

# SUPER TOURING

When Touring Cars Ruled the World

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# SUPER TOURING

When Touring Cars Ruled the World

Ben Evans



First published by Pitch Publishing, 2026

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Set in Adobe Caslon 11.3/15.5

Typeset by Pitch Publishing

Cover design by Olner Design

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.

The authorised representative in the EEA is  
Easy Access System Europe OÜ, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn,  
Estonia [gpsr.requests@easproject.com](mailto:gpsr.requests@easproject.com)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-83680-240-2

Papers used by Pitch Publishing are from well-managed forests and other responsible sources



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## Acknowledgements

THIS BOOK has been the best part of 35 years in the writing, going back to a first visit to Silverstone finals day in 1989. So firstly a huge thanks to my dad for taking me to so many of the races covered in this book, and to my mum for supporting my lifelong interest in the sport.

Thanks, too, to Maria, for tolerating a good number of evening typing sessions, although this was safe in the knowledge that the royalties are unlikely to put me behind the wheel of a racing car any time soon. And to Alex and Sophie for being interested in the book, whilst being totally uninterested in motorsport.

I would also like to thank, in no particular order, Keith Collantine, David Willey, Anthony Reid, Alan Hyde, Patrick Watts, Pooks Motor Books and many others who've supplied me with stories, race footage and various archive materials. A huge thank you to Pitch Publishing for enabling me to do this all over again. Also an appreciation to my work colleagues, who've tolerated far too many discussions about motor races which took place 30 years ago.



## Introduction

SILVERSTONE TRAFFIC. For decades it has blighted the British Grand Prix weekend. Even today, when the weather turns, getting stuck in the car park mud is a feature rather than a bug. However, contemporary woes are as nothing compared to trying to get to the motorway post-Grand Prix before the A43 dual carriageway was opened.

For much of the 1990s we went to one of the qualifying days at the Grand Prix – it was a lot cheaper and less crowded – but in 1996 my dad had been offered some very good tickets through work. Watching from Copse, we saw Damon Hill, riding the crest of a wave of popularity, get pitched into the gravel as a wheel bearing failed on his Williams.

With Silverstone heaving to capacity we were dreading the drive home, or rather the queue before we could begin to drive home.

Despite the track invasions that punctuated British triumphs, the Silverstone organisers had always sought to have another race on the schedule to close out the programme. Indeed, the race weekend itself was carefully curated to represent the high point of the national motorsport season, with rounds of the British Touring Car Championship (BTCC), Formula 3, and other high-calibre national series like the Rover Turbo Cup.

Traditionally, most of these races had been run on the Saturday afternoon, as a means to get a few more people through the door for qualifying. However, as had been the case for the past couple of years, the BTCC race would be the finale to the weekend, for what would prove to be a final appearance as part of the British Grand Prix.

Once the Grand Prix's post-race festivities had been completed, admittedly mutedly as winner Jacques Villeneuve's popularity rarely veered towards mass euphoria, people would normally head to the gates. Not this time – everyone stayed put to watch the BTCC race (except dad and me: we saw the first lap, made a break for it and were back in Bristol within two hours of getting in the car).

By 1996, the BTCC, at the height of the two-litre Class 2 regulations, aka 'super touring', was in its pomp – enjoying nine manufacturers on the grid, race-day attendances of up to 50,000, a world-class driver line-up, and millions of armchair fans through the BBC's coverage. Already, some cracks were showing – the biff and bash racing that had always drawn people to tin-tops was all too often being replaced by dull processions, with the increasingly exotic machinery only sharing a badge with the showroom saloons they were supposed to have evolved from. None of that mattered in the moment, as for one July Sunday, in front of 80,000 fans, the BTCC enjoyed a spectacular moment in the sun.

This book looks to tell the story of the super touring era, focusing mainly on the decade that the BTCC ran to the regulations, from 1991 to 2000, but also exploring how the super touring phenomenon spread worldwide – with successful championships across Europe and Japan, and slightly less successfully in North America and Australia. Whilst this interest coalesced into three 'World Cup' events,

politics, cost and local rule divergence meant that a pan-European or global super touring championship never came to fruition.

Revisiting the super touring era is also to celebrate the interest and investment there was in motorsport throughout the 1990s – a time of professional teams, salaried drivers and huge budgets that is yet to be replicated and probably won’t be, given, in times of climate change, the optics of spending millions to drive around in circles.

Once I’d decided to start on this project, I had a recurring worry – ‘Was it as good as I remember?’ The answer is yes, emphatically so. Whilst the decline and fall of super touring is covered in some detail, the fault lines emerging early in the story, so are the highs. In particular, the period from 1992–96 was special; the weekends where little happened were few and far between. That doesn’t mean the later years weren’t good – some of the racing in the 2000 season was surprisingly entertaining, and 1998 was a special year and includes the best race featured in this book (you know which one I’m referring to).

There was a lot to try and cram in here, so if I’ve not included a favourite story, incident or battle, apologies, and, as ever, all the errors are my own. A cursory glance at any internet forum discussing this period will very quickly uncover stories of technical wheezes, rule bending and outright cheating. This is hardly surprising. When you have the global motor industry competing to a very tight set of regulations, with the running of the cars outsourced to the best teams in the business, everyone will be looking for an edge. As I don’t fancy being sued into oblivion, I only really cover this where the ins and outs have been recorded as fact – however, if you’re interested, a couple of clicks will get you to some interesting stories.

For now, imagine it's 1994, we've returned to Steve Rider in the *Grandstand* studio after the 2.40 at Epsom: 'The British Touring Car Championship was in action at Brands Hatch last weekend, here's Murray Walker with the story ...'

## The Road to Super Touring and First Steps

FOR AS long as there has been motor racing, so manufacturers have used the sport as a means to sell more cars. Very broadly, from a vehicle perspective, there are three main blocks to the sport: single seaters, which are bespoke, purpose-built racing cars, forming a ladder up to the pinnacle of Formula 1; sports car or grand touring racing – largely derived and based on road-going vehicles, albeit those only attainable by the wealthiest; and touring car or saloon racing, with grids assembled of cars either identical or closely linked to those which most families may drive.

If single seaters have traditionally represented the peak of the sport, and sportscars bring exotic machinery into the racing environment, saloon car racing has always been a public favourite – fans drawn to the relatability of the cars, the panel-bashing racing, and everyman personas of many of the leading exponents.

With cars becoming affordable for many families during the course of the 1950s, saloon car racing grew in importance for the car industry with many firms hoping to capitalise on the marketing boost from on-track success. The British Saloon Car Championship was formed in 1958, with the

name changing to the British Touring Car Championship in 1987.

After a few early years running to its own ruleset, from 1961 until 1990 the championship tended to run in accordance with the prevailing FIA regulations of the day. This allowed for multi-class racing, with the field divided in line with engine capacity. Whilst giving fantastic variety to the grid, and opening the door to giant-killing smaller cars on wet days, it could also lead to somewhat distorted championship results, with consistent performance in a less-supported smaller class being enough to take the title, as opposed to racking up regular race wins.

Reflecting the ebbs and flows of the car industry, manufacturer involvement rose and fell, but grids in the late 1970s and early 1980s would feature an impressive array of Fords, Rovers and others with works support. Even in the pre-television coverage days, the BTCC was attractive enough to snag some big names. Stirling Moss appeared in a works Audi in 1980, marking a return to competition after 18 years, albeit in a move that Moss almost immediately regretted. Better fortune favoured Barry Sheene who made the transition to four wheels piloting a Toyota Celica for the 1985 season, notching up some podium finishes alongside a large accident at Thruxton.

The premier touring car series of the 1980s was the European, later World, Touring Car Championship (ETCC), running to Group A regulations, which allowed for modified touring cars, provided 2,500 examples had been built in a 12-month period, with further dispensation for evolution versions, provided 500 of these had also been built. With support from Jaguar (until the end of 1984), Rover, BMW, Volvo and Ford, the championship was spectacular, but also only really a step removed from

endurance racing, with longer two-driver races being the basis of the championship.

Until its cancellation on cost grounds at the end of 1988, the ETCC had mainly been the locus of large manufacturer programmes, looking to benefit from the pan-European footprint. The other locus of support, particularly from Mercedes, Audi, BMW and Opel, was the Deutsche Tourenwagen Meisterschaft (DTM), which had grown from production origins, and, benefitting from the demise of the ETCC, grew to be – by the turn of the 1990s – the most significant of the European touring car championships. Thanks to significant manufacturer involvement and ongoing engineering development, the cars were at the forefront of touring car motorsport technology.

In this context the BTCC was by and large a second-tier category, which was mostly by the industry for the industry. The works-supported cars were in the main either run by the UK importers, or a beat behind on the trick parts which generally first appeared in Germany.

All that started to change in 1988. Whilst touring car racing was a popular branch of the sport, it hadn't yet jumped on to the television bandwagon with an eye towards a wider audience. Highlights films of the ETCC had been produced during the mid-1980s, and a full season review of the 1987 BTCC season had been made available, but these were productions for existing fans.

However, for the 1988 season, an agreement was reached between the BBC and championship promoter, for Barrie Hinchliffe Productions (BHP) to produce round by round highlights packages of the bulk of the BTCC and British Formula 3 seasons. These would be broadcast across the BBC's sports programming, but predominately on *Grandstand*, *Sunday Grandstand* and occasionally *Sport on Friday*.

Whilst some races had been shown live before, when the outside broadcast cameras were covering a race meeting, these highlights were something different, bringing hitherto unseen (in the UK at least) production values to motorsport coverage. Presented by Steve Rider, and crucially with commentary from Murray Walker, each race was tightly edited, with rapid cuts and onboard cameras ensuring that even the most pedestrian affair was presented as a thriller.

With impressive wraparound coverage and extensive interviews, the drivers suddenly became well known to a wider audience: the likes of Andy Rouse, the fiery Frank Sytner and accident-prone radio presenter Mike Smith all adding personality to the racing. Even with the complication of multi-class racing and variable race lengths, the action was made accessible and entertaining for armchair spectators.

The depth and quality of the TV coverage was critical in building the exposure of the BTCC, and providing it with the platform to be at the vanguard of the super touring era.

That was still a few years in the future, but the three seasons from 1988–90 started to build the protagonists into household names and steadily grow interest. It did no harm that the cars at the front of the field were spectacular – the Class A Ford Sierra RS500 looked and sounded as would have been hoped, whilst being just about relatable as something you could drive out of a showroom.

Winning the bulk of the races in 1988 was series legend (and four-time champion, in 1975, 83, 84 and 85) Andy Rouse in the Kaliber-sponsored RS500 that his firm prepared. A crack engineer as well as rapid driver, Rouse was at the vanguard of the technical development of the Fords in the UK championship. His closest on-track rival was Steve Soper in the Eggenberger RS500, who only made a few appearances but they were memorable. If Rouse was the

epitome of a UK scene stalwart, Soper had been seeking his fortune abroad since 1986 in the ETCC with Eggenberger, and for 1989 would sign on as a works driver at BMW, a role he would hold until 2000.

However, in terms of the championship, the series' Achilles heel came into play. Although Rouse won nine of the 12 rounds, he lost out in the title race to both Sytner in a Class B BMW and Phil Dowsett in a Class D Toyota Corolla – Sytner winning his class 11 times, and Dowsett ten. Sytner had enjoyed a season-long rivalry with teammate Radio 1 DJ Mike Smith, and his combustible red-mist interviews always made for great viewing. Notwithstanding, it was a sell to the broader public to explain that the driver who won the most races outright didn't take the title.

