

THE RIVALS

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For more than 50 years, on-road and track, Ferrari and McLaren have been building a rivalry for the ages. But which Spider has the edge today: Maranello's 488 or Woking's 650S?



‘ONE MORE ‘GARAGISTA’ ON THE F1 GRID WAS HARDLY OF CONCERN FOR IL COMMENDATORE BACK IN 1966’

Scratch deeper though. Despite Ferrari’s top end torque only being accessible in seventh gear, it offers more emphatic – and potentially more characterful – punch compared with the McLaren’s more progressive build-up. Ferrari favours a space frame chassis comprising 11 different aluminium alloys, a notable departure from the 23 per cent less flexible 458. McLaren’s carbon fibre MonoCell in the 650S meanwhile is an updated, and lighter, version of the already well-established base

NEMESSES. **DISCOUNTING** monthly deadlines, I’ve never had one myself. Look closely at most cultural aspects of life though and you’ll find at least one: for every Batman, there is a Joker; every Guns n’ Roses, a Nirvana; every fan of top-rate cinema, an Adam Sandler.

And in the motoring world, no rivalry is bigger than that of Ferrari and McLaren.

By the time Bruce McLaren had turned his team’s first wheel in anger at the 1966 Monaco Grand Prix, Enzo Ferrari’s outfit was already an established motorsport giant, having amassed 38 victories and eight combined championships in motorsport’s elite class alone. One more ‘garagista’ on the grid was hardly of concern for Il Commendatore. Thirty years later though, it was a very different picture. Engineering wizardry and some of the best engine-driver packages in history meant McLaren’s championships numbered 16 to Ferrari’s 17, Woking just three victories behind Maranello – 103 to 106 – despite the 16-year head start. Then came the McLaren F1.

Pulling 618bhp from a BMW V12, the first ever McLaren road car was unconventional in many of its workings, three way seating and a

carbon fibre monocoque chassis to name just two. It was also – take a bow Gordon Murray – phenomenally quick. A recorded top speed of 240.1mph (386.4kph) shattered the world record for production cars in 1998, a record Woking held until Bugatti arrived with the Veyron in 2005. Technically and mechanically superior with public support to match, the F1 was a tough benchmark against which Ferrari’s new F50 – already failing to win critical support as the F40’s successor – was struggling.

Even on-track, McLaren’s race-spec F1 GTR devastated the ‘95 and ‘96 BPR Global Series against Ferrari’s F40 LM, victory at Le Mans in ‘95 a particular slap to the face. Such is the F1’s legacy, it would be 13 years before the next McLaren road car appeared, the 2009 MP4-12C. Surprise surprise, the Ferrari 458 Italia – itself only two years old but already a sales behemoth – lay firmly in the crosshairs.

Today both the 458 and 12C are long gone, the rivals’ latest bout involving Ferrari’s recently launched 488 Spider and McLaren’s 650S convertible. They’re two of the best-performing supercars on-sale today, two of the most desirable 330kph-plus convertibles money can buy, and – offering a balance between performance and day-to-day

refinement – should prove just as intriguing a contest on-road as the brands’ on-track rivalry has done for five decades.

So, Ferrari or McLaren, 650S or 488 Spider. Which of these giants has the edge?

ON PAPER

As supercar comparisons go, the 488 and the 650S are closer than most. Both for instance house a twin-turbocharged V8 producing 600bhp-plus, both of which are mated to seven-speed dual-clutch automatic transmissions that send said power to the rear wheels. They both feature carbon ceramic brakes, active aerodynamics, and motorsport inspired adaptive suspension through their double wishbone configurations. Unsurprisingly, for two companies with such a vested interest in each other, their true worth lies in the details.

The Ferrari’s 3.9-litre V8 for instance is 103cc larger in capacity than the McLaren’s 3.8-litre, and boasts 661bhp compared with the 650S’ 641bhp, 561lb ft to McLaren’s 500lb ft of torque. The pair are level-pegging as they hit 100kph from standstill in three seconds flat, though thereafter the McLaren ekes out a one-tenth gap to 200kph before strolling onto a 329kph top speed, 4kph more than the Ferrari.



Opposite, left: Both are powered by twin-turbocharged V8s producing well north of 600bhp. And guess what? They’re level-pegging from 0-100kph



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found in the 12C. It's a more restrained course of action compared with Ferrari's more flamboyant though admittedly highly technical approach. Open those scissor doors and you can see examples of this inside too.

DESIGN

Car design being the subjective minx it is, I'll leave you to flood internet message boards with your opinions and focus exclusively on cabin design and practicality. Don't get me wrong, when dealing with two '5 Star' supercars, elements like ride comfort and cabin civility should be taken with a pinch or two of salt. And yet somehow, both Ferrari and McLaren have managed to nail a damn-near perfect balance: they boast legitimate track potential yet both offer enough pliancy in the suspension to soak up even the choppiest of road surfaces, and enough comfort to make the heftiest of

journeys a piece of the proverbial.

