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GROUP TEST



DEVIL TAKE THE  
HINDMOST



This trio of power dressers are the top contenders in the race for pole position in the lucrative and highly competitive mass produced coupe market. You can forget your pretty-boy posemobiles that are all style and no substance, these three go just as fast as they look. So naturally we felt it was our duty to thrash the Probe V6, Celica GT and Corrado VR6 up hill and down dale on twisty moorland roads. Right, let's go – last one back to the test track buys the petrol

Photography: Ian Dawson

T H R A S H   M E T A L	
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Ford Probe V6	£19,350
Toyota Celica GT	£20,617
VW Corrado VR6	£20,499

Coupes are basically style statements, and very popular ones at the moment. But many offer performance that is little better than their four-cylinder repmobile cousins. The Calibra and the cooking Rover 220, for instance, are little faster than the saloons they're descended from – they just look as if they should be.

But these three coupes are different. They have the clout to back up their pretty, sporty looks and are the top of the coupe class at the moment.

For a start there's the V6-engined Ford Probe 24v. We've written about this model before, but we haven't had the chance to thrash it properly round a test track until now. At £19,350, it's competitively priced; its two rivals both come a little dearer. Like the Probe, they're also front-wheel drive.

First is the new, sixth generation Toyota Celica; at £20,617, marginally the most expensive of the three. It only has a two-litre, four-cylinder engine, but there are no problems with horsepower as its 16-valve engine whacks out a healthy 173bhp.

But the most powerful contender is Volkswagen's 190bhp Corrado VR6. With a 2.9-litre, narrow-angle V6 engine and a £20,499 price tag, it's geared to frighten off rivals rather than customers, as its somewhat crude, supercharged predecessor the G60 did.

As usual, we thrashed the cars around Millbrook Proving Ground and cruised up and down motorways. We squirted them over Welsh moorland roads and stuck them in London traffic jams – by day, by night and in virtually all weathers. Eventually we declared a winner. Here's why.

#### STYLE

As we said in April's Probe 16v group test, it is style, looks and image that are important to coupe buyers. After all, there are plenty of equally powerful but more practical saloons and hatchbacks around (VW's VR6 Golf and Vento spring to mind). Yet the coupe market is still buoyant because people like to drive something a little bit different. Something a little bit flash.

The 16v Probe didn't fare too well in this respect back in April. This came as

something of a surprise because feelings about the new Ford's looks had been very positive. But when we actually parked it alongside its many handsome rivals, it just didn't look that clever.

But this time the Probe fares rather better for several reasons. Firstly, the bigger-engined car has wider, lower profile tyres wrapped around more attractive, larger diameter, five-blade alloys. Secondly, we much preferred our 24v test Probe's Electric Blue paint scheme to the nondescript Rio Red of our 16v. And finally, the opposition wasn't quite so tasty this time.

We're still not wild about the Probe's slightly awkward rear end and tail light arrangement nor the mandatory front number plate mounting which just sabotages its sleek nose. But, all things considered, its clean cut looks give it the edge in this three-way tussle.

The Corrado has a well balanced, well proportioned appearance and pays no homage to the current jelly-mould school of design. Its lines are clean and it has a squat, purposeful look about it. But some people found its angularity more '80s than '90s (not surprising, bearing in mind its Scirocco parentage) and felt that, as a result, it might age quicker than its rivals.

Believe it or not, Celicas have been on sale in British showrooms since 1971 – the heady days of the Probe's spiritual successor, the Capri.

The Celica GT's styling has been greatly influenced by its big brother, the mighty Supra. If you've studied a new Supra, you'll know that can't be a bad thing. A bit of a jelly-mould the Celica may be, but we think that its looks are a huge improvement over all previous incarnations and no-one ever complained too much about them.

The car's rear wing broadcasts all the right messages about its performance potential, yet isn't overly flash. Almost everyone complimented the Celica's oval-shaped headlights and driving lights. They help keep the bonnet line low without necessitating the use of pop-ups or faired-in lights, which invariably cloud up with condensation.

#### PERFORMANCE

Well, well, well, who'd have thought it? The Ford's got two dozen, the Toyota's got 16 and the poor old VW



only has 12, but the results of this test would seem to make a mockery of the marketing people's obsession (or maybe it's your obsession?) with valves. Ford reckons the valve count is so important it distinguishes its Probes primarily by this number, and proudly badges them accordingly. But it's the sparsely-valved Corrado which whips all-comers here.

