

Hands up if you said this was doomed!

The biggest thing in touring cars in 25 years?

Andrew Charman finds out if the TCR formula is living up to its billing

IN *Race Tech* 172 we discussed prospects for an all-new touring car formula, TCR International, with its creator, Marcello Lotti. The fact that the man who created and successfully ran the World Touring Car Championship for several years was involved added kudos to the series, but while some dubbed TCR as potentially the biggest revolution in touring cars since the

Super Touring formula of the 1990s, others remained highly sceptical of its prospects in an overcrowded market.

As this is written, TCR is in the middle of its 11-round inaugural championship. *Race Tech* travelled to round five, at Monza in Italy, to talk to those who invested in the series, and to discover if the excitement it is generating is well founded.

THE CONCEPT

The basic concept of TCR is simple: a pyramid system, with national championships at its base, moving through regional series to a headline international championship. Crucially all use the same car, so that drivers and teams can progress up the ladder, and cars can be sold on in an extensive and lucrative secondhand market.

Lotti is courting manufacturers for his series, but he has no intention of repeating history. In the mid-1990s Super Touring was considered extremely strong, 10 manufacturers battling in the British Touring Car Championship, but the formula then imploded in a very short period, as those manufacturers allowed budgets to balloon to several millions and then pulled the plug when they couldn't keep up with the spending.

Manufacturers entering TCR are obliged to build several examples of their chosen racecar – either through their own motorsport departments, as in the case of SEAT, or through a specialist constructor such as with Honda and JAS Motorsport – and then to sell these cars to entrants. This formula is about winning the market more

TCR International Series



ABOVE Track limits: TCR is providing all the action expected of a touring car championship

than winning the races.

For this concept to work Lotti needed an affordable technical package, and it already existed, in the regulations for the long-established SEAT Leon Eurocup. These heavily production-based regulations form the basis of TCR.

Speaking to *Race Tech* at Monza, Lotti probably has reason to feel satisfied with progress. In its first four meetings, two of which have supported Formula 1 grands prix, TCR International grids have averaged 14 to 17 cars. The racing has been entertaining, to traditional touring car all-out style, and produced seven different winners in eight races.

More importantly, however, interest in TCR is snowballing, both in terms of countries wanting to run national and regional race series and manufacturers wanting to build cars. The TCR Asia Series starts this month, while next year TCR will be represented in countries such as Thailand, China, Russia, Italy, the Benelux region, Germany, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, even that nation where touring cars have traditionally struggled, the USA.

"We are seeing great interest in the US, a lot of VW group brands are in the market there," Lotti says. "Day by day more people are

Winged wonder

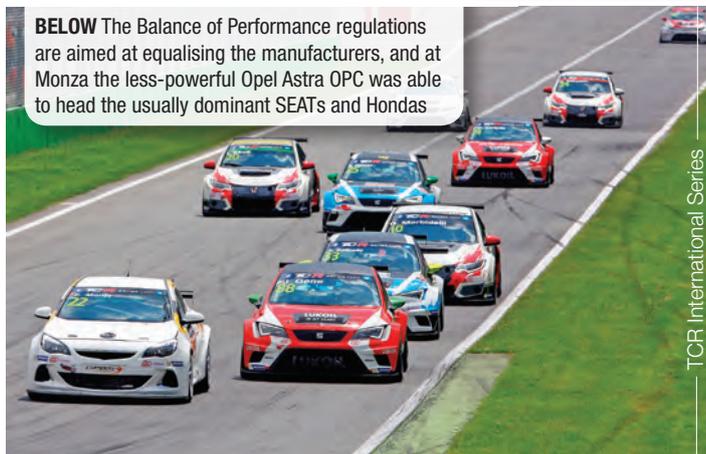
THE cars entered in the TCR International Series have displayed some novel methods of mounting their rear wings.

