

BARCELONA – APRIL 4TH TO 6TH, 2008



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A life-size statue of Juan-Manuel Fangio standing by his 1955 Mercedes Grand Prix car, Circuit de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.

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It's Thursday, so it must be Barcelona, for the opening round of the CER series in Europe. I met George (Tuma - just call me Tony) and Gerd, his long time mechanic, at the airport and we picked up a hire car and drove through Barcelona's teeming streets (never seen so many dare-devil riders!) and finally found our hotel. We set off to look at the circuit, where the "Circus" that is the ELMS (European Le Mans Series) was busy setting up.



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"Tony" considers his next purchase!

As you drive into the circuit, you are greeted by a life-size bronze (I think!) model of Juan-Manuel Fangio standing by his 1955 Mercedes Grand Prix car, a poignant reminder of motor racing long ago.

As our RSR wasn't arriving from Siggie Brunn's race shop in Eberbach until that night, we walked down pit row and took a look at the Audis, Peugeots, Lolas, Porsches, et al that were setting up in the pits. These days, it's easy to realize that the teams must be spending the equivalent of an F1 budget of probably less than ten years ago and I can't help but be amazed at how many seemingly young, 18-22 year old mechanics (engineers/technicians) look after these fabulous million dollar plus machines; Guess I'm getting old.



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Now resplendent in the decals it wore when John Fitzpatrick and David Hobbs raced it at Le Mans in 1975, our RSR is ready to go.



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Philipp Brunn.



Our two mechanics, Dimitri and Heiko. There wouldn't be a race without these guys.

One car really stood out for me; the new Charouz Team Aston Martin V12-engined Lola coupe, running in LMP1. It looked menacing, in its black finish and I couldn't help hoping that it would fare a lot better than the previous Aston Martin engine Lola T70 coupe that ran at Le Mans in 1967. That was a disaster, with both cars retiring shortly after the start of the race. Thankfully, today's engineering is in a different World (or at least I hope it is!).

One person I was very happy to see was Norbert Singer, the Porsche Racing Director for so many years; Now that he's "retired" from Porsche, he's back in the pit lane helping the teams who are running the RS Spyderys this year.

Whilst engaged in this pit walk, I couldn't help reflecting on how strange life is; Here am I, an Englishman become American, racing with a German team in a French-run series in Spain! I suppose we really have gone Global... One really good thing about this arrangement is that I am picking up some German and being forced to use my (very!) rusty schoolboy French in order to talk to the other competitors.



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SL73/110 was a car that I used to race against years ago in England (when it belonged to Nicky Amey).

Thursday late afternoon saw George sneaking our hire car onto the track and we went for some exploratory laps. Thankfully, the Spanish don't seem to be so obsessed about security as some tracks I've been to and we did three or four laps with no interference until we decided that discretion was the better part of valor and left the track to go back to the hotel and get something to eat before going to bed.



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A VERY unusual competitor! An MGC racing coupe from the Sixties.

Philipp Brunn, who was sharing a room with me, arrived at about 1 o'clock in the morning, having had to hire a taxi to direct him to the hotel from the airport and we discussed the Max Mosley situation before getting back to sleep. Wow! Isn't that something? He's had it of course; The sponsors alone will force him out. Good riddance. He's so pro Ferrari and anti McLaren-Mercedes that he's way past his sell-by date as far as I'm concerned.

Friday was practice time. After a briefing in the CER tent, George took first practice and took part in a trouble free half hour. He came back to report that the track was indeed a tricky place, with several blind exits to corners, where you are applying power once past the apex but still having to be cautious as you struggled to see the exit; only seat



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A Chevron B16 gets ready to go out on the track.



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Lola T70 Mk III B, SL76/156.

time cures this and that's something there's never enough of at a race weekend! Still, we had, as usual, watched an in car video on "U-Tube", so thankfully at least knew where the corners went. The only problem with videos is that they give no sense of gradient at a track; that's something you have to adjust your mind to when you actually get out to run the track.



Audi R10 that was taking part in the ELMS series.

Friday afternoon and it was my turn to go out and practice. George had told me that he had never got out of fourth gear in the morning session and so I determined that the best course of action was to use the session to learn the circuit and not try to go particularly quickly (well, that's my excuse!). I also determined to only use 7,200 rpm out of a permitted 8,000, so that I would be forced to learn the tricky clutch and gear change.

As you drive out of pit lane at the “Circuit de Catalunya” on the right of the pit straight, you have to make your way over to the left, if possible, in order to take the first turn, a right hander, which is followed immediately by a left hander, almost a kink. This takes you into the first blind exit long 180 degree right hander, where you are groping for the exit. Then it’s a short straight to a 90 degree right, which in turn takes you slightly uphill and up to the tightest turn on the circuit, a 180 degree hairpin to the left. The road then plunges quite steeply downhill and curves left, which leads you into another 90 degree right handed turn, again followed by a quick left. Now it’s an uphill climb up to a fast right hander with a blind exit just over the brow of the hill.