This pattern was repeated once more in 1989, when the Class A Sierras did the winning, but Class C's John Cleland in the works Vauxhall Astra GTE, who was the only driver in the class to compete in every round, took the title, by just a single point from the Class B BMW of James Weaver. The Class A battles had been good, though, as Rouse encountered close rivalry from Robb Gravett and Tim Harvey, both of whom would score multiple race wins.

This, together with the high costs and encroaching obsolescence of the Group A cars, led to the decision to introduce a new set of touring car regulations for Class B in 1990, with the plan to then have these cars as the sole class for 1991.

Formally known as Class 2 regulations, they stipulated a maximum engine capacity of two litres (2.0l), six cylinders, and naturally aspirated. The cars would have to be at least 4.2m in length. Any aerodynamic devices fitted to the cars would have to be available through dealers. For 1993 these rules were more formally codified by the FIA,

setting a consistent ‘super touring’ template across multiple championships. As part of the 1993 rule refresh, the former flexibility regarding body size and the number of doors was changed to stipulate a minimum of four doors – essentially defining the class to be based on larger family saloons. For the homologation parts, manufacturers had to produce 2,500 road-going versions (which would be increased to 25,000 in 1995).

Consequently, 1990 was a transitional year, with Class A hosting a field of Sierra RS500s enjoying their last hurrah, whilst Class B was for the cars which would form the class of 1991. The title went to Robb Gravett who won all but four of the races in a year when his Trakstar Team struggled for finance – completing the season virtually sponsor-free. Given the competitiveness of Class B, this meant for the first time in the BTCC’s televised era that the Class A winner was the champion; 1990 also saw another milestone, with the round at the Birmingham Superprix marking the last time that the BTCC raced on British roads.

The period from 1988–90 was crucial in establishing the BTCC in the wider public consciousness. Smart editing of the TV coverage made the racing look more exciting than it actually was, whilst there were enough moments of action and drama to justify the growing hype. Frank Sytner and James Weaver’s fierce battles in 1988 and the dramatic collision between Gravett and Phil Dowsett at Thruxton in 1989 were frequently replayed on clip and review shows.

Throughout this period there were varying levels of manufacturer commitment. Given the dominance of the Ford Sierra RS500s in Group A, there was no need for an outright works entry, although Andy Rouse always had close factory ties, and the Eggenberger entry for Steve Soper in 1988 was similarly supported.

The other classes, however, were pointing towards where the series would go. Prodrive-prepared, works-backed, BMWs were a mainstay of Class B from 1988 onward. BMW dealer Sytner was a key figure in the squad, partnered by Mike Smith in 1988, James Weaver in 1989 and a revolving door of promising newcomers (Kurt Luby, Kelvin Burt and Tim Sugden) in 1990. Likewise Vauxhall, with Vauxhall dealer and former Thunder-saloon entrant John Cleland as the lynchpin, supported a works entry into the series from 1989 onward, run by David Cook Racing. It would be these two marques, alongside Toyota (who had supported Phil Dowsett's Class D endeavours), that would form the bulk of the initial super touring field into 1991.

During this era the drivers were generally upper-tier national-level competitors, a combination of well-established touring car campaigners such as Rouse, together with younger challengers whose single-seater careers had run out of steam either through finance (Tomas Mezera) or injury (Tim Harvey). The two-driver enduro races gave the opportunity for some especially creative driver pairings as ex-Lotus F1 driver Johnny Dumfries, Australian touring car legend Allan Grice and then F3 driver Roland Ratzenberger were all drafted into action.

So, a new era of touring car racing dawned in 1991. The Class 2 cars (not quite yet super tourers, but they'd evolve quickly) were now the headline act, the entry evenly split in numbers between the manufacturer-backed works cars and a sizeable privateer entry.

There were certainly worse times to launch the new formula than the early 1990s – interest in the sport was high; Mansell-mania was once more resurgent following the un-retirement of ‘Our Nige’ and return to Williams; there was comprehensive television coverage via highlights

on the BBC and the new rules were piquing manufacturer interest as they promised to be lower cost than Class A and a bit more relatable to the showroom.

With the Mondeo still a couple of years away and the previous year's Class B Sapphire having proved uncompetitive, Rouse Engineering instead secured the contract to run a brace of works Toyota Carinas for team principal Andy Rouse and former single-seater hopeful Gary Ayles. Rouse, the pre-eminent Class A driver of recent seasons, would have a bit of an adjustment to the 2.0l formula.

Japanese manufacturers were further represented with a Janspeed-prepared Nissan Primera for Kieth O'dor, who would be joined for the final rounds by Julian Bailey. Son of Janspeed principal Janos Odor, O'dor was making his BTCC debut having raced successfully in production saloons for several years. Bailey meanwhile came into the BTCC after an early-season run in F1 with Lotus yielded a solitary point and three non-qualifications in four races.

Mitsubishi were also represented through John Maguire Racing, with Mark Hales campaigning both a Lancer and Galant during the course of the year.

Continuing under the supervision of David Cook Racing, the works Vauxhall Cavaliers would once more be in the hands of John Cleland, who would be joined by Jeff Allam. Vauxhall's hopes were high, as the Cavalier had been the dominant Class B car down the closing stretch of the 1990 season. Frequently equipped with an in-car camera and wired for sound, Cleland was popular with television viewers for his entertaining in-race reactions. Allam was another BTCC champion having been a front-runner throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, taking the title in 1982 at the wheel of a Rover 3500 S prepared by Tom Walkinshaw.

The numerical advantage went to BMW, where Prodrive fielded two full works cars, and Vic Lee Motorsport (VLM) had four entries running across the Team Labatt and Team Listerine banners. All six were the venerable M3, tweaked to the new regulations, but getting towards the end of its life with the 318 on the horizon. The Prodrive line-up had former Zakspeed and Tyrrell Formula 1 driver Jonathan Palmer as an ever-present, with the second car predominantly split between factory ace Steve Soper, who would be prioritising the German championship, and the upcoming Tim Sugden.

The Team Labatt's side of VLM had Tim Harvey partnered by Laurence Bristow, the pair having competed the previous year in Labatt's-backed, Rouse-prepared Sierras. Harvey was coming into his fifth season in the BTCC having made the switch to saloon cars after injury ended his single-seater aspirations. For Bristow it was a fourth campaign.

The Team Listerine charge would be led by Will Hoy embarking on his first full campaign in the BTCC. Unusually, Hoy had found fame abroad first, having raced with success in the World Sportscar Championship in the mid-1980s and winning the 1988 All-Japan Touring Car Championship. He would be partnered by Ray Bellm who had spent the past half-decade in the World Sportscar Championship as a co-founder (with Gordon Spice) of Spice Engineering.

The season would feature 15 races across 13 events, consisting of two outings on the redeveloped Silverstone National circuit, three visits to Donington Park (two on the Grand Prix loop and one on the national), a brace of trips to Thruxton, two rounds on the Brands Hatch Indy circuit, a solitary event on the full Oulton Park circuit and

two races on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit; the blue riband round supporting the British Grand Prix and the season-ending event.

The second visits to both Donington Park and Brands Hatch would be double-header events, featuring a pair of races just a few minutes apart.

Silverstone had been much reshaped for 1991 with the full track redeveloped for the British Grand Prix. Maggots and Becketts were moved from being a fast right-hander fed by a quick left and another quick left on to the Hanger Straight. Instead, the corner was replaced with high-speed changes in direction that remain today. Vale and Club were also tightened, together with the addition of the high-speed right at Bridge, then two tight left-handers at Priory and Brooklands and the never-ending right-hander of Luffield. The National circuit would now turn right at Becketts, before heading on to Brooklands and Luffield.

A field of 21 cars assembled for the brave new era of the BTCC, but only 19 made the start after practice woes. Interest was unarguably high with over 20,000 spectators enduring the early spring weather.

Taking pole for the opening race, Hoy shot into a lead which he was able to hold for the duration. Becketts for the first lap in light drizzle was always going to be busy, with Rouse losing out as he spun pushing a little too hard in the traffic. At the front, as Hoy pulled clear, Soper initially moved ahead of Allam but was forced to pit with gear-selection issues. This elevated Cleland to third, where he started to hassle his team-mate, but with no joy in terms of forward progression. They stayed that way to the flag, with Hoy impressively clear of the field.

The Snetterton circuit in Norfolk would be a perennial fixture throughout the super touring era. The layout just shy

of two miles had been in place since 1974, but was slightly altered for the 1990s with the tightening of the final Russell turn into a tight chicane, adding around five seconds to the lap time. The fast right-hander of Riches opened the lap before the slightly slower Sear fed the cars on to the rapid Revett straight. The left-right of the Esses followed before the cambered right turn at the Bombhole, before the high-speed gradual right of Coram fed into Russell. It was a track that rewarded power and precision.

From pole Cleland made the early running in Norfolk leading from Hoy, as further back Palmer and Harvey collided into Riches, both dropping down the order. A few laps later a recovering Palmer was involved in the first iconic incident of the era. Attempting to pass Nettan Lindgren into Russell he tagged the Swede, pushing both into retirement in the gravel. In front of the TV cameras and a packed spectator bank, Lindgren stalked across the gravel, opened Palmer's door to give him full vent of her frustrations. This was greeted with a huge cheer from the spectators and an enduring legacy as one of the definitive clips of the 1990s. As subsequent performances would show, it was also an unfair snapshot of Palmer's BTCC experience.

At the front, Cleland faded with tyre trouble, promoting Hoy to the lead from Allam and Bellm. The latter was soon on terms with Allam, sliding through at Russell, with the Vauxhall's Dunlop rubber fading in comparison to the BMW's Yokohamas. Allam dropped further, eventually finishing fourth behind Rouse who took his first podium for Toyota.

Round three at Donington Park saw the teams enjoying familiar territory. Reopened in 1977 by Tom Wheatcroft, the Leicestershire venue was a popular testing track benefitting from both a central location and a sweeping layout with ample run-off. The lap started with the tight right-hander

at Redgate before the downhill sweeps at the Craner Curves feeding into another right-hander, the deceptive adverse camber Old Hairpin. Accelerating to the left under Starkey's Bridge, the road rose to the right-handed McLeans and then a further climb to the double apex right-hander at Coppice. The run down the back straight followed before, on the National circuit, a right-left chicane at Goddards to complete the lap.

Added for the 1987 season and the arrival of the motorcycle Grand Prix, the Grand Prix loop was an awkward extension to the circuit's length. The left-right chicane of the Esses was followed by the right-handed Melbourne Hairpin and then the left-hand Goddards hairpin. The Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit it was not. However, the three additional heavy braking zones would provide scope for plenty of drama, and important extra passing opportunities as aerodynamics came to the fore.

Donington Park saw the first bump in the road for the VLM BMWs with the cars being over the circuit's stringent noise limit. On-the-spot modifications were made, but these resulted in a smoke-filled cockpit for Hoy and early retirement. The dilemma for the VLM team was that the driver of any car that failed the post-race noise test would lose their points to date. Bellm duly stopped just before the line to evade the top-six scrutineering but this allowed another VLM BMW of Harvey through, who duly failed the test and lost the points he had gained so far in the season, effectively ruling him out of the title race. It was still a BMW win, but this time for the Prodrive team as Soper took the honours from Cleland and team-mate Sytner.

