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The Volkswagen GTI - The True Story Behind Number 1

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GTI phenomenon. The Golf GTI is a phenomenon, a marque within a marque, an automobile philosophy carved in metal and plastic and an unmistakable design statement — it is the original sporty compact. There have been many stories about how the first GTI came into being. At the centre there is always a "secret society" of people who pushed through the GTI right up to production stage against the clock and opposition from the superiors. Many of the tales about these developments that have been passed down are true, but just as many of them have become distorted over the decades and are often wrong. The fact is that the Golf GTI is the ingenious idea of a few men. This is their story and that of the GTI.

Everything began, as always, with the Beetle. Let us go back to 1973. Volkswagen launched a very sporty version of the Beetle. The "Yellow and Black Racer", as it was called, differed from the normal Beetle in that it had a black front lid and engine cover, slightly broader tyres (5.5 instead of 5 inches), sports seats with head restraints (!) and a proper leather steering wheel. Technically it was still the same old Beetle with 1,600cc, 50hp, no more. Despite this comparatively modest output, this "aggressive model from Volkswagen" even caused a stir in the German parliament.

But to the disbelief of many, it was popular among customers. This Beetle model, which only looked faster, sold out in next to no time and laid the foundations for a two-year project in Wolfsburg that, even within the company, only a handful of people would know about.



The pioneers assemble. It is still 1973, 18 March to be precise. On this (from today's viewpoint) memorable day, the test engineer Alfons Löwenberg wrote an internal memo to a few colleagues from the Research and Development department, RD for short. He proposed that Volkswagen should put together a proper sports model. After all, a new vehicle with the project code EA 337 (the internal code for the future Golf) had reached the final stage of development - and a modern high-performance car with front-wheel drive would gain Volkswagen a completely new audience.

The recipients were reluctant at first. Only chassis specialist Herbert Horntrich and development chief Hermann Hablitzel were at least basically interested in Löwenberg's idea. However, Löwenberg kept trying and found other like-minded colleagues. For example, marketing man Horst-Dieter Schwittlinsky and Anton Konrad, the then Volkswagen PR boss. Konrad, previously manager of the Formula V association for many years and himself a racing driver in his spare time, was particularly taken with the idea. He was also aware, however, that the delicate sport seedling needed to be cultivated in great secrecy within the company. The high development costs for the new model that would be launched as the Golf in 1974 were a heavy burden on funds as it was.

Secret meeting over beer and sandwiches. Konrad invited the secret developers from the "Sportgolf" work group to meet at his home. Hablitzel, Horntrich, Konrad, Löwenberg and Schwittlinsky sorted through the possibilities like conspirators over some beer and sandwiches. Hablitzel was not definitely on board and his silent toleration allowed Löwenberg and Horntrich to get down to work. Taking a Scirocco prototype with a rock-hard chassis, they lowered the suspension dramatically, souped up the basic 85hp 1.5-litre Scirocco engine to 100hp with a two-stage carburettor and crowned it all with an exhaust pipe that resembled a stove pipe and also sounded like one.



Prototype 1 is over the top. Today, Konrad remembers the car as being "a roaring monster". The secret team soon agreed that this is not what they want. The Sportgolf should feel sporty, but should still be modest. Löwenberg and Horntrich therefore decided to build a tamer version. The result was not quite as ferocious, but it was still pretty fast. The whole undercover group felt much better about this new model and Hablitzel plucked up some courage. He told the development chief Professor Ernst Fiala about the sporty car and asked him what he thought. Fiala delivered a fatal blow: "It's far too expensive, you're all mad," he retorted.

However, Hablitzel and his men would not be deterred. The Sportgolf prototype based on the Scirocco was officially declared a disguised chassis prototype, unofficially though development continued. Löwenberg fine tuned the engine while Horntrich configured the chassis for the proposed beefy tyres. 205/60 HR 13 would be the format that, back then, would even put a Porsche 911 to shame — the quintessential Teutonic sports car still ran on 185/70 tyres in 1974...

Spring 1975 green light from the management. Not surprisingly, the "disguised chassis prototype" caused a big stir when Hablitzel & co. demonstrated their latest projects to the management at the Volkswagen test centre in Ehra-Lessien in spring 1975. Even Professor Fiala was now taken with the Sportgolf in a Scirocco outfit - and gave his approval. At the end of May, an official assignment was sent to the development department: A sporty version of the Golf is needed.



Golf GTI (Mark I)

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The Golf becomes the GTI. At the same time, the sales department now also saw good market opportunities for a sporty Golf and, in any case, Volkswagen still needed a crowd-puller for the upcoming International Motor Show Frankfurt. The project suddenly gained dynamism from all sides. Six prototypes with different configurations were created ranging from a beast with maximum sports characteristics to a modest comfortable version. Chief designer Herbert Schäfer was responsible for all the small details that would distinguish the Sportgolf from its weaker rivals. For example, the stripe on the radiator grille, the larger front spoiler, the discreet plastic wheel arch extensions, the matt black frame on the rear windscreen, the black roofliner, the golf ball gear stick knob and the chequered seat covers.

Technical fine tuning. Herbert Schuster, the new test manager, immediately gave the chassis development top priority. To cut costs, he reduced the width of the wheels from 6.0 to 5.5 inches and shrunk the tyre size to 175/70 HR 13. He did, however, also add stabilizers for the front and rear axle and developed a spring/damper configuration that provided a perfect synthesis between comfort and sportiness. In collaboration with Audi, the ultra-modern 1.6-litre fuel-injected engine delivering 110hp was produced.

World Premiere in 1975 at Frankfurt International Motor Show. The former undercover team finished their work dead on schedule. When the 46th Frankfurt International Motor Show opened its doors to the public on 11 September 1975, a red wonder celebrated its debut on the Volkswagen star the Golf GTI study. "The fastest Volkswagen ever" boasted the advertisement - and that was no exaggeration. The GTI accelerated from nought to 100km/h in nine seconds leaving considerably bigger and more expensive cars behind. The carefully announced price of "under DM13,000" was still over DM5,000 less than the closest German rival. As result, the trade fair visitors were so impressed that the management had no other choice than build a special series of 5,000 cars.

GTI mania starts. The GTI cost DM13,850 when it was finally launched in mid-1976. However, the dealers still managed to sell ten times the planned number in the first year of sale. No surprise: "Climbing an Alpine pass in the GTI — that is one of the most exciting tasks that can be set for a car driver" claimed the German trade magazine "auto motor und sport". That sums it up. Nothing has changed since then between the first and fifth series of the GTI.

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