

Day

tripper



The cream of Europe's saloon car racers gathered at an autumnal Silverstone for the annual Tourist Trophy round of the ETC. Art Markus joined them, to race Alan Minshaw's VW Golf GTI

In normal circumstances, we would not be delighted to finish a motor race in a lowly 17th place and seventh in class. But these were not normal circumstances. We had just finished the Tourist Trophy, Britain's oldest surviving motor race, and we were, to coin a clichéd phrase, over the moon.

The Tourist Trophy was first held in 1905, on an Isle of Man circuit, when it was won by John Napier in, or 'on', as they used to say in those days, an Arrol-Johnston. Since then this venerable event has had its ups and downs; it has been run for a number of different categories, and has at times suffered declining stature, almost fading into obscurity. Nonetheless, the names engraved on the Trophy read like a *Who's Who?* of famous racing names. Multiple winners include Tazio Nuvolari, Graham Hill, Denis Hulme and Stirling Moss.

Latterly, the Tourist Trophy has formed a round of the European Touring Car Championship and has, as such, recovered much of its former prestige and stature, in

unison with the ETC itself, after a long period in the 'seventies when both were in the doldrums. What at first seemed an uneasy liaison has now matured into a fine event, and can probably be regarded as one of the classics of the ETC calendar.

Certainly, we felt privileged to be a part of it. We feel a certain sympathy for the intensely serious young men who appear from time to time in top-level motor racing, who claim to know little, and care less, about the history of motor racing; we can't escape the feeling that they are missing out on something, or somehow missing the point. Motor racing is not just a mechanical and commercial exercise.

So it was with a strongly-developed awareness of the long history of the event that we contemplated our participation in the 1985 Istel Tourist Trophy.

The opportunity to contest the TT had come through our old friend Alan Minshaw, with whom CCC has had a long association. Minshaw, proprietor of the well-known *Demon Tweaks* tuning emporium, has carried the CCC colours with distinction on a wide variety of racing machinery over the years, a high point being a class win in the 1983 Trimoco RAC British Saloon Car Championship. This success was achieved at the wheel of a Volkswagen Golf GTI. However at that time, the car, a Mk1 with a 1600cc engine, had already been superseded by the 1800cc engine version, while the arrival of the Mk2 was imminent. Although the Mk2 fell outside the 0-1600cc class in which the Mk1 had been such an effective weapon, and into the 1601-2500cc class, the much-rumoured 16-valve engine would, it was believed, make the Golf equally competitive in the larger class, previously the domain of the Alfa Romeo GTV6.

Accordingly, the successful Mk1 was sold, and a Mk2 ordered. That, in retrospect, was a mistake. Now, almost two years later, the 16-valve Golf has still not been homologated into Group A. Minshaw has been forced in the circumstances to run the Golf in 8-valve configuration, to his chagrin. "I should never have sold that little black Golf", he says. The cruelest irony of all is that the newer car, forced under the class rules to carry fully 80 kilos more than the 1600s, can barely keep pace with the fastest of the smaller class cars, the power produced by the extra 200cc only just enough to offset the weight penalty!

Meanwhile, the 1600cc Mk1 Golfs, which automatically retain their homologation for five years after the cessation of production, continue to give a good account of themselves in Class C against the Toyota Corolla GT and Ford Escort RS1600i.

During 1984, Minshaw campaigned the red Golf 2 in the early rounds of the Trimoco RAC British Saloon Car Championship, in the expectation that the 16-valve engine would soon be in production, and homologated. He soon gave that up as a bad job though. The car, for obvious reasons, was hopelessly off the pace, a pace made much hotter that year by the introduction of turbocharging to Class B in the form of Graham Goode's incredibly fast Nissan Bluebird Turbo (see CCC October 1985).

