



**F**ORGET THE pacenotes and Nomex knickers. Forget that the Audi Quattro is in decline as a rally winner, humbled by a young lion-hearted Peugeot with innately superior balance and transmission.

The Quattro may have met its match on the loose, but as the world's most complete road car it still reigns supreme. Peugeot's 4x4 two-seater homologation special comes nowhere near equalling its all-round ability and appeal. To be fair, it doesn't set out to do so. The supercar Peugeot is basically a racer, detuned and semi-civilised. It is a lot more money for a lot less car. Except for handling agility and para-normal cornering powers, it is a lesser car, too.

For all that, the writing is on the wall for the Quattro. As the precursor of a new generation of all-wheel-drive flyers, its place in motoring history is utterly secure. But for how much longer can it rule the roost? It is not so much the Peugeot 205-16 that threatens to wrest its supercar crown so much as the Ferguson Formula hardware in its brilliant drivetrain. Ironically, it is the Quattro that the FF people have to thank (indeed, its luminaries do thank) for reawakening interest in their own four-wheel-drive system, widely regarded as the best there is. Why else would

Ford, Peugeot, BMW, American Motors and even Audi's senior partners, VW, beat a path to Tony Rolt's modest emporium on the outskirts of Coventry?

Audi's pride and ego has undoubtedly been dented by the abruptness with which a French upstart from PSA has ended their rallying supremacy. In the heat of competition, the conceptual shortcomings of a nose-heavy car that overworks its front wheels have been laid bare by the mid-engined Pug with dominant rear-wheel-drive. In the less demanding world of real-life motoring, though, such deficiencies are of little consequence.

To begin with, you wonder what all the fuss is about. As in a Porsche 911, it is the flaws that grab your attention first. The hemmed-in feeling you get from the high sills and scuttle is accentuated by a low seating position and poor rearward vision. Audi talk about five cylinders being a match for six in smoothness. With the possible exception of Nissan's vibrant V6, they are not. You can feel the engine tingling through the pedals in a way that would make a BMW engineer shudder. The brakes feel spongy, the gearchange is marred by sticky baulking, there's a hint of judder in the

clutch and nowhere to rest your left foot. Ride quality on pocked urban streets is poor, though anyone accustomed to the jitterbugs of a performance hatchback probably wouldn't notice.

The serious driver will soon become impervious to such petty points of criticism. It is not the all-out performance that impresses so much as the way you can use it, even in adverse conditions that would call for circumspection in lesser cars. Takeoff is terrific. The car simply catapults off the line as though it's been booted from behind, without twitch, weave or wheelspin. Within two seconds, the bar-chart tacho is flashing maximum revs at around 35mph, just before 6,700rpm cut-out. Second gear is low, too low. The ignition is killed again at 57mph. Even with two gearchanges, 60mph comes up in just over seven seconds. Third is good for 84mph, fourth (in which you pass the 100mph mark in around 20sec) for 114. Given a long, flat, windless straight, the Quattro will hit 135mph in fifth, geared to give 23.1mph/1,000rpm - hardly long-legged but relaxing enough for Britain's M-ways.

Initial takeoff makes the traction of any powerful front-drive car seem pathetically inadequate. Not that the Quattro is all muscle. Below

2,500rpm, the off-boost engine is bereft of bite and vigour so you have to keep the revs high and the gears low to avoid embarrassing lethargy when climbing or overtaking, even when meshing into a traffic maelstrom.

The Quattro's unique appeal still lies in its amazing versatility, its lack of irksome compromise. The Fast Car Guide at the back will throw up no rival that does everything the Quattro can do so completely. There are faster cars, to be sure, but how many of them cost under £23,000? And of those that do, how many will carry four adults in civilised comfort? What still sets the Quattro a long way apart from all other cars (Subaru innuendo notwithstanding) is its unique combination of packaging and dynamics. On the one hand, an accommodating luxury car with colossal reserves of performance and grip. On the other, a dynamic driving machine that goes, corners and stops like a true thoroughbred.

Although outwardly little changed since its launch four years ago, the Quattro is all the better for development progress. Audi have not neglected it. They quickly responded to British demand with right hand drive. Later on came a package of improvements, including standard-issue ABS anti-lock

brakes, revised gear ratios (third is higher, fourth lower to lessen the gap), fatter 215/50 Pirelli P7 tyres on taller, wider (eight-inch) alloy wheels. There was lowered, stiffened suspension too, incorporating minor but important geometric changes. Blacked-out tail lights and a more slippery nose distinguish the latest cars. Under the heading of retrogressive progress came digital instruments and a talking dash that spits warnings at you in a wretchedly nagging female voice.

The driveline is essentially unchanged. Up front, overhanging the wheels, Audi's oddball 2.2-litre straight-five yields 200bhp at 5,500rpm with KKK turbocharger forcing inter-cooled air at up to 12.3psi into the Bosch-injected chambers. All four wheels are permanently driven via a five-speed manual gearbox and three diffs, two of them (centre and rear) lockable by pneumatic push-button control. Whereas FF advocate an uneven torque split with roughly two-thirds of the effort going to the back, Audi assert that a 50/50 torque split is best. Suspension is by McPherson struts all round, with anti-roll bar control at both ends. Brakes are ventilated discs with third-generation ABS anti-skid control functioning when the diff locks are disengaged.

It is during such manoeuvres that sophisticated four-wheel-drive such as this comes into its own. Not for Audi part-time 4x4 that's simply engaged when the going gets tricky. Their philosophy, like that of FF's, goes much deeper. At the root of it all is this simple fact: the more torque a tyre is asked to handle, the less its cornering grip. By reducing the torque, by spreading it equally to four wheels instead of two, cornering powers and safety margins are increased as well as traction. Lateral g measurements made elsewhere indicate that the Quattro does not have supernatural cornering powers, that well-shod two-wheel drive thoroughbreds can match it on artificial skid-pan tests. Yet on the road, the sense of security, the reluctance to relinquish grip is nothing short of uncanny.

You can power out of wet roundabouts on full throttle, safe in the knowledge that the tail will not snap into oversteer or the nose push into straight on plough. It is the Quattro's ability to put its power on the road that sets it apart from ordinary performance cars. Under power, run-wide understeer sets the limit. With half the torque

