



SHORT CUT TO SUCCESS

The new RS4 calls to mind previous great Audis, none greater than the short-wheelbase Sport quattro

IF YOU DROVE THE OLD 2.7-LITRE twin-turbo V6 RS4 back-to-back with the new-generation V8 version, you'd soon realise that five years is a lifetime in the incredibly fast-moving world of the performance car. The old car would still feel very quick, but the new RS4's steering, brakes, ride quality and overall balance are virtually unrecognisable from its slightly wooden predecessor. Audi has learnt an awful lot since 2000. So, can you imagine what happens if you go back to 1985?

I couldn't, or rather I didn't really want to. Although I'd heard all the hype surrounding the original quattro (or 'ur-quattro' if you're being pernickety), I was sceptical to say the least.

Of course, the car pictured here isn't just any old ur-quattro. It's one of 200 short-wheelbase Sport quattros built for homologation purposes.

Just look at it: the bluff front, chunky arches, the vents and slashes on the bonnet, the tiny bright-white wheels. Then consider that it contains 306bhp.

Sounds pretty 2005, that number. And combined with a kerbweight of 1298kg it makes for a power-to-weight figure that wouldn't disgrace an STi or Evo IX.

When the door clacks shut you're reminded that 20 years really is a long time. Not just because of the materials and design of the dash, but because you can't believe the visibility afforded by pencil-thin A-pillars. The Recaros don't look very supportive, but they fit me pretty well. The completely useless leather-trimmed rear seats, on the other hand, can't help but raise a smile.

Things are a bit more serious on the centre console. There's a rocker switch to disable the ABS, and something that according to my older colleagues looks

a bit like a choke, but in fact locks the front and rear diffs for absolute traction on the most slippery of surfaces. Proper homologation stuff.

Twist the key and the in-line 'five' churns slightly reluctantly to life. It's a bassy, busy noise, but at idle there's little hint of what's to come. The conventional five-speed 'box (no dogleg) is pretty horrendous. The throw is comically long, and the shift from second to third almost has you punching the passenger door. But that's about where the criticism ends.

Of course, there's plenty of turbo lag, but even off-boost the 2.5-litre engine feels pretty perky. Hit 4000rpm and the boost gauge springs into life, while that unmistakable warble seems to infect every fibre of the car. The power, which feels easily as strong as the 306bhp claim, just keeps growing, and because it's pretty long-geared the journey to over 7000rpm can be savoured. Even deep into fourth the Sport quattro feels genuinely 2005-rapid.

There's textural steering feel – something that not even the RS4 can really claim – and the strong brakes are full of feel, with their assistance perfectly judged.

We took the Sport to Bedford Autodrome to see how it performed at its limits in a risk-free environment. Driven hard but with a degree or two more mechanical sympathy than we would afford a brand new press car, the quattro turned in a lap time less than four seconds behind the new RS4 – and I'm sure you could close the gap even



further if you forgot exactly what you were driving. Not bad for a car wearing 225/50 ZR15 tyres.

The power is directed 50:50 front:rear, but the short wheelbase makes the Sport a lively, interactive machine. Lift-off as you turn in and the tail edges wide; brake late and deep into a corner and the rear jinks left and right, keeping you on your toes.

Although the ABS dramatically increased stopping distances if you triggered it, the brakes didn't fade at all. The car also demonstrated remarkable resistance to understeer. With the full Scandinavian flick the Sport would oversteer from entry to exit. Brilliant!

It seems Audi has forgotten more in the last 20 years than most manufacturers have ever known. Let's hope that the RS4 signals that it was just a case of temporary amnesia.

CS feels light, razor-sharp, almost devoid of inertia compared to the lazy Mercedes, and against expectations the M3 has more faithful front-end grip than even the RS4. That's the advantage of having a straight-six tucked well back in the engine bay rather than a V8 slung out ahead of the front wheels.

Activate M Track mode with a prod of the button on the tactile suede-rimmed steering wheel, and you're allowed more slip before the traction and stability systems call a halt to the fun, enabling you to use that strong front-end grip to feel your way into the M3's immensely gifted chassis. There's less torque than a thumping V8 produces, but the payoff is superb traction. Even pinning the throttle from the apex of greasy third-gear corners fails to excite the relaxed stability system.