Its 2.9-litre V6 produces horsepower and torque by the barrowload; 190bhp and 180lb/ft, to be specific. Its power to weight ratio is also superior: 160bhp per ton versus 146bhp per ton (Celica) and 129bhp per ton (Probe).

Not surprisingly, these 'on paper' advantages were demonstrated clearly at the Millbrook test track, where the Corrado's impressive performance won it first place in virtually every speed test. Only the Probe could beat it on the 30-50mph fourth gear run.

Curiously, while we managed to shave one tenth of a second off the manufacturer's own 0-60mph times for

both the Probe and the Celica, the Corrado failed to live up to Volkswagen's 6.7secs claim and would deliver only 7.3secs.

Both the Probe and the Celica had barely completed their running-in periods and their engines may have been a little tight. But the Corrado had no such excuses – it had covered almost 7,000 miles and was, therefore, fully loosened-up.

Away from the test track and out on the road, the Corrado keeps its head in front. The engine is a real gem, pulling very strongly in most circumstances. We'd like it even more if Volkswagen could find a way around using that springy and lifeless cable-operated gearchange linkage.

But, that aside, if you need more power than this you'll have to look at Escort Cosworths, Audi S2s or even Porsche 968s. The Corrado, make no mistake, is fast.

Although it's the lightest of the three at 1,200kg (2,646lbs), the Celica needs



F O R D P R O B E V 6



With its lower profile tyres and smart alloys, the Probe V6 looks racier than its two-litre brother. We loved the Electric Blue paintwork, too. But despite having an engine with two dozen valves, Ford's coupe accelerated into bottom place at the test track. In the front you get airbags and comfort, in the back you get cramp

to be in exactly the right gear and given full welly to keep the Corrado VR6 in sight. Although it is more powerful in terms of absolute horsepower than the Probe, it produces its best when the tachometer needle is most of the way round the dial.

But the problem is that when it's four-cylinder engine is revved hard, it's not as smooth, nor does it sound anywhere near as invigorating, as either of the V6s. In fact, with your eyes shut it could be mistaken for the Carina, its repmobile stablemate.

In this company it also suffers from a lack of torque which, despite its low weight, doesn't make for very relaxed high-speed motoring.

Although the Probe's 165bhp is less than that produced by the other two, its main handicap is weight. The V6 engine certainly feels gutsy and strong in most situations and its off-the-line acceleration is assisted by the widest tyres, but as speed builds, the Probe gradually falls behind. Its performance

would be better suited to a more mature driver than a boy racer.

H A N D L I N G

Fortunately the car with the best all-round performance also has the most capable and entertaining chassis. Although we didn't venture onto a race track for this test, we can confidently state that even without its performance advantage the Corrado would show a clean pair of tail lights to the other two in a circuit shoot-out.

It is beautifully balanced and, unlike its gearstick, the steering wheel feels perfectly weighted and willing to transmit driver commands implicitly and without histrionics.

When you press the Corrado hard through a corner, it pushes its nose a little wide. If you push harder still or back off the throttle indelicately, the tail will gently step out of line. But unless you've been really hamfisted, neither the understeer nor the oversteer become remotely disturbing or panic-



TOYOTA CELICA GT



The Celica looks for all the world as if it's raided the wardrobe of its big brother, the mighty Supra, and nicked some of its old clothes. The oval front lights and rear spoiler look pretty neat, don't you think? Sadly the engine note doesn't match up to the sporty looks. Like all three of these coupes, the interior is pretty uninspiring



inducing. Its only bad habit is its tendency to lift an inside rear wheel when cornered hard.

There are few other cars which have such impeccable high speed cornering manners as the VR6. Two which do spring to mind are the Porsche 968 and the new 911, and that's high praise indeed for the Volkswagen. That it can handle so well and still provide a comfortable ride is a tremendous asset.

The Celica is prone to pushing its nose wide on corners as it nears the limits of adhesion, but apart from that it has good grip, sharp steering and stays pretty much on course when the going gets tough.

An experienced competition driver who is used to flicking the tail from side to side to compensate for understeer could probably keep the Celica on the same lap as the Corrado for a while, but he'd really have to work flat out. If it had the Corrado's power, the Celica would definitely give the Volkswagen a run for its money.

However, its ride is harsher and noisier than the Corrado's or the Probe's.

