

MASTERS

AND

COMMANDERS

Stick 16 former Touring Car stars in identical machines and watch the sparks fly. It happened at this year's BTCC season finale as Andrew Charman took cover.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GARY HAWKINS



Back when this correspondent was a full-time Touring Car journo during the 'Golden Years' of the mid-1990s, the BTCC season always ended on a high with a mad dash-for-cash around Donington Park called the TOCA Shootout. Without team orders and championship points to worry about, the drivers let the red mist rise and the action was frantic. Memorable moments were aplenty, surely the most famous being Nigel Mansell's heavy meeting with a bridge parapet in 1993 after his

Mondeo was blamelessly tipped off the circuit by Tiff Needell.

The man who came up with the TOCA Shootout was Alan Gow, the very forthright Australian who ran the BTCC. Well after a few years away Gow has returned to once again boss the championship this year, and after amending the rules and making various other far-reaching changes he turned his attention to the season finale – he needed a big draw.

Step forward SEAT, and 16 Leon Cupras, as used in this year's one-make

championship. With the 2004 series done and dusted, the idea that the cars be used for a one-off 'Masters' race at the final BTCC meeting was well received. It would be good exposure after all, but SEAT was taking a big risk – having run the Cupra series itself for the past two years, the Spanish maker will let teams in the 2005 championship look after their own cars, this year's Cupras are available for sale to intending competitors over the winter – except that Gow first intended to entrust these same cars to a clutch of former Touring Car stars...





THE ENTRY LIST READ LIKE A WHO'S WHO OF TOURING CARS, WITH EIGHT CHAMPIONS JOINED BY A HOST OF OTHER BTCC NAMES

You can never take the racer out of a racer and most of those invited jumped at the chance. The entry list read like a who's who of Touring Cars, with eight champions, Frank Sytner, Robb Gravett, Tim Harvey, Gabriele Tarquini, John Cleland, Frank Biela, Alain Menu and Jason Plato, joined by a host of other BTCC names. Double World Cup winner Paul Radisich flew in from Australia to take part, joining BMW pilot Johnny Cecotto, Cleland's former Vauxhall sidekick Jeff Allam, Julian "I was better than that lot" Bailey, the irrepressible accident waiting to happen that is Patrick Watts, and three still very much involved in the BTCC today, Kelvin Burt, Anthony Reid and Matt Neal. The last was particularly pleased to be taking part, his opportunity was thanks to Vauxhall decreeing that their two drivers and the last two champions, James Thompson and Yvan Muller, would have to watch with the rest of us.

So was Alan Gow worried about potential carnage? Well one of the assembled heroes told me on Sunday morning that at a dinner the night before said BTCC boss had stood up, told them all what a massive favour SEAT was

doing for the BTCC, and basically pleaded with the 16 to treat the Cupras gently, Tim Harvey reckoned such concerns were unnecessary; "Everyone wants to do well and they don't want to embarrass themselves in front of their own peer group," he said. "But we don't have to prove anything, we're all here for the right reasons, for the good of the sport and for charity. I don't think it will be a crash-fest like everyone thinks it will."

Others, however, had their doubts. "I've done a bit of research beforehand on these cars," said Kelvin Burt, "Everyone has, they pretend they haven't but they have. It will be frantic tomorrow - anyone who pretends they don't want to be at the front is lying." Paul Radisich suggested that if the race was dry "it will be full-on, the last of the late-brakers and lots of pushing people out of the way. It should be awesome." And Frank Sytner summed up matters eloquently by concluding, "This is a race full of egos and reputations."

