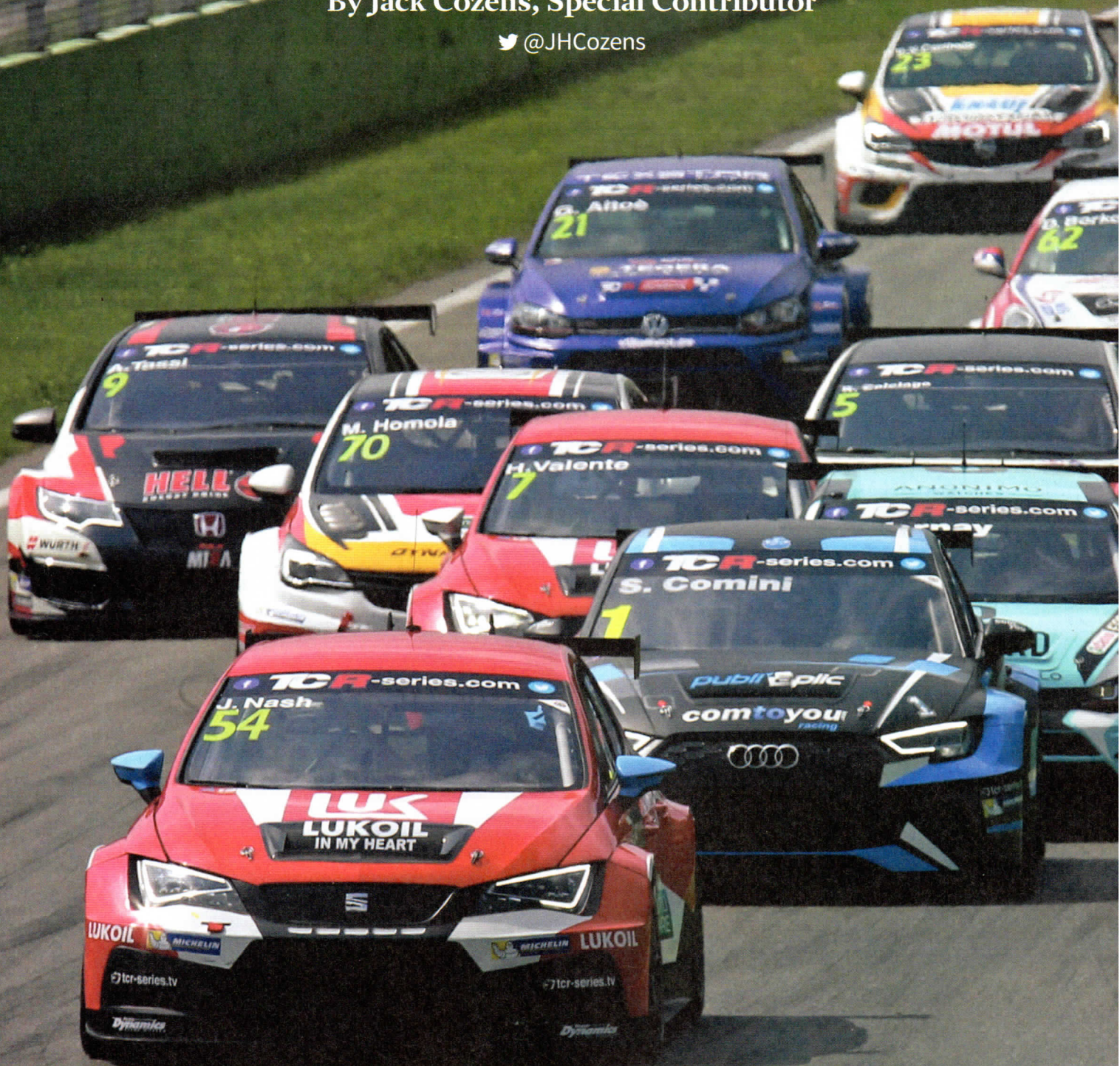


TCR's ever expanding empire

With more new markets opening up, the touring car format's rapid growth shows no sign of slowing down

By Jack Cozens, Special Contributor

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Among an open, dicing field, Roberto Colciago and Gianni Morbidelli are two drivers fancied for success. But this isn't the 1989 Italian Formula 3 season – this, almost certainly, is touring car racing's future empire. For anyone unfamiliar with TCR, a crash course might be in order. It's the brainchild of Marcello Lotti – the man behind the re-establishment of the World Touring Car Championship. TCR started life as TC3, a cost-effective tin-top concept inspired by Stephane Ratel's successful GT3 format and constitutes the third tier in the FIA's touring car regulation pyramid.