The rear will move a few degrees when you're deep into the power-band and really leaning on the Michelin Pilot Sports, but as it does so the information from the steering (the CS benefits from the quicker, more feelsome CSL rack) and through the seat cushion almost draws a picture in your mind of the car's attitude – it's like an out-of-body experience.

Stay committed and the CS scythes cleanly through the corner, totally balanced, completely hooked-up. When you're dialled-in to the chassis and really nail a road in the M3 it's so unhurried, so serene. You could almost set it to music. I love this car.

Roger Green has had his fun in the M3, too. But emerging from the RS4 he seems like a man with something to get off his chest. 'It's just so fast. The engine is a monster, and the way it deals with nasty roads is very un-Audi-like. The gearchange is fantastic, the steering smooth and consistent. And those eight-pot brakes are superb. Phwoar!' He likes it, then.

And the Merc? Hayman didn't get off to a great start with it. He didn't realise you have to

engage 'M' on the transmission tunnel for the steering-wheel-mounted up- and downshift buttons to work faithfully, and kept finding himself fully committed mid-corner only for the 'box to kickdown, the tail to snap sideways and the ESP to clumsily tidy things up. Now enlightened (he only had to ask) he's warming to it. 'Incredible torque,' he says, 'nice steering feel once you're up to speed, and although it rolls a bit at modest speeds, the body control is actually very crisp when you're on it.'

I'm pretty much in agreement with the Haymanator. In fact I'm unexpectedly falling for the C55. It's so full of character you can almost forgive it the dodgy interior and staid lines. And despite a more understeery initial balance than either RS4 or stubbornly neutral M3, it's very easy to impose your own will on the car. The ESP can't be switched off completely, though, which is annoying on track or even on bone-dry, well-sighted roads, but on damp, leaf-strewn tarmac the system is perfectly judged in its most lenient setting (just prod the ESP button and watch for the yellow triangle glowing on the dash).

One particular corner illustrates the point perfectly. An uphill left taken in third and blind until the apex. Coax the front tyres onto line, feed in some power and immediately the V8 takes the modest-looking Pirelli rubber to its

'You can often hear the RS4 tearing towards its red line, even when you're driving one of the other cars'



Amazingly, tyres were barely hurt by our session at the Bedford Autodrome. Above: choke-like lever locks the front and rear diffs; pedigree runs through every millimetre of this car – and every millimetre that's missing





Audi interior (right) a class act; pits dated Mercedes cabin (far right, lower pic) to shame. RS4's seats (below left) hold you perfectly, increasing their grip when the driver hits the 'S' button



'The Audi's engine is one of the greats. It gives the RS4 a soul'

limit, the tail edging out enough to require just a flick of opposite lock. Keep a steady throttle and the C55 stays up on its toes, gently drifting, ESP allowing free rein.

As you crest the rise and see the road ahead is empty, a bit more gas adds to the angle. Too much and the ESP recovers the slide. Get it right, though, and the C55 dances with a delicious angle until the road straightens. Then it explodes along the next straight in one violent lunge. Few cars have such a grin factor.

So, the M3 CS is, as we discovered last month, a truly bewitching car. More surprisingly, the C55 is getting under our skin, too. But the RS4 has a kind of magnetic draw. You can often hear it tearing towards its redline, even when you're wringing the neck of one of the other cars, and especially if the Audi's driver has hit the 'S' button, freeing the exhaust, sharpening the engine's response to your right foot and increasing the seat's grip on your torso. It's a tight, metallic howl, cutting through the cold air with a fervour that even the screaming M Power straight-six can't muster.

Let's break down the constituent parts that set the RS4 apart from other hot Audis. First and foremost there's the linear steering response.

It's still a Servotronic set-up and perhaps just a shade on the light side, but unlike, say, the S4, the changes in assistance as your speed varies are imperceptible.

The manual box is slick and positive, and the brakes are exceptional (the eight-piston front callipers grip 365mm discs), displaying none of the hyper-sensitivity that often makes Audis tricky to meld with. It all feels just right.

The engine is one of the greats. At low revs there's ample response (unless you've just stepped out of a C55), and it feels genuinely

muscular even when lugging at 2000-3000rpm. At 5000rpm you're flying, and then, just when most V8s are starting to huff and puff under the strain, the RS4 kicks again and hammers on to 8250rpm. Never once does it feel overstressed or unenthusiastic. It gives the RS4 a soul.

