

car

T H E D E F I N I T I V E V I E W

Our fave hot hatch...
Impreza STi or Civic Type R?



DISCOVER WHY

the Civic Type R is the
hottest hatch.



Odds are, the Impreza STi should steal the Civic Type R's hot hatch black belt – especially on Welsh roads.

Ben Oliver finds out

LOADED DICE

Photography Stuart Collins



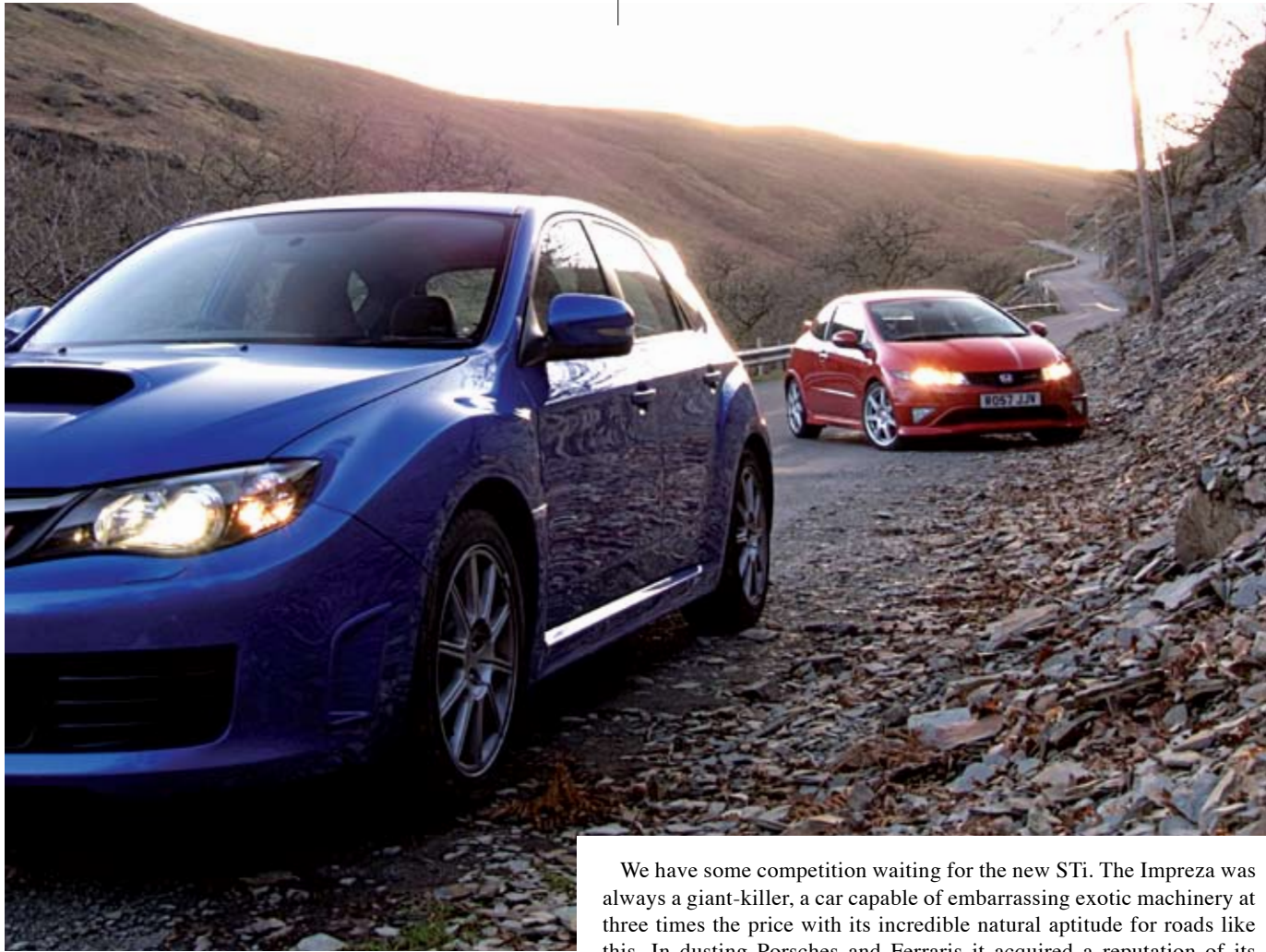
PLAYING CATCH

A driven rear axle, an extra 99bhp and a £7k price gap: surely the Subaru has this contest sewn up? That really depends on whether you value power over precision

IF WALES CHOSE A NATIONAL VEHICLE TO GO WITH ITS National Assembly it would be either an Ifor Williams trailer filled with sheep, or the Subaru Impreza STi. As I point mine west out of London in the early hours there are plenty of people about but, despite Sonic Blue paint, a big bonnet scoop and pink STi flashes on the wings and boot (sadly, no gold wheels), nobody seems to spot its significance. Some hours later, turning off the M4 and heading north to Abergavenny and beyond, the population is sparser but the nod count noticeably higher. They know what this is; one of the very first STi's to arrive here, the model that will spawn the rally cars that will soon detonate and ricochet through the forests of South Wales, and the car that has to prove that the Impreza hasn't gone soft as well as sensible with its new hatchback.

