



YELLOW STREAK

Peter Dron joined the TVR works team in the Four-Hour Relay Race at Oulton Park recently, but managed to stay on the comfortable side of the threshold of terror during 41 laps behind the wheel





IT WAS one of those moments when the bullshit must be suspended. I was in the paddock at Oulton Park, a circuit around which I had never previously driven, and the car into which I was about to climb was sitting there, on enormous racing slicks and with a big V8 under the bonnet that produces well over 300bhp. The situation seemed full of latent menace.

Like all TVR's employees, Competition Manager, Chris Schirle, had been putting in 20-hour days for some time getting cars ready for the Motor Show, as well as preparing the racer. This probably made him more grumpy than usual in the early part of the day. His words of encouragement to me as I prepared to get into the car went something like this:

"I'll be honest with you, I didn't want you to drive this car today. None of us wanted you to drive it today. It was only because Noel (Noel Palmer, TVR's Press Officer) made the arrangement with you that I agreed to it. This is a serious car. We want to stand a chance of winning the race tomorrow, and if this car is crashed or its engine is blown up, we won't be able to..."

And so on for a couple of minutes, all the time a pair of steely blue eyes

threatening to burn a hole in the bridge of my nose. This man not only calls a spade a spade; he's prepared to spell it for you.

I climbed into the car, and the mechanic grinned as he helped me adjust the belts and the steering column. "What's a decent lap time around here?" I asked Mr Schirle.

"If you get round here in under 1min 34sec, I'll make sure you get a Grand Prix drive next season", he said gruffly.

Thus encouraged, I set off and promptly stalled turning into the pit lane.

It took a while to get used to the dips, humps and swooping curves of Oulton: the place is like a miniaturised version of the old Nurburgring. My first flying lap occupied 1min 40sec, and after about 10 laps I'd worked down to 1min 32.5sec. Now that I'd put up a respectable time, without either stuffing the car or lurching the engine, Chris Schirle was a much more friendly man. Maybe he had a good breakfast while I was out on the circuit.

Steve Cole, the car's regular driver, can get down to just below 1min 30sec on the soft-compound tyres we were using in testing. He revs to 6,800, and although I was only using 6,200rpm in the intermediates, I felt that the Rover 4.2 (to be precise it is 4,227cc, a stroked version of the 390, which is itself a bored-out version of the 350) was beginning to run short of breath from about 6,000rpm onwards. I think that Steve extracts his advantage from an intimate knowledge of car and circuit, combined with an impressive level of skill and determination. I'd like to be able to follow him round for a few laps to

sharpen up my entry to Cascades, Island and, possibly, Druids bends.

Everywhere else, I think I was doing a pretty good job. On the approach to Knicker Brook, the car pulls 6,300rpm in fourth, which is equivalent to 138mph. Incidentally, I often wondered what ancient feat of swordsmanship led to such a strange name; I am informed that, when the circuit was being made, 'Blaster' Bates was called in, and a young lady and gentleman ran off following one of his explosions, which caused a discarded item of underwear to fly upwards.

Whether or not it is a true story, the bend could just as aptly be named Brown Trousers, because it is very tricky indeed. In the TVR it can be taken in fourth, but the car feels better balanced in third and accelerates more firmly up to Clay Hill, a bumpy, adverse-camber left-hander with a sharp brow at its apex. This is taken with foot flat down in fourth, and the car kicks and squirms its way to the outside of the track on the exit, after attempting to take off. This neatly lines you up for the narrow entry line for Druids, which at first appears to be a double-apex right-hander, but in fact it's best to ignore the first apex altogether.



That section of the circuit is very demanding, but the biggest test of man and machine at Oulton is Cascades, also an adverse-camber left-hander, but one which is approached on a falling gradient at some ridiculous speed I don't care to know about too exactly. And it seems to go on forever.

It was here that in 1968 my brother Tony, lying third or fourth in a Formula Ford race, went in far too fast in his Titan and lost control in a reasonably interesting manner. He was just reaching the end of a series of gyrations when the next car, driven by a chap called James Hunt, entered the bend at an equally optimistic speed, leaping up the bank on the right and then shooting across towards the infield, where the bank helped it become airborne. This probably gave the idea to the naval engineer who invented the 'ski-jump' launch on aircraft carriers.

After shearing off the six-inch oak post of an advertising hoarding some six feet from its base, James and his Merlyn cartwheeled into the Oulton Park lake. My brother unbuckled his belts and ran across the track. Nothing was to be seen of either Hunt or the Merlyn, though steam and bubbles rising to the disturbed surface of the lake hinted that they had passed this way. Shortly, a bedraggled figure, face covered in mud, blood and weeds emerged, swaying, from the water. It was one of those rare accidents where the absence of safety belts (not then compulsory in racing cars) probably saved the driver. James, who had sold his car that morning, went on to greater exploits, but a promising career had

nearly been cut short.

