMW M3s and Porsche 911s around the Nürburgring. 'We want anyone to be able to drive our car, and for it to flatter the driver,' says Leach.

ALTHOUGH THE £20,000 RS FOCUS IS EXPECTED TO sell in only modest numbers (5000 in Europe in a full year), it is vitally important for Ford, if for no other reason than that it gives all those RS fans both inside and outside Ford something to cheer about after five years without a single RS product on the market.

But it also represents a change of culture at Ford, proving that it's possible to cut through all the red tape and customer clinics and bring an exciting new niche product to market in the sort of compressed time scale normally associated with the likes of Lotus.

On top of that, it's a sign that Ford is in a fighting mood, ready to snatch back some of the ground that it has lost to rivals such as Subaru and Mitsubishi with their rally cars for the road. 'It was our market,' says Leach of the performance arena Ford once dominated, 'and we almost surrendered it to the Japanese. I don't think that's right. We need to push back.' And when push comes to shove, few companies have more weight to throw around than Ford.

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