Round four was the turn of Thruxton. The Hampshire venue was always a distinctive stop on the calendar with its high-speed sweeps unseen elsewhere in the UK. The rightward curving pit 'straight' led into Allards a fast right

taken almost flat out, before climbing to the left into the right-left-right complex sequence of Campbell, Cobb and Seagrave, a trio of turns that to this day pay for many parts manufacturers' mortgages. Accelerating left through Noble there was then a sequence of right-handers starting at Goodwood and culminating in the hair-raising Church that fed the cars on to Woodham Hill and back towards the pits. The lap concluded with the low speed Club chicane. A circuit that demanded respect due to the consequences of it going wrong, the racing was often excellent, offering superb slipstreaming opportunities. Tyres too would frequently be a factor due to the highly abrasive surface.

With more sustainable fixes in place at VLM, Hoy qualified on pole, but botched the start, initially jumping the lights, then stopping, before finally being swamped by the Vauxhalls and Palmer. Soon Palmer was overhauled by Harvey and then Christian Danner (deputising for Soper). The brace of Cavaliers led the way throughout, the Dunlop tyres proving more durable, giving the pair the confidence to push. The race came down to the final chicane as Allam looked every which way to find his way past Cleland but to no avail as the Scot racked up his first outright race win in the BTCC. Hoy recovered to third and somehow evaded a penalty for his overeager start.

It was back to the Silverstone National circuit for round five and that rarest of beasts – a race that never was. Getting underway on a wet track with a drying line, Cleland and Allam were bullying Hoy at the front, the latter tipping the BMW into a spin at Becketts. As the race progressed, the storm clouds gathered, drenching the circuit and turning Brooklands in particular into a skating rink. All the front-runners went off, Cleland terminally so, piling into the barrier that in 1991 was dangerously close to the exit of Brooklands.

Hoy, Allam and many others flew off, with Sytner steering clear of trouble and taking a commanding lead. The red flag was then flown and the decision was taken to not restart the race. On a countback Cleland was the victor, but as per the regulations at the time, an insufficient number of laps had been completed so no result was declared – after all the effort of the weekend, no one had anything to show for it.

Hindsight makes for an interesting comparison – in the present day, unless no laps are completed, a result is declared, even if this means you get farcical ‘races’ conducted almost entirely behind the safety car – like the 2021 Belgian Grand Prix.

The next round saw the first visit of the year to Brands Hatch. Alongside Silverstone, the Kent circuit was a lynchpin venue of British motorsport, although heading into the 1990s it was at a low ebb. Following the loss of the British Grand Prix in 1986 and the death of circuit owner John Foulston a year later, the circuit was now run by Foulston’s daughter Nicola and beginning to show the signs of under-investment in both the track and surrounding facilities. Nonetheless, the Indy circuit that would be twice used in 1991 was a near-perfect spectator venue, set in a bowl with excellent vantage points of its entire length.

The lap started with the gentle right curve of the Brabham Straight before the notorious right-handed downhill plunge of Paddock Hill Bend before climbing to the tight right of the Druids hairpin. This was followed by a downhill drop into the left-handed Bottom or Graham Hill Bend before a short straight into the left-right of Surtees. The tight right-hander of Clearways followed before opening into Clark Curve and the sprint to finish the lap.

Brands Hatch provided an excellent battle for the lead with Tim Sugden (taking his turn in a Prodrive BMW)

scrapping with Hoy. The decisive moment came at Surtees as Sugden stuck his nose to the inside of Hoy, the ensuing contact pushing Hoy off-line and allowing Sugden through to take the win. Rouse took his second podium of the season with a distant third.

Heading to the British GP support race, this gave Hoy a healthy championship lead. Fittingly it was Hoy who engaged in a super battle for the lead with Soper on the Grand Prix circuit, with the latter forcing his way into the lead at Priory. The best battle in the race was for the lower placings in the top five as out front Soper took a commanding win from Hoy (once more outscoring his title rivals) with Harvey in third.

The first double-header followed on the Donington National circuit, the two races separated by just a ten-minute break. This proved to be disastrous for Hoy who blew his engine leading the opening race and, with no time to repair, he was unable to add to his points tally in either race.

Hoy's woes promoted Rouse into the lead, the Toyota driver scoring his first win of the season, chased home by Soper, who kept the pressure on throughout. Third went to Cleland who fended off attacks from an exuberant Palmer.

Race two's grid was formed from the finishing order from the opener, so Rouse would start from pole. He duly made a good start, holding the tight inside line into Redgate giving no space to Soper to squeeze through. Instead, by taking the wide line Cleland was able to snatch second down the Craner Curves. At the end of the opening lap Cleland went even better, launching into the lead around the outside of Rouse into Goddards. Rouse fought back moments later, running side by side with Cleland down the Craner Curves, but it couldn't last. Cleland went into the Old Hairpin too

fast and slightly off-line, allowing Rouse to reclaim the lead as the Vauxhall dropped down to fifth.

As Rouse led, from a chasing pack comprised of Soper, Bellm, Allam and Cleland, Soper took his turn to challenge Rouse, slipping through at the Old Hairpin. In the best race of the year so far, Soper was immediately called upon to deploy every trick in his book to keep Rouse behind.

Meanwhile at McLean's, the biggest accident of the year started to unfold. A blown engine on Nick Whale's BMW threw him into the gravel but not before leaving an oil slick on the racing line. Some of the backmarkers were caught out immediately, but the marshals nervously awaited the arrival of the surging battle for the lead – this being before the option of a safety car deployment was available, so warning flags would have to suffice. Heading along the pit straight, Soper's BMW suddenly slowed, dropping down the order and re-promoting Rouse to the lead.

Approaching McLean's, the leading pack were still together. Rouse made it through safely but both Vauxhalls fell victim to the oil, with Allam slamming into Whale's stricken car as Cleland and Bellm both got stuck in the gravel, Harvey also rotating.

Unsurprisingly, the race was stopped, with the restart set over 12 laps and some of those stranded in the gravel starting from the pit lane. According to the regulations of the time, the result would be decided on aggregate time – the remaining 12 laps combined with the times from the first half of the race.

Rouse led away at the restart, initially from Harvey, before Soper shot through at the Old Hairpin. Harvey fought back before he and Soper collided heading down the Craner Curves on the next lap. The Labatt's BMW went into a lurid spin with Harvey rejoining at the tail

of the field, and fortunate not to be collected by the chasing pack. The contact gave Bellm his chance to slip into second, as Soper slowed again, letting Palmer through to third, before retiring into the pits. The order would stay that way to the flag, Rouse claiming an impressive double and eating into Hoy's championship lead. Finishing in fourth was Gravett, the Ford Sapphire finally showing some form.

The sole visit to Oulton Park followed. The undulating Cheshire venue was on the schedule at least once a year throughout the 1990s, albeit in four different configurations. The layout used in 1991 had the short sprint from the starting grid into the trickily cambered right-handed Old Hall before the cars accelerated steeply downhill at the Avenue and into the fast left-handed sweep at Cascades. A high-speed run along Lakeside followed before another rapid left at Island Bend, then the steeply cambered right-handed Shell hairpin. Heading back towards the paddock, the next obstacle was the left-right-left Foulston's (latterly Brittain's) chicane before dropping down from Hilltop and into the daunting right at Knickerbrook. Climbing from Knickerbrook there were two right-handers to finish the lap, at Druids and then the far tighter Lodge, which was the best overtaking opportunity.

The track was narrow, with unforgiving kerbs and barriers all too close to catch out the unwary. Overtaking was challenging, with only a couple of clear-cut opportunities around the track. This year – 1991 – would be the last that Knickerbrook would run as a fast right-hander; following two fatal accidents (the tragic deaths of Andrew Colson in testing and Paul Warwick in a British Formula 3000 race) during the course of the season, a new chicane was introduced for 1992.

Cleland took a dominant second victory of the season, aided by the squabbling BMWs and Toyotas behind. Rouse was initially in second before Hoy was able to find a way past at Lodge and break clear. This left Rouse, Bellm and Soper to dispute the final podium spot. Bellm took himself out of the battle by out-braking into Island, releasing Soper to fill Rouse's mirrors as the Toyota driver continued to try and keep Hoy honest. Soper repeated Hoy's move by darting to the inside of Rouse at Lodge. The latter stages of the race were punctuated by a huge crash for Bristow on the exit of Island, his BMW slamming broadside into the tyre barrier. Cleland, Soper, Rouse was the order through to the flag, with Hoy once more accumulating a decent points haul.

The second double-header meeting of the year followed at Brands Hatch. The opener was a battle between Hoy and Rouse. After the Toyota took the lead, Rouse was then delayed by a rotating Ian Forrest at Clearways, giving Hoy the chance to reclaim the lead. A few laps later Rouse fought back, taking his moment at Druids to score his third win of the year from Hoy, with Ayles in third after a battle with Cleland.

Ayles's fun ended on the warm-up lap for the second race. Having been slow away, as he moved through the field to reclaim his grid position he collided with Sytner heading into Surtees. Soon after there was a tightening of regulations regarding drivers recovering to their grid position during formation laps.

An in-form Hoy took a commanding victory, with Gravett taking a fine second ahead of Cleland. For Gravett the podium was a just reward for his effort in developing the Sapphire, which had been progressively more competitive with each round. Rouse had been in the fight for second but

spun away his chances pushing just a bit too hard to pass Cleland into Paddock.

Hoy's performance at Brands Hatch served to rebuild his championship lead with just three races remaining. Cleland could still pip him but would need to both outscore Hoy each time out and finish well up the order.

A third visit of the year to Donington Park followed as once more Cleland was able to drive clear in the Cavalier, with Harvey scoring a fine second place, drawing the battle lines for the following season. Hoy completed the podium, having to fight hard for the place, seeing off Sugden and Bellm. Over the coming seasons, Donington Park would consistently prove a happy hunting ground for the Vauxhall team.

The second visit of the season to Thruxton followed – never an ideal venue for prudent points conservation. Palmer took pole from team-mate Soper, but it was Cleland who made the best start to take the lead into the Complex, from Soper and Hoy. At the same point on the circuit on the second lap Soper went for the lead, but ran wide and took Cleland with him, promoting Hoy to the lead. However, before long Soper was through and back into the lead. By mid-race Cleland's tyres were fading, with Hoy in a safe second, content to follow Soper. Then heading into the chicane, Palmer, challenging for second from some distance back, saw half a gap and tagged Hoy, spinning him down to the mid-field.

As Soper pulled clear out front, Hoy was mired in the mid-field battle, never where you want to be when competing for a title. Coming into the chicane fighting for the lower reaches of the top ten, he and Cleland made contact, the cars colliding side to side at speed, with the resultant damage to Hoy forcing him into retirement. Cleland would finish

ninth, not a huge points haul, but enough to keep the title chase alive into Silverstone.

That left a BMW one-two-three of Soper from Palmer and Armin Hahne, the German ace making a one-off appearance. However, there were obviously recriminations within the BMW camp: whilst Palmer and Hoy ran in separate teams, the expectation would be that the BMWs supported each other to get one of their drivers over the line for the title.

Into Silverstone, Hoy still held the advantage and just needed to keep Cleland in sight whilst staying out of trouble.