Oulton used to be longer than it is now, but in its present form it has one horrid, tight little hairpin, called Island which in the TVR demands first gear. You must get the line absolutely perfect to avoid scrubbing understeer, and feather the throttle for a few yards to avoid massive oversteer. It's very difficult, but not very satisfying, yet it seems to be the most crucial point of the circuit, because it is the starting point of the longest straight.

T H E R A C E

MR SCHIRLE decided that I'd be capable of driving "a full session" in the race the next day. Never having driven in a relay race before, I wasn't sure what might be involved. For the benefit of those among you equally ignorant, this is what happens: teams may consist of between three and six cars, of which only one is allowed on the circuit at a time.

The handicappers decide, on the basis of practice, previous results, protests, whinges and hard bargaining how many laps to credit to the various teams, having awarded zero credit laps to the team considered to have the fastest cars. In this case the 'scratch' team, a collection of

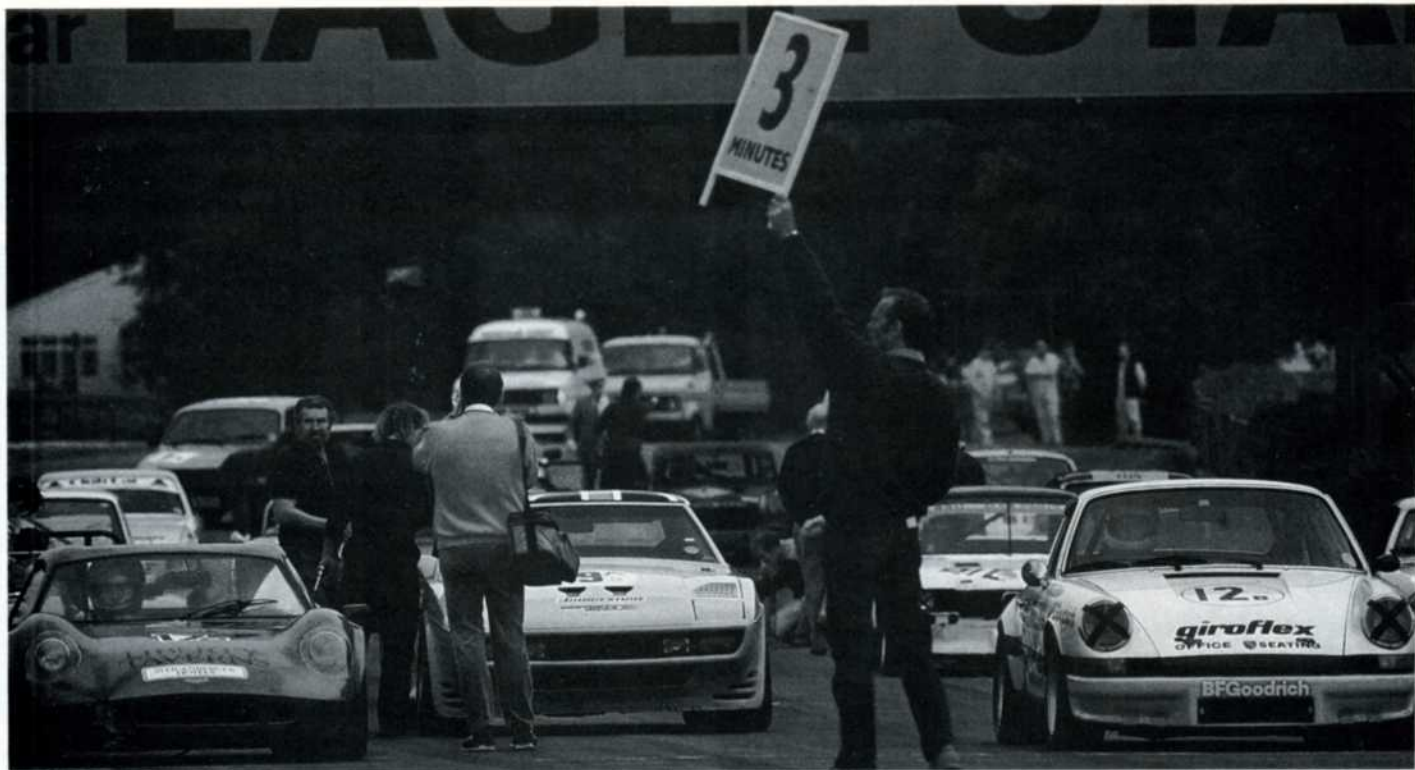
beautiful (and very fast) Chevrons, was not hard to select. At the other end of the scale was an odd collection of vehicles including a Lotus Cortina, an Austin A35, a Morris Minor and a Ford Mustang. They were credited with 36 laps.

Thus, if the handicappers got their sums correct, the Chevron team would complete 36 more laps than this 'Classic Saloon' team in the four hours of this Relay Race, sponsored by local Volvo dealer John Wallwork.

We were given nine credit laps along with a team of Porsches, and two other Porsche teams were judged to be quicker than us. Our team consisted of the yellow works car that I was to share with Steve Cole, a green 420 SEAC entered and driven by Tim Exeter of BLE Automotive and an old (Ford-engined) 3000S driven by Andy Clarke.