That the chassis not only contains the V8's muscle, but actually encourages you to cling on to every last rev and search out every scrap of horsepower, is a testament to the latest incarnation of the quattro drivetrain and the clever pitch- and roll-reducing DRC

(Dynamic Ride Control) suspension system.

That it very rarely feels nose-heavy or doggedly understeery is vindication of the decision to send more of the power to the rear wheels. Here's an Audi with a nice neutral balance and genuine nimbleness. How long have we waited to say that?

So it kills the M3 CS, then? Well, not quite. At eight-tenths the RS4 feels exceptional, and even when pushed to its very limits it retains much of its composure. However, it's still true to the Audi philosophy, which means it will always





Left: challenging Welsh roads provide the ultimate test; RS4 feels at home, shrugging off poor surfaces while displaying better balance than previous fast Audis; DRC suspension system reduces body-roll while quattro four-wheel drive encourages the driver to use every one of those 414bhp

look after you first and foremost, even when you just want a bit of entertainment. Towards the end of two days of fantastic driving it's fair to say that our collective confidence is up and our pace has escalated. Suddenly the RS4 doesn't feel so impregnable. The ride, so unflustered and reassuring until now, deteriorates as our commitment grows. The body control starts to betray that peculiar engine position with slightly clumsy crashing where before it had glided.

It's very busy under braking, too – somewhat unexpected considering the car's inherent stability. And ultimately, despite the clever four-wheel-drive system that can channel as much as 85 per cent of power to the rear wheels, it becomes clear that mild understeer is still the RS4's preferred stance.

The RS4 is a mighty achievement, a sea-change for fast Audis that hints at how good the mid-engined R8 might be when it arrives later this year. But where the BMW and the Merc taught us new and exciting things the harder and further we drove them, the Audi lost just a bit of its lustre. Perhaps it's a victim of its mesmerising first impression. It's an impossible standard to live up to.

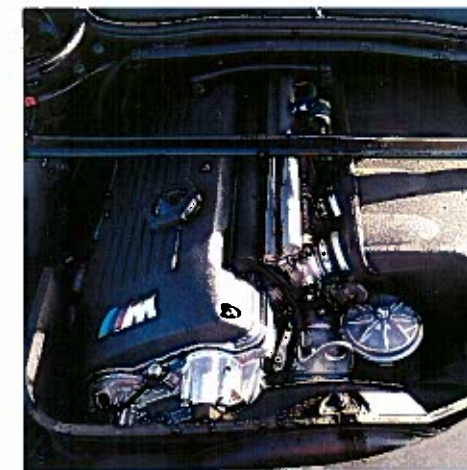
By contrast the Mercedes feels remarkably average on a quick squirt, but beneath the off-putting 'box and initially odd steering feel is a chassis that is incredibly engaging. Even so, it can't scale the heights of the Audi or BMW. It's a softer, less focussed product. Still, its peachy balance shows that AMG could really deliver the goods if they wanted to.

No surprises then. It comes down to RS4 and M3 CS. After ten minutes behind the wheel the RS4 was my winner. It's got the looks, the interior, the edge on performance. Forty-eight hours later, the deft balance, awesome adjustability and sheer exuberance of the M3 CS seemed insurmountable. It gives you so many options, and I don't just mean you can oversteer it all day long (which you can). It has incredible balance, and it's so responsive to your inputs that you feel intimately involved through every part of every corner. For you and me, that's what really counts.