We're heading for roads that will tell us. The Elan Valley in mid-Wales has an odd, other-worldly landscape. Its hills are monumental in scale but mostly gentle in slope and bare of trees, but you come across the occasional tightly knotted wood or steep, scree-covered slope or rock formation that punches through the hills' humanoid forms like a compound fracture.

And then there's the road. Oh, that road. It looks as if it has fallen across the landscape at random; there are long stretches of sweepers along the gentle hillsides with miles of visibility that you can take deep into three figures if you're prepared to, followed by intricate chicanes through the rocks, and then switchbacks that cascade straight down the valley walls, doubling your car's acceleration and testing your faith in its grip. These are the roads you always promise yourself you'll drive on, but never do. And because you don't, they're empty, other than the odd farmer in a battered four-wheel drive or retirees in a Rover. ▶



USER'S GAME
You've got Welsh roads to yourself and the right cars to exploit the situation, but will the Honda's precision overcome the muscle and grip of the Subaru? The Elan Valley will provide the answer

We have some competition waiting for the new STi. The Impreza was always a giant-killer, a car capable of embarrassing exotic machinery at three times the price with its incredible natural aptitude for roads like this. In dusting Porsches and Ferraris it acquired a reputation of its own. We wondered if a radically restyled and slightly softened Impreza might itself be vulnerable to an upstart, so we're meeting a Honda Civic Type R. The distance between the two isn't as great as some of the scalps the Impreza has claimed; the Civic starts at £17,990 has 198bhp and weighs 1267kg to the Impreza's £24,995, 297bhp and 1505kg. They're both Japanese hatchbacks and there will be plenty of buyers choosing between the two. But there has always been a gulf in dynamic ability between hot hatches like the Civic and the blown, all-paw rally-special category inhabited by the Impreza and Evo. If the STi can't dismiss the Type R then it really isn't the car it once was.

The Impreza makes mixed first impressions. You'll decide for yourself on its looks; the old car was never a beauty, and this latest version is true to tradition. The new hatchback bodyshell might be more accessible but the rear drive parts make for a shallow boot, there isn't much room in the rear cabin and the rear doors in particular move and close with a flimsy, tinny feel. It's better up-front; the driving position is good and the cabin materials are up to Ford Focus standards, which is a considerable compliment, but the big rally seats don't quite deliver the level of lateral grip their looks suggest they might.

Every successive generation or special edition of Impreza seemed to get harder and rawer and louder and faster and more aggressive, but your first yards in the new car make clear that Subaru has hit the reset button. The ride is still firm but with an initial compliancy that makes the bad urban roads and motorways at the start of the trip bearable. The odd, multi-tonal thrum of the 2.5-litre flat four is still there – just – and the steering is calm and free from kickback, but worryingly short of feel. If Subaru wants to tempt more of us out of our BMW 330i's it has given the Impreza the refinement it will need. But what has it lost in return?

Not speed. Once off the motorway, the Impreza bolts over the fast A-roads leading north to Rhayader but you'll need to use the speedo to appreciate your rate of progress. The calm ride, steering and engine note do all they can to disguise it; you don't feel like you're going fast ▶



NEED TO KNOW	
HONDA CIVIC TYPE R	
Price:	£17,990
Engine:	1998cc 16v four cylinder, 198bhp @ 7800rpm, 142lb ft @ 5600rpm
Transmission:	Six-speed manual, front-wheel drive
Performance:	6.6sec 0-62mph, 146mph, 31.0mpg, 215g/km
Weight:	1267kg
Made from:	Steel
On sale:	Now

IF THE STi CAN'T
DISMISS THE TYPE R
THEN IT REALLY ISN'T THE
CAR IT ONCE WAS





until you're going too fast. And you might as well be driving an auto, so immense and elastic is the Impreza's torque. Fourth is pretty much the only gear you need; changing down seems unnecessarily rowdy and the muddy, slightly obstructive shift means you'll seldom want to.

