



BEHIND THE SCENES: ROUND 5 BRANDS HATCH

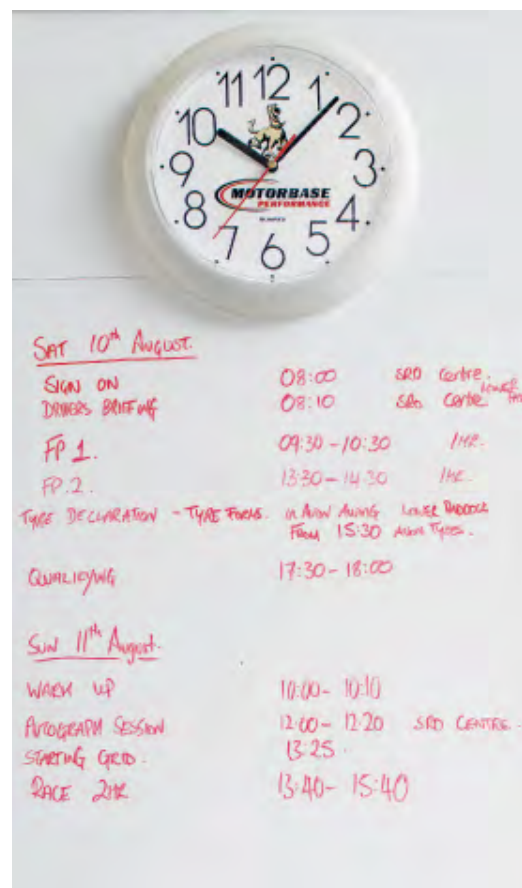
Total 911 were granted access all areas as reigning champions Oman Air Motorbase brought their 997 GT3R to the picturesque Brands Hatch circuit for Round 5 of the 2013 British GT season

Written and photographed by **Will Belcher**

When you're competing at the top end of national-level motor racing competition, you can expect nothing but the best in preparation and performance come a typical race weekend. In the case of Oman Air Motorbase, the current champions of the series are at the top of the game, and there is a reason that even with a penalised

car through a heavy weight in the back they are the only team in the entire paddock to score points in every single round. Due to the driver grading system in the British GT, The Motorbase 911 GT3 R is running each race with 130KG of ballast – that's the equivalent of an extra-large passenger sat in the back. It's also 75KG heavier than the other 911 GT3's, which has a highly undesirable effect on the handling and characteristics of the car.

This year, the extra weight has had a huge effect on Motorbase's overall standing in the championship too, but how exactly does a high-end team in British endurance racing go about trying to defend their title? Away from the television cameras following the 'front of house' action on the track, Total 911 spent an entire weekend pitside with the team at Brands Hatch to find out exactly what goes in to successfully competing in a Porsche 911...



Arrival, practice & qualifying

The Motorbase lorry arrives early to the circuit on Friday morning, even though the first practice session doesn't start until 10am on Saturday. Nevertheless, the team have lots of preparations to complete before the Oman Air 997 can even turn a wheel on track: team facilities such as the garage area are set up on Friday while the car is unloaded from the transporter. Before preliminary scrutineering checks, some basic setup procedures are carried out on the car by a throng of team mechanics, attaching bodywork stored during transit, plus a quick geometry check in preparation for Saturday free practice.

Saturday morning sees all the cars out on track bright and early for the first practice session. It's the first chance the teams have had to really stretch the legs of their cars around the circuit, so now is the time for data gathering and analysis of how the new weight penalty will affect the Oman Air 911. The topic is a cause for concern as Michael Caine, who partners

Ahmad Al Harthy at the wheel of the Porsche, explains, "The officials are trying to slow down the 911s from the Trackspeed team so they have given them weight penalties – and because they have 911s and we have a 911, we somehow get the weight penalty as well!"