For the second run of the year on the full Grand Prix circuit Cleland qualified on the front row. It was Rouse who made the early running, with the rest of the pack forming up behind Cleland, a frustrated Harvey protecting Hoy. The sensation of the race was a hard-charging Andy Middlehurst in the 2.01 Sierra, who carved through to third as Hoy was shuffled towards the rear of the pack.

Once freed from duties protecting Hoy, Harvey went on the charge, clearing Middlehurst and Cleland before setting off after Rouse. Despite the stout defence, Cleland was starting to suffer from tyre issues manifesting with severe understeer. Middlehurst was soon past Cleland as the Vauxhall ran wide. Hoy tried to slip through as well but Cleland redoubled his defences before his tyre issues became too much and he dropped from contention.

At the front, Rouse too was suffering from tyre trouble and was passed by Harvey, who took victory. Third went to Middlehurst, but for Hoy a fifth-place finish, ahead of Cleland, was enough to give him the title.

It had been a solid if rarely spectacular first year for the new 2.01 formula, with a good-sized and generally high-quality field at each event. This was certainly aided by the availability of the ageing BMW M3, which generally made

up half the grid across the two works teams and multiple privateers.

In the end of year *Autocourse* review, however, it was far from clear that the 2.0l formula would be the way forward, with a general recognition that the German DTM series, running to a larger engine formula, was still the premier championship. Certainly, the way BMW prioritised the time of its works drivers seemed to back that up, with British fans arguably robbed of a closer title fight due to Soper's part-time presence in the series.

Nonetheless, Hoy was a deserving champion, driving assuredly to maintain his early-season points buffer, never allowing any one rival to consistently finish ahead of him. For his rivals, there would be some lingering questions about the car's early-season legality, but motorsport, and particularly touring car racing, had ever been thus.

A big plus was the balance of performance between the different manufacturers which ensured that the Vauxhalls were competitive from the outset, with the newer Toyotas and Fords getting more competitive as the season progressed. Another absorbing characteristic was the tyre war, which generally saw a more impressive single-lap performance from the Dunlops, offset by a more consistent whole-race performance from the Yokohama-shod BMWs.

Championship runner-up Cleland continued as a crowd favourite, beloved for his hard driving and straight talking. But for a few too many races where his tyres faded, he could well have claimed the title, having had the edge on Hoy for outright pace for much of the season.

As with the two drivers ahead in the standings, third-placed Rouse had also scored three wins. The Toyota was largely competitive from the outset, but really hit its stride mid-season as his three wins came in a four-race burst. A

couple of late-season retirements removed his outside shot at the title, but it was encouraging to see one of the prior era's greats adapting so rapidly to the new formula both in the cockpit and in engineering the cars.

Also with three wins, and fourth in the points was Soper, who only appeared nine times. As such, he was never in the title hunt, although had his two retirements instead resulted in good finishes, it is not impossible that BMW would have juggled his programme to give him a tilt at the crown. Nonetheless, Soper was a good benchmark for the regulars, who could pit themselves against one of the world's best.

Of the rest, Bellm was consistent but, barring a spate of retirements, generally outside the podium positions. Allam would have hoped for more – a brace of early-season podiums where he more than matched Cleland was followed by a second half of the campaign where he only broke into the top five once. Thanks to the Lindgren and Hoy incidents, history has not been kind to Palmer's sole BTCC season. In reality, it was a more than solid debut campaign in touring cars and he acquitted himself far better in the transition from Formula 1 than many others who followed in his wheel tracks. Harvey's season was derailed by the Donington disqualification and loss of points; however, he progressively moved to the front as the season progressed, culminating in a fine win at Silverstone.

## The Greatest Finish? The 1992 Season

THE BTCC in 1991 had made strides forward in professionalism and manufacturer involvement, but, at its core, it was still a national championship, with a grid largely filled out by privateers. From there, 1992 would prove to be a transitional year, still very much rooted in the national racing scene, but ushering in the step change that would follow, with a bigger, competitive works grid, with Peugeot and Mazda entering works, or works-supported cars, and the Vauxhall and Nissan ranks being strengthened.

Reigning champion Will Hoy made the switch to Toyota to partner Andy Rouse in the Carina. With Rouse overseeing the operation, the Securicor-backed cars were tipped to be front-runners. With a roster of sponsors in place, the resources to develop the car in-house, and (like other works teams) a works Yokohama tyres contract, the team were well set.

Their main rivals were likely to be the primary Vauxhall pairing of John Cleland and Jeff Allam. The exuberant Cleland was arguably the series' best-known driver, whilst Allam was a solid podium contender. David Cook Racing would once again prepare the cars, which aside from a switch

to Yokohama tyres and a stiffening of the chassis were an evolution rather than revolution from 1991. The Cavaliers were generally thought to be strong in straight-line speed, but gave something away in traction.

Additional Vauxhall strength would come from the Ecurie Ecosse team (run by Ray Mallock Limited – RML), where David Leslie in his first full BTCC season would be partnered initially by Bobby Verdon-Roe and then Alex Portman. Verdon-Roe, the 1991 Formula Renault champion following a hard-fought campaign against Jason Plato (of whom plenty more later), had taken out insurance against himself winning the championship. The £100,000 payout on winning the title funded his step up to the BTCC. The cars themselves were the 1991 works cars passed on from DCR, running on Dunlop tyres and sharing access to works specification engines.

The changes were more visible at BMW with the introduction of the rear-wheel drive 318i to replace the M3 (although the latter remained the go-to car for the privateers), a move only possible due to local homologation rules that allowed the cars to race on the promise rather than actuality of a sufficient number of road cars being built.

Both Vic Lee Motorsport (VLM) and Prodrive provided works entries. More often than not VLM fielded three cars, with Tim Harvey being the lynchpin, supported by Steve Soper (BMW having moved him to VLM for 1992) and Ray Bellm. Harvey would be the team's main title challenger, with Soper's German commitments once again taking priority where there were clashes. The engine of the 318 was largely rolled over from the M3, but almost everything else was new – predominantly the lower shell, longer wheel base and wider track. The cars were also fitted with the new ABS brake system that had been raced with success in

Germany the previous year – now standard on all road cars, this was the height of cutting-edge technology. As with Toyota and Vauxhall, the team benefitted from a factory Yokohama tyre deal.

Meanwhile, Prodrive entered their fifth year as a BMW works squad, also with the 318. Their engines were prepared in-house, the main difference to VLM being that the cars would run on Pirelli rubber. On the driving side the team opted for young talent in the form of Tim Sugden, whose victory at Brands Hatch the previous season had stunned the paddock, and highly rated single-seater refugee Alain Menu.

The Janspeed Nissan Primera team expanded to two cars for Kieth O'dor and Andy Middlehurst, with an occasional third car for Tiff Needell. The cars would start the season on works Dunlop tyres, pending the promise of upgraded tyres later in the year. The Primera chassis was generally thought to be strong, but engine power remained a concern.

Mazda's effort looked likely to be much more low key, with a single car 323 run by Roger Dowson for Patrick Watts, one of the last of the crop of drivers to come into the BTCC from the one-make championship route. He picks up the story: 'Four things got me to the top of Mazda's driver list: one, Roger Dowson built and ran the Mazda and my great relationship with him went back to the BSCC when I drove for ARG in the Metro Turbos; two, I convincingly won both the manufacturer-backed Mazda MX5 and the Honda CRX championships in 1989; three, I won the Esso Saloon car championship in 1991 in – I think – a Peugeot 309 16v. It was sponsored by Peugeot and Shell. And four, maybe Michelin put a word in, as I stuck up for their tyres when others in the MX5 championships said they flat-spotted too easily. I defended any change as I had won all the races and never had that problem.'

The engines were due to be prepared by Neil Brown, but with Brown also undertaking extensive Formula 3000 and Formula 3 programmes, this was likely to cause tensions.

Peugeot also entered the BTCC fray, with a true 'factory' operation run from the French firm's plant in Coventry. With just a single car available for Robb Gravett, there were likely to be limitations on what the team could achieve. Juggling the twin challenge of forming a racing team from a group more used to going rallying, and developing the 405 was always going to be difficult.

The independent pack was almost entirely comprised of BMW M3s, which were, initially at least, more than able to compete for top-ten places. Of the BMW runners, only Matt Neal and Sean Walker would be on the grid for almost every outing, whilst Karl Jones completed the bulk of the season. The only other regular was James Kaye, making the step up from national saloons in his Toyota. As would perpetually be the case, the independents had to combat constrained budgets and the ever-accelerating development of the works entries.

The calendar saw a shake-up too, with the addition of Pembrey and Knockhill to the calendar, bringing the show to crowds in Wales and Scotland. With the 15 races split across eight rather than six venues, there was greater variety for fans and more challenge for the teams. Whilst Pembrey would only remain on the schedule for two years, Knockhill continues as one of the BTCC's most beloved events. The number of race weekends was also reduced from 13 to 12, with the addition of a double-header at Knockhill.

As was traditional, the season started in early April on the Silverstone National circuit, the well-worn layout from innumerable test days giving the teams a chance to bed in their new machinery in familiar circumstances. In a race

that was tense rather than exciting, it was the Vauxhalls and Toyotas who led the way, Cleland taking victory from Rouse and team-mate Allam. Hoy was the only front-runner to falter, a lurid moment at Luffield pushing him off the podium and into fourth.

It was an identical finishing order next time out at Thruxton on Easter Monday, the top three covered by just over a second in a race which was close rather than thrilling. Cleland's victory was bittersweet as the whole event was overshadowed by the death of Marcel Albers in the adjoining British Formula 3 race.

The season truly crackled into life next time out at Oulton Park, with more than 20,000 fans drawn to the Cheshire circuit on the first May bank holiday. The dangers of motorsport were once more in evidence at the meeting, with the field getting to grips with the new Knickerbrook chicane, which had been introduced following the tragedies of 1991.

If tension had been the prevailing theme of the opening races of the campaign, the crowd at Oulton Park was treated to the rough and tumble that had made the BTCC so popular. After taking the early lead, Cleland failed to get enough temperature into his rear Yokohama tyres as he approached Knickerbrook for the first time. Under heavy braking for the chicane, the Cavalier snapped sideways, Cleland doing a magnificent job to avoid spinning. Somehow retaining the lead, Cleland came unstuck again a turn later as he ran wide on the entry to the double apex Druids, this time culminating in a lurid spin coming out of the corner. Incredibly, Cleland both avoided a hefty clout with the barrier and was somehow missed by the entire field as he rotated back on to the track. After pitting for a puncture, the Scot rejoined but couldn't get back to the points.

Cleland's spin split the field, allowing the Toyota pairing of Hoy and Rouse to break clear with a gap that was sufficient to ensure the race would be decided between the team-mates. Hoy had the pace and would have won comfortably but for electrical gremlins. Twice the Toyota lost all power and had to be restarted through Hoy jiggling the master switch. These delays were enough for Rouse to take the lead, his experience then being sufficient to see off a late challenge from Hoy. Rouse thus took his first victory of the season, with a frustrated Hoy (his barely concealed fury during the *Grandstand* post-race interview being something to behold) and Allam once more finishing in third.