Dive into the details once again though, and the innate character of both Ferrari and McLaren begin to shine. The 488 for instance is considerably more outlandish than the 650S, all sharply angled dashboards, beautifully cut leather upholstery, chrome-detailed '488 Spider' emblems, centre-mounted carbon fibre floating 'wings' above the transmission tunnel, and hexagonal multifunction steering wheels. It's awe-inspiring stuff, as you would expect from the prancing horse.

And then there's the more restrained approach in the 650S, which, in spite of that, boasts possibly the best cabin design in the motoring world today. In my opinion at least.

Like the 488 the overall look is a striking if slightly more measured one. Carbon fibre and leather upholstery, yes, but with dashes of Alcantara on the very non-multifunction

steering wheel, and just a touchscreen infotainment system on the floating centre console. Save the 'funky' yellow stitching, it's a monotone look compared with the flashier Ferrari cabin, rather apt for the Woking tick, synonymous as it is with the company's 'form follows function' mantra. And yet despite this, it's the more user-friendly of the two.

The damping of the suspension for instance soaks up imperfections in the road slightly better than the Ferrari – admittedly we're dealing with hair-breadths here – and the complexity of the Ferrari's cabin setup did trip me up a few times during our drive, not a problem with McLaren's more minimalist approach. I could even argue that its lower wings make the 650S easier to place than the 488, though that would be doing a disservice to the absolutely perfect seating position Ferrari's Spider. Even if the decision to diagonally mount

a fire extinguisher in the passenger footwell baffles and infuriates to this day.

For me then, the McLaren takes first scalp.

DRIVETRAIN

We ease ourselves into Ferrari terrain here. Though the transition from natural aspiration to downsized twin-turbocharging was an inevitable one if those pesky fuel efficiency ratings are to be believed, it didn't stop nuclear amounts of heat descending on Maranello from Ferrari purists frothing at the mouth. Hard to argue with the results though: a 100bhp step up over the now-retired 458 Italia and some clever, F1-inspired tweaking to the ECU means engine performance is now 12 per cent more volcanic, response times across the board nine per cent more rapid than before. And much like the design, Ferrari's inherent sense of drama and joie de vivre is all too clear in the way the

488 puts its power down.

There's no turbo lag, at all, and peak torque has been deliberately limited in the lower revs to avoid nuking the rear tyres. It also makes the initial burst of acceleration smoother and more linear. That stout torque curve in the higher gears though and the spooled up turbo thereafter mean 661bhp-worth of acceleration in the mid-card feels like being cracked in the spine with a bullwhip. From the hardly-gentle initial burst, it's a savage hit designed to grab you square in the feels. Each seamless gear change delivers a massive clout of forward momentum up to a dizzying 8000rpm, along with a high-pitched, operatic soundtrack that could rupture an eardrum. It's glorious.

Nope, we hadn't forgotten about THAT sound. Turbocharged though it may be, and perhaps lacking an ace of its naturally aspirated forebear up in the rpm rafters, the Ferrari's V8

soundtrack is simply stunning, made all the more gut-wrenching in closer proximity when the hardtop roof is stowed.

That's not to knock the McLaren's similarly turbocharged V8, even if the lower-pitched, slightly more warby soundtrack doesn't quite pique the neck hairs like the 488 does (something McLaren has worked on, including a cylinder cut on upshifts for a more emotional note). Power delivery in the McLaren for instance feels less raw than the Ferrari's more fiery approach, but only a fool would denounce the 650S' speed.

Good God it's quick. Pick-up from the off – especially with Power turned all the way to 'holy crap' in Track mode – is simply brutal, a surprisingly more aggressive hit off the line than even the 488 spits out. The difference though lies in the low-to-mid revs. Here the Ferrari finds another flame-spitting gear

where the McLaren retains a more progressive but no less emphatic 641bhp surge well into the triple figures. Again, gearshifts are seamless, and again, the sensation of speed is baffling. It's full-bodied and utterly delicious, if perhaps – still – lacking just that final tenth of emotional punch only a Ferrari powertrain can deliver.

Be under no illusion though, straight-line bursts in either supercar will leave you giggling like a wide-eyed idiot.

HANDLING

Time to REALLY start digging into those details. We've driven both the 488 Spider and 650S Spider previously at evo Middle East, both proving as glorious and utterly spellbinding in their manoeuvrability and responsiveness as you would expect from Ferrari and McLaren. The balance of each is astonishing, the merest hint of body roll cast aside with derisive laughter by both adaptive suspension setups. Lateral grip is similarly phenomenal as power is fed in mid-corner: grabbing either by the scruff of the neck and hustling furiously is a cake walk. Take a closer look though...

