

In January 2015 when Race Tech interviewed promoter Marcello Lotti about his newly created global affordable touring car concept, TCR, the questions inevitably included whether a series running to the format could be created in the UK, home of the globally-renowned British Touring Car Championship. "The BTCC is legendary," the Italian replied, "the UK does not need anything from anywhere else, there would be no sense in trying to run a

UK TCR Series..."

Less than three years on, TCR is now a worldwide success. The international championship has a solid grid of 20-plus cars while the regional and national series have mushroomed – there are now well over a dozen, with more to come, while in TCR Germany, a series only in its second season, grids regularly number more than 40 entries. And in 2018, those championships will be joined by TCR UK.

When we tackle Lotti on the subject of the UK, he insists his view has not changed. "I still consider the BTCC a legendary and very successful series. However, since then (2015) we have had the time to prove how good the TCR concept is for customer teams.

"A lot of people – also in the UK – have realised that (TCR) provides an excellent compromise between real competition and affordable budgets. As a consequence we have been approached by a number of competitors who pushed for a TCR UK."

This is a view shared by the promoter of TCR UK, someone who should know what he is talking about. Jonathan Ashman was until 2010 president of the FIA Touring Car Commission, and back at the start of the 1990s an architect of the two-litre formula that became the global phenomenon of Super Touring.

Ashman hints that the UK was never completely off the list of countries TCR wanted to expand into, but was always at the bottom: "Marcello had always been extremely sensitive to the UK, which

NEVER SAY NEVER

In less than three years the TCR formula has mushroomed around the globe, and now it is coming to where it said it would not – the UK. **Andrew Charman** finds out why

BELOW Initial interest in TCR UK suggests it could reach the grid-filling status of TCR Germany





ABOVE The BTCC is the standard bearer of UK motorsport – a position TCR insists it is not trying to usurp

obviously has the BTCC. He didn't want anyone to think we were treading on toes or trying to be too clever."

THE BIGGEST LAST?

Ashman adds that the UK is regarded as a 'major market' – these also include the USA, which is set to launch a TCR series next year, and Japan which is rumoured to be starting in 2018. He also hints that even in Australia, home of the Supercar, TCR talk is starting.

Such major markets had to be left to last, principally due to the explosive growth of TCR taking everyone involved by surprise, and leading to the very real issue for manufacturers of the cars of keeping up with the demand from teams.

Under the TCR concept a single constructor represents each brand, either that OEM's sporting department or an appointed specialist, and they are required to be able to build a run of cars to the tightly controlled technical regulations, for sale to teams. As Lotti says, the idea is not to "win the race but win the market".

The 'early adopters', SEAT and Honda, have now been joined by more than a dozen other brands, the latest being the Renault Megane unveiled as this feature is written. The success of the TCR concept is most

clearly demonstrated by Audi's customer programme, which was launched with the TCR RS3 at the Paris Motor Show in September 2010 and had sold 100 examples by mid 2017.

"TCR provides an attractive and affordable budget touring car series around the world with these 350 hp machines," says Chris Reinke of Audi Sport Customer Racing. "We can produce these cars in significant numbers to sell to customers while at the same time can enter new markets in the Benelux, Scandinavia, Southern and Eastern Europe as well as some Asian countries. To

have produced 100 of these cars within seven months is impressive. I obviously do not expect us to grow at the same rate in the future because once a team has the car then they should hopefully be very happy with it for a while."

"The demand for TCR series around the world was far beyond the manufacturers' capacity to build cars," Ashman says. "Jaime Puig (sporting director of SEAT) told me at one point they had staff on three eight-hour shifts a day building body shells and still couldn't meet the demand. They've done over 200 now. We now have more ▶



ABOVE TCR founder Marcello Lotti (left) feels the time is right for a UK series headed by the widely experienced Jonathan Ashman (right)



ABOVE Competitive grids ensure there is no shortage of action in TCR...

Why has TCR worked so well?

THE TCR formula certainly seems to have found its mark, evolving rapidly round the world. So what makes it so globally attractive?

"The key is a very clear concept right from the start," says TCR UK promoter Jonathan Ashman. "You had to have an affordable formula, not to make the mistakes of the past in the Super Touring days, where each country started interpreting the regulations in their own way."

The example he offers of the 'straw that broke the camel's back' in Super Touring, concerned a manufacturer in the German series that instead of mounting the battery low down in the boot effectively hung it under the floor. "To enable this they added what they called a 'battery protection skid' – what it actually created was a complete flat floor across the rear of the car.

