

# HOW GOES THE TCR

**The TCR concept was introduced this year with big ambitions. Halfway through its first season, ALEX KALINAUCKAS asks if it's working**

**F**our-wide down the straight, door panels rubbing, smashed windows and the odd outrageous punt – this is touring car racing all right. But the TCR International Series is attempting to popularise a new concept: to bring touring cars to the masses at an affordable price. It's a 21st-century revolution in the vein of Super Touring, but hopefully without the budget escalation that struck that formula in the 1990s.

TCR is the brainchild of former World Touring Car Championship boss Marcello Lotti, and brings together new

technical guidelines that rigidly control development and running costs (effectively a budget cap). Cars are available with a production-based two-litre 300bhp turbo engine for €70,000-90,000, and the series aims to create a healthy business for the customer teams via new regional and national championships in countries that don't have established touring car series.

So far six manufacturers have appeared on the TCR grid over the first eight rounds of the season, and one more plans to join the field imminently. SEAT's Leon Cup car has made up the bulk of the field and currently holds the top three places in the drivers' championship

## TCR INTERNATIONAL



SEAT Leon makes up bulk of the field

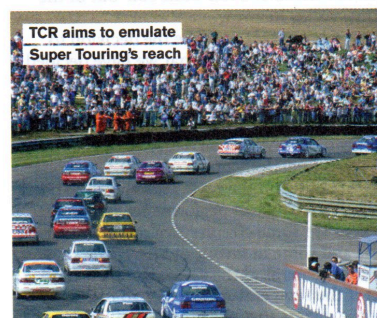
courtesy of Pepe Oriola, Stefano Comini and Jordi Gene. West Coast Racing has taken race wins with its Honda Civic TCR, as has former WTCC team Engstler Motorsport, using an adapted Audi TT Cup car and a VW Golf TCR. Campos Racing is yet to win with its fleet of Opels, while Ford also made it onto the grid with Proteam Racing.

Despite that impressive array of models, TCR has suffered as cars have sporadically joined the grid over season one. Audi was given an exemption to enter four two-door TTs over the first four rounds of the season to boost grid numbers before that exception was closed following the Algarve meeting in May.

After that, Engstler made do with Leons before it entered the Golf in Austria, winning on its debut. On top of all that, the Top Run team is set to run a Subaru WRX STi in this weekend's Singapore Grand Prix support round.

TCR may not have grabbed headlines around the world, but the racing so far has been pretty spectacular on occasion. Nine drivers have taken victories from the 16 rounds held so far and three manufacturers have tasted success.

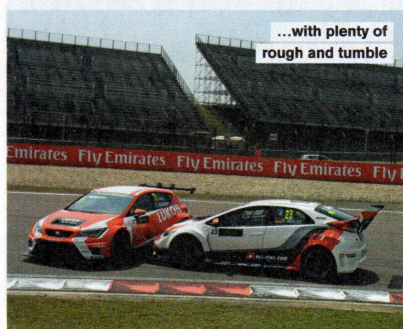
This all suggests that TCR's concept is sound. And, as the inaugural season heads into the final three rounds, Lotti is pleased with what he's achieved so far, even if it hasn't been quite as he envisaged timing-wise. ▶



TCR aims to emulate Super Touring's reach



Crowds have seen decent racing...



...with plenty of rough and tumble

## “TIGHT CONTROL OF COSTS IS ONE WAY TO ATTRACT YOUNG DRIVERS TO THE SERIES”



Lotti has gained support from Ecclestone

► “It’s following what was our provisional plan,” he explains. “Not my personal one – that was much clearer and to have all of the brands ready at the first event, but that doesn’t often happen, especially as a start-up.”

“When we decided to start the season we knew that the problem of [manufacturers] developing cars was not really linked to our timing, but if you don’t start, you never start.”

For Lotti, the first season was always about getting the concept off the ground in order to attract manufacturer interest and ironing out the issues ahead of a full-scale roll-out of the regional series in 2016.

“It was important to make the decision to give everybody the signal that we have decided [to go ahead with the start], to help customers of additional championships,” he says.

So far, SEAT and Honda have shared the majority of race wins (currently 10-4 to SEAT), plus Team Engstler’s brace – one TT and one Golf – making up the rest. This shows to Lotti that TCR’s balance of performance is working.

“There are some circuits that are in favour of Honda and some in favour of SEAT,” he says. “But it is [generally] the same. Honda will be faster if the temperature doesn’t go too high.”

Lotti explains that the production ECU in

the SEAT is “set up to calculate the different temperatures and automatically keep the engine with the same power”. Honda’s racing ECU can’t do that, but the car typically performs better on circuits with long straights, although it loses that advantage if the temperatures increase.