It's tempting to favour the McLaren's steering, given that the precision and deft feel for the front wheels is slightly more precise, more neutral than the Ferrari's. So rapid is the steering rate in the 488 for instance – a hallmark of recent Ferraris – that the direction change can border on alarming. Specially tuned Pirelli P Zero tyres and a perfect weight distribution means there's never any fear of overloading the front axle, nor could you even

dream of calling Ferrari's electronic power steering 'over-damped'. It's the 650S' ideally weighted and more fully textured setup though that I relate to, the precision to flick the front end into the corners as mesmerising as the Ferrari's and yet subtly more engaging.

Then there's the traction. Both are sublime, and yet it's slightly greater in the 650S, the 488's rear axle proving twitchier, and considerably more playful thanks to that limited slip differential, another nod to Ferrari's 'flashy' charm over its British nemesis. It's subtle and certainly doesn't affect the phenomenal traction out of the corners unduly, but it is there. While the temptation is to lean heavily on the McLaren's front end, in the Ferrari the real engagement comes from balancing the rear tyres on the throttle.

I'm certainly not suggesting that the 650S is incapable of slipping – make sure you've had your morning coffee if/when you turn traction control off – but it's difficult not to be won over by the slightly more enthusiastic Ferrari zeal.

Having said that, there really is no trumping the telepathic steering feel in the 650S. It truly is baffling to think how McLaren could improve upon it.

VERDICT

So, a rivalry for the ages, Ferrari vs McLaren? 488 vs 650? Which is it?

That both the Ferrari 488 Spider and the McLaren 650S Spider are five star models is unquestionable. Ride quality is excellent, each design will turn heads quick enough to snap

vertebrae, and the performance on-tap plus the agility through the turns is scintillating. Time to take a brave pill though and award some brownie points.

In terms of ride comfort and practicality, the McLaren gets the nod, though admittedly not by much, such is the effect that flamboyant Ferrari design has on me. For emotional bursts of speed, a V8 and gearbox to match and an utterly glorious soundtrack that could reduce grown men to weeping puddles, the Ferrari is difficult to beat, despite a stellar case posed by McLaren. Steering and precision is separated only by a more textured setup in the 650S, though the 488's friskier rear end makes me wonder if that alone could swing the decision in Maranello's direction.

At a push, at a very, VERY hard push – we're talking an elbow driven hard between the ribs here – I'm tempted to side with the McLaren. But there is a problem. One with a prancing horse on the bonnet.

The 650S Spider is utterly brilliant, of that there is no doubt, and as an overall package it's hard not to give it the blue ribbon. But then I consider life with the McLaren over the Ferrari, the knowledge that the emotional connection – that Italianate charm that Maranello piles with gusto into each of its models – would be missing on the daily drive to and from the office, and those weekend blasts through the mountains.

My respect for the McLaren 650S Spider remains, and will forever remain, absolute. But for me, on these roads, it can't quite topple its Italian nemesis today. ☒



McLAREN 650S SPIDER

V8, twin-turbo, 3799cc
641bhp @ 7250rpm
500lb ft @ 6000rpm
Seven-speed SSG, rear-wheel drive
Double wishbone, ProActive Chassis Control, active dampers, springs
Double wishbone, ProActive Chassis Control, active dampers, springs
Carbon ceramic discs, 394mm front, 380mm rear
19 x 8.5in front, 20 x 11in rear
235/35 R19 front, 305/30 R20 rear, Pirelli P-Zero Corsa
1330kg (dry)
482bhp/ton
2.9sec
333kph (Coupe), 329kph (Spider)
\$285,000



FERRARI 488 SPIDER

Engine
Power
Torque
Transmission
Front suspension
Rear suspension
Brakes
Wheels
Tyres
Weight
Power-to-weight
0-100kph
Top speed
Basic price

V8, 3902cc, twin-turbo
661bhp @ 8000rpm
560lb ft @ 3000rpm (in seventh gear)
Seven-speed dual-clutch
Double wishbones, coil springs, adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar
Multi-link, coil springs, adaptive dampers, anti-roll bar
Carbon-ceramic, 398mm front, 360mm rear
9 x 20in front, 11 x 20in rear
245/35 ZR20 front, 305/30 ZR20 rear
1475kg
455bhp/ton
3.0sec (claimed)
330kph+ (claimed)
\$313,200



evo rating



**'GEARSHIFTS ARE SEAMLESS,
AND THE SENSATION OF SPEED IS
BAFFLING. IT'S FULL-BODIED AND
UTTERLY DELICIOUS'**