

INTERVIEW – Marcello Lotti

Global vision

TCR is intended to be a global 'pyramid' for touring cars based on the proven GT3 concept. We talk to its creator about his bold new vision for saloon car racing

By MIKE BRESLIN



'I wanted to establish a category on a global scale with a single set of technical regulations'

More than a decade ago, Racecar Engineering ran a piece on Marcello Lotti's plans to set up a global touring car series, the World Touring Car Championship, which was launched in 2005 and is still going strong. Ten years on the same man has plans for a new global approach to tin top racing, yet the concept this time is very different.

Lotti's new project is called TCR. It was originally given the name TC3, but this was shelved in favour of the three letters (standing for Touring Car Racer) to avoid implying a link with the FIA's TC1, as the cars in WTCC are now known. It's a shame in a way, because that original name gives you the clearest indication as to where the inspiration for TCR originated: GT3. But more on that later, first of all, who is Marcello Lotti?

Lotti started his motorsport career as a successful rally co-driver before going on to run teams in rallying, touring cars and at Le Mans, and then becoming a promoter in 2000 with the European Super Touring Cup, from there moving on to the WTCC in 2005. He finished his spell at the WTCC at the end of 2013 and he is now CEO at WSC, the promoter of TCR.

Clearly Lotti knows his stuff then, but even granting this, does the world really need yet another type of touring car? 'This started in my mind many years ago, because I was really disappointed with the situation in touring cars at a national level,' Lotti explains. 'I never believed that you can have a successful international or world championship without a basic category at a national level. I wanted to establish a category on a global scale with a single set of technical regulations. This should arouse interest from the national dealers or importers and create an international market among the race teams for buying and selling cars and parts.'

But since the TCR concept was first proposed last year the landscape has changed, with the FIA unveiling its own two-tier blueprint for a touring car 'pyramid'. It will be based on the BTCC regulations and the Argentine production saloon regulations and will be called TCN-1 and TCN-2 respectively.

This doesn't phase Lotti, though. 'Nobody can impose something at a national level. Not me, not the FIA, nobody, because all the national federations have the freedom to decide for themselves. The national federation and the national promoter – because sometimes it's a private company – will follow what is interesting for them,' he says.

And it seems that many of them certainly find TCR interesting, with a fair number of federations and promoters already signed up. 'Asia and Portugal will run their series from 2015,' Lotti says. 'The Benelux countries, Russia, Italy, China, Spain and USA will run it as a promotional category within their existing championships in 2015 with the aim of running proper championships in 2016, while Central America, Thailand, South Africa and Germany are due to join in 2016.'

On top of this there is to be an Asian series, and also an international series, which deals with the pyramid aspect of growth from national to regional to global. The international

series, which Lotti admits will be a high profile shop window for the category, has gained significant kudos due to its link with F1 – it will be supporting three grands prix this year (Malaysia, China and Singapore).

Grids for the international series are expected to be around 16 to begin with, with 24 cars taking to the track by the end of the season. But the really interesting thing is the cars that will make up those grids, which takes us back to the basic concept. 'We saw that in a lot of national championships one car was always present, the SEAT Cup [Racer],' says Lotti. 'In Russia we found five SEAT Cups already racing, for example. So, we think perhaps this is what we need. So I looked at the technical specification of this car. It was very simple; a completely stock engine – with a wet sump, for example. They don't touch the engine, yet it still it gives around 300 to 350bhp.

'I started to discuss this with other manufacturers, saying: "Look, you can make the same car and sell a lot of cars around the world." But at the same time we can create a common interest in national touring cars, to have the same regulation, so it's easy to have a second hand market for teams, too.'

Lotti does not dispute the fact that the concept was in part inspired by GT3 and the way manufacturers have grasped the idea that there's money to be made from selling 'customer' GT cars – incidentally, the SEAT racer sells for around €70,000 and other TCRs are expected to come in at around that price. But another reason for the success of GT3 is its balance of



performance – there is little risk to a buyer of a racecar because the playing field is always levelled. It's here that Lotti believes TCR actually has an advantage over the GT3 series.

'It's practically the same concept as GT3,' Lotti admits. 'But there is one thing that will be easier for us, and that is the balance of performance. GT is for cars with different [amounts of] cylinder engines, different dimensions of cars and so on, but with TCR you have two-litre turbos and the same, practically, dimensions of the cars. So it will not be as complicated as it was in GT3 at the beginning.'

TCR intends to operate its balancing across three parameters: height, weight and engine restrictors, although with the latter it's slightly more complicated because the engines are standard production units. 'It's a road engine, which means they're all different. So instead we'll start on 100 per cent of the production restrictor, and then adjust it down to 95 per cent and then 90 per cent.'

The formula seems to have struck a chord with many manufacturers with cars from SEAT, Honda (JAS built), Ford (Onyx built), Audi, Volkswagen, Skoda and Opel all likely to run either this year or next.

The Opel entry is an interesting one, as it's expected to be the car the GM arm will use in its new-for-2016 Trophy series, in much the same way the SEAT came from the company's Cup championship. This, says Lotti, is one of the big selling points for manufacturers. 'If manufacturers are planning trophy [one make championships] then it's very easy for them to prepare the trophy car on the TCR spec, and then they have two platforms into which they can sell cars: TCR platform and trophy platform. It's a little bit like GT3 at the beginning, there were Ferrari Challenge cars, and other things like that, and this is very similar.'

Budgets should be relatively low, thanks to the standard nature of the car and engine, and teams already lined up for the first TCR International Series season include Onyx, West Coast Racing, Target Competition and Engstler Motorsport, with more waiting in the wings. Beyond the international series Lotti hopes a plethora of national championships will help 'recreate an interest around the touring car category' across the world. Whether TCR can succeed in this lofty aim only time will tell. But just possibly in 2025 Racecar Engineering will be starting a feature on TCR with: 'More than a decade ago ...'