For his part, Sytner didn't feel he was out to prove anything, but that he was at a bit of a disadvantage to the rest. Now a historic racer of some repute, the last time he had driven a contemporary

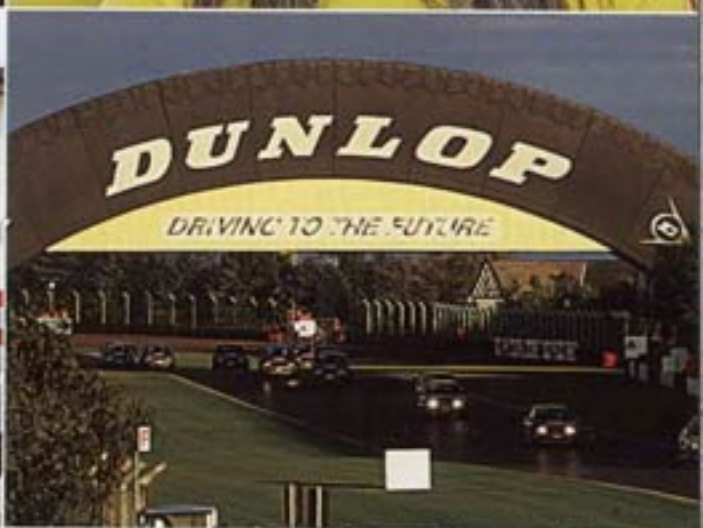
racing car was in 1990, the BMW M3 with which he won the BTCC title with that year, "But the last time I drove a front-wheel-drive racing car was 42 years ago, in my very first race."

Others took it more seriously, especially SEAT's current BTCC team leader Jason Plato. Saturday practice saw Plato's car consistently at the sharp end of the times, sparking malicious rumours of some favouritism. "Listen to Plato's car going through Redgate," fellow scribes said to me. "It has a distinctly different engine note to the rest..."

Not that practice mattered, as the grid was decided by ballot. The drawing of numbered balls from a bag put Radisich and Tarquini right at the back (Gabriele responding by eating the ball with his number on it) while at the front would be Scottish rivals John Cleland and Anthony Reid, Patrick Watts lurking just behind them. This was good news for Patrick, who in a typical example of typecasting had got in very few laps of practice; "I missed a gear and a little light came on. I had been told to come into the pits if that happened so I did and they took the car away."

The race, over 20 laps of the National

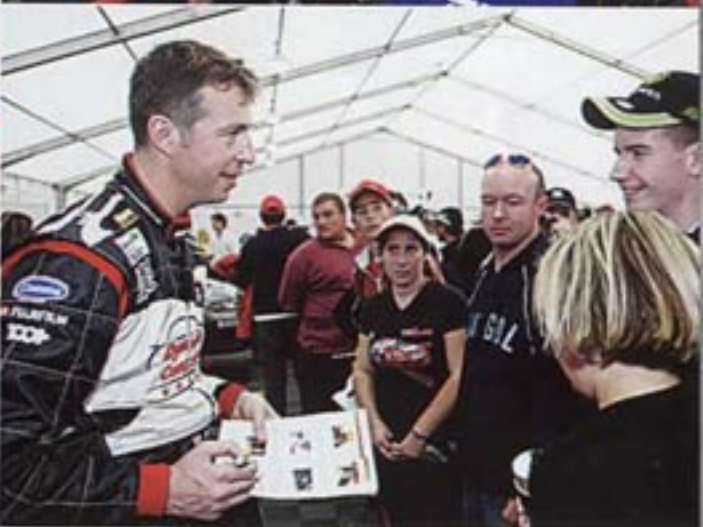




Circuit, was scheduled at the end of a very long day that saw the BTCC title decided by one point in favour of James Thompson. Clever marketing involving a fair few free tickets resulted in more than 20,000 people watching all this, and the majority were still there at 5.40 eagerly awaiting the banger... sorry, Masters race – strike one to Alan Gow.

On the grid there was confusion. "It's been so long I've forgotten what to do," grinned pole man Cleland, adding, "Apparently the start lights don't even go from red to green any more." But the one who had problems was Reid. Anthony, who really should have known better, leapt forward too early, pausing just as the reds did go out and being swamped by the pack as Cleland's Cupra headed a weaving, rubbing traffic jam which amazingly survived the first corner unscathed.