Lotti is planning to add the cars from the TCR Asia series – which got under way with a SEAT hat-trick at Sepang earlier this month – to the International Series grid in Singapore when it rejoins the Formula 1 support bill after rounds at Sepang and Shanghai earlier in 2015. But ordinarily he is more concerned with having a superior field of fewer cars than a packed one.



Strength of BTCC keeps TCR out of UK

The value of being on the F1 support bill cannot be underestimated. TCR has its own TV deals, but a guaranteed audience on grand prix race weekends is a bonus; even if the grandstands in Malaysia and China were not as packed as they often are in Europe, the Singapore GP remains popular.

“I think Singapore will be nice,” says Lotti. “Thank you to Bernie [Ecclestone].” On the subject of having the F1 boss’s favour in order to continue their relationship in 2016, Lotti explains that while Ecclestone didn’t insist on seeing progress from the TCR International field in Singapore, he wants to put on a good show nevertheless, particularly as calendar negotiations for 2016 are ongoing.

“It’s not an obligation – he said we didn’t [have to] do more, but it’s clear that I want to show to him that I am,” adds Lotti. “We are just discussing about next season’s calendar. [If Ecclestone sees more brands and more cars in Singapore], perhaps he starts to pay me!”

Despite its slightly patchy start, the TCR concept has all the hallmarks of a popular touring car championship. For season one, there’s no UK round and there’s a good reason for this: the British Touring Car Championship. TCR is seeking to build its brand in new

## THE RULES

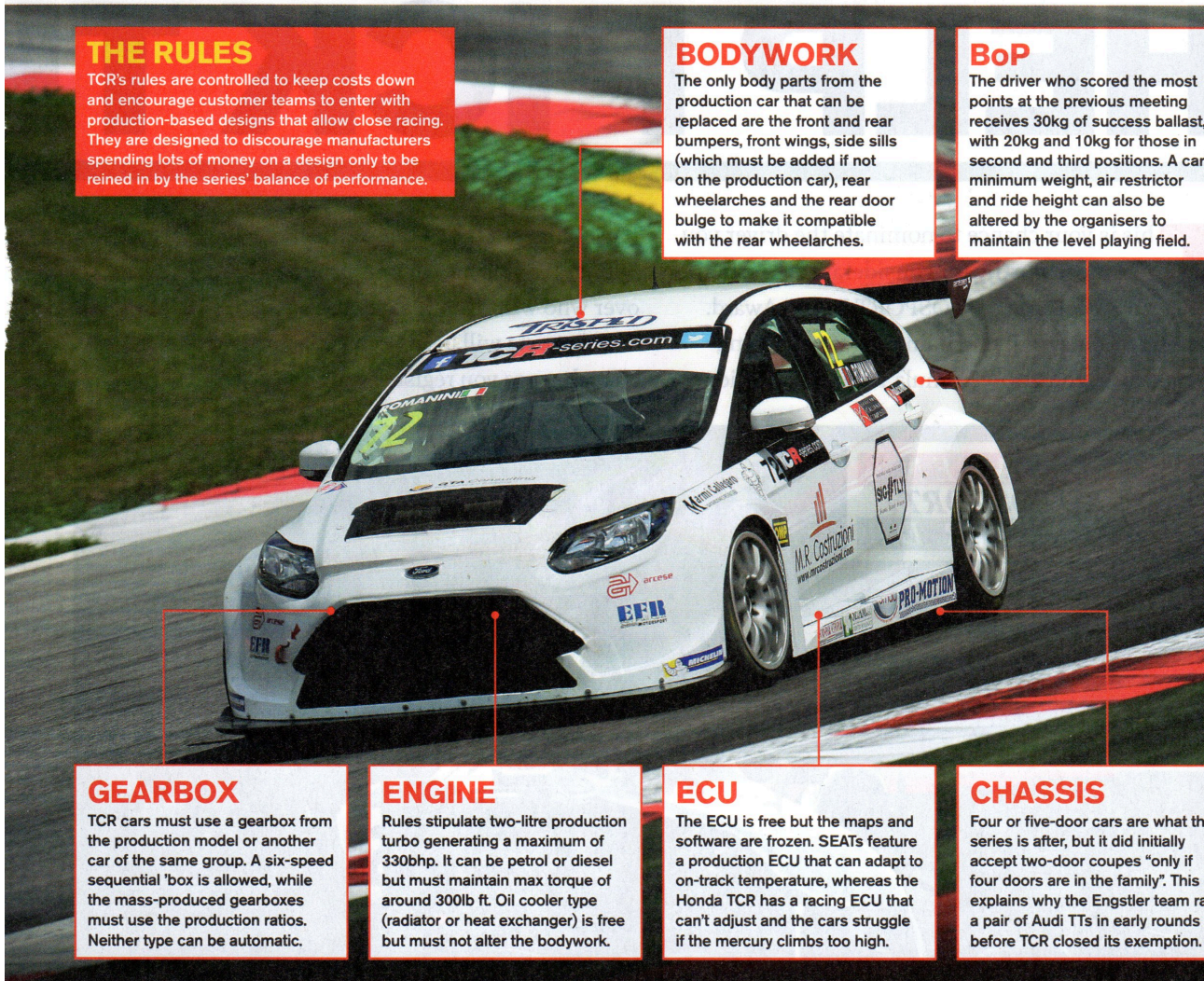
TCR's rules are controlled to keep costs down and encourage customer teams to enter with production-based designs that allow close racing. They are designed to discourage manufacturers spending lots of money on a design only to be reined in by the series' balance of performance.