Built around four- and five-door saloons, TCR cars are basically beefed-up versions of their road-going counterparts. Freedom is granted in areas like the ECU (although even here maps and software are frozen), but a car's two-litre turbocharged engine can only come from the original make or another brand in the same family. Plus, a great deal of components are as-standard production parts.

The TCR International Series' maiden season was run in 2015 and, without many of the regional series the concept now enjoys, the first year was a modest one. The International grids were in the mid-teens at most rounds, and these were largely propped up by SEAT Leons and Honda Civics, plus a couple of Volkswagen Golfs, Audi TTs (before they were outlawed) and the odd under-prepared Ford Focus, Opel Astra, or lesser-spotted Subaru WRX STi.

Nevertheless, year one was a good calling card, as the International title went down to the wire, eventually being won by Stefano Comini. That success was built upon in 2016, with a stronger and more stable International Series, plus the launch of more regional championships – although a greater production run of Golfs and the arrival of Alfa Romeo's Giulietta model were the only developments on the car front.

But 2017 has been a year of rapid growth. Honda and SEAT might still be the best-represented brands on International and regional grids, but it's no longer these cars locking out the front rows. Six makes – Honda, SEAT, Alfa, Volkswagen,

“This is customer racing at its best. The cars are affordable and easy to maintain”

Opel and Audi – were present on the most recent International Series grid at Buriram in Thailand (KIA has appeared sporadically throughout the year) and five of those have won races. TCR now lends its name to 13 regional series, and its regulations are used in classes at events including the Nurburgring 24 Hours.

“The concept is absolutely perfect,” says Chris Reinke, head of Audi Sport customer racing. “There is no point running factory programmes in an entry-level touring car series. This is customer racing at its best. The cars are affordable and easy to maintain for our clients.”

The brilliance of a global touring car platform is that the cars can be raced just about anywhere – so while the professional International teams might not step far from that path, if you're an independent driver there's nothing (apart from logistics) to stop you competing at Spa one week and Buriram the next.

“Generally speaking, [in TCR] the world now has an attractive budget touring car series that, despite limited costs, provides great racing with 350bhp machines,” adds Reinke. “This platform has been lacking in international >>

motorsport for quite a while. The cars are so much more affordable for privateers when compared to the 1990s' Super Touring cars or the S2000 touring cars in the 2000s or the current WTCC.

"It allows us to produce racing cars in significant numbers and sell them to customers. Plus, we can enter new markets, such as the Benelux countries, Scandinavia, southern and Eastern Europe as well as some countries in Asia."

Reinke, who has previously stated that TCR "has even larger potential than that of GT3", touches on an important point. It's a low-cost formula, which allows manufacturers to mass-produce racing cars and sell them in volume. Audi's S3 model only went on the market for the 2017 season, but already 100 units have been produced.

Motorsport isn't just expensive for the individual competitor, so any programmes that allow costs to be recouped (and showcase new cars) are increasingly attractive for manufacturers.

"There are different reasons why we are involved in TCR," says Hyundai Motorsport customer racing manager

Andrea Adamo. "One is it's an expanding category with racing around the world. It's an open market; there's quite a nice opportunity to make a business out of it."

It says a lot about TCR that Hyundai has signed up. The Korean brand is a relatively new player in the world of motorsport, and this marks its first foray into circuit racing. Development of its i30 N TCR has been comprehensive – the group started looking at TCR in "January and February 2016" and earlier this year hired Gabriele Tarquini as its test driver. He and fellow touring car legend Alain Menu will give the car its first competitive TCR outing at the next round of the season at Zhejiang in China next month.

"The first thing for customer racing was to have something

other than the R5 [Hyundai's rally project] from the commercial point of view," Adamo adds. "Then we had occasion to work on the i30 that was a new car on the road-car market for Hyundai, and its platform perfectly matched the TCR car description. It was quite natural to match the two things, and connect both the dots."

It's clear from Adamo's words that, while manufacturer backing is not the done thing, TCR projects aren't put together on a whim – there's serious thought to make sure the commercial side is optimised and ample development time given to each project to ensure the cars are competitive.

Reinke offers a similar outlook: "The [A3] is based on the same Modular Transverse Matrix platform [on which a number of Volkswagen Group cars are based] as the SEAT and the VW [sister brand] TCR cars, so it was a logical choice.

In theory, we could have opted for the hatchback version as well, but the sedan is very popular in many markets worldwide. The sales figures of our racing car underline this fact. It's a nimble, compact car with excellent

aerodynamic properties thanks to the shape of its body."

Cost is arguably the greatest weapon in TCR's arsenal. The cars cost around €100,000 and, depending on the programme, a similar sum can keep you racing for a year. A middling British Touring Car Championship budget is getting on for double that, while WTCC drivers can shell out somewhere in the region of €1million to put a campaign together (including the cost of the car).