The steering is equally elastic, but in this context it's not a good thing. It's vague and light and free of feel, and it takes a while to learn that the old Impreza's seemingly limitless grip is still there. Turn into a bend and stamp on the gas and you'll feel the STi subtly shuffle the torque beneath you before clamping its jaws on the apex and hurling itself out. It's impressive to witness, even if the steering and every other interface relegate you to a back-row seat. And the brakes deserve special mention. The only criticism we can make is that they feel hopelessly over-specified for road use.

Switching from Impreza to Civic is like going from cathode ray to Blu-ray: suddenly everything is rendered in precise, almost painful detail. If you ever wondered why *CAR's* late lamented LJK Setright was such a Hondamentalist you ought to try a Type R. We'll leave the engine and gearbox, Honda's usual aces, aside for now. This is a three-door, but there's easy access to the rear seats, the boot is vast and the back bench folds flat in one movement to leave a van-like loadbay – bear this practicality in mind when we start making supercar comparisons later. Again, you can decide for yourself on the looks but don't miss fresh, original details like the arrow-shaped door handles or the triangular tailpipes. Its cabin plastics look honest and modern and fit together perfectly, the driving position is terrific with a deep-dished wheel and grabby seats, and the smooth, cool aluminium lever is right where you want it: the whole thing feels fitted and purposeful. The split instrument binnacle and the circular switchgear spread seemingly at random over the dashboard might seem insane but, after an hour's familiarisation, you realise how organic and intuitive those switches are, way more human than a screen and a long list of sub-menus.

Yes, the ride is borderline hard. Take a long test drive in a Type R before you commit to it. On balance we could live with it – in 500 miles of driving we only found one stretch of road where it was unbearable. The payoff is iron body control over yumps and compressions and around bends, leaving the Civic plenty in reserve to deal with a mid-corner bump or a ▶

IN TRIM
Functional and neat in here but still no Audi. Odd details like the rear diff temp warning light are endearing, but it makes the Civic's dash look like Starship Command



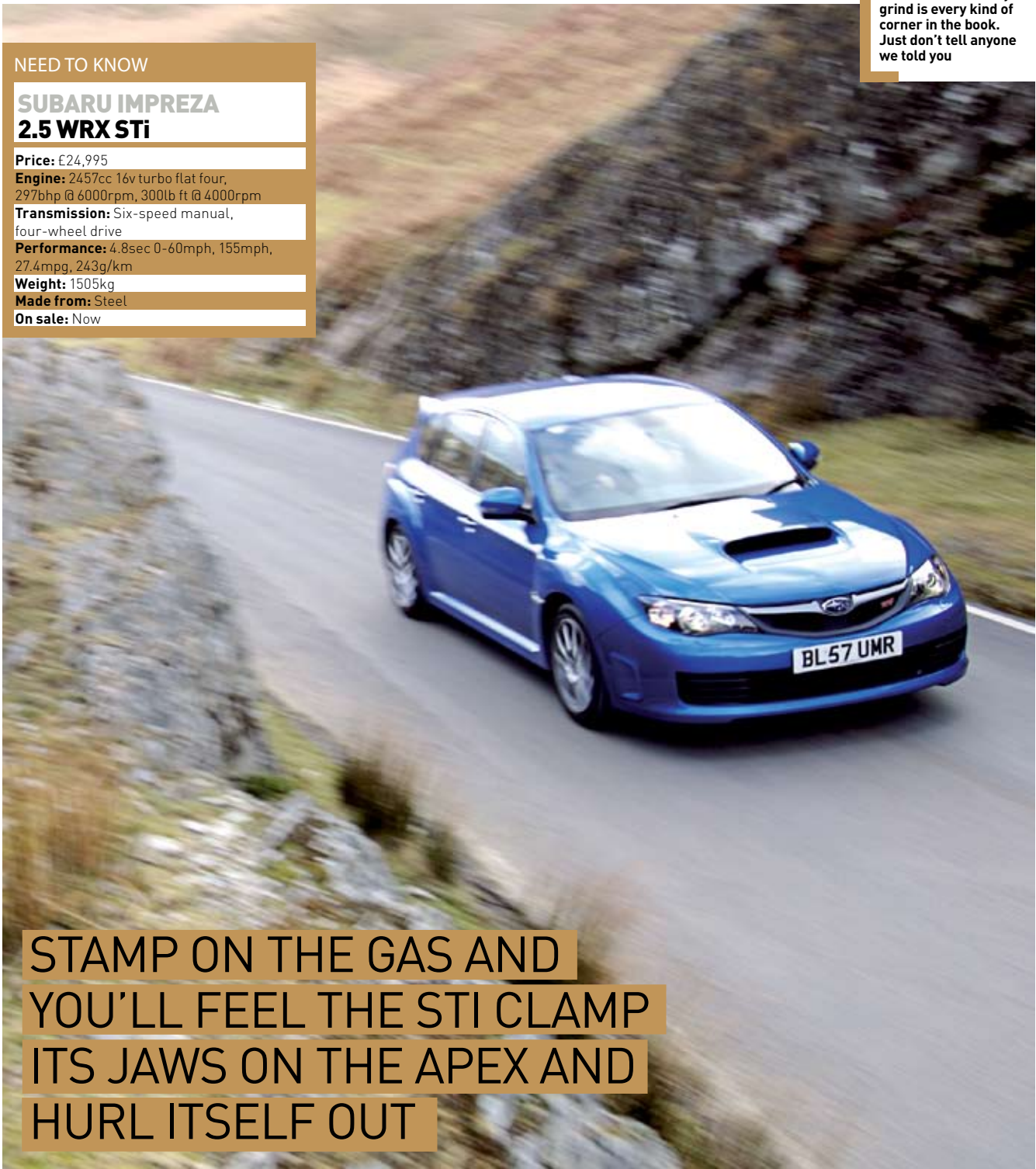
ANOTHER WORLD
Forget urban gridlock, empty rural Wales is worth the effort of getting there. At the end of the motorway grind is every kind of corner in the book. Just don't tell anyone we told you