## BODYWORK

The only body parts from the production car that can be replaced are the front and rear bumpers, front wings, side sills (which must be added if not on the production car), rear wheelarches and the rear door bulge to make it compatible with the rear wheelarches.

## BoP

The driver who scored the most points at the previous meeting receives 30kg of success ballast with 20kg and 10kg for those in second and third positions. A car minimum weight, air restrictor and ride height can also be altered by the organisers to maintain the level playing field.



## GEARBOX

TCR cars must use a gearbox from the production model or another car of the same group. A six-speed sequential 'box is allowed, while the mass-produced gearboxes must use the production ratios. Neither type can be automatic.

## ENGINE

Rules stipulate two-litre production turbo generating a maximum of 330bhp. It can be petrol or diesel but must maintain max torque of around 300lb ft. Oil cooler type (radiator or heat exchanger) is free but must not alter the bodywork.

## ECU

The ECU is free but the maps and software are frozen. SEATs feature a production ECU that can adapt to on-track temperature, whereas the Honda TCR has a racing ECU that can't adjust and the cars struggle if the mercury climbs too high.

## CHASSIS

Four or five-door cars are what the series is after, but it did initially accept two-door coupes "only if four doors are in the family". This explains why the Engstler team ran a pair of Audi TTs in early rounds before TCR closed its exemption.

territories that have lacked a viable touring car series. The BTCC is supremely well established in the UK, and it would be pointless to take it on.

As well as the Asia series, Lotti has confirmed deals with promoters in 12 countries, including China, Thailand, Russia (which has a series that started this year), the Benelux countries and Germany for 2016.

TCR is also attracting interest in the US thanks to the fact that "a lot of brands of the Volkswagen group are involved – this makes it more easy for American people to do it," according to Lotti.

For the inaugural season, TCR has a useful mix of touring car drivers who have experience of multiple championships over long careers, such as Gianni Morbidelli and Gene, and up-and-coming drivers such as Oriola and Comini, although it lacks a clear headline star.

When Morbidelli – a veteran of 70 F1 races and multiple touring car championships – heard about the new series, he called Lotti directly to enquire about a drive.

Morbidelli reckons the front-wheel-drive TCR machines require a "particular style of driving", and he accepts that although they might not compare favourably to WTCC cars

in terms of pure speed, TCR's close racing will attract interest.

"If I compare it to the WTCC, where I was involved last year," he says, "of course the performance is less, but people don't care [as long as they] see a good show and have a championship where there is balance and where you can have a fight."

One of the reasons TCR's organisers want to keep a tight control on costs is to encourage young drivers to enter the series. Speaking to AUTOSPORT before the championship was launched, David Sonenscher, whose Motorsport Asia company runs the TCR Asia series, said: "Young drivers can come in and race the same type of car from national to regional and then international, and then could maybe go to WTCC after getting their grounding here."

Indeed, TCR's backing of young drivers also played a part in Morbidelli's desire to take part. "OK, the manufacturers are not involved directly," he says, "but it's a good alternative [for young drivers] because they try to keep the cost of the championship low."

"This gives the possibility for young drivers to come here and to be in a championship where there are drivers like me who have a lot of experience – ex-F1 drivers. We have

a lot of young drivers now. One of them is only 17 years old, I am 47 – I can be his father! But this is good because it's a good mix and you can understand that this is a category for everyone.

Maintaining low costs to support young drivers as well as encouraging close racing is admirable but, with the WTCC currently not in a particularly healthy state due to huge costs and Citroen's domination, it's hard to see why a young touring car driver would want to graduate to that level if they will struggle as soon as they do. It could be better for TCR to keep its young charges closer to home in the national and regional series before making the international championship the ultimate goal.

So far, TCR's tin-top revolution is very much a work in progress. It lacks the top-nan drivers to pique audience interest early on, but has potential to grow. It has to improve next year but, if Lotti and co can get the regional championships up and running alongside the main series and keep the manufacturers on board for the duration, they can start to create their own touring car hegemony at a time when the WTCC's star is waning.

Tune in for season two. TCR's second album needs to be a definitive hit for its lofty ambitions to be fulfilled. ☼