

BIMMER GLIMMER

What's it like to hustle a BTCC BMW at Brands?
BEN COLLINS tries a Motorbase-run 320si

Recently I've heard people saying that racing is dead in the UK, that touring cars were a 1990s fad, and that motorsport fans should tune in to repeats of *Big Brother* or take up fishing. What a load of rubbish.

Admittedly, my NASCAR-skewed view had always been that touring cars were a bit slow and gnat-like. I recalled that, back in my Vauxhall Junior days, our lap times were nearly a second per lap quicker; hardly enough to blow the froth off your beer in the grandstands.

Last month I drove a rear-wheel-drive BMW Super 2000 car for the first time, and you could forgive me for not expecting too much.

After all, the only S2000 machine I'd driven previously was a front-wheel-drive Alfa Romeo 156 in sub-zero, wet conditions at Snetterton. It felt like the suspension settings had been booby-trapped. Every time I touched the brake the Alfa began to rotate, with a one in three chance of making the corner. With four main corners on the circuit, that made the odds of completing a good lap one in 12, which I assumed was the reason for doing 12-lap runs.

But this BMW, run by race-winning BTCC team Motorbase Performance, is a totally different animal, even though the wintry conditions at Brands Hatch are no less treacherous. As the day progresses we wear a dark patch in the frost, but it's impossible to register a proper tyre temperature.

FEELS FAST, HAPPENS FAST

I feel the lack of power as soon as I pull away and chunter along in first gear, but after that it's plain sailing. The engine note is pure and fresh; the gearchange on the sequential 'box is beautifully precise. It feels fast, it happens fast.

It's startling to compare the power-to-tyre ratio with the Australian V8 Supercar that I raced in last year's Bathurst 1000. The 280bhp-plus BTCC racers run on similar size and spec Dunlop tyres to the V8 Supercars, which boast more than double the grunt.

I'm expecting the BMW to be as sensitive under braking as the V8 Supercar, but it's kinder on its rubber. The skinny, low-profile ▶



How about bringing some JD backing to BTCC?



Motorbase BMW has been race winner in 2009



Car has relative lack of power in straight line



Kingston (centre) is Motorbase engineer

◀ Dunlop makes it exceptionally hard to feel what's going on when you brake in the V8. Quite often, the only suggestion that you've locked a wheel comes in the form of a BBQ in the cockpit as the blue smoke belches in.

The BMW has more feel. In the haul up to the braking zone for the fast drop into Paddock Hill Bend, I can brake so deep that I end up turning in simultaneously.

Engine braking is critical in slowing the rear of the car to prevent overloading the front tyres, and I wind the bias way back to the rear. She then carries a healthy amount of speed into the apex. Once there, the tiniest dribble of acceleration balances the car and shifts the poise of the chassis, allowing the rear tyres to take a set. Then 'pow', the BMW is in a four-wheel drift.

It takes a while to adjust to the reduced power compared to a V8. In the bigger car, you apply the throttle so slowly you could measure the time with a sundial. In the BMW, I'm practically using a digital input with my right foot, hooning the car in and

banging the gas as hard as I can.

It's a case of carrying just the right amount of speed into the corner, not a hair too much, but enough to steal a few tenths of a second, then blasting off again on the exit.

The real fun is the fast left at Surtees, which is nearly flat-out in fifth gear. It shows me why the high-speed Thruxton circuit is so popular with the BTCC drivers: the car is on a real knife-edge of the tyres' lateral grip; every input of the wheel and the throttle is critical. It feels like my balls are being measured with every pass as the car squirms. If it breaks free it'll be almost impossible to stop and turn right for Clearways, and the track off-line is still frozen...

Exiting Clearways, you need to carry the critical momentum through the apex, delicately squeezing, then mashing, the throttle before flowing out to the very last millimetre of available asphalt. I hardly dare move in the seat in case it pushes a wheel over the edge.

The lack of downforce keeps engineers such as Motorbase's

“The real fun is the fast left at Surtees, which is nearly flat-out in fifth gear. The car is on a real knife-edge of the tyres' lateral grip; every input is critical”

Geoff Kingston awake at night.

