

TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING  
STARTERS: SUBARU WRX STI, VOLKSWAGEN GOLF R



## two hot to trot

STORY: BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS AUTONEWS

### WRX STI STATS

**MLP:** \$49,990<sup>^</sup>  
**WARRANTY:** 3 year/unlimited km.  
**SAFETY:** ABS, ESC, EBD, BA, TC, limited slip differential, DFSCA, KA.  
**MAIN FEATURES:** All-wheel-drive, Brembo brakes, HSA, RC, three drive modes, Active Torque Vectoring, bonnet scoop, rear diffuser, sports body kit, AW18, sports seats, dual-zone climate control, Datadot security, alarm, multi-function display and NAV, bluetooth, MP3/WMA/iPod compatibility, CD player, eight speakers, subwoofer and amplifier.  
**ENGINE:** 2.5-litre, turbo-petrol, Boxer 4-cyl.  
**MAX. POWER:** 221kW @ 6000rpm.  
**MAX. TORQUE:** 407Nm @ 4000rpm.  
**FUEL:** 10.4 litres/100km (averaged 13.8 on test).  
**ANCAP CRASH RATING:** ★★★★★  
**GVG EMISSIONS RATING:** ★★★☆  
**FOR:** Value for money, engaging drive.  
**AGAINST:** Taut ride, uncompromising nature.

### GOLF R STATS

**MLP:** \$54,490<sup>^</sup> (auto)  
**WARRANTY:** 3 year/unlimited km.  
**SAFETY:** ABS, ESC, EBD, BA, TC, DFSCA, KA.  
**MAIN FEATURES:** All-wheel-drive, anti-slip regulation, electronic differential lock, extended electronic differential lock, adaptive chassis control, driver fatigue system, front/rear park sensors, front/rear spoilers, AW19, tyre pressure monitor, alarm, dual-zone climate control, RC, NAV, bluetooth, USB, multi-function display, sports seats, gearshift paddles.  
**ENGINE:** 2.0-litre, turbo-petrol 4-cyl.  
**MAX. POWER:** 206kW @ 5100-6500rpm.  
**MAX. TORQUE:** 380Nm @ 1800-5100rpm.  
**FUEL:** 7.1 litres/100km (averaged 12.4 on test).  
**ANCAP CRASH RATING:** ★★★★★  
**GVG EMISSIONS RATING:** ★★★★  
**FOR:** Exploitable performance, everyday useability.  
**AGAINST:** Might not have enough involvement for some.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, from Japan, in the red corner we have Subaru's fourth-generation sports sedan, the mighty WRX STi. Weighing in at 1485kg (tare), this victor of countless street fights has turned its attention from battling long-time rival, Mitsubishi's masterly Evo, towards a troupe of bold newcomers from Europe.

Shaping up in the blue corner, we have one such challenger, Volkswagen's ultimate hot hatch, the Golf R. Tipping the scales at 1435kg (tare), the R carries a reputation of being the fastest performance Golf to date.

The Subaru has trimmed down impressively for this bout, dropping \$10,000 in price to \$49,990 as well as offering \$7000 more value. The VW, which also bristles with features and technology, costs \$54,490 with optional six-speed DSG auto.

On paper, the STi flexes more muscle, boasting higher power (221kW) and fatter torque (407Nm) outputs, which it backs up in the power- and torque-to-weight stakes. It's also a fraction quicker – 4.9 pays 5.0 seconds – in claimed 0-100km/h numbers.

Put them in the ring together, however, and the VW punches above the weight of its 206kW/380Nm. Drive them back-to-back and seat of the pants says the R is quicker, a feeling validated by faster times

in all six of our standard acceleration tests.

A well-calibrated launch control system gets the R off the line quicker and it never looks back. Simply put, the STi, with its manual gear change, can't match the pace of the flat-shifting, micro-second upshifts of the VW's double-clutch box.

And while the Subaru's 2.5-litre, flat-four needs to be kept revving to maintain its turbo on boost (some lag is evident, even in Sport-sharp mode), the 2.0-litre, inline-four of the German car delivers its power more linear and smoothly.