"A British steward would have laughed at it but they got away with it in Germany and the technical creep became a gallop. The cars became more and more expensive because everybody made the same move and ended up spending a lot more money to be in the same position."

Such a situation cannot occur in TCR, Ashman contends, a pillar of the category being the ability to use the same cars in every series, in different countries. "Marcello Lotti ensures that

the technical regulations are completely and tightly controlled, so there is no technical creep.

"A team can go onto the TCR website, buy an 18-month-old DSG-gearbox SEAT Leon for £50,000, and they will be in the mix at the races. Then at the end of the UK season they can rent the car out to for example run in the Middle East championship held through the winter."

Depreciation, or the lack of it, in TCR cars is also a major factor. "Having run that used SEAT for a season and then rented it out at the end of the year, if it's still the same shape the team will likely still get £40,000 for it. "That is a problem the BTCC has – the cars don't have a used value," says Ashman. "The value is the price of the mandatory components – you'd strip out the components you have to have and would re-use, the rest is scrap."

Both Lotti and Ashman believe the TCR technical regulations are set and no major changes needed. "We have to keep in mind that more than 500 TCR cars have already been produced and any significant changes to the regulations would result in a dramatic impact on such a large field," says Lotti. "This is why we have decided to completely freeze the technical regulations, as well as the homologation forms, for the next three years at least." **RT**

than 500 TCR cars in existence and we are only halfway through year three – it's beyond astonishing."

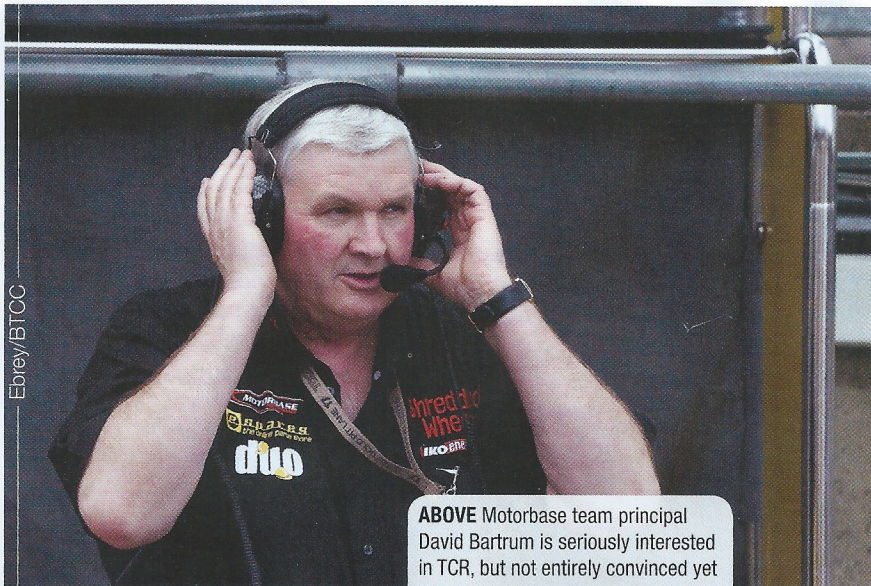
So with TCR series established across the globe, and a strong inventory of cars, both Lotti and Ashman feel the time is right to answer demand from the UK, and to launch a series that they say will be a stepping stone to the BTCC, not challenge its place as the UK's leading series.

"We believe there is a substantial gap in the market below BTCC, purely on a financial basis," says Ashman. "The jump to the BTCC from say even the most expensive programme in Renault Clios or Ginettas (both support categories on the BTCC package) is enormous. We are very much closer to those, nowhere near the BTCC – there will always be a place for that series, it's got the big TV deal, the massive crowds, it's not us."

BIGGER THAN THE GRIDS?

The immediate interest that has been generated in TCR UK would appear to support this. Ashman admits to being overwhelmed by the level of enquiries, and is now confident enough to say that grids in the initial 2018 championship will definitely number at least 20 to 25 cars – but could go much higher.

"We started out by suggesting we'd exactly follow the format of TCR International with



Ebrey/BTCC

ABOVE Motorbase team principal David Bartrum is seriously interested in TCR, but not entirely convinced yet

"We were keen to go with GT and I think GT would have been happy to have us, but it was sheer practicality – we just would not fit into paddocks."

So TCR has taken the apparently bold decision to head up its own race meetings, in the process posing a challenge for the British Racing & Sports Car Club, which will be running the series and is currently trying to tie down the calendar for the first six-to-seven meeting season. There are further challenges, particularly the desire to spread the rounds across the UK.