Free practice two sees Ahmed suffer a puncture whilst out on track. As tensions run high in the pits, Michael said of the mid-practice puncture, "We can only take it that the extra weight isn't helping and we are the heaviest car out there by a country mile. We've had a tyre failure and out the back you are fairly committed over the humps and bumps, it's the only way you can get the car round the circuit. The tyres weren't designed to be on the back of a Porsche and then have all that weight thrown at them."

Before qualifying (or in fact any track time) the geometry on the car is checked again, using the tested and proven method of hanging some fishing line around the wheels on an aluminium rig.

The constant change in weight in the car during a race weekend makes this a vital procedure. Both Ahmed and Caine then took the GT3R for flying laps around the Kent circuit, but the extra weight was proving difficult and the team managed to secure a disappointing 20th position, 20 seconds off the pace of a field being led by Porsche works driver Nick Tandy who was making a guest appearance for a rival team. Talking to Ahmed after the session, he remarked "P20 is a very difficult position to start but we have a very strong race pace and hopefully that will come into effect tomorrow. Talking to Michael there is definitely more pace in the car, there is something for us to learn from the data and use in the race tomorrow." The data gathered from the car during all sessions can help the team save hundredths of seconds during the race, and as the sun sets, the Oman Air team get back to the hotel to assess the data and begin plotting a game plan for the two-hour race the next day.

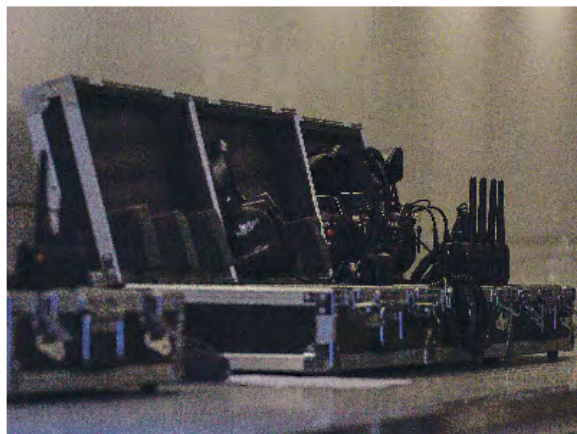


Pre race

Before the green lights are shown to the 30-strong GT cars on Sunday, there is an immeasurable amount of man hours carried out preparing the car and its consumables. Any final checks and tweaks on the car have to be carried out then scrutinized by the race series officials. The car has the fuel system purged and the geometry double-checked. VIP guests have to be wined and dined in the hospitality area and spectators begin to filter into the circuit grandstands, but before that, the drivers, mechanics and even the team boss need to be fed and watered. The whole team will also be called into the meeting room tucked away at the back of the Motorbase transporter for a

final meeting, which for obvious reasons is all behind closed doors. The mentality of the driver is also crucial ahead of the race, and Ahmad talks us through his own personal preparation: "Although I don't have any pre-race rituals, I like getting suited up early and always like talking to my race engineer as it helps during the wait. Also with the endurance races this year I've been training harder back in Oman and with our summer temperatures it helps mimic the cockpit conditions." With interviews and lunch out of the way, teams prepare to grid up. All of the teams bring their GT racing machines out of the comfort of the garages and out on to the start straight. The grid is a hive of activity

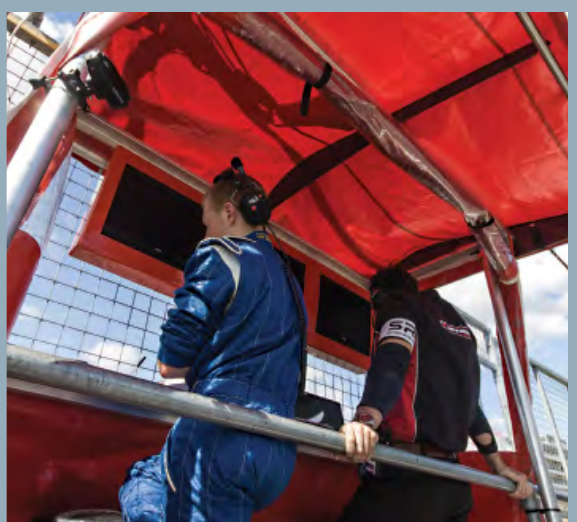
in the events leading up to the warm up lap with cars, tyre racks, mechanics and drivers everywhere. Ahmad clambered into the Motorbase 911 and made himself at home ready for his stint as first driver. After the final radio check it was time to close the doors and leave the drivers in the cars, ready to form the grid. In memory of the late British GT driver Allan Simonsen, who tragically succumbed to his injuries sustained during an accident whilst racing at Le Mans this year, all teams run a small tribute on their number boards. There's also a minute's noise on the grid just before the start of the race, a beautiful reminder of the family element of racing – even at the highest level.



