

THIS TIME IT'S WAR

With ten teams, F1-style budgets and Volvo estates, the stakes in the '94 Touring Car Championship are higher than ever. Only a brave man would try and predict what's going to happen and his name is Nick Carter



BRITISH racing fans could be forgiven for thinking they have died and gone to heaven. For the 1994 Auto Trader British Touring Car Championship, which snarled into action at Thruxton on Easter Monday, looks certain to provide the best action we've ever seen. And you thought it couldn't possibly get any more exciting.

The reason for the optimism is simple — no fewer than 10 manufacturers are contesting the series, and of those 10 at least eight have a realistic chance of victory. There are extra races, more big names in the driving seats, better TV slots, big-bucks sponsors and more razzmatazz and ballyhoo than ever before. It's going to leave the spectators breathless, so God only knows what sort of state Murray Walker will lather himself up into.

The big news is, of course, that Alfa Romeo and Volvo have joined last year's magnificent eight; Alfa with a budget bigger than several of the minor Grand Prix teams, and Volvo with the assistance of racing's Mr Success-at-all-costs, Tom Walkinshaw. Just for good measure, the Swedes have baffled everyone by deciding to race a silenced, cat-equipped 850 Estate.

Both newcomers are deadly serious about BTCC success and have employed ex-F1 drivers to pilot their machines; only a

brave man would bet against them. And yet the majority of the other eight works teams start the year looking incredibly strong, most with new or substantially re-engineered chassis and all with the highest motivation.

There are no fewer than 21 races on the '94 calendar, many of the BTCC meetings now featuring either double (two races separated by a 10-minute pit-stop) or twin (an hour or more interval between races) formats. All races will again be televised by BBC Grandstand, in new, longer slots.

If there's one blot on the horizon, though, it's the danger that the stakes might force some people into, shall we say, creative adaptation of the hitherto rigidly enforced technical regulations. For example, although a semi-automatic transmission is expressly forbidden, most cars' gearboxes allegedly now feature an electronic device to cut the engine revs when shifting. Within the letter of the law, if not the spirit...

"The clever cheating this year will involve dampers and differentials," said one source, "it's quite possible to link up a car's dampers in an undetectable way to provide a crude form of active-ride suspension. And hydraulic differentials are a big help in setting a car up. The problem for the scrutineers is, how do you define what is, or isn't, a hydraulic diff? We'll soon find out..."

BTCC 1994

ALFA ROMEO 155 ALFA CORSE

55 Gabriele Tarquini (I)
56 Giampiero Simoni (I)



If there's a championship for the biggest budget, then Alfa has already carried off the title — estimates of the team's UK racing spend vary between £5m and £10m; it's apparent that as much will be spent as is necessary to get the job done. Alfa used the same philosophy in Germany last year, trouncing Mercedes. Tarquini's F1 career was undistinguished but he's a quick touring car peddler; F3/F3000 man Simoni has no touring car experience at all. So can Alfa sweep the board? The logistics of running a UK operation when all your important facilities are in Turin may prove a stumbling block. No major sponsors (they lost the Old Spice deal to Nissan at a late stage); Michelin tyres.



FORD MONDEO GHIA TEAM MONDEO

3 Paul Radisich (NZ)
33 Andy Rouse



Most observers had the works Fords down as the pre-season favourites; certainly Radisich's late-'93 form (three wins and two seconds from the last five races, capped by triumph in the world finals at Monza) and pre-season testing pace would suggest that the Kiwi is the man to watch, at least at the start of the year. Grizzled veteran Rouse is, at 46, not only the oldest works driver but also the most successful (four BTCC titles, 60 race wins). Again with Mobil and ICS backing and running on Michelin rubber, the Mondeos this year have more power, better handling and are running with a budget said to top £3m. An irresistible combination?