NEED TO KNOW

SUBARU IMPREZA
2.5 WRX STi

Price: £24,995
Engine: 2457cc 16v turbo flat four, 297bhp @ 6000rpm, 300lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission: Six-speed manual, four-wheel drive
Performance: 4.8sec 0-60mph, 155mph, 27.4mpg, 243g/km
Weight: 1505kg
Made from: Steel
On sale: Now

STAMP ON THE GAS AND
YOU'LL FEEL THE STI CLAMP
ITS JAWS ON THE APEX AND
HURL ITSELF OUT



THE IMPREZA HAS GRUNT AND GRIP BUT THE CIVIC COUNTERS WITH COMPOSURE AND CONFIDENCE



clumsy stab at the gas or the brakes. Its natural levels of traction and grip are so high that, driving about as hard as we could, we could only provoke the occasional chirrup from the tyres, and most of the day had passed before we finally triggered the stability control by turning into a bend faster than the tyres might reasonably have been expected to cope with.

The steering isn't as communicative as you'd hope for, but what modern car's is? Weight and precision are as much as you can expect and, after the Impreza, the Type R's rack is a revelation.

Setright was also a concert-grade clarinettist and he would have played the Civic's drivetrain the same way. You never hold one note for long; you change gear because you have to, keeping it in a powerband that runs from 5500rpm to a feral 8000rpm, and also because you want to, because the shift is so wrist-snap satisfying. I thought I was too old to drive like this any more, lacking the energy and attitude to constantly wring the neck of a high-strung engine like this. But it's so rewarding, in both the sensation and the speed it generates.

Ultimately the Impreza is quicker, but not by the margin its 50 percent power advantage suggests. It has grunt and grip but the Civic counters with composure and confidence. The Impreza only really pulls away on long open stretches where power counts and, had it been wet, the gap would have been more apparent.

But driving cars like this on the road isn't about simple speed, and the Civic provides a level of excitement and involvement the Impreza simply can't match. We spent two days driving on some of Britain's fastest, most intricate, most scenic and emptiest roads and never really wished to swap the Honda for anything faster or more powerful. Certainly not some fragile, unwieldy, impractical supercar.

And sadly not the Impreza either. We desperately wanted to like it, and even took it to Wales to give it second-home advantage. We ended up admiring it as much as ever, but weren't sufficiently engaged by it. The giant killer has been slain. **car**

IN CONTRAST
Variable valve timing or forced induction? Flat-four warble or insane 8000rpm buzz? Front- or four-wheel drive? Never let it be said that Japanese cars lack character



CIVIC TYPE R Backed by race technology.

There are only two types of car in the world qualified to carry the famous red 'H' Honda badge. One is built for the sole purpose of racing, our Formula 1 race car, the other is a Type R. As soon as you climb behind the wheel of the Civic Type R, the Formula 1 heritage and passion becomes evident. A hard revving 2.0 litre DOHC i-VTEC coupled with a slick 6-speed manual transmission, taut suspension, precise steering and body hugging Alcantara seats deliver an all-round experience that will surely quicken your pulse. The Civic Type R has been developed to intuitively respond to the driver's command. It is this engineering principle that has allowed us to win championships in the pressure cooker environments of Formula 1, Indy Car and Motorcycle GP. The red badge tells you one thing - this is our engineering taken to the absolute limit, so strap yourself in. For more information contact your Honda Dealer or go to civictyper.com.au

HONDA
The Power of Dreams

CIVIC
TYPE R

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