In the programme Watts had revealed his secret for getting to the front, "From the first bit of the Craners all the way to Schwantz Curve it's a straight line and if I can drive a rally car sideways on gravel a bit of grass will be easy – photographers are advised to stand well back." Of course this was typical Watts-speak, but



TIM HARVEY

CV: BTCC 1987-2002 in everything from a Sierra RS500 to a Volvo 850. 16 race wins, 1992 champion in a BMW 318i.

What's he doing these days?

Commentating on the BTCC for ITV & Motors TV, and racing in the Porsche Carrera Cup (he just lost the title, and a new road 911, on the day of the masters race).

What does he think of today's BTCC?:

"In terms of pure motorsport it's not a patch on the old days. There is a lack of manufacturers entries with proper teams, so you haven't got the same depth. But (BTCC boss) Alan Gow has done a good job to create exciting racing with such things as reverse grids and success ballast. For the purist it's artificial but for the spectator both at circuits and on TV it's very exciting racing."

Would he do it again?

No. I don't enjoy the cars, they're not powerful enough or fast enough and I'm enjoying what I do now."



PATRICK WATTS

CV: BTCC 1983-84 and 92-97 with Rover, Mazda and Peugeot. No race wins but a permanent crowd-pleaser with his take-no-prisoners race-style.

What's he doing these days?

"Today I'm rallying my Sunbeam Tiger, which is now a full-on rally car." Your correspondent remembers this car, because back in 1996 Patrick took him for a trip in it from his Kent home to testing at Brands Hatch. The dash probably still has the imprint of my fingernails...

What does he think of today's BTCC?

"It looks good on the TV, and they were right to bring the costs down in order to get a few privateers in, but of course they



needed the privateers because of the lack of makers." **Would he do it again?**

"Absolutely, what they should do to improve the championship is get a few past masters in."

GABRIELE TARQUINI

CV: BTCC 1994-98, Alfa Romeo and Honda, 12 race wins, champion in '94 in Alfa 155.

What's he doing these days?

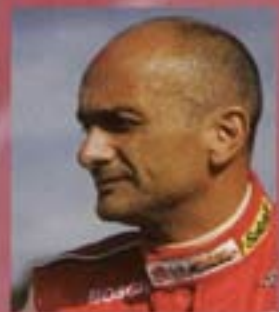
Racing in the European Touring Car Championship with Alfa Romeo, ETCC champion in 2003. Next year will progress to new World Touring Car Championship.

What does he think of today's BTCC?

Well it's not as good as in 1994, but the formula works like in the ETCC, with some staging to make a good show. But in 1994-97 we didn't need the staging, the racing was enough, with a lot of cars, good drivers and lots of action. But we have the same problem today in the ETCC with only seven competitive cars."

Would he do it again?

"I'd be very tempted. I like the atmosphere here and I especially like the English fans. I race in all countries but there is something special about the English. They know their motorsport and they also love it, they have a real passion for the racing."



no, here was the Cupra, powering down the Craner grass, its driver full-on in the way only Patrick does, rejoining the pack at the bottom of the hill a dozen places worse off than he'd started.

Up front Cleland was under serious pressure from Plato, and on lap 3 Jason was past - cue knowing looks amongst the cynics. But Cleland wasn't finished and snatched his lead back, while behind these pair the recovered Reid crawled all over Harvey. Tim was trying to put some gloss on what had been a pretty poor day, earlier having lost the Porsche Carrera Cup title, and a new 911 road car which he'd already made space for in his

garage, to rival Richard Westbrook. By lap eight the lead battle featured five cars, with the looming presence of Alain Menu joining the fun. Plato finally found a way past Cleland, and John responded by bouncing across the gravel trap, emerging to find the field slowing behind the safety car. When we asked Alan Gow why we got the matter-of-fact reply, "Someone dropped a leaf on the track."

So with everyone closed up again Plato led the restart, but not for long, his Cupra was neatly pushed out of the way by Reid. "We've been doing that all year," grinned Anthony later. The action was no less frantic further back, Burt was

tipped into a spin by Tarquini and slammed hard into the tyre wall at the bottom of the Craners. As Kelvin emerged unscathed potential Cupra championship squads crossed his car off their shopping lists. They'd be deleting a few more before this was over.

