

Shifting attention: Transmission makes a manual seem vintage

by Mark Maynard

I used to think that when I lost the thrill of shifting gears, it'd be time to throw dirt on the pine box.

But a week of testing the VW GTI with direct-shift gearbox has me planning another exit.

Volkswagen calls its DSG an automatic, but that's misleading. It's more of an automated manual transmission. Or is it a semiautomatic?

VOLKSWAGEN SHIFTS - Volkswagen's new direct-shift gearbox, called DSG, is more like an automated manual transmission. The DSG allows so much more driver involvement that the standard six-speed manual seems vintage and one-dimensional by comparison. CNS Photo courtesy of Volkswagen. There are a few of these transmissions on the market -- from BMW, Ferrari and Volkswagen-Audi -- but VW has the simplest engineering.

These are sport systems but practical because they are lighter and more compact than traditional automatic transmissions. They also are more fuel-efficient, reduce engine emissions and give quicker acceleration because there isn't the power drain from a torque converter to change gears.

To prevent teeth-gnashing criticism from tech-types, I must say that this is not an automatic transmission, though it does have a full automatic drive mode for comfort and commuting. But it's missing a pedal for it to be a traditional manual.

I'll call it a computer-controlled manual transmission, one that gives quicker shift points than are humanly possible. Put the pedal down and the transmission clicks off upshifts with Formula 1 intensity and blips the throttle on downshifts.

The DSG allows so much more driver involvement that the standard six-speed manual seems vintage and one-dimensional by comparison. The DSG is more engaging than a continuously variable transmission and gives more immediate shifts than most automatics with a manual mode.

Volkswagen uses the DSG with its 200-horsepower, 2.0-liter turbocharged models, including today's test car, the GTI. Manual shifts can be made via the steering-wheel paddle shifters and or at the console shift lever in Sport.

And be aware that the car will roll on a hill when in drive, just as a car with a manual transmission will roll backward with the clutch pedal depressed.

This isn't for someone who wants a car to get from point A to point B, but for someone who appreciates an automobile and what it can do, a VW spokesman told me.

Agreed.

The transmission moves quickly among the six gears to maintain peak performance, jumping multiple gears up or down as needed. The process can be viewed at the digital readout in the speedometer gauge.

And when driving in manual mode, that readout could be larger. With so many gears to work with, I sometimes forget which one I've punched. I'd also prefer slightly larger steering-wheel shift levers and upshift and downshift control on each lever. Here, the right side is for upshifts, the left for downshifts, but when making a 90-degree turn, the wheel is out of place to flip a upshift. And occasionally my left shifter finger would stumble over the turn signal stalk or the cruise control lever.

At 3,150 pounds, it's not a heavy car, and there's not much turbo lag from the four-cylinder, but it's more noticeable with the DSG. The 207 foot-pounds of torque kick in at a low 1,800 rpm and runs steady through 5,000 rpm, so it doesn't take much to get the engine into the sweet spot of its pulling power.

Fuel economy is 25 mpg around town and 32 on the highway, compared with 23/32 for the manual. And the DSG will do zero-to-60 mph in 6.9 seconds, a tick better than the manual.

The thick, leather-wrapped three-spoke steering wheel fits with the firmness of a pistol grip. And it is entertaining to zip through gear changes to feel the suspension dynamics and hear the tone of the engine.

VW has also tamed the mad scramble of torque steer at the front wheels on hard acceleration. Some of the control comes from suspension geometry, the rest from an electronic stabilization program, anti-slip regulation and an electronic differential lock.

But none of these influences gets in the way of driver bonding with machine.

Another slightly unnerving quality to this engine is how quiet and smooth it is. Much of that can be attributed to the direct injection of gasoline into the cylinders. The design is adapted from diesel engines.

At a stop, this engine idles so consistently at 800 rpm that I couldn't detect any movement of the tachometer needle. I almost restarted.

VW launched the GTI in 1983 and with it the "Hot Hatch" segment. This model had years of richer and poorer evolutions, but the new fifth-generation GTI is back to reclaim its "Hot Hatch" status.

Using the Rabbit foundation, GTI is sold in three- and five-door models. Three-door pricing starts at \$22,730 with six-speed manual transmission; add \$1,075 for the six-speed automatic DSG. The test car was almost \$26,000 with a few options. Five-door pricing starts at \$23,230.

Options include 18-inch wheels with performance tires, \$750; DVD navigation with iPod adapter, \$1,800; and leather-trimmed seats with dual-zone climate control and heated seats and nozzle washers, \$3,160. A lowering kit of front spoiler, side-sill extensions and rear valance is \$1,650.

There are substantial safety features and conveniences and no sign of budget constraints in the quality of materials and construction.

The three-door is roomy but not the cutest exterior design of the group, which includes the Mini Cooper.

The test car in tornado red had the stance of an angry flame, accented by GTI features of roof spoiler, black lower body trim, dual exhaust tips and a sharp-looking 18-inch wheel design (optional) that shows off red brake calipers.

Back-seat room is less cramped than expected, unless there's a giant in the front seat. A 60/40 folding back seat and ski pass-through expand cargo room.

Large doors are a problem in tight parking, but VW says the doors are built to stop a truck.

Because three-and-five-door models are the same size, the five-door is better suited for those who, say, drive kids to school.

Volkswagen is making a statement by offering an automatic transmission that requires a modest amount of driver attention. The fun of driving is bred into a car in search of a new breed of driver.

Copley News Service SPECS2007 VW GTI
Body style: compact, 3- or 5-door, 5-passenger front-wheel-drive hatchback
Engine: aluminum 200-horsepower, DOHC, 2.0-liter direct-injection four-cylinder; 207 foot-pounds of torque at 1,800 to 5,000 rpm
Transmission: six-speed automatic DSG
Acceleration: 0-60 mph, 6.9 seconds (7 seconds manual)
Fuel economy: 25 mpg city, 32 highway; premium fuel recommended for top performance
FEATURES
Standard equipment: remote locking, air conditioning with pollen filter, cruise control, leather-wrapped steering wheel, power (heated) mirrors, power windows-locks, sport front seats with height and lumbar adjustment, split folding back seat with ski pass-through, front and rear cup holders and reading lights, floor mats, 17-inch alloy wheels with locks, 10-speaker audio system with in-dash six-disc CD changer, red-painted brake calipers, xenon headlights, fog lights
Safety: front and side air bags, side curtain bags, anti-lock brakes, electronic stabilization program, anti-slip regulation, electronic differential lock, tire pressure monitoring system
CHASSIS
Suspension: independent strut sport front, multilink rear
Steering: electromechanical rack and pinion; 35.8-foot turning circle
Brakes: 4-wheel discs with ABS
Tires and wheels: 225/45 17-inch H-rated summer performance tires
PRICING
Base price: \$22,730, including \$630 destination charge; price as tested, \$25,925
Options on test vehicle: sunroof and satellite radio, \$1,370; DSG transmission, \$1,075; 18-inch alloy wheels, \$750
Warranty: four years/50,000 miles basic coverage with roadside assistance; 5-years/60,000-miles powertrain
Where assembled: Wolfsburg, Germany
PLUSES: No budget shortcuts to interior features. DSG is the best of a manual and automatic, but better. Snug, solid ride and ever-ready for a workout.
MINUSES: Sport seats have strong bolsters that may constrict large bodies. Large doors are a hassle in tight parking, but VW insists they are built to stop a truck.

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