

TCR - CTCC 'face off'

The Macau Guia Race - first held in 1972, and one of the most famous touring car races in Asia - also offers one of the most sought after trophies in the careers of top touring car drivers from around the world. Before the Macau event became an FIA World Touring Car Championship (WTCC) qualifier, the Guia race was run for a selection of races - and production-based saloon cars. Following ten years of WTCC, the race transformed into the final round of both the TCR International and Asia series last year, with TCR class cars competing for the first time. This year, however, the Macau Grand Prix organisers have decided to open up the the race to cars conforming to British, European and China Touring Car Championship (BTCC/ETCC/CTCC) specifications, in addition to the TCR class cars already permitted to race last year.

Basically, for this year's event the regulations permit any 2.0 litre turbocharged car from the major touring car championships competing to FIA national touring car regulations to take part. No budget requirements exist for BTCC and ETCC cars to join the race this year, leaving the CTCC



guests as the only non-TCR representatives on the grid. East and West touring car concepts will face off for the first time.

Unlike private entry-oriented TCR racing series and competitors, the CTCC Super 2.0T class enjoys a lot of popularity in Mainland China and has big fat budgets and factory support teams from Ford, SAIC Volkswagen, BAIC and Hayma behind

them, even if none of them have been able to commit to the Macau race. In theory, the CTCC cars are of higher spec than the TCR cars. To avoid any damaging difference of pace between these two forms of touring car the organisers have promised to ensure performance parity by modifying the original specs of the cars, creating a level playing field and good racing.





2015 TCR Asia Series vice-champion Rodolfo Avila is the first and only Macau driver to have driven the last generation of CTCC cars, but is uncertain who will win this duel. "It's difficult to predict who will be faster as the result will depend upon too many factors, like the tyres, set-ups, drivers' skills, etc.," explains Avila who has driven CTCC's VW Lamando GTS and TCR's SEAT León. "On the Zhuhai circuit, for example, the CTCC cars are definitely faster, with more aerodynamic downforce and engine power. However, the TCR cars are more reliable and the teams stronger - and they know

the Circuito da Guia much better".

Only five CTCC cars have entered this year's race: two Citroën Ellysées, two Audi A3s and one Mercedes-Benz C260. The look of the CTCC cars is definitely more aggressive than their TCR opponents because they are "inspired by WTCC but with some parts that have been standardised," says one well-known chief engineer in the paddocks who prefers to remain anonymous. "Suspension, brakes, clutch and electronics are the same for all cars but with more freedom in aerodynamics. Both engine and aero can be developed by the teams or their

suppliers/consultants within the limits of the regulations. For example, there are currently four different engine types running in the championship".

By contrast, "the TCR cars are factory built cars subject to strict homologation rules", our source says. "In the present configuration of the two different categories CTCC should have an advantage in terms of engine power. The cars are also approximately 100 kg lighter if they run without ballast and possibly better aerodynamics. The cornering performance, however, is quite similar although CTCC has a more tunable suspension".

However, we live in an era of one-make tyre spec series, as in the old days of the Guia Race, and to further complicate the life of punters and racing experts this year's Guia Race 2.0T make of tyre is free, yet the TCR International and Asia Series competitors have to run on Michelin S9 tyres if they want to score points for their own championships. Their Chinese counterparts are likely to run on Korean Kumho rubbers, while the non-registered TCR cars will use whatever tyre they have at hand like Pirelli or Yokohama. The Chinese tyre makers are not yet ready for this challenge - but if the rules remain the same for the next few years it wouldn't be surprising to see 'Made in China' tyres on the grid in the most prominent touring car race in the region. ■



"TCR is the perfect platform for customer racing"



Marcello Lotti, the former General Manager of the FIA World Touring Car Championship (WTCC), and spiritual father and promoter of the TCR series, had been key to find a good solution for the Guia Race when the WTCC left town. The TCR concept is designed to be a marketable, profitable and spectacular, yet cost-effective competition platform. It has borne the expectations in full at Guia Circuit last year. The race was seen as a great success for all involved, granting the continuation of a top production based car category that has always been part of the Macau Grand Prix weekend's DNA.

The CEO of TCR Promoter WSC Ltd spoke to Macau Business.

Last year's Guia Race was one of the best, if not the best race of the Grand Prix weekend. Did you believe that your new racing concept would work so well in Macau streets?

That was not a surprise to me. The Guia circuit suits perfectly to Touring Cars and, on top of this, the TCR technical concept does not stray much from the produc-

tion road going models, therefore it is obvious that TCR racing cars perform well on the street...

You have been one of the FIA WTCC founding fathers. There has been a lot of talk about the TCR concept being severely hampering the FIA WTCC's development with private teams and drivers opting for TCR International Series instead of the World Championship. Does this make any sense?

Nothing like this has happened so far. In fact the concepts on which the two categories are based are very much different. The FIA WTCC is conceived for the factory teams, while TCR is the perfect platform for customer racing.

This year you will have to share the paddock with the CTCC cars in Macau. They will certainly be comparisons. How positive can this be for both series and for the event itself?

My personal feeling is that mingling different technical regulations suits better endurance than sprint races. However, we have very good relationship with the CTCC

promoter, therefore we welcome the CTCC teams. We are talking of different technical concepts, but the participation of a few CTCC cars is not detrimental to the TCR concept.

The TCR concept was developed based on customer racing and affordable prices. In 2015 the cost of the SEAT León TCR was at EUR70,000 but the recently launched Audi RS 3 LMS will cost EUR129,000 in 2017. Is there anything to prevent the sudden escalation of the costs?