BMW 318i BMW MOTORSPORT TEAM SCHNITZER

1 Jo Winkelhock (D) 2 Steve Soper
21 Roberto Ravaglia (I)

The Fatherland's finest came, saw and duly conquered the BTCC in '93, with Winkelhock, Soper and the Schnitzer outfit between them winning eight of the 17 races. 'Smokin' Jo' returns to defend his title, supported at selected meetings by Britain's top tin-top man Steve Soper and by Roberto Ravaglia, multiple touring car champion. No question marks over the driving talent, then, but can the team continue to cope with the 100kg penalty that its cars must carry as the only rear-wheel-drive machines in the field? New 318i said to be 90 per cent different to the '93 car, and now at last features a motorcycle-style sequential-shift gearbox. Fina and Warsteiner backing; Yokohama tyres.



MAZDA XEDOS 6 TEAM MAZDA

8 David Leslie
12 Matt Neal



'Touring car racing's newest top-league team... will have the richest sponsorship in British motor sport,' trumpeted one motoring magazine at the beginning of March. Oops. They weren't to know that Mazda's big-bucks backer would veto the deal three hours before it was due to be signed, leaving Mazda and chief wheeler-dealer Steve Neal looking elsewhere for their football pools-sized budget. All parties were optimistic that another deal could be stitched in time for the first round. Roger Downson-built Xedos 6s are all-new, with better weight distribution, slightly more powerful V6 power units. Leslie was one of the BTCC's quickest last year in the Ecurie Ecosse Cavalier, while Neal was a worthy privateer champion. He lacks front-drive experience, though. Yokohama tyres.

NISSAN PRIMERA 2.0 eGT OLD SPICE NISSAN RACING

23 Kieth O'dor
24 Eric van de Poelle (B)
34 Tiff Needell Norwalk



Now you too can smell like Tiff Needell — an interesting prospect, by and large. However, Nissan's sponsorship by Britain's leading after-shave brand carries with it an important message: that the BTCC has grown in stature to the level that the makers of everyday household products are interested in supporting it. As we have seen only too clearly in F1, more money does not necessarily bring with it better motor sport. Naked greed, yes. Closer racing, no. Anyway, O'dor, son of Janspeed's founder, is likely to be upstaged this year by Belgian ex-F1 pilot van de Poelle, who shook the regulars at the Monza finals last year. Needell will run only in selected races. Dunlop tyres.

PEUGEOT 405 Mi16 PEUGEOT SPORT

13 Eugene O'Brien
18 Patrick Watts

The Peugeots may be sporting splendid new colour schemes, but they are far from being new cars. Sidetracked into contesting races Down Under over the winter, Coventry's finest got behind with their '94 chassis to the extent that they are unlikely to be seen until round four at the earliest. Having ditched 1990 champion Robb Gravett from the driver line-up, Peugeot Sport has picked up the talented and occasionally wild Patrick Watts from Mazda. The wild and occasionally talented Eugene O'Brien drives the other car. Being the only true works team in the championship — factory labour prepares the cars — has hitherto proved more of a hindrance than a help to Peugeot. Shell and Auto Windscreens money may ease the pain; Michelin rubber.



RENAULT LAGUNA RENAULT DEALER RACING

10 Alain Menu (CH)
11 Tim Harvey

Though a double wet-race winner last year, the Renault 19 was a real problem child for the fledgling Renault team. What a relief, then, that the Laguna came along and gave them the excuse to start afresh with a car plainly more suited to the job. The Laguna, looking immaculate in a paint job created by none other than Renault design chief Patrick Le Quement, was one of the first of the new cars to be readied and has posted lap records all over the place. Swiss charmer Menu is a superstar in the making; '92 champ Harvey has lost weight and looks a threat again. Michelin tyres, backing from various Renault suppliers.