Part of the STi's appeal is its robustness, but alongside the R, it demands higher driver input to achieve the same outcomes. The clutch requires heft and the gear shift, while accurate every time, needs an assertive touch. The steering is quick, but overly heavy, and has a tendency to self-centre/load-up as you apply lock, though reducing the driver-controlled centre diff setting sharpens response and partly redresses the problem.

In contrast, the VW is easy going. The DSG auto makes a clutch pedal redundant, the steering is nicely weighted and communicative and VW's Adaptive Chassis Control and choice of three modes allow the driver to optimise settings to suit weather/road conditions and driving preferences. As a result, the R is always 'in the zone'.

Grip and traction levels of both all-wheel-drive chassis are beyond criticism. The STi might take more settling down for fast cornering, because of the need to manually down-change and keep the turbo 'spooled' up, but it matches the R for stability and drive, mid corner and on exit. Handling prowess, overall, is as driver rewarding as it is confidence inspiring.

Not surprisingly, given their performance reason-for-being, both cars ride firm on sport suspension and low-profile rubber, particularly the STi.

On test, braking performance favoured the VW, with the R pulling up



1.8m shorter in emergency stopping from 80km/h. After successive use, there was no hint of brake fade from either car. But even Blind Freddy would be able to tell the difference in pedal feel. The VW has a light and progressive touch, while the Subaru's middle pedal requires firmer application.

Both cars' hip-hugging sports seats do the job of holding you in place, but the STi carries height adjustment on the driver's side only; the R has it on both fronts and also comes with two-way lumbar adjustment.

Though different body shapes, our test dynamic duo offers rear-door functionality. With rear seats up, the STi wins on cargo capacity (460 litres to 343).

Driven in isolation, there are no ergonomic deficiencies with the Subaru, but things feel just that bit better placed and more user friendly in the Golf.

Standard equipment on both cars is comprehensive, as it should be on \$50,000 models. Tick the boxes for touch screen, voice control, steering wheel-mounted controls, footrest, rain-sensing wipers, keyless start/proximity entry, tilt/reach steering and rear view camera, among plenty

of other features. The R has front and rear park sensors, too.

There's no question that the Subaru has been engineered and put together well but, inside, it feels a little dated.

#### CONCLUSION

Based on our driving experience, the STi goes the distance but the R wins on points. It's quicker, delivers its optimum performance more readily, and would be easier to live with day-to-day. And then there's the relatively understated appearance, with only subtle external indicators such as wheels, badging and exhaust outlets to tell it apart from other Golfs. For many, this 'sleeper' look would add to the appeal.

The STi offers a lot of 'bang for buck' and is an engaging drive. However, circa 2014, it feels a little old-fashioned, too hard-edged and one-dimensional.

We suspect that not everyone will relate to the VW's clinically efficient way of going about its business. No doubt there will be those ready to embrace the Subaru's more demanding nature and step up to the driver involvement it demands uncompromisingly.

Ah, choice – isn't it a wonderful thing?

ABBREVIATIONS: ABS (anti-lock brakes), AC (airconditioning), ACC (climate-control airconditioning), ACCD (dual-zone climate-control), AL (anti-theft alarm), ASS (auto stop-start), AW (alloy wheel and size in inches), BA (brake assist), CC (cruise control), CCI (intelligent/active cruise control), CT (cloth trim), DFSCA (dual front/front side/curtain airbags), DKA (driver's knee airbag), DRL (daytime running lights), EBD (electronic brakeforce distribution), EPB (electric park brake), ESC (electronic stability control), HDC (hill descent control), HFS (heated front seats), HSA (hill start assist), KE (keyless entry), LSD (limited slip differential), LSW (leather steering wheel), LT (leather trim), MLP (Manufacturer's List Price), NAV (satellite navigation), PBS (push-button start), PDS (power driver's seat), PFS (power front seats), PS (parking sensors), PSR (power sunroof), RC (reversing camera), RSW (rain-sensing wipers), SBPT (seat belt pretensioner), TC (traction control), TPMS (tyre pressure monitoring), XH (xenon headlights).