

Hat-trick hero

A decade ago BMW dominated the British Touring Car Championship, and a little German became a big hero

Words & photography: Andrew Charman



Winning a leading motor racing championship is an achievement – winning it three times in a row is remarkable, particularly when the series concerned is the British Touring Car Championship. But ten years ago, just when the BTCC was at its toughest with eight manufacturers pouring millions into their efforts, BMW duly took a title hat-trick. It was a success achieved with unprecedented early-season dominance, in the process making a star of a little-known German called Joachim Winkelhock.

The fans who poured into Silverstone for the opening round of the 1993 series cannot have expected such a steamroller. Not only were BMW's rivals stronger, and expanded by the arrival of Renault and Ford, but the BTCC organisers had done their best to peg back the Germans. Works cars in the series were now required to be four-door, rendering the '92 title-winning Coupés obsolete. The new BMW 318i's would also carry 100kg more weight than their opposition, the penalty for being rear-wheel drive, and their anti-

lock brakes were banned. BMW even needed a new team, its 1992 title-winning Vic Lee squad having been disbanded.

For a while over the winter it had appeared as if the men from Munich would not bother, but then they showed just how importantly they regarded the BTCC by abandoning their home Class One championship, the Deutsche Tourenwagen Meisterschaft, and sending the hugely respected 1992 DTM squad to Britain. Team Schnitzer was run by brothers Dieter and Charly Lamm. They



rented a workshop at Silverstone, but decided to run the campaign from their base in Bavaria.

Schnitzer retained Joachim Winkelhock – a short, charismatic German who had reached Formula 1, only to sign up with the uncompetitive AGS team. Most, including perhaps Jo himself, expected him to play a support role to a title bid by Steve Soper, who had dutifully played rear-gunner to 1992 teammate Tim Harvey's BTCC title success.

The smart money was on the Vauxhalls to dominate the early rounds, John Cleland looking

for revenge after Soper punted him out of the '92 final and the title. But the first half of what became a neatly divided season saw a BMW walkover. By the time of the British Grand Prix meeting in July, the two 318i's had taken seven of eight races, and Winkelhock led the series by nine points from Soper, who in turn was 48 ahead of the Vauxhalls.

Only round two at Donington broke the trend, and Schnitzer believed it had an excuse. Torrential rain hit the Easter Sunday race, supporting the European Grand Prix, and turned it into a demonstration of

just how good the new Michelin wet-tyres worn by the equally new Renault team were. Tim Harvey and Alain Menu drove their hitherto uncompetitive Renaults from eighth and 14th to a one-two finish, as the Yokohama-shod BMWs joined the slippers and sliders in horrendous conditions.

Initially it appeared Soper had one hand on the title. He took the opening race at Silverstone from pole position, fighting off his teammate, and was victorious again in round three at Snetterton when the German missed a gear. But then Jo fought

Lamm the rookie winner

Charly and Dieter Lamm masterminded Team Schnitzer's BTCC attack, an arena totally new to them, as Charly explained: 'We had only raced in Britain in the European Touring Car Championships in the late 1980s, so we were rookies. We were learning about a new championship, and a new type of car.'

'We made sure we tested at every BTCC circuit, to see what the place was like and so Jo could learn it. The BTCC is tough, but we did well in the early races and when the other teams caught up we were able to stay ahead.'

Much was made of the team commuting from Germany, but Charly said this was not a problem. 'Our cars stayed in Britain most of the time. The workshop at Silverstone was very small but big enough, and BMW had built us a good car,' he said.

Schnitzer emphasises teamwork, and this proved vital as the season became a fight between Soper and Winkelhock. Charly could only sympathise with the loser. He said: 'I felt sorry for Steve because he was unlucky. The tyre exploding at Silverstone and the accident at Oulton Park – neither were his fault.'

Despite many successes since, Charly still describes 1993 as: 'A fantastic year. My best memories are of the last race at Silverstone, and of Knockhill. The whole team had a fantastic week there – like a holiday at a race.'



back with wins at Donington and Oulton Park, a race which saw Soper pitched off the track by a suspension failure – providing dramatic footage as he hit the tyre barrier directly under a TV cameraman.