While the Hondas attach their vertical mounts from below in traditional fashion, other brands such as SEAT

and Ford use mounts that stretch around the wing and bolt on from above. By far the most convoluted method is that fitted to the Opel Astra OPCs, a large device looking for all the world like a conventional wing that has been fitted upside down... **RT**

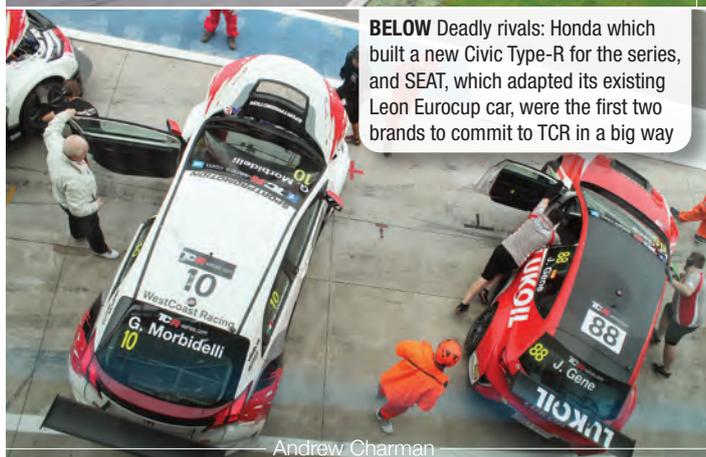


BELOW The Balance of Performance regulations are aimed at equalising the manufacturers, and at Monza the less-powerful Opel Astra OPC was able to head the usually dominant SEATs and Hondas



TCR International Series

BELOW Deadly rivals: Honda which built a new Civic Type-R for the series, and SEAT, which adapted its existing Leon Eurocup car, were the first two brands to commit to TCR in a big way



Andrew Charman

calling us with interest in organising a series. France for example – but I've suggested they wait one month as we are discussing a car entry with a French brand and if they confirm it will make it more easy to get support to organise a French series."

While Lotti won't say, that brand is widely rumoured to be Renault, which could adapt its well-established Trophy series to TCR rules, and this is indicative of the manufacturer interest in the concept. Just as *Race Tech* went to press the Volkswagen Motorsport-developed Golf made a winning debut at the A1-Ring round (see news). Italian squad Top Run Motorsport expects to debut its first Subaru WRX STI at Singapore in September, and has an agreement with Subaru to produce two cars a month from that point. And other manufacturers, notably Audi, are known to be close to confirming programmes.

PROGRESS TO PLAN

So is Lotti happy with progress? "It's following our provisional plan," he says. "My personal plan was much better, to have all brands ready for the first event, but that doesn't happen in the real world, especially with a start-up. You have to lead day by day but it is not in my DNA to be patient!"

"We knew before we started that the development time for new models did not really suit our timing, but if you don't start you will never start. It was important to be out there, especially to help encourage potential customers of next year's national championships in such places as Russia, China, and Thailand. So we sped up the development time, to ensure that ►

there will be cars ready for January next year and all the teams that will be running in national championships."

Lotti is pleased with the way the car builders and teams have responded to the challenge, though he does admit to disappointment at the performance so far of the Ford Focus cars built by Onyx in the UK. A decision to use a road gearbox to avoid the weight penalty that comes with a race unit has cost the Fords dearly, the plastic components of the road transmission apparently not strong enough for race demands, and current information suggests the team is working on a switch to a race 'box.

"I was expecting Ford to have provided more action, but they are still having gearbox problems," Lotti says. "Tom Boardman the test driver tells me that the car and the engine are okay, when they solve the problem we will see the car perform."

The technical package is correct, Lotti believes, and little likely to change going forward. He adds that the much-vaunted Balance ▶



ABOVE & BELOW The three-door Opel Astra OPC campaigned by Campos Racing (above) is competing under a dispensation ahead of the expected debut of the new Astra five-door in 2016. The Onyx-built Ford Focus cars of Proteam (below) have suffered transmission issues all season and have yet to show their potential

Photos: Andrew Charman

The driver's view

GIANNI Morbidelli should certainly be able to rate a touring car – his storied career includes spells in the Super Touring era of the BTCC with Volvo and in the World Touring Car Championship, even V8 Supercars. But for 2015 he signed with West Coast Racing, running JAS-built Honda Civic Type-R cars in TCR International, and he has quickly become a title contender.

Morbidelli believes that TCR has "incredible potential" and will become a significant part of touring car racing in the future. He points particularly to the fact that manufacturers are not permitted to enter the series with the aim of purely winning it by throwing huge budgets at a programme, without selling cars to customers.

"I was in the WTCC with Munich, a private team, we had a good budget but it was 10 per cent of what Citroën was spending," Morbidelli tells *Race Tech*.

"I had no chance of competing, we just made up the numbers. Here you buy the car and if you are a good driver, with a good engineer, you can compete at the same level.

"In the WTCC a car costs €500,000-€600,000, and then when you end your programme what can you do with that car? Nothing. Here the car costs much less to buy and there is a market to sell it on."