Behind, it was all happening. The two works BMW squads were on a massive development curve, wrestling the 318i into front-running contention. Harvey claimed a season's-best fourth, albeit 28 seconds adrift, whilst Soper (starting at the back with a ten-second penalty having missed qualifying due to DTM commitments) claimed a fine eighth, demonstrating the car's potential. Despite the improvements in pace, the new BMWs still seemed a long way off contending for wins, let alone challenging for the title.

Meanwhile, the rough and tumble, or 'biff' as Murray Walker called it on commentary, was largely provided by Sugden in the Prodrive BMW, as he managed to dispatch both Gravett and O'dor from contention at Cascades. In a separate incident, Neal was fortunate to evade a monumental accident at the start-finish line as he was rotated in the midst of a febrile mid-field dice.

Another record crowd convened three weeks later for 25 laps at Snetterton, where once more it was the Toyotas and Vauxhalls who set the pace. Making amends for Oulton Park, Hoy was a dominant winner, six and a half seconds

clear of Cleland. Third would almost certainly have gone the way of either Rouse or Allam, except the pair collided at the Esses, putting both out of meaningful contention. This elevated Alain Menu to score BMW's first podium of the season, albeit more than 18 seconds back from the race winner.

The Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit was next, and it was the Toyota pairing who showed best in qualifying with Hoy on pole. The VLM BMWs of Soper and Harvey meanwhile had to start from the pit lane having failed to get on track before the pit lane closed – particularly frustrating for Soper who would have lined up third.

As the lights turned green, Cleland (benefiting from having the second row to himself) got the jump and led the Toyotas. Hoy and Rouse were in hot pursuit, whilst also fighting for position. Coming out of Westfield on the second lap the pair fractionally misjudged it, the cars entangling and slamming into the barrier to the left of the circuit on the run-up to Dingle Dell. Today, the accident would at the very least have brought out a safety car, but in 1992, as the drivers walked away, the brace of Carinas was left in situ as a reminder for the others. The conclusion from the numerous replays was that it was a genuine racing accident, although Hoy was somewhat sheepish in his post-race interview.

The early drama left Cleland out front, although he was joined by team-mate Allam, the pair of works Cavaliers circulating well clear at the front of the field. Given events, Allam was content (or ordered on pain of sacking) to settle in behind Cleland but not engage him in battle. The main interest came in the resolution of third position. Starting from the pit lane, Soper had an inspired drive, which saw him carve through the field, and show what was clearly race-winning pace. Demoting the Prodrive 318 of Sugden

late on, Soper took a spectacular third, but clearly rued what might have been. Team-mate Harvey made fewer waves moving through the pack, but picked up helpful points for sixth.

A fortnight later it was on to Donington Park for the first double-header of the season, the two 15-lap races being separated by just ten minutes, the result of race one forming the grid for race two. Pole position went to Hoy, who was determined to put Brands Hatch behind him. He went on to dominate the opening race, with Cleland in second, the position gained late on with a well-judged dive to the inside of Rouse at Goddards. Harvey was fourth, whilst team-mate Soper again suffered misfortune, this time a misfire. Behind, the main talking point of the race was the opprobrium aimed at Verdon-Roe whose misjudged move into the Melbourne Hairpin claimed a few casualties.

After everyone (Verdon-Roe aside) had more or less behaved in race one, race two was always going to be the livelier of the pair. The start was messy, as in a squeezed mid-field Bellm moved across on Gravett, rotating the Peugeot into the pit wall, the pair colliding with others as they went. The contact was angular rather than hefty, but it was sufficient to eliminate both Rouse and Allam.

Hoy once more made the early running despite a spirited challenge from Leslie, but Harvey had held a set of tyres back for the race, and by one-third distance it was clear he had the pace. The decisive move came on lap three at the Melbourne Hairpin and thereafter Harvey was able to build a buffer to claim his first win of the year. Despite the victory, Harvey was still so far back in the title fight that he didn't cause too much concern to his rivals.

Championship leader Cleland finished fourth, his Cavalier appearing to struggle with understeer, particularly

early on. Instead, the podium was completed by Hoy, who was at this stage of the season Cleland's main rival, and Soper who delivered another special drive from the back of the grid.

The midpoint of the season came on 11 July, when the BTCC would bring the curtain down on the British Grand Prix weekend. The race start was delayed by some 40 minutes following the celebratory track invasion that marked Nigel Mansell's victory as he swept towards the F1 title. With Mansell-mania in the ascendancy, the BTCC was certainly benefitting from the popularity of motorsport at the time.

It wasn't all plain sailing for the teams; the UK was in recession with rising unemployment, meaning that sponsorship was hard to come by. This would be compounded in late September on Black Wednesday when the UK crashed out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. Times were good, but they weren't perfect.

With much of the capacity Silverstone crowd staying on, the race was decided by a brave move from Allam on the sister Cavalier of Cleland at Becketts. With team orders clearly not in place, Allam overtook and pulled away – and Cleland was eventually demoted to third by Hoy. The win put the consistent Allam into the title hunt, although in a season of many 'what-if' moments, the loss of those points for Cleland would prove hugely significant at the same venue later in the year.

The final weekend of July was the BTCC's first visit to Knockhill, one of the two new venues on the calendar. Sited six miles north of Dunfermline, the circuit – which opened in 1974 – would provide a very different challenge for the drivers. Just under 1.3 miles long and running on an unchanged layout since its inception, the track offered big

undulations (notably Duffus Dip), blind apexes and the tight Taylor's hairpin to complete the lap.

The BTCC's debut there was immediately spectacular with David Leslie (fittingly a Scottish driver for the Ecurie Ecosse team) setting pole position in a damp qualifying session with a time of 59.6s (in the dry, the cars were lapping over 4s per lap faster). As at Donington, it was a double-header race day for the teams to deal with and, unlike the Leicestershire venue, no one quite knew how the races would pan out. Ninth-place qualifier Menu, meanwhile, was ruled out for the season after badly breaking his leg in a paddock quad bike accident. His team had expanded to three cars for the weekend with the one-off addition of rally star Colin McRae.

The opening race, held in dry conditions, saw Allam score his second win in succession, coming home more than five seconds clear of Harvey and Rouse. Cleland meanwhile suffered the second big blow to his title chances, after he was disqualified for ignoring a black flag to fix an errant bumper which had been knocked loose in the early jostling.

The clouds were forming, but race two got underway in dry conditions, only to be stopped almost immediately after Leslie inverted his Cavalier. He was, fortunately, uninjured, but there was a lengthy delay whilst the tyre wall was rebuilt (before belted tyre walls, a 30-minute delay was not uncommon as the barrier was manually restacked). By this point the rain had set in, and the restart took place in worsening conditions.

Unsurprisingly, what followed wasn't a classic. Harvey took the early advantage, leading Allam home for his second victory of the season (and only his third trip to the podium). Cleland salvaged something from his home event with a clear third, his onboard camera on the subsequent

television coverage showing just how tricky the 20 laps were. Meanwhile, McRae was disqualified after spinning Neal out at the hairpin, a variation of a move that Neal would deploy with some regularity over the coming decades.

Overall the first weekend at Knockhill was a huge success: a large crowd turned out to enjoy the action, which was rarely less than spectacular. In the championship Cleland still led the way, with team-mate Allam still viewed as his most likely rival, having led the pair home in the past three races. BMW were ascendant but had ground to make up from their low-scoring opening rounds. Meanwhile, Toyota seemed to have peaked and were no longer the fastest in the field.

The next stop for the championship was the other non-English round of the year, at the Pembrey circuit in Wales. Set in the grounds of a former RAF base just to the west of Llanelli, the 1.5-mile track had first opened in 1989, and presented a very different challenge to Knockhill. In motorsport terminology, it is a 'technical' (aka not necessarily the most thrilling) circuit as, after the opening right-hand Hatchets hairpin, the circuit consists primarily of medium speed, medium radius corners that demand smoothness and consistency from the drivers in order to set a competitive lap time.

The circuit's remoteness immediately made it a favourite testing venue for Formula 1 teams, who could run well away from prying eyes, and it was allegedly the scene for robust clear-the-air talks between Ayrton Senna and Alain Prost following the 1989 San Marino Grand Prix.

Qualifying was all about the VLM BMWs with Harvey and Soper locking out the front row, the pair only separated by 0.05s over the 71s lap, and Cleland in third a further 0.3s back. By this point in the year, Soper had no more

clashes with the DTM and could focus fully on the BTCC, although the championship table suggested a supporting role to Harvey.

Even so, team orders didn't seem to be on the agenda as the VLM pair dominated the race, as they had qualifying. Soper harried Harvey throughout, but couldn't find a way past, finishing just one second behind. For Harvey this was now two wins in succession and he was starting to steadily climb up the championship table. His points bid was helped by Cleland suffering his first retirement of the season, the Vauxhall rolling to a halt seven laps from the end. Cleland hadn't been a factor for the win but was in position to accrue another decent points haul.

This left the podium to be completed by Sugden, the Prodrive entrant underlining just how much the Welsh track suited the BMW. This point was further emphasised by Menu's replacement, Kris Nissen, claiming fourth on his debut outing.

The final double-header of the season followed, with two 30-lap encounters around the Brands Hatch Indy circuit. A sunny bank holiday Monday ensured the circuit was packed, reflecting the ballooning popularity of the championship.

Qualifying saw them line up for the first race by manufacturer with the VLM BMWs of Soper and Harvey on the front row, from the Toyotas of Hoy and Rouse and then the Vauxhalls of Cleland and Allam – all six cars separated by under 0.6s.

The early stages of the opening race provided some great entertainment, with the leading protagonists all running closely together as Soper set the pace. The BMWs seemed to have the edge on pace, but at two-thirds distance Soper started smoking, allowing Harvey into the lead. Displaying his usual tactical astuteness Soper then fought a rearguard

action to fend off Hoy for a lap or so, allowing Harvey to build a decisive buffer. As Soper retired into the pits, Hoy and Rouse completed the podium with Cleland in fourth.

With just the ten minutes between races, in the opener most of the field had stayed out of trouble or at least avoided hitting anything too solid. The second Ecurie Ecosse of Portman would be the only non-starter following a race-one off, although Soper would start from the pit lane.

Without his team-mate's support, Harvey had to directly defend himself from his title rivals. Hoy took up the challenge and remained glued to the BMW throughout, although he was unable to find a way through. Meanwhile, Cleland and Rouse had an ever-changing fight for third, which eventually went to the Vauxhall, Rouse just a few tenths back at the line.

Four wins on the bounce meant that Harvey was now truly in the title fight, and, ominously for his rivals, it was clear that the VLM BMW was the in-form package. Cleland still held on to the championship lead but needed to start outscoring his rivals down the stretch.

The penultimate round was held at Donington Park, the venue where the 318 had first really showed its pace. Cleland came into the weekend in pain, nursing a fractured sternum from a testing accident. Despite driving in near agony, with a slender and diminishing points lead, missing the event was not an option.

However, the biggest story of the weekend didn't happen at Donington Park, but a few days before at a customs office in Sheerness. Despite focusing on the British championship, the VLM team had been making frequent trips across the channel to test at Zandvoort in the Netherlands. Whilst it is not unusual for teams to test abroad in pre-season (for the weather and opportunity to pool data with similar cars in

other series), the frequency of the VLM team's transporters heading to the Netherlands had aroused suspicion.