In the morning, each driver had a practice session lasting 15 minutes, and I soon discovered (being in the quickest car in my session) that threading through slower traffic called for constant attention. Most of the drivers of Fiestas, BMWs and so on were very polite once they saw the yellow beast steaming up behind them, but the speed differential was so enormous that a few of them didn't spot me until I was halfway past them. It was interesting to catch up with a couple of Porsche 911s and flash by them as if they were going backwards. Today, I was on harder-compound tyres which took just over a lap to warm up: the first couple of times through Cascades were a bit fraught, as if there were oil on

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the track, but once the tyres got warm, I lapped consistently at 1m 35s.

Steve Cole started the race in the 420 SEAC, and at the end of the first lap was third, behind one of the amazingly rapid Chevrons and a Porsche 911. The positions were the same at the end of an hour, with Steve lapping consistently below 1m 34s. Then Tim Exeter took over in his car, only to pull off with electrical failure after a few laps. This left Andy Clarke out for a while in the 3000S.

I pulled on my helmet and adjusted the seat, the steering column and the harness, and drove into the pitlane, avoiding the embarrassment of stalling this time. I had a mercifully short wait before Andy came in (if you wait too long, the imagination starts to pump the adrenalin around excessively even before you are out there on the circuit, and imagination is usually more frightening than reality).

Then I was out there, on tyres still reasonably warm, so I could go quite quickly straight away. My first flying lap was at 1m 35s, and almost all the subsequent 40 were at the same pace. One lap was two seconds slower, when I became too obsessed with the rear-view mirror, and missed the braking point for Island, scrabbling around the outside on the 'marbles' but not actually going off.

After about 15 laps I noticed a pain in the middle of my back; I think I'd pushed the seat back an extra notch and come into contact with a crossmember. After 20 laps, accelerating along the straight from Island to Knicker Brook, and checking the instruments, I realised that I'd probably never done more than 15 consecutive laps in a car around a circuit before. I felt my concentration begin to lapse at times. After 30 laps, I was beginning to enjoy it again, getting into a rhythm.

I don't think there was a single totally

clear lap; almost all the time I was passing much slower cars, and occasionally I'd come upon something nearly as fast as the TVR which required a bit more effort: one of the Caterham 7s was very well driven, and that took about half a lap. A 911 took a little longer. One Chevron passed me early in my stint, and it promptly spun about five times at Cascades. Towards the end of my 41 laps, another Chevron flew past me a couple of hundred yards after Island, as if I were hard on the brakes.

The car in the 'mirror incident' was the quick 911; I was confused because he seemed to be catching me along the start/finish straight, and then dropped back, perhaps having had a moment at Old Hall. Then he was catching me slightly again, but not to the extent that I needed to worry. I'd not have been in his way at Island, and his extra power would have got him past after that.

I felt I could have gone on for many more laps, but the team called me in, worried that I might be low on fuel. Andy Clarke took over for the interval while the yellow racer was topped up and turned around, for its final session in the hands of Steve Cole.

While on the circuit, I had no idea of race positions, with or without handicap. In fact, when I took over, the team's troubles had dropped us to 19th on the road. In an hour and five minutes, more than 90 miles at an average of nearly 90mph, I'd got us up to sixth, and Steve hauled us into fifth place on the road, and sixth on handicap by the end. But for problems with Tim Exeter's car we might have finished third on handicap.

In fact, the handicappers didn't do too bad a job, since the average number of laps completed (including handicap) by each of the 23 teams was 152, and only four teams were not within five laps of that. We completed 145 laps, or 154 including handicap. Scratch team Chevron did 156, to be first on the road but third on handicap, and the winners were "NAF Rennsport", consisting of a couple of 911s, a 914/6 and a three-litre Capri. They managed 133 laps on the road, but 158 on handicap.

The 420 SEAC racer has much stiffer suspension settings than the road going cars, and in fact has become stiffer all through the season. But Oulton, for a race circuit, is quite bumpy, and the car is not uncomfortable to drive by any means, and is actually quite stable through Clay Hill, so long as one is on the designated flight path. In fact, everywhere, it is neutral and forgiving. It is not a hard car to drive, though a long session around Oulton in any car is tiring; in the TVR there are 18 gearchanges on every lap, and if you are not held absolutely firmly in the seat, you get thrown around a bit. I'd played squash twice that week, and thought I was fit; at the end of my session, I was soaked in sweat, totally knackered, and so thirsty I even drank an entire can of Coca Cola. I'd discovered previously unconsidered areas of my arms and legs where muscles might give an advantage. Perhaps I shall have to go to a gym for some training.

TVR's racing plans for next season are to continue to race in the production sports car championship. Having won 14 rounds this year, the SEAC was banned on the grounds that an insufficient number had been produced to satisfy the homologation requirement (150). But that will have been achieved by 1987. The sight and sound of the yellow beast is worth a day's outing.