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# FINAL



# FANTASY 2

*We've waited nearly eight years for BMW's 1 Series and Audi's A3 to get properly exciting. Now they've both gone ballistic within months of each other. Which is hotter?*



The A3 took a wrong turn on the way to pick up its pension payout, ended up at the gym and finally earned its RS prefix

#### WHAT TOOK THEM SO LONG?

### WHY THE GERMANS SAVED THE BEST TILL LAST

**THE A3 IS** eight years old, the 1 Series is seven, but both Audi and BMW believe that releasing a halo model late in a car's lifecycle boosts sales of bread-and-butter models. Ex-BMW boss Wolfgang Reitzle perfected this strategy with the E30 3 Series – the best version was the last, the 177kW Sport Evo (which SA never got)

though this had more to do with touring car regulations than product planning. Nonetheless, its success made BMW sit up and take note. Hence it played the same trick with the 3.0-litre E36 M3 – the limited edition (dark green only) GT was the best of that generation, and another – the red Imola Individual aka

GT2 – came towards the end of 3.2-litre E36 Evo production. Same again with the E46, which bowed out with the CS – better than standard, more useable than a CSL.

Why buy a car that's about to be replaced? Well, it'll be six years before the next RS3, and there may never be another 1M.



**V**ETERAN ACTION HERO

Jean Claude Van Damme turns 51 this year. But instead of retiring to Florida to cultivate a beer gut and a golf handicap, he plans to climb back into the boxing ring, becoming the oldest man ever to compete in a pro kick-

boxing match. Is he sure? A loss could do more damage to brand Damme than even a decade and a half of straight-to-video dross has managed. I hope the Muscles from Brussels knows what he's doing.

I hope the Muscles from Ingolstadt has thought through its upcoming bout too. At eight years old, and with its replacement within sight, the A3 took a wrong turn on the way to pick up its pension payout, ended up at the gym and has finally earned its RS prefix. With 250kW on hand courtesy of the TT RS's turbocharged inline five and the ability to achieve 0-100kph in 4.6sec, it's the quickest hot hatch ever. And at more than R500 000 (est), possibly the most expensive. But like JCVD, the RS3 could be laid out cold on the canvas, because it's stepping into the ring with BMW's new baby M3, the 1M. A 1 Series coupe with a tweaked 135i engine also delivering 250kW and the brakes and suspension of the real M3, it is, for Audi, a fast-but-wrinkly worst nightmare.

No contest, you might think. An eight-year old steroid-addled A3 against a junior M3 – why even bother? Going on past form, rear- beats four-wheel drive almost every time, and logic suggests an artificially aspirated straight six must eclipse a similarly blown five. But when this twin test was over and done – tanks empty, brakes sizzling, exhausts ticking like a shop full of mismatched grandfather clocks – we'd discovered that it's not that simple.

The BMW looks every inch a spiritual successor to the 2002 turbo. All balloon arches, 'outside now!' front air-dam, cartoon wheels and Navy destroyer cannons for exhausts. Allocation is inevitable from launch in July, and you can have it in any colour you like as long as it's black, white, or this car's tangerine metallic. It seems hideously out of proportion from some angles, simply irresistible from others, but there's no denying its kerb menace. It's just as good inside. Climb into a cabin swathed in leather and Alcantara, and you're confronted by a set of pretty, if not particularly legible, bespoke instruments and an optimally chunky steering wheel. The 1M nominally has room for four, but if you're tall, you're essentially driving a two-seater that happens to have a couple of seatbelts mounted to the rear bulkhead.

The Audi meanwhile, has obviously been designed for those who like glitzy watches so big and heavy that they need a Steve Austin bionic arm to lift a hand to the annoyingly flat-bottomed wheel. There are too many fake air intakes, too much black and chrome body gloss, too much air-deflecting plastic tat. Inside, the RS3 adds more brightwork to the dashboard, the pedals and the striker plates, and should that not be sufficiently taste-free, you can specify body-colour shells for the Recaro seatbacks and gaudy contrasting red stitching for the quilted leather. Wasn't there a time, not too long ago, when Audi had a reputation for creating the classiest cabins? ▶



The bloke who designed the front splitter had to be dragged away before he could add any more bits of diffuser



He looks harmless, but try catching him on a twisty road

The 1M feels massively more urgent low down than an M3 and sounds way more convincing than a regular 135i

It also had a reputation as maker of some seriously dull-to-drive cars but it doesn't take more than a couple of twisties and a handful of bursts to the redline to realise that this rowdy red racer is more than capable of holding its own against the Munich car. Better still, it avoids being a smaller version of the soulless RS5. This is an honest car with no artificial steering flavouring, no fancy driver assistance systems, no active aerodynamics. Like the 1M, the RS3 features fixed-rate dampers, brake energy regeneration, dual-stage ESP, 19in wheels, and a button (labelled M in the BMW and S in the Audi) to modulate the throttle response and the exhaust note. But only the Audi comes with five doors, four-wheel drive and dual-clutch paddle-shift gearbox.