"Manufacturers like to go to parts of the country where they will attract guests for hospitality, so they don't want to go to remote places," says Ashman. He quotes the example of Castle Combe, which is close to Honda's UK factory and has a large population in easy reach, so is very appealing from a manufacturer point of view. But with a lack of infrastructure, for example no pit garages, it will be less popular with many teams.

He also doesn't want to visit a particular circuit just before or just after the BTCC to avoid inevitable comparisons, and he states that a fundamental of the calendar will be to avoid running on BTCC race weekends – because several BTCC teams also want to do TCR.

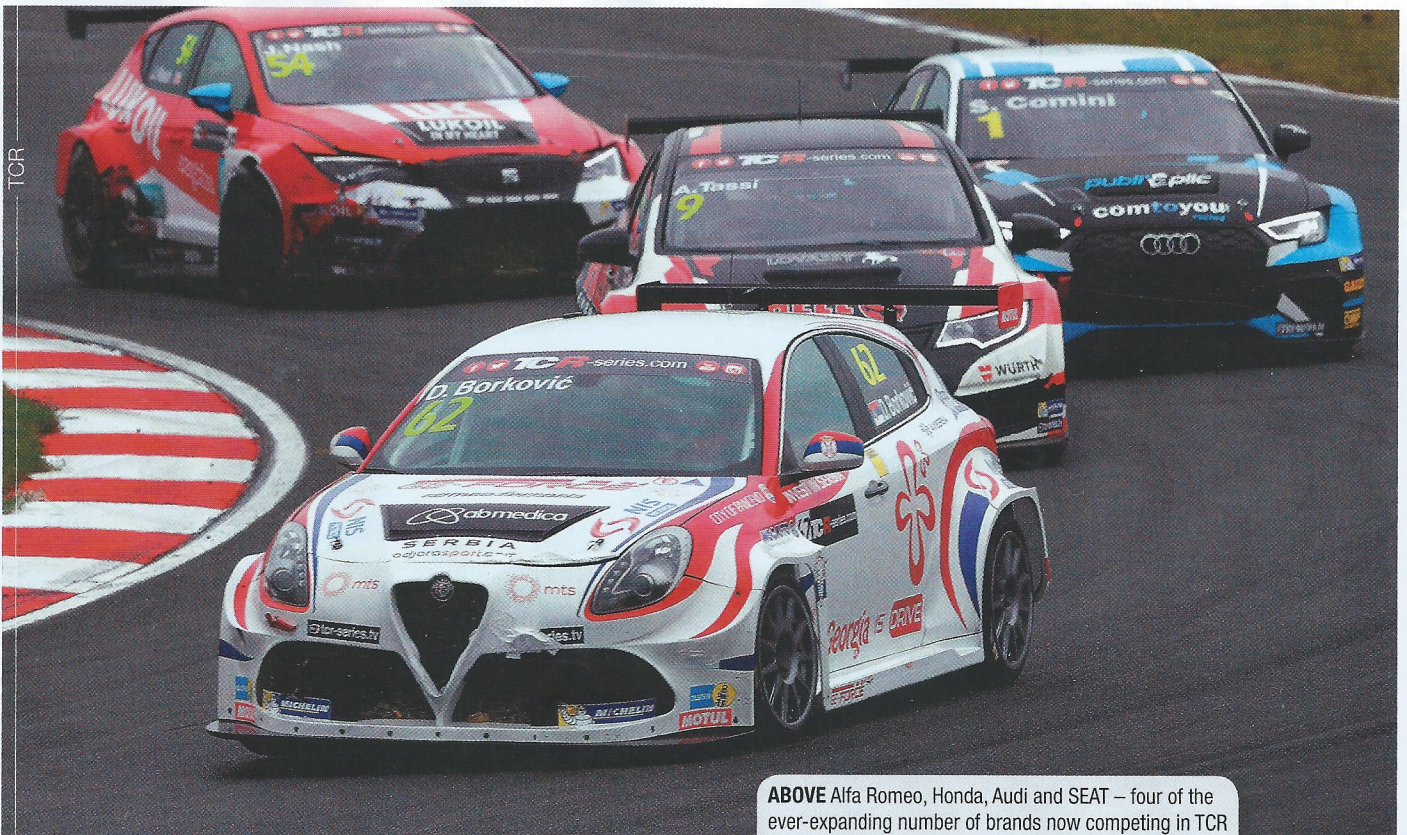
Just as this feature went to press TCR UK revealed its provisional 2018 calendar, which ▶

two races per meeting, a tried and tested format," he says. "We never contemplated ending up in a situation of being at a track with more entries than the grid could accommodate. But then people started contacting me wanting to pay deposits to ensure they have an entry."