On 8 September it was disclosed that the team's transporter had been stopped by customs officers in Sheerness the prior Thursday (3 September), after the Brands Hatch round, and 40kg of cocaine had been found hidden amongst the racing equipment. The discovery followed a month-long investigation, and would clearly cast a huge shadow over the team's future. With Vic Lee in custody and it being clear that the team would be wound up, Bellm stepped in and did the deals required to keep the cars on the grid for the final two rounds, to give Harvey a tilt at the championship.

Despite the furore, the VLM BMWs turned out as normal at Donington Park and came into the weekend as favourites. As it was, none of the title contenders were to the fore in a damp but drying qualifying session as Leslie took pole from Rouse, with Cleland in ninth, Harvey 11th and Hoy down in a distant 17th. The normal order was quickly resumed in the race, as the brace of VLM BMWs carved through to the front of the field. Soper with the benefit of a higher grid position had the lead, but waved Harvey through at the Melbourne Hairpin, content to ride shotgun and fend off challengers. Cleland was in a painful third, but content to take the points and retain a small lead over Harvey going into the Silverstone decider, while Hoy, with his early-season successes, was still in the hunt. Fifteen laps of the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit would decide the outcome. Once again, however, qualifying saw the title contenders packed into the mid-field, Cleland the foremost in seventh, from Hoy in ninth and Harvey with plenty to do from 12th. In Harvey's favour was the long Silverstone Grand Prix layout that allowed easier progress through the field compared to the shorter and tighter circuits elsewhere on the schedule.

Unlike Donington Park, the title protagonists were never in contention for the win, which went to Rouse following a tightly contested battle with Allam and Leslie. On any other day, the top three being separated by under three quarters of a second would have been the story.

Instead it was the battle behind that captivated the crowd on the day and, later, TV, and later still, YouTube. The early skirmishes were frenetic and it was Soper who was first to hit trouble, spinning wildly at Club following contact with Leslie, before being collected by Gravett and sustaining extensive damage to the rear of the BMW. Somehow this was largely cosmetic and Soper was able to get on his way back up through the field.

Meanwhile, the title protagonists ran in fourth (Hoy), fifth (Harvey) and sixth (Cleland), as Soper rapidly closed on to the trio.

With two laps to go, Harvey, needing some daylight between himself and Cleland, challenged Hoy into Copse, making the pass but pushing both wide, allowing Cleland and Soper through. Fourth place would be enough to make Cleland the champion. However, that position didn't last long as Soper passed Cleland into Club, the latter giving Soper the finger as they accelerated towards Abbey.

With Cleland focused on repassing Soper, Harvey behind was able to set himself up for a successful move on Cleland at Bridge, before Soper leapt aside to give his team-mate fourth. Clearing Soper was now Cleland's utmost priority as he lunged to the inside at Brooklands, pitching the Vauxhall on to two wheels but somehow moving ahead of Soper.

Pushed wide, Soper knew he couldn't let Cleland have a shot at Harvey. With the desperation that only comes in the closing stages of a title decider, Soper launched inside

Cleland at Luffield. It was never on, the BMW torpedoing the driver's door on the Vauxhall and slewing both cars off the track and into the barriers. 'The man's an animal' was Cleland's summary to the BBC cameras, as he furiously remonstrated with Soper.

The arguments would rumble on for years, but what's done is done, and, with Cleland out, Harvey was clear to cruise through the final lap to take fourth and the title. Setting aside the controversy, Harvey was a worthy champion: he had won more races (six) than any other driver and had enjoyed a superb second half of the season.

For BMW it was a case of job done: the 318 had proved a winner in its first season of competition, despite all the off-track turbulence. However, with the collapse of VLM and wider uncertainty on the future of BMW's touring car programme, it was a far from foregone conclusion that they would be back to defend their crown.

With Cleland's retirement, Hoy took second in the standings. The 1991 champion had enjoyed his moments, the Toyota being the dominant car for a period running up to mid-season. However, the Brands Hatch crash was disproportionately costly, the retirement coming at the apex of when the Toyota was the most competitive package. For the following season, there would be changes, as Rouse and team would revert back to Ford, and getting the Mondeo race ready, whilst Hoy would remain with Toyota.

Although he would have been loath to admit it, Cleland had been fighting a rearguard since the Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit round. Thereafter, he'd never really challenged for a win and had to rue the lost points from Knockhill and Pembrey. The Cavalier, whilst a strong all-round package, didn't quite have the high points to rival Toyota or BMW

in full flight, the car's straight-line speed not matched by cornering stability and traction.

For the other works teams there would be much to ponder. The Nissan Primera proved to be an excellent chassis, but was consistently let down by engines that couldn't compete with the front-runners. Mazda had been forced into a mid-season change in engine supplier as Neil Brown couldn't give sufficient attention; whilst the Weslake units were better, particularly when coupled with handling improvements, Watts generally had to outdrive the car in order to score good results. It had been a learning year for Peugeot, but by season's end there was enough evidence from a revised, lower-lying, 405 to show the programme had potential. However, for the smaller works efforts, it was clear that there was a mountain to climb to match the spending and development of the title contenders.

Before the year wrapped up, there was one final event to go – the inaugural TOCA Shootout. Held at Donington Park on the National circuit and supported by most teams (albeit mainly with one rather than two cars) the event offered a £15,000 cash prize for the winner, together with innovations such as a pace car to bunch the field up, and the last-place runner being black-flagged on successive laps in the closing stages to create tension.

Unfortunately, there wouldn't be an opportunity to avenge Silverstone. As a result of an argument about the regulations, the BMWs were withdrawn, leaving the Cavaliers as the favourites. Despite the half-size grid, it was an entertaining race, with the field tightly bunched and constantly swapping places. As the race moved to the closing stages, Cleland eased to the front of the field to claim victory, the cash bonus providing some compensation for the championship disappointment.

The race, though, is remembered primarily for O'dor's enormous accident. Coming down the Craner Curves and setting up for the Old Hairpin, the Nissan snapped to the left, flying across to the gravel trap at almost 90 degrees. The car dug in, flipped into a high-speed roll and then vaulted over the barrier and safety fencing to land in the spectator area. Fortunately (and unlike 12 months later), the event was not packed, meaning that the Nissan landed on empty banking. Incredibly neither O'dor nor any marshals were injured, and nor were any spectators. Just as incredibly, the race continued without a safety car or red flag.

Without doubt, 1992 was the year that the televised era of the BTCC came of age. The combination of a varied field, some occasionally superb racing, plenty of 'biff' and big personalities was catnip to a motorsport-hungry public. It was also clear that the 2.0l touring car ruleset was a success – attractive to manufacturers in that it showed off their family saloons, and allowed for programmes across multiple championships.

It was a fantastic season, with just the right competitive balance, allowing for close racing with plenty of overtaking, together with scope for heroic recovery drives through the pack. The finale is the best-remembered moment, but partly because it was the culmination of a title fight that came together perfectly, with the main protagonists all having their moments throughout the year.

As the front-runners of the 2.0l category, with huge spectator interest and an impressive television package, the BTCC was moving into position as the foremost national touring car championship – and would enjoy further expansion into 1993.

## Super Touring Explodes in Europe – 1993–2000

IN 1993 the super touring rulebook was eventually finalised by the FIA. This set a common specification and homologation requirement for manufacturers, conferring consistency across the 2.0l touring car formula.

However, there was still plenty of space for local promoter divergence. The first of these flashpoints would prove to be in regards to aerodynamics in 1994 when Alfa Romeo exploited the slightly looser BTCC regulations before moving mid-season back to the FIA rules.

Homologation also had local variation, with some series allowing cars to compete on the promise that sufficient would be built, or setting the bar a bit lower to get locally popular brands on to the grid. As super touring's costs began to bite, some championships – in order to control the expense – began to introduce a few specified components as well. Tyre rules also tended to vary locally and there was no attempt to specify a single, or limited, number of suppliers across the super touring universe.

However, a common rulebook was a huge success, bringing consistency to the raft of thriving 2.0l touring car championships.

Inevitably, there was talk about a pan-European super touring championship, and it probably came closest to fruition ahead of the 1996 season. However, touring car racing has always had a tough time in establishing pan-national championships, particularly for cars that, in appearance at least, were close to what could be found in a showroom. The Class 1 touring cars did expand to a world championship but that collapsed after just two years – the investment and logistics required not being met by promotion or public interest.

Many of the super touring programmes were at least part funded by the national subsidiaries of the manufacturers, who thus contractually required the cars to race exclusively on home circuits, not just once or twice a year as would have been the case in an international championship. Likewise, most touring car stars were homegrown heroes, who had come through the ranks of national racing: the Steve Sopers, who moved between series, fulfilling manufacturer contracts, were quite rare.

Ultimately, by the time it looked logically possible to get a European series off the ground, super touring was already on the downward slope, with some firms exploring different motorsport programmes and others starting to baulk at the investment.

So, whilst an international championship never got off the ground, there were three one-off FIA events run during the period from 1993–95, initially as the FIA Touring Car Challenge before being upgraded to World Cup status after the first year.

The first event was held at Monza in October 1993, and was a huge, if accident-strewn, success. A mammoth 43-car entry was assembled, categorised by driver's nationality rather than manufacturer. Broadly speaking the entry list

was comprised of the best of the British, French, German and Italian championships, with cars found for stars from Australia, Portugal and South Africa.

In terms of manufacturers it was a broad entry, although BMW and Alfa Romeo were particularly well represented – unsurprising given BMW's pan-European reach, and Alfa's multi-national 1993 programme. On the driving front, it was an incredibly strong line-up, reflecting the calibre of driver racing across super touring.

There were only two Ford Mondeos on the grid, for Paul Radisich and Andy Rouse, and it was the Kiwi who ultimately prevailed, his end-of-season form marking out the Ford as the most competitive proposition in the BTCC.

The opening race was marred by a dramatic incident on the first lap involving Soper, Rouse and Fabrizio Giovanardi, which led to a red flag and a full restart. Soper famously described his involvement as like 'driving through a Havoc video' in reference to the crash compilation video tapes that were popular at the time. Once restarted, Radisich dominated the field and took the win. He repeated this in race two, to be the emphatic winner.

The event also signalled something of a shift in the centre of gravity of super touring, with the front-wheel drive Fords and Alfa Romeos generally outperforming the BMWs, which had been the dominant cars at the start of the year.

Despite a decent level of coverage in *Autosport*, the event was somewhat underpromoted – with television coverage buried on Eurosport. Nonetheless, it was enough for it to be elevated to 'World Cup' status in 1994. This time the event was held at Donington Park – once more drawing a large end-of-season crowd after the success of the 1993 TOCA Shootout.

Again a 40-car field was assembled, matching, if not exceeding, the previous year. The main super touring championships were represented, with, unsurprisingly, a large BTCC contingent, but also front-runners from Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Belgium, with Switzerland, Japan, South Africa and the Nordic series also represented.

Unlike in 1993, the competition would be run over a single race, with all the potential for chaos that would bring. The top five places on the grid went to drivers familiar with all the tricks of going quickly at Donington, with Radisich taking pole from Soper, then Gabriele Tarquini, John Cleland and Tim Harvey. In sixth, Emanuele Pirro was the highest qualifying driver who hadn't been a BTCC regular.

Cleland made the best start to lead into Redgate, but behind there was a multi-car mid-pack accident on the grid, eliminating five cars before they'd even reached the first corner. Later on the first lap Alain Menu and Frank Biela collided at the Melbourne Hairpin, removing the Renault from proceedings. With wrecked cars strewn around the circuit, the red flags came out to allow a clear-up.