The Italian also contends that in terms of driver fulfilment the TCR car is not far removed from the more powerful machines of the WTCC. Perhaps not

surprisingly TCR's only minus point for him is the one all racing drivers hate, Balance of Performance. "For the concept I have of racing Balance of Performance is wrong – for me the best must win," he contends. "If Rory McIlroy is the best golf player in the world you cannot penalise him with a heavier ball. Letting the best person win is the concept of sport.

"But I understand perfectly that the BoP is needed and we have to accept that. But we have to be very careful to do it in a proper way, so that you don't go direct from winning a race to fighting for 10th place at the next track."

He is also content that the TCR rules will ensure no manufacturer can win by spending money. "If a manufacturer comes in and spends €20 million, no BoP will make a difference to that, but

here that is impossible. There must be a budget cap so everyone can be a part of the championship – if you say a car cannot cost more than €100,000, it is a good rule. Lotti has a good idea how to manage it."

He is highly confident about future prospects for TCR: "The concept is perfect. By the end of the year we will have more brands, we have already run two races alongside Formula 1 and will have another in Singapore, which is good if you want to sell the championship to sponsors.

"In January when we were talking about TCR many were saying it's rubbish, they will never do that. But it's here – I don't know how many people could set up a championship to this level in six months." **RT**



BELOW Morbidelli is convinced TCR has a strong future

TCR International Series



TCR International Series

ABOVE The series has already provided plenty of the panel-bending action that touring cars are renowned for

of Performance (BoP) regulations, used to equalise the various brands of car and provide competitive racing, have worked well, despite criticism.

The initial BoP was set during a pre-season test but the opening races have seen several adjustments, as Lotti always expected in the early days of the series. Notably the Hondas were given a 35-kilo penalty before the round in Valencia, for using a racing gearbox, while at the same time rivals were able to drop their ride height by 10 mm.

Such changes saw the Honda drivers complaining loudly, while by the time the series reached Monza the SEAT drivers were arguing for the straight-line speed of the Hondas to be reined in. But Lotti is unfazed.

"The balance of performance works very well," he says. "Honda and SEAT were the two brands ready for the start of the series. Honda built a car to the ▶

The constructor's view

MADS Fischer is Development Business & Customer Service Manager for JAS Motorsport, a specialist constructor founded in Milan in 1995 and an official partner of Honda since 1998. Since then it has built cars for major touring car championships, including the BTCC and currently the WTCC.

JAS was one of the first constructors to commit to TCR and by March 2016 hopes to have built at least 23 examples of its Civic Type-R for customers. And according to Fischer, the build process is very different to that of a WTCC car.

"In this series the one major problem is cost constraint – you need to rethink everything you do, take care what you put in the car, what you spend on it," Fischer tells *Race Tech*. "We have built rally cars for cost-capped series but in touring cars we are used to having development projects with budgets."

The priorities in the TCR programme were to build a fast car that is reliable and looks the part. "We took the decision to make reliability point number one. We obviously want it to be fast but we also want to give the customer a nice product that he will be happy to look at, and to compare to other cars."

The other major difference is the need to set up a production line, as opposed to the bespoke handful of cars that would be built for a traditional programme such as in the WTCC, and this impacts the entire manner in which



ABOVE Thumbs up: Mads Fischer, seen here (left) with driver Gianni Morbidelli and Honda's West Coast Racing team manager, has the job of selling Civic Type-R race cars to TCR customers

the company works. "You need to guarantee delivery times, to be flexible when you sell parts, to be good at managing your customers, and to not regard customers differently," he says. "Whether someone is buying one car or 10 cars they get treated the same way."

"Over the last 10 years in JAS we've turned the business into being more customer-related, which provides a strong base for the company. When you are running high-level programmes if they pull the plug on them you end up with a big hole in your income."

The build itself needs to be as efficient as possible: "You build the cars as kits – radiators, suspension for example, not one-offs but in blocks, several at a time. You need to carry a lot more spares, more stock, but this is the only way to make it feasible."

Fischer admits that from a sales point of view the cost cap is his least favourite aspect of the TCR formula, "but this

is something you have to live with! Sometimes you have to compromise; you could make things a little better, but this would raise the price. I understand why they want to keep a €100,000 cost cap and this should be where they keep it."

JAS Motorsport's long-time technical partners have helped significantly with the TCR programme, Fischer adds. "We are lucky to have partners like Mugen – they have been with us for almost 10 years, and without them such a project would have been difficult. Partners such as Ole Buhl Racing have supported us in the initial build while one of our key suppliers is Sadev – they build gearboxes for our R3 rally programme and are also now helping us get this programme up and running."