The Probe has the fattest tyres of the group (225/50 16s) and, therefore, also has high levels of grip. But again its weight and physical bulk hamper its progress, especially when the road is narrow or tight. Steering is relatively vague and ponderous and as a result the car feels and is a lot less 'chuckable' than the other two.

While the Probe isn't particularly enthusiastic about being hurled through hairpin bends, it does lap up the miles on gently swooping A-roads and motorways with aplomb. Here the Probe is most at home. It's as good to drive over a long distance as the Corrado and more enjoyable than the harsher Celica.

INTERIOR

To be brutally honest, we didn't find the interiors of any of these cars very inspiring. As coupes, none of them offers commodious accommodation



V O L K S W A G E N C O R R A D O V R 6



for both passengers and luggage, yet none of them make up for this with outstandingly attractive or even sporty interior designs. We can think of a number of other similarly priced coupes, hatches and saloons which offer a much more pleasant environment for their occupants.

Where these three are concerned, you pay for snazzier exterior looks and improved performance and handling (to a greater or lesser extent) but you don't really get an interior to match.

We'll start with the only car which can carry four adults over a reasonable distance in moderate comfort. From the outside you'd probably expect that to be the Probe, but looks can be deceiving – in fact it's the Volkswagen which collects full points again.

The Corrado has sufficient rear leg and headroom to enable owners to at least offer their friends or family a lift, without fear of being ridiculed, or of having to stop every few hundred yards to let them stretch their legs.

We've previously described the 16v Corrado as being 'no limo in the back' and that still holds true, but by comparison with the Celica and especially the Probe, it's the only proper four-seater here.

The Volkswagen also offers a very good driving position and supportive seats. Although the dashboard and instrumentation are now looking a bit dated, almost everything you need is where you'd expect to find it. You don't get airbags, however (the Probe has two, the Celica one) or a fuel range readout on the trip computer, which is, after all, the most useful function on these devices.

Then there's the rear wash/wipe switch – it's just so frustrating! You can't turn the rear wiper on without wasting water and nobody on this magazine has yet discovered how to switch it off first time (this in spite of the fact that the same stalk is fitted to all current VWs, Audis and SEATs).

Another improvement we'd make to



Looking more purposeful than sexy, the muscular Corrado has 'grunt' written all over it. Our test car had outrageous paint all over it, too. We christened it Bonkers Metallic Aubergine, and it stood right out in the crowd. With blistering performance and rear seats which adults can fit into without getting blisters, this VW is hot



the inside of Corrado would be to brighten up the interior trim; it's all much too black, dark and oppressive.

The Celica is also dark inside, but front accommodation is good. The dash and controls are well laid out and the interior, like the exterior, apes the Supra – yet it doesn't look as good as it should at the price. In the back there's room for a couple of kids but the average adult won't be too happy.

Adults won't be happy in the back of the Probe, either. There's virtually nowhere to put your legs, unless the front seats are slid far forward, and there's precious little headroom too.

Things are much better in the front, where there's ample space and a well designed, airy environment. The seats are of unconventional appearance but are very comfortable, especially on the driver's side where there's electronically adjustable lumbar and lateral support.

If two of you go off on a Continental touring holiday in the Probe, it will carry all your luggage and a load of shopping, because its boot, in contrast to the other two, is enormous.

#### C O S T S

Here the Probe scores highly straight away because of its price – it's well over a grand cheaper than the Celica or VR6. But the Celica makes up some of that ground when you look at fuel consumption and the warranty period.

The Celica's official Euromix of 34mpg is roughly six miles per gallon better than the other two. During our test period, the smaller-engined Toyota averaged almost 29mpg against the 23mpg of both the Ford and VW.

The Celica, in common with other Toyotas, also has by far the most attractive warranty agreement. At three years or 60,000 miles (whichever comes sooner), it's effectively three times what Ford and VW are offering.

Following *Top Gear's* recent JD Power survey of customer satisfaction, it's unlikely that the Toyota's long warranty will be put to too much use, but what price peace of mind?

As regular readers will know, the Probe has been borne of a corporate collaboration between Ford of America and Mazda. The Mazda MX-6, upon which the Probe is heavily based, is subject to a Toyota-style three-year or

60,000-mile warranty; Probe buyers however, have to make do with one-year unlimited mileage cover only. VW offers similar cover for the Corrado.

The Probe's insurance rating is group 17; higher than the Celica's group 15 and lower than the VR6's group 18.