Although changing gears with clutch and lever can be fun – and it's far more fun with the 1M's mandatory short-throw six-speed manual than in a three-pedal M3 – it is difficult to argue with the ruthless efficiency and usability of the Audi's gearbox. In this case, there are seven speeds to choose from, evenly staggered and neatly matched to the characteristics of the 2.5-litre five-cylinder engine, which delivers 250kW between 5 400-6 500rpm and spreads 450Nm from 1 600 to 5 300rpm. Its 2 979cc BMW counterpart employs a twin-scroll charger to muster an identical 250kW at 5 900rpm. Shaped like Table Mountain, the BMW's torque curve peaks from 1 500rpm to 4 500rpm, delivering a total of 500Nm, a massive 100Nm more than a standard M3 can summon. But purists will note that it's not a true bespoke M-power engine, just a 135i motor tweaked to produce an extra 22-odd kW. The very same straight six is sold in the Z4 under the 35is badge, minus 50Nm.



Leather, Alcantara, a chunky steering wheel and bespoke dials you can't quite read



That's not to say it isn't effective. It feels massively more urgent low down than an M3 and sounds way more convincing than a regular 135i. But it's missing that rawness, that suggestion that you're packing something really special under the bonnet, which cars like the M3 impart. While both cars are limited to a top speed of 250kph, the RS3 outprints the M coupe from 0-100kph by 0.3sec (4.6 vs 4.9) thanks to its superior traction. The Audi is thus quicker off the mark than an M3, and even the recently offered V10-engined M5.

Its talents aren't limited to slaying super saloons and the odd clumsily driven supercar, because the Audi is putty in the palms of a poised driver. Where the BMW likes to colour the feedback being delivered from its super-precise quick rack with recurrent tugs and kicks, the RS3 feels more relaxed, less easily irritated and, quite simply, better connected to the road. True, its body might display a little more lean and roll, but there is a smoothness to these body movements that actually enhances control and composure. The steering never loads up excessively through tight corners, its self-centring motion feels subtle and natural, the holding forces are intuitive, and the weight strikes a balance between flimsy and ballsy.

And if you're the sort of person who wakes up in a cold sweat from nightmares where you accidentally brush the DSC button off in an M car and instantly have a colossal accident, then you'll love the Audi. Point. Shoot. Score. But definitely not scare. If you want to be more than along for the ride though, it has to be the 1 Series M. Traditionally M cars aren't big on torque. They'll go sideways, sure, but they need provocation to get there because their traction is actually surprisingly good. A half-hearted

attempt at punting the tail round often ends in understeering failure.

But this is a different type of M-car. It has so much low-rev grunt that you begin to wonder if a set of ice racer-style door-mounted window wipers might not be a worthwhile option. Fortunately for the sanity of the traction control system and to the delight of show-offs everywhere, the 1M gets the proper limited-slip

M differential. The halfway DSC Sport setting is enough to have fun while maintaining some sort of safety net. But when it starts to rain, the BMW gets messy and the Audi is instantly elevated to a league of its own. The RS3 pulls ahead relentlessly as the 1 Series M tries to marry its strong low-rev boost to one pair of driving wheels fewer than the optimum for slippery conditions. ▶

#### SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

### WHY NOT STICK WITH S3 & 135i?



**DESPITE WHAT** cynics and critics alike might think, there are substantial differences between the 1M and RS3 and their lesser brethren, the 135i coupe and Audi S3.

It's best to think of the 1 Series M coupe as an M3 chassis in a smaller shell – the blistered bodywork accommodates suspension, brakes and rear differential lifted wholesale from big brother. Alas there's no

bespoke M Division engine: the 135i's single turbo straight six is replaced by the older, twin-blower 3.0-litre from the Z4 35iS.