Post race

After the race, Michael was relieved his dramatic stint in the 911 was over: "It was sort of different really, when we came in for the driver change the rear bumper had caught alight through the rear back box and it was melting the bumper. This meant there was carbon monoxide coming into the cabin for the whole race. It was horrible; I struggled in the car in all fairness. The stench, the smell and the resonance inside my head was incredible. There was 22 minutes to go and I'd had enough. I can't really tell you much about the rest of the race because I can't really remember it!" Team boss David Bartrum was delighted to come away from the weekend in 7th place: "When you consider we started P20 and there was no safety car I thought P7 was a good job today by the team. Ahmad came in on fire, we put that out but the split opened up during Michael's stint and towards the end that led to some fume inhalation, not a good thing. I was monitoring the times to see if he dropped

off and kept talking to him. He said he was ok but you have to be careful of drivers, they tend to tell you they're ok when they're not. Michael got to the end, got out of the car and you could see he was in trouble. We got some fluid into him and the doctors took a look at him and other than that, we're very happy with the position. Both Ahmad and Michael drove fantastic stints despite our adversities, so all in all it wasn't a bad weekend!" Standing around watching the team break down the garage almost seemed a little anti-climactic given what had been happening only 30 minutes previously. The garage was once again a hive of activity but this time the team were clearing down advertising boards, tool boxes, tyre warming tents and fuel rigs, not getting ready for the next pit stop. The transporter was then filled with the contents of the Motorbase garage and then of course the 911 ready for its next outing at Round 6 of the British GT at Zandvoort in the Netherlands.



During the race

Ahmad started well in the 997 and gained a couple of extra places early on in the race. The new tyres and better race pace clearly worked to the advantage of the Oman Air GT3R, which provided an early boost for the team and momentum they would look to build on during the course of the race. Ahmad was making slow but steady progress through the field and was looking very solid – however, during a small tussle with a competitor, one of the rear exhaust back boxes had become split. This grew increasingly bigger throughout Ahmad's

stint, culminating in a small fire just behind the rear wheel arch. The team decided to pit the car whilst running P5, extinguish the fire and get Michael in the 911. The team remained composed and professional with a very technical pit stop required. With a singed but otherwise perfectly working car, Caine headed back out onto the track. As a racing driver, Ahmad always prefers being in the car, but a driver's duty is not over once he climbs out of the cockpit and the Omani stays suited in the pits to support Michael and the team in the garage.

On the track, Caine built on Ahmad's earlier hard work, slowly making progress through the field of other cars. Towards the end of Michael's stint the Oman Air 911 settled into P7, though something didn't seem right and there was a concerned look on the faces of David Bartrum, Ahmad Al Harthy and the Motorbase mechanics in the pits. Engineers would run out to the pit perch and exchange words with the engineers on the pit wall then run back into the garage. There was a lot of communication between the garage and Michael in the car.

It soon became clear that Caine was struggling inside the car, the mix of carbon monoxide from the exhaust leak and earlier fumes from the small fire were creating an environment no driver wants to be in. David constantly monitored Caine's lap times and was constantly on the radio checking with Michael to make sure he was ok to continue. Having made their way from P20 to P7, Cain was determined not to break his team's record of being the only car to score points in every single round so far this year and get the car to the finish.