Burt's shunt brought the safety car back out and the field slowed again, but not quickly enough for some, Cecotto and Harvey slamming into each other and ending their race. Ever felt you shouldn't have got out of bed in the morning Tim? As the survivors were set loose once more Reid still led with Plato under pressure from Menu, who pushed

PAUL RADISICH

CV: BTCC 1993-97 with Ford and Peugeot. Six race wins, Touring Car World Cup winner in '93 and '94.

What's he doing these days?:

Racing V8 Supercars in Australia. "It's much like the BTCC in its heyday. The whole field is covered by not much more than a second. We do have more cars, and of course they are very different. With a rear-wheel-drive V8 you live on the edge, it can be uncomfortable and you steer it with the foot. Front-wheel-drive like in the BTCC are very precise, but you can alter the lines in corners in ways you simply can't in a V8."

What does he think of today's BTCC?:

"I do follow it on TV and it's coming back – they need to sort the rules, decide whether they are going to run to European or the new World Touring Car Championship rules."

Would he do it again?

"If I was offered the same money today to race in the BTCC or V8s, I'd come back here. I've been in Australia six years and I'd be ready for a return"



ALAIN MENU

CV: BTCC 1992-2000 with BMW, Renault and Ford. 27 race wins, champion in 1997 (Renault Laguna) and 2000 (Ford Mondeo).

What's he doing these days?:

Has spent 2004 looking for new employment after three years in Germany's DTM. "I'm hunting a drive – I'm bored!"

What does he think of today's BTCC?:

"What can I say, it's nothing like it used to be. I watch the races on TV and it looks good but there's too much biffing – it's a different era to the one I raced in."

Would he do it again?

"As I said I'm hunting a drive – but not in the BTCC."



JOHN CLELAND

CV: BTCC 1989-99, 17 race wins, champion in '89 and '95 in Vauxhall Astra and Cavalier.

What's he doing these days?:

"The only racing I've really been doing has been in Australia (he has a traditional slot in the world-famous Bathurst endurance event). I'm a full-time car dealer with a Jaguar and Volvo franchise."

What does he think of today's BTCC?:

"I watch a bit of the BTCC on the TV but it's not like it was because they no longer have the

manufacturers they did. At the time I was in it were golden years, there was lots of money around.

Would he do it again?

"No. I've been there, done that, won it twice, so I'm not that fussed about doing it again."



THE ONLY SOUR FACE AT THE END BELONGED TO WHOEVER WOULD BE FOOTING THE BILL FOR REPAIRS

his former team-mate wide at the Old Hairpin. You could almost see the smile inside Alain's helmet as Jason powered along the grass Watts-style, rejoining the track only to be neatly executed at full pelt by the blameless Patrick. Two more used Cupras to avoid.

All of which left Reid to come home to victory ahead of Menu, the final podium place taken by an overjoyed Tarquini, Gabriele having fought his way from the back of the grid to snatch third from Biela on the last lap. "I don't have big damage on my car," pointed out the very happy Italian,

adding; "okay it's a little bit shorter than before..."

Reid was not surprisingly elated; "I can't believe that," he said, "to beat the best of the best in the same equipment – fantastic!" Menu was even more enthusiastic. "Two more laps and maybe I could have got Reid, but my main aim was to have fun – and I had much, much fun. Actually I haven't had that much fun for many, many years!"

As had everybody, the only possible sour face at the end of this race belonging to whoever would be footing the bill for the repairs. Great idea Mr Gow – same again next year? ■

ROBB GRAVETT

CV: BTCC 1988-98, 13 race wins, champion 1990 in a Ford Sierra-Cosworth

What's he doing these days?:

No longer racing, teaches driver training and ultimate car control.

What does he think of today's BTCC?:

"Well it's not as good as it was, I don't agree with the way the rules have gone, and I'm not sure how successful this new World Championship will be."

Would he do it again?

"If it was a drive with a front-running team I'd consider it. I've kept training, in fact I train harder now than ever before, and I was very buoyed by still being up with the current drivers in the race."