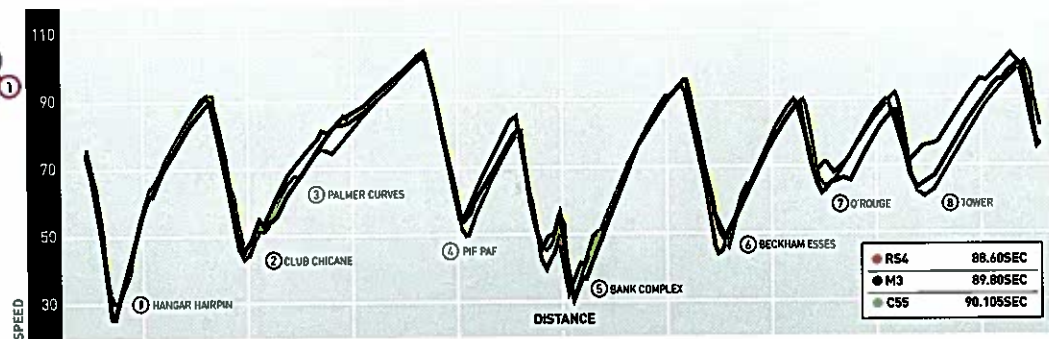
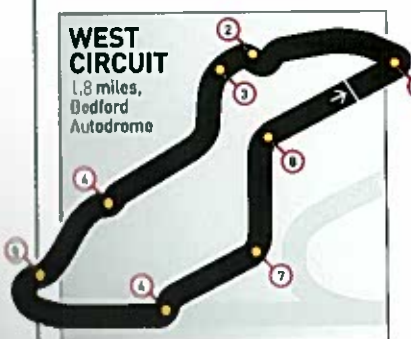
The M3 is still the all-conquering action hero. Did I mention there's a new one later this year?

SPECIFICATION

	BMW M3 CS	AUDI RS4	MERC C55 AMG
■ Layout	Front engine, rear-wheel drive	Front engine, four-wheel drive	Front engine, rear-wheel drive
■ Engine	In-line 6-cylinder	V8	V8
■ Location	Front, longitudinal	Front, longitudinal	Front, longitudinal
■ Displacement	3246cc	4163cc	5439cc
■ Bore x stroke	87.0mm x 91.0mm	84.5mm x 92.8mm	97.0mm x 92.0mm
■ Cylinder block	Cast iron	Aluminium alloy	Aluminium alloy
■ Cylinder head	Aluminium alloy, dohc, 4v per cyl, variable valve timing	Aluminium alloy, dohc per bank, 4v per cyl, variable valve timing	Aluminium alloy, sohc per bank, three valves per cylinder
■ Fuel and ignition	Bosch electronic management, multipoint fuel injection	Bosch electronic management, direct injection	Electronic engine management, multi point fuel injection
■ Max power	338bhp @ 7900rpm	414bhp @ 7800rpm	367bhp @ 5750rpm
■ Max torque	269lb ft @ 5000rpm	317lb ft @ 5500rpm	376lb ft @ 4000rpm
■ Transmission	Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive, M-diff, stability and traction control	Six-speed manual, permanent four-wheel drive, electronic diff lock, ESP	AMG Speedshift five-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive, ESP
■ Front suspension	MacPherson struts, coil springs, gas dampers, anti-roll bar	Four-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	MacPherson struts, coil springs, gas dampers, arb
■ Rear suspension	Multi-link, coil springs, gas dampers, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Multi-link, coil springs, gas dampers, anti-roll bar
■ Brakes	Cross-drilled and vented discs front and rear, ABS	Cross-drilled and vented discs, front and rear, EBD, ABS	Cross-drilled and vented discs front, vented rear, EBD, BAS, ABS
■ Wheels	8.5 x 19in fr, 9.5 x 19in rr	9 x 19in fr, 9 x 19in rr	7.5 x 18in fr, 8.5 x 18in rr
■ Tyres	235/35 ZR19 fr, 265/30 ZR19 rr, Michelin Pilot Sport	255/35 ZR19 fr, 255/35 ZR19 rr, Michelin Pilot Sport	225/40 R18 fr, 245/35 ZR18 rr, Pirelli PZero Rosso
■ Weight (kerb)	1570kg	1650kg	1635kg
■ Power-to-weight	219bhp/ton	255bhp/ton	228bhp/ton
■ 0-62mph	5.1sec (claimed)	4.8sec (claimed)	5.2sec (claimed)
■ Top speed	155mph (limited)	155mph (limited)	155mph (limited)
■ Basic price	£43,555	£49,980	£48,790
evo RATING	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★



'The deft balance, awesome adjustability and sheer exuberance of the M3 seem insurmountable'



▲ Three more different styles would be hard to find. The Audi's peerless traction means it holds its line brilliantly around the tricky Bank complex. The superb brakes can upset its composure into Pit-Pit, though. The Merc's auto 'box is frustrating as it rarely responds immediately to your commands at these speeds. It particularly likes to prevent you from changing down. The way you can use the M3's tail to point the car into the apex is very effective, particularly through Bank and the last two corners. It would've gone quicker had it not been delivered on new tyres.