TOYOTA CARINA E GTI TOYOTA CASTROL TEAM

5 Julian Bailey
7 Will Hoy
57 Tim Sugden

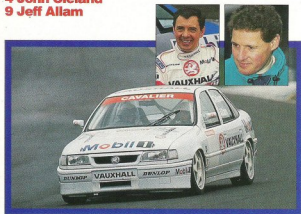


Running on a budget that wouldn't keep Alfa's paddock kitchen running, Toyota may be facing its make-or-break season — if you can't be seen regularly to be beating the BMWs, then what's the point in bothering? Especially when Toyota GB's board would probably much rather spend the cash on a golf tournament. Champion in '91, Hoy had a win-less season last year; Bailey was usually quicker. Julian will, for his part, have to keep an eye on third team member Tim Sugden, back in the BTCC after a year's sabbatical (waiting for a Mercedes drive to come along). Cars have been re-engineered by TOM's, and the engine has always been a strong one. Main backing is from Castrol, tyres from Yokohama.



VAUXHALL CAVALIER VAUXHALL SPORT

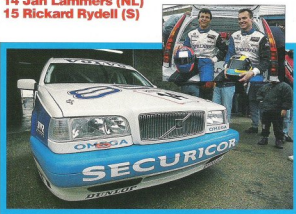
4 John Cleland
9 Jeff Allam



All change — after countless seasons with ace Yorkshire preparation expert Dave Cook, Vauxhall has dropped its wad in the lap of Ray Mallock, the man behind last year's swift Ecurie Ecosse Cavaliers. The chassis has been completely re-engineered, the motors are to the latest reverse-head spec from Swindon Racing Engines and the tyres are courtesy of Dunlop. Drivers John Cleland (champion in '89) and Jeff Allam rave about the new car, which makes last year's works Vauxhall look like a shagged-out Chevette. Cleland's car is backed by the GM Card, Allam's bears allegiance to Vauxhall Masterfit. Vauxhall is one of the few teams to have a dedicated test team; youngster Chris Goodwin does the donkeywork and will be rewarded by a regular drive later in the season.

VOLVO 850 ESTATE VOLVO 850 RACING

14 Jan Lammers (NL)
15 Rickard Rydell (S)



And we all thought they were joking! We should have remembered that the Swedes have no sense of humour... The computers say that Volvo's 850 Estate ought to be just as competent on track as the saloon, so why not race it? Nice logic... so long as it works. TWR, the power behind Jaguar in sports cars and Benetton in F1, is there to make sure it does. Volvo had to have a Swede in the team, and F3/F3000 man Rydell was the only logical candidate. However, like his Dutch team-mate Lammers, he has no touring car experience. And, as if Volvo didn't have a hard enough job on its hands, it has elected to run with full silencing and emissions control systems! Dunlop tyres; Securicor Omega Express backing poached from Toyota.



● **Don't believe the hype? With ten teams and big investment 1994 ought to be a vintage year. And that is a Volvo estate, yes**

THE PRIVATEERS

Championship organiser TOCA's coffers have been swelled by a £250,000 investment from oil company Total to give the privately funded runners something to gun for. So why does the TOCA Cup winner only get £25,000? Strongest challengers for the cash are James Kaye and Ian Khan, who have bought ex-works Toyota Carinas and are being run with Enny and Tamchester money by the Masted team. Meanwhile, last year's Renault 19s have been picked up by former Clio Cup team Harlow Motorsport, who will run them for Nigel Albon and another, yet-to-be-named driver.

York youngster James Thompson, the reigning National Saloon Car Cup Champion and just 20 this month, is a touring car star of the future and should run well in his Dave Cook-built Peugeot. Ian Flux once again bids for TOCA Cup glory, this time with a Halfords-sponsored, French-built Peugeot. Geoff Steel (BMW) and Nigel 'Sideways' Smith (Vauxhall) complete the list.

● **The privateers — there's more to gun for this year**

BTC 99 AUTO TRADER BRITISH TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP 1994 CALENDAR

Apr 2/4	Thruxton
Apr 16/17	Brands Hatch *
May 1/2	Snetterton
May 14/15	Silverstone †
May 29/30	Oulton Park
Jun 11/12	Donington Park *
Jun 25/26	Brands Hatch †
Jul 8/10	Silverstone
Jul 30/31	Knockhill †
Aug 13/14	Oulton Park
Aug 28/29	Brands Hatch *
Sep 10/11	Silverstone
Sep 17/18	Donington Park *

* double-race format

† twin-race format