He has no intention of turning away any team who wants to enter TCR UK: "A driver that gets their act together and buys a second-hand car that complies with the regulations, will be assured of two races at each meeting. If entries exceed the grid we

will run two heats and an A and B final. No-one will be turned away."

This situation has in turn forced a revised view of the role of TCR in a race meeting. "Initially we thought we would be a support race to another series, the obvious one being British GT," he suggests. "But GT takes a lot of the timetable, and many UK venues do not have the physical space in the paddock to accommodate a support race of the size ours could be. British GT would have the garages, we would be out in the paddock and that is a problem.



TCR

ABOVE Alfa Romeo, Honda, Audi and SEAT – four of the ever-expanding number of brands now competing in TCR

consists of seven rounds, none clashing with BTCC weekends. The series is set to open at Silverstone on 31st March/1st April, head to Knockhill in Scotland on 12th/13th May, then Brands Hatch on 2nd/3rd June and Castle Combe on 14th/15th July.

Restrictions at Oulton Park will require the series to cram its meeting into a single day on 4th August, followed by Croft on 8th/9th September and a finale at Donington on 13th/14th October.

ADDITIONAL ATTRACTION

Ashman says that TCR UK has so far been contacted by 10 BTCC teams: "None of them want to leave the BTCC and come to us, but they have the workshops, the mechanics and trucks and can see TCR as a profitable second string, running a couple of cars for other people."

Team Hard and Maximum Motorsport are among BTCC outfits that have already firmly stated they will run cars in TCR UK. The most high-profile team so far to make public its interest is Motorbase Performance, currently running three Ford Focus cars in the BTCC backed by household name Shredded Wheat.

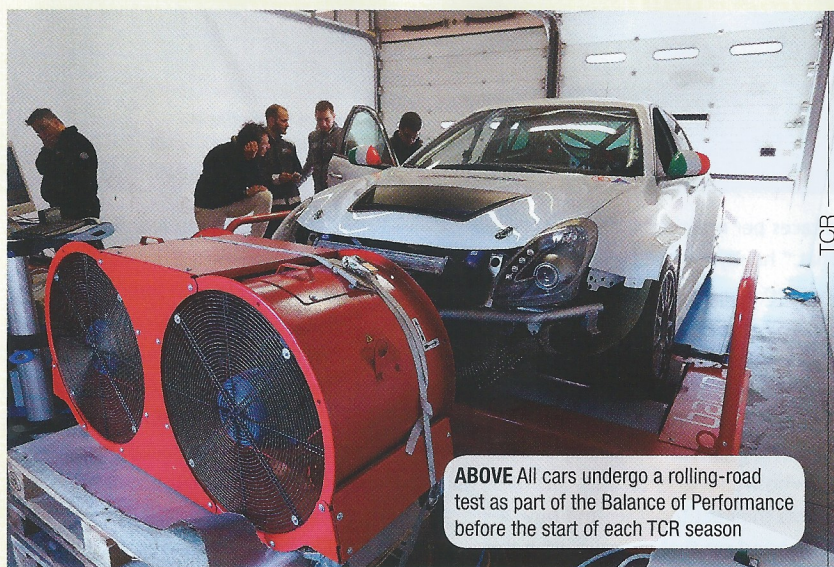
Principal of the long-established Motorbase team, David Bartrum, says that the TCR series has to be looked at. "You can't ignore something that works across Europe – and having recently ended our GT programme, we have the workshop space, manpower, and equipment. I like TCR – I've done quite a lot of homework on it, made ▶

Keeping the balance

ONE aspect that has caused some controversy amongst TCR teams is the Balance of Performance regulations. TCR stages a BoP test for all marques at the start of each season, bidding to equalise them through performance data and testing on rolling road and track. Then at each round the series can further adjust the

BoP, through weight, horsepower and ride height changes.

Predictably these in-season changes leave some teams feeling unfairly penalised. But Lotti is not particularly worried. "It is impossible to make everybody happy. I will be very worried the day that nobody complains about something," he says. **TT**



ABOVE All cars undergo a rolling-road test as part of the Balance of Performance before the start of each TCR season

BELOW Motorbase's three-car presence in the BTCC comes at a cost – could a TCR programme help with the revenue?