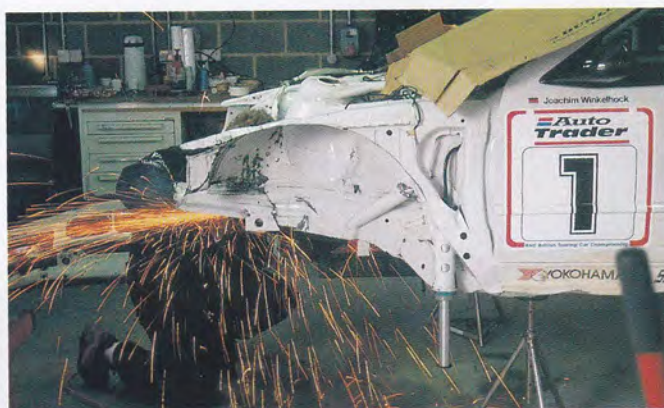
The pair shared victories in rounds six and seven – the season's first double-header – at Brands Hatch, Soper handed the second race when Winkelhock missed another gear and hit a barrier after three laps. By this time the German had earned the nickname 'Smokin' Jo', less due to the fact that outside the car he always had a lit cigarette in his hand and more to the tyres he often locked up due to the lack of ABS brakes.

But he could put the power down when he needed to, demonstrated most clearly at Pembrey in South Wales in one of those moments people talk about for years afterwards. In an astounding start, Jo's BMW went from sixth on the grid to the lead by the time they reached the first corner, and was never headed.

That race also marked a turning point in the season. On the grid for the first time were the new Ford Mondeo's, their debut delayed by a late decision to convert from rear- to front-wheel drive. By the time the series reached Knockhill in Scotland the Fords were on Michelin tyres, and thereafter they provided BMW's biggest threat.



Unknown to British fans just months earlier, Winkelhock was a highly popular champion



Before heading north, Soper was cruelly robbed of the chance to close the points gap to his teammate at the Silverstone British GP meeting. The crowd wanted action after watching Damon Hill lose a first GP win to a blown engine, and they got it. The BMWs qualified only ninth and 11th on a grid in which the first 14 were covered by a second. The pole-winning Nissan of Keith Odor was beaten away by Will Hoy's Toyota, who led for the first five laps, at which point he collided with teammate Julian Bailey right in front of the pit lane, Hoy's car rolling. Odor then led, but came under heavy pressure from Soper, who tried everything, constantly locking his wheels,

until with one lap left the left front tyre exploded, sending the 318 heavily into a barrier.

Straight after the meeting, BTCC scrutineers sealed Winkelhock's BMW for a '72-hour check', proving to rivals that the early season pace had been achieved legally. But the following Knockhill double-header meeting only served to confuse the formbook, as BMW fortunes dipped. Winkelhock finished the first race in third, but a battle with Paul Radisich's Ford took its toll on the BMW's clutch, ending the German's day. Soper ended his with a single point for a tenth place.

Next on the calendar, however, was Oulton Park, a track Winkelhock compared to Germany's



Clockwise from left: In the first half of the season the BMWs were unstoppable, here they head the pack at Brands. Soper's big 'off' at Oulton Park was caused by a rare suspension failure. Winkelhock's car receives some attention after hitting a barrier at Brands. Winkelhock was the surprise star of the season - this is winning at Brands. The Schnitzer-run 318i's proved to be devastatingly effective with plenty of one-two finishes

The ballad of Smokin' Jo



To British fans at the start of 1993 Joachim Winkelhock was an unknown, and the feeling was reciprocal. 'Before I came to Britain all I knew about the series was from Steve Soper, as he had raced in it,' Jo said. 'It wasn't so big then and there were not many articles in German magazines. I was surprised BMW stopped its DTM programme and shocked when they sent me to England. I spoke very little English at the time, it was going international and was a big step for me. In fact, I only realised how big a step it was after I won the championship.'

Jo admitted that his biggest problem was simply brakes. 'It was not difficult to adapt to a two-litre BTCC car from the Class One car. The biggest challenge was the lack of ABS. I'd raced three or four years with ABS on my car, and it was at the first BTCC race where I got my nickname 'Smokin' Jo, because I was battling Steve, braking hard and locking my wheels.'