They ride a delicate balance to run a quick car without degrading the tyres. To stoke the tension, the duel between front and rear-wheel-driven racers is intensely strategic.

“The most challenging aspect for BTCC is to equalise the performance between the different-spec cars, front-wheel drives and rear-wheel drives, H-pattern or sequential gearboxes, and now there's a turbo engine coming in,” says Kingston.

“Setting the cars up is relatively straightforward once you have a baseline setting. With just two 40-minute test sessions at a race weekend, it's a case of react and respond to track conditions and ambient, then making a quick turnaround for qualifying. The only other major consideration is adjusting to the range of circuit grip levels, from say the lows of somewhere like Rockingham to the

extreme highs of Thruxton.”

The rear-drive boys get off the startline well, but begin to struggle as oversteer sets in and munches their beer-coaster tyres. The front-wheelers set their cars up with a satanic degree of oversteer from the outset, in order to save their front tyres. It balances during the race, and then the hunt truly begins.

The only potential spanner in the front-wheel-drive plan is if the safety car comes out. This provides a fillip for the BMWs, which can rest their sore rear and sprint to the end.

The other advantage for the front-wheel drivers is that if they get punted sideways by one of the other dodgems, they have a better chance of recovery: they just floor it.

Still, a BMW won the championship last year in the hands of Colin Turkington and the WSR-run Team RAC, so Motorbase chief Dave Bartrum and his crew have twinkles in their eyes as they look ahead to 2010. The team won two races last year with Rob Collard, so can the title follow?

“We know we can do it this year,” says Bartrum. “We started out small and built up our operation slowly, underneath the radar. Now we’re ready to go big time. Let’s just say we learned a lot last year.”

Bartrum is just as enthusiastic about the current state of the BTCC.

“It’s still by far the best series in Britain and one of the best in the world, with the intensity of the three-races-per-weekend format,” he says. “We’d love to see a broader spectrum of drivers in the series, which is obviously going through a transitional period right now.”

Motorbase has the warmth of a family operation, coupled with the slick drills of a hardened race team. The Kent company’s Carrera Cup squad has swollen from three to six cars for 2010, the premises have expanded by 2000 square feet and the team is hungry for a BTCC title.

I would love to race this BMW and hustle for position with the Good, the Bad and the Ugly that is the field of drivers in the BTCC. But I’m not the only one. And the problem is, we’re all chasing the few sponsors around and we’re all too ugly to marry Donald Trump.

Why do the Australians have a packed grid of nearly 40 V8 Supercars – which are more expensive to run than Super 2000 cars – that are covered in big corporate sponsors, when the country has only a fifth of the UK population? The simple answer is that the Aussies turn up

to watch it.

Everyone should go to the next BTCC race. The attendance figures at some venues are pretty impressive, but we need to strengthen this across the board, and then hopefully new sponsors might be attracted. Then, if they get paid as professionals, more top-calibre drivers may be attracted.

Come on – you know it makes sense. *Big Brother*, fishing or BTCC? Is there really a choice to make here? ☒

Narrow Dunlops are similar to Oz V8 rubber



DUNBAR/LAT

Brake bias (right) plays critical role in laptime



DUNBAR/LAT

An in-car heater button would be useful here...



DUNBAR/LAT

TOURING CAR COMPARISON
HOW DO THEY COMPARE?



STALEY/LAT

DTM
MAKE **AUDI**
MODEL **A4 DTM**
ENGINE **AUDI 4000CC V8**
POWER **460BHP**
WEIGHT **1050KG**



HONSBURGH/LAT

V8 SUPERCAR
MAKE **FORD**
MODEL **FALCON FG**
ENGINE **FORD 5000CC V8**
POWER **620BHP**
WEIGHT **1350KG**



DUNBAR/LAT

BTCC (\$2000)
MAKE **BMW**
MODEL **320Si**
ENGINE **BMW 1996CC**
FOUR-CYLINDER
POWER **280BHP**
WEIGHT **1180KG**