At the second attempt Radisich made use of his pole to lead from Soper into Redgate as behind, strident efforts were once again in place to fund the parts department Christmas party – a coming together at Goddards removing Cleland and Pirro, although instigator Tarquini was able to continue. This briefly brought Harvey up to third, before the engine blew on the Renault, ending his and the French marque's day.

At the front, the race was relatively settled, with Radisich maintaining a healthy advantage over Soper. The main interest for the podium was the battle for third between Biela and Joachim Winkelhock. The latter forced the issue with a robust move at the Esses a couple of laps from the

end, pushing Biela down the order, before his red-mist-powered recovery left him beached in the gravel.

For Radisich it was an impressive second World Cup triumph in succession, whilst Soper was a solid second from fellow BMW pilot Winkelhock. Tarquini recovered well to fourth, but ran out of time to depose Winkelhock. Hans-Joachim Stuck took a hugely impressive fifth having worked up from 21st on the grid, quite the feat on a circuit not known for its abundance of overtaking opportunities. With Soper badged as a Japanese championship contender for the day, Germany took the nations trophy, with BMW the top manufacturer.

The third and final World Cup would be held at Paul Ricard in mid-October 1995. Running on the short version of the circuit (as seen in the late 1980s French Grands Prix) and prior to the venue's redevelopment, the track was arguably as close to a neutral venue as could have been found, with none of the British, Italian and German powerhouse teams having raced there during the course of the season.

Once again a 40-car field was assembled, but this was padded out with some five cars from the Czech championship. However, the calibre at the front was a strong as ever, with some teams, notably Alfa Romeo, having diverted their late-season development focus to the event.

Reverting to 1993's two-heat format, in a harbinger of things to come in 1996, the A4 Quattro was comfortably the class of the field. Audi took a one-two-threein qualifying with Pirro, Stuck and Biela taking the top three on the grid for both races, followed by the same three BMWs on both occasions of Soper, Johnny Cecotto and Yvan Muller, in that order.

Biela won the opening heat comfortably from Soper, who was almost five seconds back. Polesitter Pirro was down in seventh after a mistake on the third lap dropped him

down the order, giving the advantage to Biela. The race highlights show that it wasn't a thriller, with little action at the front after the first few laps.

Race two was better entertainment. Pirro took the lead through the opening stages, but Biela was initially down in fifth with a trio of BMWs between the Audis. Before long, though, Biela was past Muller and by lap 15 of the 26 (the Paul Ricard layout used was much shorter in 1995) was on to Soper. It was only on the penultimate lap that Biela was able to move past the BMW on the Mistral straight to claim second place, behind a very comfortable Pirro.

This was enough to give Biela the third and final Touring Car World Cup. Given the diversity of competition, it was a minor miracle that the three events had taken place – the logistics of scheduling calendars, ensuring balance of performance and making it attractive to the manufacturers and teams had been formidable. However, these were all hurdles that couldn't be cleared for 1996 and the event withered.

Despite attracting large trackside crowds, in the UK at least, only the 1994 race had been shown on terrestrial television, meaning that the event never gained masses of traction outside the motorsport bubble.

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During the 1990s, super touring, initially at least, wasn't the only touring car game in town and in Europe faced stiff competition from the Class 1 touring cars.

Class 1 had grown out of the late 1980s Deutsche Tourenwagen Meisterschaft (DTM), which at the turn of the decade was regarded as the strongest and most innovative of the touring car series. For 1990 the DTM ran to Group A regulations comparable to the BTCC, albeit

with turbochargers having been banned, which had the effect of removing the Ford Sierras from the fray. Instead, for the 1990 through to 1992 seasons, the championship would be a three-way battle between BMW, Mercedes and Audi, although works and semi-works efforts did appear from Opel and Ford during this period.

The technical regulations were substantially revised for 1993. From then until the end of the class in 1996, six cylinder, 2.5l engines with a lot of room for modification were permitted, ensuring the cars were appreciably faster than the super tourers. However, a lot of the innovation came elsewhere, with all-wheel drive, ABS braking and traction control all permitted, along with purpose-built suspension and far greater aerodynamic freedom.

With the change of regulations for 1993 there were initially only two manufacturers with Class 1 cars for the bulk of the season, in Alfa Romeo and Mercedes, although Opel joined for the final round. These would be the three manufacturers for the duration – with both Opel and Alfa Romeo balancing Class 1 and super touring programmes, with mixed success.

For 1993 and 1994, it was just the DTM who ran Class 1, before the expansion to a combined DTM and International Touring Car Championship (ITC) in 1995 and a single season of a fully fledged ITC in 1996.

The 1993 DTM season was made up of ten double-header rounds, together with a non-championship away day at Donington Park in the middle of the year. Reflecting the relative sparsity of permanent racing venues in Germany at the time (Sachsenring hadn't been restored, Oschersleben and Lausitzring hadn't been built), much of the championship comprised of hair-raising temporary street and airfield circuits. Starting with the solitary non-German

round of the year in Zolder, the calendar took in two visits to Hockenheim, both the Nürburgring Grand Prix track and Nordschleife, then the airports at Diepholz and Wunstorf, the Norisring and Singen street circuits, and the Berlin high-speed dual-carriageway circuit – AVUS.

The season was dominated by Nicola Larini, who combined his Alfa Romeo touring car programme with Ferrari F1 test duties. With ten wins during the year, including eight in the opening 12 races, he was a clear champion. Second in the standings went to Roland Asch, who had been part of the Mercedes team since 1985. With only two wins over the course of the season, his position in the standings was borne of consistency. Third in the points was another Mercedes driver, Bernd Schneider – one of the standout drivers of the touring car world throughout the 1990s and 2000s but someone who never raced in super touring. Schneider had more wins and podiums than Asch; however, he had also accrued more retirements.

Opel joined the fray for 1994, a three-car effort headed by Keke Rosberg, taking on the might of Mercedes and Alfa Romeo. The schedule remained the same, but another non-points-scoring round was added at Mugello alongside the trip to Donington Park.

In the title hunt, it was Mercedes's turn to triumph, with Klaus Ludwig taking the crown with a hugely consistent season. Scoring three wins and seven other podiums, Ludwig was a consistent front-runner, but what really propelled him to the title was that he finished inside the top ten in all but one race, steadily accumulating points as his rivals faltered.

The early-season pacesetters had been Alfa Romeo's Alessandro Nannini who won four of the opening eight races but, thereafter, didn't feature on the podium, his title chances gradually slipping away. He eventually dropped

to fourth in the standings by a single point behind teammate and reigning champion Larini, who also notched up four victories and several other podiums, but was hurt by five retirements, including two in the final weekend at Hockenheim. This gave second to Jorg van Ommen, another Mercedes pilot, who had trodden a similar path to Ludwig – a couple of wins and a lot of consistency.

Overall, the DTM was a very different beast to super touring: highly German-centric and with team orders coming into play to a very different extent, with Mercedes running almost ten works or works-supported cars. It was, however, hugely popular with large race-day crowds and increasing traction outside Germany, with fans drawn to highlights on satellite TV.

This led to expansion for 1995, when the teams would race a combined DTM and ITC schedule with seven rounds in Germany (Hockenheim twice, Nürburgring, Norisring, Singen, AVUS and Diepholz) settling the DTM. Five rounds outside Germany at Mugello, Donington Park, Magny-Cours, Estoril, and the not wholly appropriate Helsinki street circuit would determine the ITC standings.

Schneider took the DTM title and was a deserving champion with five wins, although as he faltered in the final round at Hockenheim, Mercedes intervened to instruct Van Ommen (who mathematically could have taken the crown) to not overhaul Schneider. Ludwig made it a clean sweep in the points for Mercedes. Meanwhile, Alfa Romeo had a difficult season, with unreliability, incident, and managing the Class 1 and super touring programmes concurrently all factors.

Schneider made it a double with a far more dominant run to the ITC title with six wins from the ten races, Helsinki being the only weekend when he didn't feature

on the podium. His nearest challengers were Mercedes juniors Jan Magnussen – who was second despite missing Donington, and Dario Franchitti, who had a win and three other podiums. Both drivers would use the ITC and Mercedes patronage to progress to the top of the sport – Franchitti in particular becoming the standout driver of 2000s IndyCar racing.

For 1996 it was all change again with the DTM swallowed by the ITC, albeit with German venues hosting six of the 13 rounds. Mercedes fielded eight works cars with Schneider and Franchitti being the primary drivers. There would be nine Alfa Romeos with an incredibly strong driver line-up including Larini, Nannini, Tarquini, Stefano Modena and a youthful Giancarlo Fisichella. Opel's line-up was similarly starry, with the experienced Manuel Reuter, Uwe Alzen, Yannick Dalmas and JJ Lehto leading the team, whilst emerging stars Alexander Wurz and Oliver Gavin also had seats.

Hockenheim (short and long), Nürburgring (twice), Norisring and Diepholz were the German venues, with Helsinki, Estoril, Mugello, Magny-Cours and Silverstone on the schedule, together with two transcontinental end-of-season trips to Suzuka and Interlagos.

A strong early season was enough to clinch a close championship for Reuter and Opel, who did enough to hold off Schneider, who came good in the second half of the season, while Nannini, who had more wins than anyone else (six), took third in the standings.

At the end of the season, though, the ITC collapsed, with the series too expensive, underpromoted and under-supported to continue. For Mercedes this precipitated a move into the new-for-1997 FIA GT Championship, whilst Alfa Romeo stepped back from racing commitments. Both

Mercedes and Opel would return to support the DTM on its relaunch in 2000.

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As the DTM set its sights internationally, the Super Tourenwagen Cup (STW) was launched for 1994, capitalising on the success of super touring, and recognising the commitment from many German manufacturers (Opel, Audi, BMW) to the 2.0l formula.

The opening season in 1994 consisted of eight single-header race events, starting in May at Berlin's ultra-fast AVUS street course, then visiting the airfield track at Wunstorf, before five successive non-German rounds at Zolder, Zandvoort, Osterreichring, (in its penultimate season before being remodelled into today's Red Bull Ring), Salzburgring and Spa, before the campaign concluded in late September at the Nürburgring. Whilst pitched as a rival to the DTM, the calendar was constructed in such a way as to minimise clashes.

The core field consisted of four works, or works-supported teams. BMW motorsport fielded resident ace Johnny Cecotto alongside Alexander Burgstaller. ROC Competition were entrusted with running the Audi 80 Quattros with an impressive driver line-up of Frank Biela and former F1 racer Emanuele Pirro – both of whom would stay with the marque through multiple Le Mans successes.

Eggenberger Motorsport (perhaps best known for running the Texaco-backed Sierras in the late 80s European Touring Car Championships) continued their affiliation with Ford, running a brace of Mondeos for Bruno Eichmann and Thierry Boutsen, whose F1 career had come to a close with Jordan the previous year. Two more ex-F1 racers were to be found in the Nissan team. Ivan Capelli's disastrous

start to 1993 with Jordan (following a catastrophic 1992 with Ferrari) had led to Boutsen picking up the drive for the Silverstone team. The Italian would be looking to rebuild his career, alongside Michael Bartels who had been unable to hustle the Lotus on to the grid in four attempts in 1991.