The RS3 also pinches parts from other RS models, specifically the engine from the TT RS: out goes the S3's 2.0 turbo'd four for the forced-induction 2.5-litre five-pot. It means an extra cog in the twin-clutch S-tronic transmission, too. The front wings are unique

– made from carbon fibre-reinforced plastic to save 2.1kg over the standard steel – to shroud a wider front track. The RS-specific suspension means you can't have the S3's adjustable magnetic dampers.

The 1 Series M will set you back a significant R91k more than a standard 135i, and the RS3 Sportback will cost (we estimate) an extra R100k or so more than an S-tronic Audi S3 Sportback.



Pretty gaudy for an Audi. And you have colour-coded Recaro seatbacks if you must

## The 1M is more challenging, but as soon as someone puts a stopwatch on the table or the weather changes, the Audi appears on top



The Ingolstadt chromefest



Georg gets a tow – overtaking now a mere formality



They're both old shapes, but the BMW still looks edgy

I followed the BMW from the wheel of the RS3, pushing and swerving in fruitless attempts to up the ante, wondering whether the difference in speed was driver-related, imagined or real. Then we swapped cars, and sure enough, the tide turned. There are three tangible strengths which prevent the 1M from catching the RS3: the Audi's more lively acceleration, its enhanced traction through any kind of cornering radius, and the somewhat blurred dialogue between the BMW's DSC and M differential which leads to twitchier-than-expected behaviour at the limit.

It's twitchy below the limit too, in a different manner, the very firm spring and damper setting permitting a fair bit of pitch and enough yaw to dent the flight path over uneven ground where it bobs and jiggles more than such a focused driving machine should. The RS3 is no marshmallow, but it is more compliant and composed than the BMW, and that's a surprise coming off the back of the unresolved RS5.

I am not saying that the Audi is more fun. The 1M is the more challenging piece of kit, a triple-x-rated drive for cocksure pilots, a hoot on the circuit and an absolute weapon through the three or four bends you know best in the whole world. But as soon as someone puts a stopwatch on the table, or as soon as the weather changes or you decide that you're not in the mood and realise that one of these cars can triple the return on some very minimal driver inputs, the Audi appears on top.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was in how many different disciplines the BMW would lose time to the Audi. Even in the dry, the shorter wheelbase and the more compact dimensions make the red car a bit more chuckable, while its superior high-speed brake performance is another bonus. Neither vehicle is an aerodynamic masterpiece, something revealed in reduced rate of autobahn acceleration beyond 200kph. And both of them are definitely more dynamic than efficient. Driven brutally hard, the Audi returned 19.2l/100km, the BMW 18.8, although you could expect to halve that on a gentle highway cruise.

The 1 Series M coupe scores on looks inside and out, its manual gearbox immerses you in the driving experience in the way the RS3 never can, and yes, it is rear-wheel drive. This creates a unique handling balance, and an opportunity to sift the men from the boys. But the Audi is quicker, more homogenous in the way it moves, responds and performs, displaying an entertaining mix of control and compliance. And above all, inspiring more confidence. The verdict? The 1 Series coupe from M division delivers the more visceral driving experience and that's why it would get my money. But for the majority of drivers, even when the sun is shining on the ground, and setting on the A3, the RS3 is the better, more complete car. **TC**

**BMW 1M****PRICE** | R537 500**ON SALE IN SA** | July**ENGINE** | 2979cc 6cyl bi-turbo**POWER** | 250kW @ 5900**TORQUE** | 500Nm @ 1500-4500**TRANSMISSION** | Six-speed manual  
rear-wheel drive**0-100KPH** | 4.9sec**TOP SPEED** | 250kph (limited)**FUEL ECONOMY** | 9.6ℓ/100km**CO2** | 224g/km**LENGTH/WIDTH/HEIGHT** | 4380/1803/1420mm**WEIGHT** | 1495kg**POWER TO WEIGHT** | 167kW/tonne**AUDI RS3****PRICE** | R520k (est)**ON SALE IN SA** | November**ENGINE** | 2480cc 5cyl turbo**POWER** | 250kW @ 5400-6500**TORQUE** | 450Nm @ 1600-5300**TRANSMISSION** | Seven-speed dual-clutch,  
four-wheel drive**0-100KPH** | 4.6sec**TOP SPEED** | 250kph (limited)**FUEL ECONOMY** | 9.1ℓ/100km**CO2** | 212g/km**LENGTH/WIDTH/HEIGHT** | 4302/1794/1402mm**WEIGHT** | 1575kg**POWER TO WEIGHT** | 159kW/tonne