Minshaw realised that with the high running costs inherent in Group A, he was effectively throwing good money after bad. The outclassed Volkswagen, initially built and set-up by Andy Rouse, had already cost the *Demon Tweaks* man no less than £25,000. Meanwhile, the homologation of the 16-valver seemed to get further and further away. Now, even if the homologation formalities are completed in time for the '86 racing season, as seems probable, there remains some doubt that the Volkswagen will be competitive against the new challenge of the latest turbos. Richard Longman qualified the new Ford Escort RS Turbo on the class pole for the Tourist Trophy, more than six seconds faster than the best the Golf could manage, even with the benefit of a somewhat optimistic practice time. That is not the sort of margin that is likely to be bridged by the extra 50-odd horsepower that the latest engine is expected to yield.

It was largely because the Volkswagen is, to

all intents and purposes, a white elephant, that we were lucky enough to land a ride in the Tourist Trophy. Knowing that the race car is neither competitive nor – the two are virtually inseparable – saleable, Minshaw is determined at least to get some fun out of it. That meant entering the Trimoco round that accompanies the annual British Grand Prix, and the British rounds of the European Touring Car Championship; no expectations; no high hopes; no pressure from sponsors eager for results.

And if that meant taking some journalist along for the ride in order to get some publicity for your own company, which is picking up the tab, then so be it. The result was an unforgettable experience!

What follows is a haphazard collection of impressions gleaned from our first experience of top-line international saloon car racing. The one thing the writer was concerned about above everything else was keeping out of the way of faster traffic. As it turned out, this was among the least of our worries. Despite the apparently large gulf in performance between the Rovers, Volvos and BMWs, and our machine, we found it relatively easy to monitor the approach of faster traffic in the rear-view mirror, and take appropriate action. Usually that meant doing nothing other than sticking to the conventional line and letting the following hot-shot sort things out for himself, sometimes indicating by hand signal out of the half-open window not so much how and



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where he should pass, but that we had seen him coming.

When the Volvos and Rovers did come by, we were surprised to note that they weren't that much faster than the Golf; not to the extent that we had expected, anyway. We had anticipated being virtually blown off the road, especially by the Volvos, but the difference in top speed was, we estimate, no more than about 20mph.

What was markedly different, and what would largely account for the 10 seconds per lap difference, was acceleration out of Silverstone's fast corners. The braking and cornering capabilities of the cars seemed to be roughly equal regardless of class, but whereas the smaller cars would go through Club Corner, say, at very close to their maximum speed, the bigger cars still had a good deal of acceleration left. That was made particularly noticeable on the slight uphill gradient towards Abbey Curve, where the larger cars really romped away.

Conversely, our suspicion that the Golf was little quicker than the best of the Class C cars was confirmed when we spent a number of laps in close company with the Escort RS1600i of Richard Belcher and David Carvell, with neither car able to wrest an appreciable advantage. Cruelly, these two were denied what looked like certain class victory only a few laps from home by a massive engine failure, which literally broke the block in two.

On a lighter note, the antics of some of the Alfa Romeo GTV6 drivers were straight out of the Fiery Italian Racing Driver instruction manual. Their favourite trick was to cut in unnecessarily sharply after easing by on the straights, in what we interpreted as an intimidatory gesture. And that was only

during practice and qualifying! Macho stuff. All a bit silly really, as any misjudgement resulting in contact would almost certainly have resulted in them losing control, rather than us. Credit where it's due, though; none of these numerous incidents did actually result in contact. Perhaps their judgement really is inch-perfect. There again, we weren't really intimidated, either.

During the race, when one of the many Italian-entered GTV6s drew alongside under braking for Copse, and then realised in the nick of time that his approach speed was incompatible with his tight entry, we tottered around Copse side by side, door-handle to door-handle, eyeball to eyeball, each spoiling the other's line. We were unable to take our normal apex because the Alfa happened to be occupying that piece of road, and he wasn't able to get back on the power, drifting out towards the rumble strip, as we were in his way. I swear that he reciprocated my sheepish grin through his helmet as we regained lost momentum and he slowly eased ahead!

Notwithstanding our earlier comments about the competitiveness of the Golf, it must be said that the pace of the Belgian RAS Sport car, sponsored by Monroe shock absorbers and driven by Van Dalen and Hohenester, which co-incidentally occupied the pit next door to the *Demon Tweaks* example, was a considerable surprise. The diminutive but fiery Hohenester recorded a time some three full seconds faster than our supposedly identical example even on the official practice times, which rather flattered our car.