TCR's balance of performance is a divisive matter – to a similar but lesser extent than boost is in the BTCC – but the idea behind the performance weights system is to keep a level playing field. And, while manufacturer presence is at a minimum and development is controlled, there's less

"It's an open market; there is a nice opportunity to make a business out of it"

Audi A3 shares a platform with SEAT and VW TCR cars



Hyundai i30 will make its race debut in China



Multi-make racing has proved competitive in TCR



likelihood of an arms race setting in that could send costs spiralling – as happened with Super Touring.

The interest in TCR cars – even unproven ones – shows how much momentum the concept currently has.

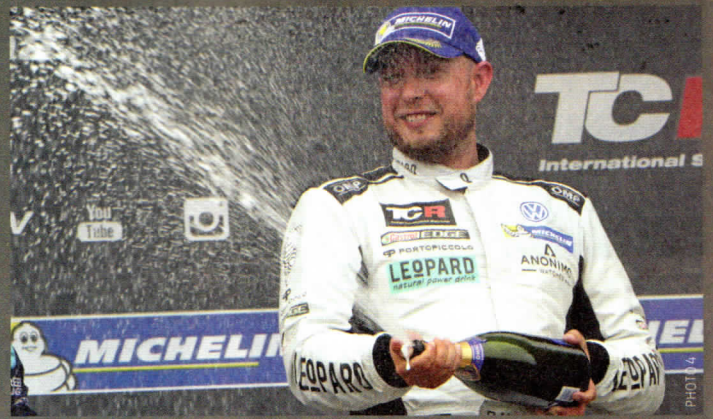
“Customer racing is always something that needs sowing, and then you check if the seeds are flowering,” says Adamo. “Many people are interested in what we are doing, we have people coming to visit us. I’ve already had some potential customers to see the car on track. The level of potential is quite high, but the car is sold when the money is in the bank.”

When Autosport first investigated TCR two years ago, we wrote that the strength of the British Touring Car Championship had kept the formula out of the UK. But guess what’s heading to British shores next season? Talk of a UK version of the series was first reported late last year (Autosport December 15–22), and a series was formally announced in July 2017. A provisional seven-round calendar is now in place for ’18 and as many as 47 teams have made approaches.

This development doesn’t suggest that the BTCC has become weaker, but proves the appeal of TCR is such that the concept has spread into markets that were previously considered beyond its reach.

Plenty of talk since TCR UK was announced has been in the context of the BTCC, with most keen to stress that the start-up will be no rival for the long-standing series – which celebrates its 60th anniversary next year. But who wouldn’t want to see two strong tin-top series thriving in the UK and, more to the point, whoever complained about a little bit of healthy competition to keep the experienced side on its toes?

“How goes the tin-top revolution?” was the question Autosport asked when it first examined TCR. Two years on, and with previously resistant territories well on their way to being conquered, it’s hard to envisage the expansion of the empire slowing down any time soon. ❖



Rob Huff on TCR

THERE’S NOT A LOT IN the world of tin-tops that Rob Huff hasn’t driven. The 2012 World Touring Car champion first found national acclaim after winning the SEAT Cupra Cup in 2003, and was rewarded with a campaign in the British Touring Car Championship with SEAT’s works programme.

Eight years with Chevrolet in the WTCC followed – the last of which culminated in title success – and Huff has remained in the championship since, throughout the TC1 era.

Throw in countless outings in historic, Nurburgring 24 Hours assaults in GT3 machinery and appearances in the BTCC (in NGTC machinery), Chinese Touring Cars and the TCR International series this year alone, and you’ll be hard-pressed to

find someone better qualified to provide a take on how TCR stacks up as a concept.

“Compared to historic, where a driver manipulates the car to make it work, TCR is kind of the opposite,” he explains. “TCR cars aren’t particularly difficult to drive, you want to run it, around double that to run it for a year. That is considerably cheaper than any other breed of touring car, [and it’s] what motorsport needs; motorsport has been in a difficult place for a long time, and finances play a big part.

“I believe it will be the future of touring car racing”

but what Marcello Lotti has managed to create as a business and race championship is monumental. There’s no doubt about that. It needs a bit of tidying up around the edges, but I do believe it will be the future of touring car racing.”

“You’re looking at €110,000 for a car and depending on where

“A World Touring Car is a race car from the ground up. A lot of it is carbonfibre, it’s light, it’s got a lot of aero. I loved it when they introduced TC1 because all of a sudden you could really drive a car hard again. With an S2000, you were always sort of tip-toeing around looking after the tyre.

“A TCR car is basically a road car and you have to let it do the work. You’re just guiding it. I’m not a huge fan of cars where the driver isn’t able to manipulate things too much, but at the same time anyone can win.”