There were advantages too, particularly as no-one expected Winkelhock to spearhead BMW's attack. 'I was quite relaxed as all the pressure, the target of winning the championship, was on Steve,' Jo said. And even as the title chase came down to a fight between the two of them, they remained friends. 'Even when I was battling Steve he was always open, sharing setups, not the sort of guy who stabs you in the back... In all our years racing together we've had a very good relationship, been good friends.'

1993

1) J Winkelhock	BMW	163
2) S Soper	BMW	150
3) P Radisich	Ford	110
4) J Cleland	Vauxhall	102
5) J Bailey	Toyota	88



By the time of the British Grand Prix meeting in July, the two 318i's had taken seven of eight races

awesome 14-mile Nürburgring. He revelled in his challenges, leading home his teammate to open up a 42-point gap. Soper, on 120 points, was only seven ahead of Vauxhall's Cleland, with a maximum of 120 still to claim. Little did we know it, but BMW had taken its last victory for almost a year – and Yokohama had taken its last of all...

The final visit to Brands Hatch produced the race of the season, which saw Ford gain its 200th Touring Car win. Initially, third-placed Winkelhock traded bodywork with both David Leslie's Vauxhall, Andy Rouse's Ford and Soper, before a second clash with Leslie spun the BMW down the field. Soper moved into third spot, and closed up the points when Winkelhock's bad day climaxed in a blown tyre and a 20th-place finish.

In a season that had suddenly become complicated, August bank holiday Monday at Thruxton provided another turn. Leslie won the race, Cleland's eighth place ensured the driver's title battle was now a straight fight between the BMWs. But Soper felt his points for sixth were not

enough despite Winkelhock managing no higher than 14th. Their employers were happy, however, as BMW secured the manufacturers' title.

The penultimate meeting and the season's last double-header at Donington brought another success each for Ford and Renault. Soper and Winkelhock could only manage a single fifth place each, to the delight of the BTCC organisers. Yet again the title chase went to a final showdown at Silverstone. The British driver had to win, with his teammate finishing seventh or lower, and in the event it was too much. Radisich won, Soper was fifth, and Winkelhock eighth, to become the BTCC's first foreign champion in 20 years.

Unknown to British fans just months earlier, Winkelhock was a highly popular champion, and little did we know it then, but he was also to date BMW's last BTCC title winner. 1994 would see the 318s unable to cope with the bewinged Alfa Romeos, and by then Munich's attention was shifting, towards sports cars and the Le Mans 24 Hours. BMW's golden BTCC era was over... ●



Both drivers had several wins, but Smokin' Jo took title



The BMW 318i

For 1993 BMW was forced into a complete redesign of its car, thanks to new rules banning the use of two-door coupes and anti-lock brakes, along with an increase in the weight penalty for rear-wheel drive machines – which effectively meant only the BMWs. It was increased by 25kg – the BMWs weighing in at 1050kg compared to the 950kg of their front-wheel drive rivals.

Despite the weight penalty, the rear-wheel drive remained an advantage, with around 65 percent of the car's overall weight over the driven wheels, whereas on front-drive machines it was only around 35

percent. The BMWs won many races with their fast getaways from the start.

Schnitzer was the only team not to take advantage of the other big technical advance, in gearboxes. Specially built, compact, versatile units allowed far greater freedom in locating the engine for the most effective weight distribution. They also boasted sequential changes, push-pull levers that we are familiar with in road cars today but in 1993 were very new. This system allowed faster changes and prevented missed gears – a factor that cost Winkelhock two potential race wins.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION – BMW 318i

Length 4433mm

Width 1698mm

Height 1393mm

Wheelbase 2700mm

Weight 1050kg

Engine Four cylinders in-line longitudinal

Capacity 1989cc

Power 275bhp (quoted)

Torque 177lb ft

Gearbox Six-speed, rear-wheel drive

Front suspension MacPherson strut

Rear suspension Central arm, longitudinal double-track control arm

Brakes Front 355mm vented discs, six-pot calipers, rear 304mm vented discs, four-pot calipers

Wheels 18 x 8-inch centre lock

Tyres Yokohama