According to our own lap charts, the gap was more like four seconds – a night and day difference.

During the race it soon became apparent that the gap was down to a more reasonable two seconds or so; the RAS Sport team had obviously made a special effort for qualifying. Their superiority was still marked, though, as we were to discover at first hand during our stint, right in the middle of the race.

As we sped out of Copse, we spied the RAS Sport car just leaving the pit road and gathering speed. As we approached the braking point for Becketts, the red, white and blue car was tucked in behind with the less talented of the drivers, Van Dalen, aboard. To our amazement, he was able to simply pull alongside and power past on the next straight, without even doing us the courtesy of slipstreaming, or breathing down our neck for a couple of laps. He simply pulled alongside and disappeared. At Club, though, came a mistake, and near disaster, as the Golf got into a long fishtailing moment that lasted all the way to Abbey. Imagine our chagrin, though, when with the benefit of a clean and quick exit from Club and a good deal more momentum, we pulled alongside the other Golf, only to have it ease away once more. *Rats!* Thereafter, we kept the Belgian-entered machine in sight for several more laps, but with each lap our rival would stretch his advantage a further small, tantalising amount, until finally we lost sight of him – very frustrating.

Interestingly, the RAS Sport car bucked the current trend of using the largest allowable wheel – 15in in the case of the Golf – appearing on 13in wheels. While these gave it a faintly ludicrous toy-like appearance, there was no denying the car's pace. The smaller wheels also allowed it to sit very much lower than the DT example, not just the inch lower that would be an automatic result of the change in wheel sizes, but probably fully 2ins lower, achieved by lowering the whole car until it all but touched the wheel arches on its 2in smaller-diameter tyres. Although the car's advantage appeared to be on the straights, this can be deceptive, as any increase in cornering ability automatically translates into better speed on the straights. All in all, it was an interesting confrontation, and perhaps an indication that the Golf cause is not irrevocably lost after all.

Finally, there was the pace car incident. We still have nightmares about it. For us the incident started when we were approaching Woodcote Chicane about midway through our stint, to find a forest of waving yellow flags. The cause of this alarm was obvious; one of

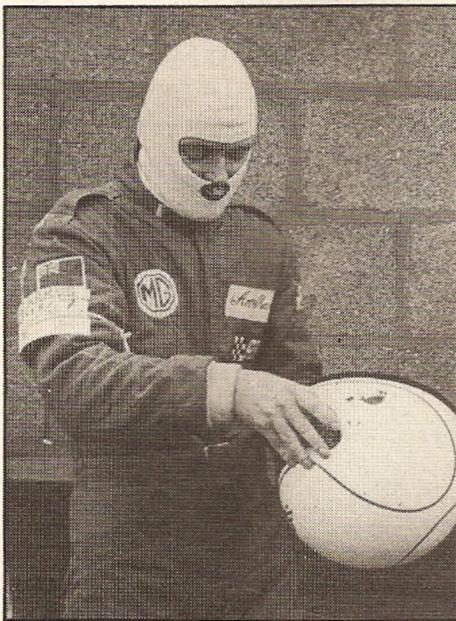


the brightly-painted Cibi-Emme BMWs was planted firmly against the entrance to the pit lane, looking distinctly second-hand. This didn't cause us any particular concern, as we were already treating the infamous chicane with a good deal of circumspection. Ray Concar, the man responsible for the Golf's immaculate preparation, had beseeched us before the race to keep off the kerbs, as the shock loadings would almost certainly destroy the driveshafts, the Golf's only real weakness. So a conservative line between the Woodcote kerbs was the order of the day. It was obvious though, that the immobilised Bee Em was in a dangerous place, and so were the marshals who were attempting to manhandle it to safety.