#### V E R D I C T

While drawing our conclusions at the end of a group test, the *Top Gear* test team gathers all the available data and elicits opinion from everyone who has driven the cars plus a few more besides. This invariably gives rise to reasonable discussion and debate. Sometimes, however, it sparks off a monumental argument which becomes impossibly difficult to resolve. But in this case there were no such difficulties. The jury was, and still is, unanimous in its verdict – the Corrado VR6 wins.

For sure, there are a few minor points we're not enthusiastic about, such as the dark interior, but when all its attributes are taken into account, it stands head and shoulders above the rest. It's the best performer, the best through the corners and the most fun to drive. It's comfortable, looks good, sounds good and seats four grown-ups.

The Corrado VR6 not only wins this test but goes straight into our unofficial shortlist of the best cars we've tested. Need we say more?

Mind you, we like the Probe 24v too. Arguably, it's better looking than the Corrado, it costs less and is capable of gobbling up the miles at high speed in good comfort. But it's let down by having very limited rear passenger space and by being less sporty and not as much fun to drive as the VW. Driven in isolation, we'd be tempted to think of it as a potential winner, but the Corrado's multiple strengths are just too overpowering.

Toyota's Celica is also a very good car but as we've said, it's more expensive than the two V6s. While its engine can produce good power, it takes a heavy foot on the throttle to extract the best from it and you'd have to do a huge mileage to recoup that initial cost in fuel savings. When all's said and done, its busy four-cylinder motor just doesn't have the charisma or low rpm grunt of the big V6s, so the Celica GT finishes runner-up to the runner-up. □







P R E T T Y , Q U I C K ? S			
	Ford Probe V6	Toyota Celica GT	VW Corrado VR6
<b>Performance</b>			
0-30	2.9	2.9	2.8
0-40	4.7	4.3	4.2
0-50	6.3	6	5.6
0-60	8.4	7.8	7.3
0-70	11.4	10.5	9.6
0-80	14.6	13.5	12.3
0-90	18.8	16.7	15.1
0-100	24.5	21.7	19.1
0-110	31.9	27.8	24.1
Max Speed, mph	133	133	141
30-50 in 4th	6.6	8.3	7.1
50-70 in 5th	9.4	11.9	9.4
30-70 through	8.4	7.6	6.8
Braking 70-0, ft	177	170	173.7
Standing 1/4 mile	16.6	16.4	15.7
Terminal speed	85.4	88.6	91.6
Speedo @ 70mph	65.5	67	65.5
<b>Costs</b>			
List price	£19,350	£20,617	£20,499
Test mpg	23	28.8	23
Euromix mpg	27.5	34	28.3
Insurance group	17	15	18
Service interval	every 10,000m or 1yr	every 9,000m	every 10,000m
Warranty	1yr unlted.	3 yrs or 60,000m	1 yr unlted.
<b>What you get</b>			
Central locking	yes	yes	yes
Radio cassette	yes	yes	yes
Radio CD	no	no	option
Electric windows	yes	yes	yes
Sunroof	yes	yes	yes
Alarm	yes	yes	option
Immobiliser	yes	yes	option
Power steering	yes	yes	yes
Alloy wheels	yes	yes	yes
Anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes
Airbag	yes (two)	yes	no
<b>Technical</b>			
Engine	V6 cyl, 24v, dohc	4 cyl, 16v, dohc	V6 cyl, 12v, sohc
Capacity	2,497cc	1,998cc	2,861cc
Max power	165bhp @ 5,500rpm	173bhp @ 7,000rpm	190bhp @ 5,800rpm
Max torque	156lb/ft @ 4,800rpm	137lb/ft @ 4,800rpm	180lb/ft @ 4,200rpm
Transmission	5 sp manual	5 sp manual	5 sp manual
Front brakes	Vent. discs	vent. discs	vent. discs
Rear brakes	discs	discs	discs
Front suspension	MacPherson struts	MacPherson struts	MacPherson struts
Rear suspension	Indep. multi link	MacP struts	Torsion beam axle
Wheels	7Jx16"	7Jx15"	6.5Jx15"
Tyres	225/50 16	205/55 R15	205/50 R15V
Dimensions	L:181", W:70"	L:174", W: 121"	L:160", W:67"

Millbrook. Twiggy. Coily. Unruly behaviour. Undisciplined handling. Superglue's just not what it used to be