If you make a thorough analysis of the technical development, you will see that the increase in the cars' selling prices is only ostensible. The fact is that the first version of the SEAT León had been conceived for a one-make trophy and was closer to the production model than to a racing car. TCR cars have been developed since to offer a few racing features that enhance both reliability and performance, hence the relatively higher price. In the case of the Audi, they have also included a sophisticated safety package, but they also offer a 'club sport' version at a much cheaper price.

“Win on Sunday, sell on Monday” motto appears to be somehow valid here for all car manufacturers or private companies investing in the construction of new TCR cars. The TCR concept was initially conceived to leave the big car companies out in order to allow privateers to race. Will you be able to keep the car manufacturers at bay, leaving the track fight for the privateers only?

TCR remains a customer-oriented concept and the basic requirement to homologate a TCR car is the absence of denial from the car manufacturer. We don't have factory teams in the TCR series and we don't think that manufacturers have an interest in changing this status. In the end, for them this is about making business and selling cars and parts to the customers.

From Formula One to the FIA World Endurance Championship, motor racing in general has been invaded by environmental friendly rhetoric - electric racing, hybrid engines, etc. Does TCR have any idea up its sleeve for the future?

Everything needs to be addressed to at the right time. In motor sports this entails the technical development and the choice of strategies. TCR has only been launched last year, thus it's too early to think about this kind of evolution. ■



THE TCR CONCEPT

The Touring Car Racing (TCR) Series is the leading platform for close-to-production touring car racing. Opposed to the factory-backed competitions such as the German Touring Car Masters (DTM) or the FIA World Touring Car Championship (WTCC), the TCR offers a stage for ambitious, professional customer racing teams looking to deliver exciting sport with close-to-production and attractive touring cars. Factory-backed teams are not allowed in the TCR. The manufacturers offer their vehicles to the customers but are not involved in the action on the track. The so-called “Balance of Performance” system, successfully used in other racing series, safeguards equal opportunities, thus ensuring that every manufacturer can develop and offer a competitive TCR vehicle, regardless of the conceptual interpretation of the production model. The key “Balance of Performance” levers in the TCR are weight, engine output and ride height. Honda, SEAT, Volkswagen, Ford, Opel, Alfa Romeo and Subaru are the car manufacturers that already producing TCR cars. Audi and KIA will join them from 2017.



Bill O'Brien: Man of many talents

Bill O'Brien, an American who lives in Hong Kong and Zhuhai, and who will be behind the wheel of a TCR VW Golf GTi on race weekend, has a long history of motor racing. Born in New Jersey - home to Frank Sinatra, Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi, among others - Bill has raced in such illustrious places as Lime Rock, Connecticut, an awesome circuit owned by the legendary Skip Barber. Regarding other better known locales, Bill has raced at Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium, as well as Sepang in Malaysia - and, of course, Macau.

He cites tracks like the twisty, turning Sonoma in the California desert as one of his favourites, more than the classic Mazda Raceway at Laguna Seca, also in California: “I like Sonoma which has some tight corners and some tricky bends. Laguna has the famous Corkscrew, but Sonoma still does it for me.”

Bill started, as so many aspiring drivers do, in karts, but “I also raced on dirt tracks in the US” - before he was old enough, apparently. He came to Asia - to Beijing - many years ago and has raced at the Goldenport Park circuit which he described in the olden days as being “dreadful”. It has been upgraded these days and hosts a number of international events, including FIA GT, touring cars and China Superbike races.

Bill O'Brien is also a partner in Zhuhai-based Black Arts Racing, a company, he says, which offers “a professional race school” amongst other activities.

“We do corporate track days, professional training, and support and licence allocation on behalf of the FIA. We can do advanced training as well. We have people like



Danny Watts and Dan Wells on our team, both top drivers in their fields. We take care of our customers and always offer help; we also take care of their race cars if necessary. We can support our customers in practice and in the race; we are there to assist”.

Black Arts Racing is, says O'Brien, “The only professional race school in Asia. We work to win championships with our drivers, but we know it takes time. We offer our people simulators as well as real course professionals to teach them race-craft.”

Volkswagen GTi

“The VW is an amazing machine. It's a true race car: the suspension is not rubber bushes like a road car, but has steel ball-joints which makes it more precise; it also has amazing brakes. It's front-wheel drive, of course, which makes it totally different to the single-seaters I drive. It's sometimes difficult to get a handle on the car.

“My teammate is Kevin Tse. He will

win many races and will go well in Macau, undoubtedly.” (At the time of writing Tse was equal second with Henry Ho in the title race, behind runaway leader Andy Yan.)

The Golf is powered by a 326 bhp, turbocharged four-cylinder engine and creates an amazing impression, particularly on tight tracks. At Macau, the TCR Golf GTi will be getting close to 270 km/h at the end of the long Guia straight. Bill will undoubtedly thank those “amazing brakes”.

It is, as Bill puts it, “a real race car”.

The Future

Bill does not rule out switching to another Volkswagen brand, the championship-leading SEAT, in the future. But adds, “My major opposition is myself! I never really believe I can achieve what I set out to do. But, I should add, ego becomes subjugated. Every time I get in a car it can be a 98 per cent learning curve, even at my age. I'd say that I'm an empty channel in a race car.. I can change the way I do things.

“Unlike golf, at which I'm crap, racing a car comes naturally. At Lakewood Golf Club (in Zhuhai) I can hit a shot off the tee 300 yards occasionally but there's only a 15 per cent chance of it landing on the proper fairway! In racing I expect at least to win my class; I'm more demanding on myself on a circuit.”

Bill says he first drove a Caterham Seven on a race circuit: “I learned everything in that car. It had a Fireblade 900 cc motorcycle engine, chucking out an impressive 130 bhp, but it didn't steer or possess any brakes to speak of. That's what teaches you on a track!” ■

Bill O'Brien was talking to Jeff Heselwood