He feels that brands such as Honda, which don't have DSG gearboxes in their production range, are compromised slightly compared to those such as the VW Group cars. "We didn't have a choice but to go with the gearbox that makes our car a little bit more expensive compared to other cars. It maybe has some disadvantages in terms of weight, but this is the championship, you have to live with it and we accept it."

He shares the confidence of others in the series going forward, saying: "It's a series where you can race all over the world but the cost is low. You will see a lot of second-hand cars changing hands. This is what has been missing in the sport." **RT**

TCR regulations, the SEAT was an existing car adapted to TCR.

"Some circuits favour the Honda, some favour the SEAT, which is basically production and manages its temperatures better between hot and cold places. The Honda is more racing-focused but cannot manage the changes in temperature so well.

"After the Valencia race when the cars were in parc ferme we booked a dyno without telling the teams. We put the four brands, the Honda, SEAT, Opel and the Audi TT, on and gained horsepower and a torque graphic from all of them. It was what we expected, within 5-6 horsepower, the Opel a little less than 300 horsepower but with better torque."

TCR allowing Engstler Motorsport to campaign two Audi TT coupes, after the team's planned VW Golfs were not ready in time for the start of the season, raised eyebrows, but it was regarded as an information-gathering exercise for a potential Audi entry. And it is indicative of Lotti's determination to get the



ABOVE The much-awaited Volkswagen Golfs made a winning start to their TCR career at the Red Bull Ring

series right that following Audi TT driver Nicki Thiim's win at Portimao, the exemption ended, Lotti deciding enough information had been gathered despite the potential drawbacks of removing two cars from his then not over-populated grid.

"They helped to start the series with a nice brand but they departed with enough info," Lotti says. "To continue would be unfair on other competitors."

So going forward, where does he expect

to be at the start of 2016? "Marcello's plan would be to change the track rules to allow more cars on the grid! But realistically, I expect a 24-car full field in TCR International with at least six brands represented."

Such a grid will without doubt produce a very exciting second season for TCR, just as the national and regional series get up and running. No one is sceptical any more. TCR is here to stay and in 2016 will be a significant global force in the touring car arena. **RT**

The manufacturer's view

SEAT Sport Director Jeimi Puig has reason to attend each TCR round with an expression of satisfaction. The TCR rules are based closely on those of SEAT's own Eurocup series, successful over many years, and it is no surprise that currently the most numerous cars on the grids are SEAT Leons.

"We are now on our third generation Eurocup car, and we have always started on the same basis," Puig tells *Race Tech*. "We take our standard highest performance road car, the Cupra, and we make a car that is good for racing.

"We've seen over the years many using these cars in national, in endurance championships. Now for the first time a promoter will create a pyramid with national championships, regional and international. For us it's like we won the lottery!

"Someone has believed in our idea and followed it, but it's an idea all manufacturers can follow, it's not just related to SEAT. Many manufacturers have 2-litre turbocharged cars in their road range, and it is important to use as many standard parts in the racecar as possible."

In SEAT's case, according to Puig, that means a road-derived engine, gearbox,



Andrew Charman

ABOVE The SEAT Leon Eurocup car needed minimal modification to make it suitable for TCR competition

differential, steering and body. "We are lucky to be part of a big manufacturer group where many parts are available, but it is not easy – the engineer has to do a lot of work to make the racecar competitive.

"It's very easy to build a performance car to win a championship, but a performance car that has to cost less than €100,000, that's difficult. An engineer designing a racecar never thinks that he has to use a standard part, he always wants to design a motorsport piece. To give one example, our front and rear sub-assemblies come from the production line, but they have motorsport bushes fitted."

Puig is happy with the TCR technical package, but believes it is important to closely monitor how it is interpreted by new brands coming into the series. So

what if a manufacturer entered with the intention of simply winning it, without basing a programme around selling customer cars? "If the TCR organisers say we have a new manufacturer but they will not sell cars for two years I will say no problem, 300 kilos extra weight for them!" he laughs.

Puig supports the current rules but appreciates the arguments over gearboxes. "Everyone is asking us about sequential gearboxes – we have one developed and it is faster but it would add €20,000 to the costs. We are lucky in the VW group that we have a very good DSG gearbox in the road range. I understand some other teams cannot use the standard gearbox, that's why we opened the rules to allow not only the standard gearbox." **RT**