Within a few laps, yellow flags began to appear all around the circuit. Theoretically, overtaking was now prohibited, but that didn't seem to inhibit some drivers. At this point, we were becoming frustrated, wondering what the fuss was all about. Then, all of a sudden, it became obvious as we tagged onto the back of the long colourful snake of cars formed up behind the pace car. For several laps, everyone trailed patiently round behind the Jaguar, until suddenly the crippled BMW was gone.

Now, mass impatience in the cockpits was almost palpable. There was some confusion around the circuit as some of the marshals' posts continued to display the waved yellow flags, while at other points they had been withdrawn. The Jaguar was now cruising along at the head of the snarling pack, with its flashing orange lights extinguished.

But wait. Some of the leading cars are already passing the Jaguar, and racing ahead. More and more of the cars begin to break ranks. Surely they have got it wrong? "Thou shalt not pass the pace car unless signalled to do so" Pierre Aumonier had thundered during the morning driver's briefing. So where was the signal? Had I missed it? Had I missed something vital in the driver's briefing; too busy soaking up the atmosphere; too pre-occupied with trying to recognise some of the



lesser-known drivers, and greeting some of the Trimoco regulars; too busy trying to look as if I belonged.

What had Aumonier said? 'That will teach you to stand about posing when you should have been listening', I thought. Quite suddenly I was first in the queue behind the pace car, the road ahead rapidly clearing of traffic. Agonies of indecision gripped me. Surely a signal to go should come from the pace car? Nothing. Perhaps on the next straight. Nothing.

Try as I might, I could not recall the exact wording used in the drivers' briefing. It is remarkable how acutely the brain concentrates on the immediate problem of driving, to the total exclusion of anything else. My mind was a blank I could see the other cars streaking ahead as we continued to potter along, while those behind dived in and out of view in the rear-view mirror, fuming with impatience and frustration, jockeying for position.

Somehow, I remained convinced that I was right; that overtaking the pace car was a mistake. But just as I began to think, 'to hell with it, I'm going', an arm came out the off-side window and motioned us to resume racing. By this time, the cars that had broken ranks, amounting to well over half the field, had virtually disappeared, leaving those who had played by the rules with considerable ground to make up. As far as we are aware at least, no-one was moved to register any protest as a result of this delay.

We were gratified to learn later that we had been correct to maintain station. Indeed, the first man to break ranks and pass the pace car,

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Alfa Romeo driver Dagmar Suster (he was one of those whom I didn't recognise at the driver's briefing!) was fined £1000 for his trouble.

Nonetheless, this was a rather unsatisfactory incident, with the pace car driver, and those in command of the race, woefully slow to react to the fact that, right or wrong, the race was back on. And this so soon after the embarrassing British Grand Prix lap-scoring debacle at the same circuit. We have little doubt that Volvo drivers Brancatelli and Lindstrom have good reason to feel aggrieved. They could only watch while their painstakingly accumulated lead evaporated as the field closed up behind the pace car. They were destined to lose the race by the slimmest of margins.

The use of a pace car is obviously a thorny subject. We would like to believe that a pace car is unnecessary; that the drivers themselves have enough common sense at this level to act with restraint when passing the scene of an incident where marshals are working. Race officials world-wide don't seem about to credit drivers with that common sense, however, and of course, the first incident where a marshal is injured while working at the scene of an earlier incident would clinch the case for pace cars, and leave the drivers, as a group, with much on their consciences.

It seems to us, though, that there has to be a better way, as pace car incidents, even in the United States where they are used as a matter of course, are a continual source of controversy. Why it is apparently so difficult for the pace car driver to a) pick-up the leading car, and b) to set the field in motion again with the minimum delay, is beyond us.

This incident, while unfortunate, could not spoil our enjoyment of a great race. Just to be a small part of that big-race atmosphere was something we will not readily forget. Our thanks to Alan Minshaw and co-driver Tony Hill, who incidentally did a great job in bringing a well-used car to the finish with, it later transpired, a deflating tyre. Thanks also to Ray Concar and assistant Mike Sample for their meticulous preparation, and to Jane Sample for her devotion to duty with the stop-watches and time sheets.