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Gerd, George and Philipp sampling the local tapas.

This one's really tricky, as you are tempted to brake more than you need to and take off too much speed. Another short straight leads you down to yet another 180 degree hairpin, back steeply uphill through a left-right kink (taken whilst attempting to shift into third gear) and then it's into a long right hander, which brings you onto a short straight. Then there's an almost-blind entry into a particularly nasty right-left chicane, a right



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In 1976, this was the only 911S/C that was raced at Le Mans. It was entered by Thierry Perrier.

onto the track, followed by another long, curving right hander onto the pit straight, where you are shifting up through the gears ASAP and then flat out down the straight, braking at 150 feet for that first right hander again. Tricky, indeed!

The most spectacular moment of qualifying came when the black “Interscope” Porsche 935 overtook me going into the first turn. He arrived with all the brakes locked up in a cloud of smoke, with flames from the exhaust penetrating the smoke!

On that Friday evening, we walked the track with Philipp advising us as to the best lines and braking points. He’s very quick is our Philipp – Growing up with a father who races can’t have hurt but he’s also got talent. He should have been a professional driver and I guess in a way he is, being a development engineer/driver for BMW. He has a natural eye for the right line through a corner and the great ability to not brake too hard and knock off too much speed, which I think is my greatest failing on a track but I’m working on it!

Back to the hotel and then we all went to a Tapas bar to eat (pretty good!) and then back to bed.

Saturday morning saw final qualifying, with George doing the bulk of the 30 minute session and Philipp going to do a couple of laps at the end in “our” RSR, in order to see if he could suggest any tweaks that could be made to make the car handle any better. Also, we had been running on the same tires that we had used at the season-ending Silverstone race of last year and to say that they were somewhat used would be to put it mildly!

As I was concerned that I had not had enough track time, I suggested to George that, if I could have just two laps in the car after him, I should feel a lot more confident for the afternoon’s race and George readily agreed. After one 30 minute session, a few slow laps in the hire car and the track walk, those two laps were a huge confidence boost for the afternoon’s race. Philipp managed one last lap with our car and suggested (of course!) new tires and tightening up the front sway (anti-roll) bar by two notches. He also said that the clutch was: “Not user friendly!”

So to the afternoon’s race: Thirty-seven cars took the start and after the first lap, Philipp was in tenth place overall and George in twentieth. At that point, our main opponents, Charles Rupp and Gilles Boyer, in an RSR engined RS 3.0 were just ahead with George slowly closing the gap. After twenty-eight minutes, George came in, got out and I climbed in, Hikel lashed me into the belts and it was off out of pit lane. Almost immediately, I could feel how much better the car was handling but, as I was accelerating onto race pace, another RSR, this one driven by Michel Artero, passed me. I spent the rest of the race attempting to get past him but, sad to say, could never quite manage it. I could close up to him o.k. but then we would become entangled in

passing slower cars, or have lapping cars come by and I never quite made it. On the last lap, coming up to the chicane, I thought I might get him but then he put a slower car in between us and that was that!



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The 1979 Daytona 24 Hour-winning Porsche 935.

There was a 935 and four BMW M1s in our class, which we can't get near. They have 150-400 more horsepower than us! Still, we finished sixteenth overall and that's our best yet. George lapped in 2:10, I did a 2:11 and Philipp did a 2:01! He finished 10th after driving the whole hour and was absolutely worn out at the finish. Not surprised! Nevertheless, there were still two M1s and the 935 ahead of him in our class. It does need some refining, methinks. But at least now we are in the top half of the finishers, and looking for better.

Another happy result (for me at least!) was the fact that the new Lola-Aston Martin finished third overall on it's maiden race in the 1000 km race the following day.

Another good dinner in a Tapas bar on Saturday evening, sleep and then up early next morning to get to the airport and catch the flight home. Oh, by the way, Barcelona, as a City, looks pretty spectacular if you are ever tempted to visit but beware the motor bikes and scooters, the drivers all appear to have death wishes and don't know what indicators are for.

Back home in St. Petersburg by 8.00 p.m. on Sunday, all ready for keep fit session at 8.00 a.m. and then work at 9.00 a.m. on Monday. Hey-ho, such a boring life!

Next is Monza in two weeks time. I've always loved the place and am very much looking forward to it.

The REALLY good news is that we have an entry for Classic Le Mans in July. It was explained to us by the organizers that they only have two RSRs in this year's race, due to complaints from other racers about there being too many previously, but we are first reserve and Guillaume promised us that we are in without a doubt as "someone will cancel, someone will not get past first practice without blowing up an engine...." So that's great.



Some of the VdeV Spyders that race in their own series with us.

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