Further strength in depth came from another two-car, factory-supported Audi team, SMS Schmidt Motorsport, where the vastly experienced Hans-Joachim Stuck was alongside Patrick Bernhardt. Two solo BMWs were ever present in the hands of Yolanda Surer and Altfried Heger, whilst Markus Oestreich campaigned a Ford. Overall most races had a grid size in the low teens, which was not unimpressive from a standing start.

The championship came down to a two-way battle between Biela and Cecotto. The Audi driver was stronger in the first half of the year, winning three of the opening four races, but never finished better than fourth in the second part of the season. Meanwhile, Cecotto won the final three races on the bounce (four in total), and, coupled with slightly greater consistency, was able to take the title. Pirro finished third in the standings, without taking a win (and escaping a large start-line accident at the Salzburgring), whilst Heger was fourth and victorious at the Osterreichring. That quartet finished well clear of the rest with, in line with the trend seen elsewhere, Capelli and Boutsen enduring somewhat fruitless seasons.

In 1995 there was an expansion, with in excess of 20 cars in the field for each event. BMW lined up with two works-supported teams – the Schnitzer team returning from their foray to the BTCC partnered Jo Winkelhock with Peter Kox, whilst the Italian-based Bigazzi squad had Roberto Ravaglia and the returning Burgstaller. Audi matched BMW – ROC Competition continued to prepare the Audis

with Biela and Pirro partnered by Tamara Vidali, whilst AZK had Stuck alongside Rinaldo Capello. The works Fords (entered by Team Schubel) reunited the 1989 and 90 Williams F1 pairing of Riccardo Patrese and Boutsen. Eggenberger Ford also had a strong line-up of Roland Asch and the often-controversial Swiss Johnny Hauser.

With Nissan's withdrawal from the BTCC at the end of 1994, the STW effort was expanded to three cars, with Capelli joined by Sascha Massen and ex-BTCC Nissan leader Kieth O'dor. A new manufacturer on the grid came in the form of Honda, where the vastly experienced Armin Hahne and Klaus Niedzwiedz were entrusted with an Accord each.

Supplementing the factory cars was a much-larger cohort of single-driver private entries, benefitting from increased availability of older cars and an aversion to the ultra-high cost of competition in DTM.

The format was tweaked, now mirroring other series, with eight events each consisting of a double-header. The first race was a shorter sprint race (typically 25 minutes) that gave 20 points to the winner, with a longer feature race then offering a 60-point bounty. Unlike the feature races later introduced to the BTCC, there was no mandatory pit stop requirement. The calendar changed too, with Zolder opening the year, before visits to Spa and the Osterreichring. Then it was on to Hockenheim, the Nürburgring, Salzburgring and AVUS before completing the year back at the Nürburgring.

Biela was once more the star of the opening exchanges, winning five of the first eight races before eventually fading to third in the standings. He was pipped for second in the final meeting of the year by Kox, who didn't win a race, but didn't experience a retirement either, thus racking up points each time out. The title went to Winkelhock, who

took six wins throughout the year, including three from the final six races.

It was, however, a title tainted by tragedy. After steadily pushing his Nissan up the top ten, O'dor scored a breakthrough win in the opening race at AVUS. Disaster struck in race two when, whilst dicing with Winkelhock and Kox, he clipped the barriers and spun. The initially innocuous accident left the Nissan perpendicular to oncoming traffic on the driver's side. The first few cars on the scene evaded it, but a partially unsighted Biela slammed into the driver's door. With cars continuing to circulate behind the safety car, it took 30 minutes to extricate O'dor from the shattered Nissan. Despite being airlifted to hospital, he passed away that night.

Across the touring car world, 1995 had been a year tainted by accidents, but O'dor's death and that of Gregg Hansford in a very similar accident would see immediate improvements being made to driver safety – particularly in terms of protection from side impacts.

There was another year of growth in 1996, with the addition of three manufacturers in Peugeot, Opel and Alfa Romeo, the STW being the French marque's primary focus for the year. BMW were down to one works squad with Soper and Alexander Burgstaller as the primary drivers. ROC Audi had four cars on the grid, with Vidali and Pirro supplemented by former Sauber F1 driver Karl Wendlinger and his Austrian compatriot Philipp Peter. The Abt Sportsline team also ran a brace of competitive Audis for Christian Abt and Kris Nissen.

Hahne and Niedzwiedz continued in the Linder Honda team, as Roland Asch led the Ford charge, initially supported by Boutsen before Warren Hughes took over the seat. Hughes would have a trying season, with both a spectacular flip at

Zweibrucken and a mammoth accident at the Salzburgring. Lead works driver Laurent Aiello led the Peugeot campaign alongside Heger. For Opel, the new Vectra was very much a development project, but Marco Werner could be relied upon to get the car performing. Nissan again entered three cars, with Anthony Reid, fresh from a successful stint in Japan, joining Maassen and Capelli. The Engstler team offered up a brace of Alfa Romeo 155s.

The calendar was both expanded and changed, running over nine double-header events. Zolder would start the season, before a trip to Assen (then still very much regarded as a bike circuit), Hockenheim, and then a visit to the newly reopened Sachsenring – the East German road course now remodelled as a twisty permanent track. Two airfield circuits followed at Wunstorf and Zweibrucken, with Salzburgring, AVUS and the Nürburgring completing the season. The points mechanism was slightly adjusted with a sprint win netting 30 points, and the feature still at 60.

Audi finally swept to the title in 1996, with Pirro the utterly dominant driver, winning nine of the 18 races and only thrice finishing off the podium. Soper kept Pirro honest in the title battle, with three wins and multiple podiums, but a disappointing final couple of events meant his points tally was a very distant second. The battle for third in the standings was closer, Aiello taking the place as some inconsistent results offset by three wins elevated him clear of the regular but winless Abt.

Heading into 1997, there was a shift in the landscape. With the temporary demise of the DTM, the STW was elevated to be the primary national touring car championship. Furthermore, with a general slowing of the touring car boom across Europe, many manufacturers were generally focusing their programmes on the STW and BTCC.

The ten-round schedule started at Hockenheim, took in two visits to the Nürburgring, the permanent circuits of the Sachsenring, Zolder and Salzburgring, the streets of the Norisring and three temporary airport tracks at Wunstorf, Zweibrücken and the new Regio-Ring at Lahr.

It was an impressive driver line-up too. Four ROC Audis were entered for Pirro, Peter, Muller and Vidali, with two further Abt cars for Abt and Nissen. BMW focused their efforts on the Bigazzi team with Cecotto and Winkelhock the drivers, although there was a secondary Isert-BMW squad as well. Peugeot also concentrated on a two-car team of Aiello and Jorg van Ommen. Opel had two very strong teams – Zakspeed (Kurt Thiim and Uwe Alzen) and SMS (Manuel Reuter and Michael Bartels). Honda once again featured with Accords for Werner and Heger, with Team Rosberg running Nissans for Sascha Massen and Asch. Lastly, Alfa Romeos run by JAS Engineering had Christian Danner and Stefano Modena behind the wheel.

Unlike the Renault-dominated 1997 BTCC, the STW was competitive and featured a close battle for the title. With points paying down to 20th place, staying out of trouble was rewarded. The racing was generally good, and the varied calendar made for great viewing as the tightly sprung cars did battle with the mammoth bumps of the airfield circuits.

With just one retirement, and one other finish outside the top ten, Aiello took an impressive title for Peugeot – winning 11 of the 20 races. A mid-season surge from Winkelhock, who took four victories in succession at the Sachsenring and Norisring, made Aiello's triumph far from a foregone conclusion. Winkelhock took second in the standings from team-mate Cecotto, who notched up three victories along the way. The only other drive to take a win was Pirro, but the Audi driver ended the year a distant sixth.

Another bumper year followed – the only change to the circuit line-up for 1998 being the removal of Zolder in place of the new Oschersleben circuit in Magdeburg, which had opened the previous July.

Peugeot returned to defend their crown, with Aiello and Van Ommen once again the drivers. With the demise of the Quattro, and shift in focus towards a sports car programme, the Audi operation was reduced to three front-wheel drive Abt cars for Christian Abt, Biela and Pirro. Four works Opel Vectras were on the grid (under a variety of banners), with Burgstaller, Alzen, Reuter and Eric Helary as the drivers. The Rosberg Nissans were back for Asch and Michael Krumm, whilst responsibility for running the Hondas went to the JAS Team and a very strong line-up of Tarquini and Tom Kristensen. Schnitzer once again prepared BMWs for Winkelhock and Cecotto. It was all change at Alfa Romeo, where the 155 had been pensioned off in favour of the more aerodynamic (but maybe less striking) 156, where Modena would plough a lone furrow for much of the year.

The season started excitingly with four different winners in the opening quartet of races – Alzen, Reuter, Asch and Cecotto. It was the latter who would take the form into the remainder of the season, winning rounds five and six at the Sachsenring to establish himself at the head of the standings. After a comparatively slow start, Aiello then had a sensational end of the season, winning four in succession at the Salzburgring and Oschersleben to close within touching distance of Cecotto.

It came down to the final weekend at the Nürburgring. In the sprint race, Aiello finished third ahead of Cecotto to take a one-point lead into the finale. However, in the longer race, the best the French driver could manage was sixth, to Cecotto's fourth, handing the title to the BMW driver by

just three points. Alzen was a distant third, more than 100 points back, ahead of Helary and Reuter.

Before the 1999 season, BMW, Peugeot and Nissan all dropped out of the championship – with only the latter continuing its super touring programme for a final run at the BTCC title. With the DTM due to be revived for 2000, this would be the last hurrah for the STW.

Although somewhat reduced in manufacturer support, it was still highly competitive at the front. The Audi effort was headed by the semi-works Abt team with Christian Abt alongside Nissen. Opel once again had four factory or works-supported cars for Alzen, Helary, Asch and Reuter. Tarquini and Kristensen continued for Honda, whilst Modena would get support at Alfa Romeo from Andreas Scheld and then Gianluca Paglicci.

The title fight was a two-way battle between Abt and Alzen, which went down to the final weekend at the Nürburgring. Heading into the closing stages, it looked like Abt had done enough to take the title. However, circulating within the leading group was Asch, who had been black-flagged earlier in the race but had continued on track. Braking into the final chicane, Asch slammed into Abt, almost climbing on top of the Audi, badly damaging Abt's car and dropping him down the order as he limped across the line. This gave the on-the-road title to Alzen, but in a deeply unsatisfactory way. It was a disgraceful move from Asch that didn't even make a pretence of being an attempted overtake. The matter was taken to the German Motor Sport Federation Court of Appeal, where the result was taken back to the standings at the end of the penultimate lap – giving the title to Abt.

It was a less than ideal way for the title to be decided, and for the curtain to come down on super touring racing in

Germany. At the time, the consensus was that the incident was at the limit of manufacturer-led team orders – something that the DTM would repeatedly challenge over the next 15 years.

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Although it became the continental focus of super touring racing, Germany was a step behind some other European countries in adopting the 2.01 formula, with France, Italy, Spain and Belgium all also having thriving championships.

As with most motorsport nations, France has enjoyed a storied touring car history, with a national championship having been run since 1974. The French Supertourisme (FTCC) was quick to adopt the super touring format, running to that set of regulations for the first time in 1993.

Held across ten rounds (single races at each event), the 1993 season started and finished at the tight and twisty Nogaro circuit. The other eight races took place at an array of venues, starting with Magny-Cours and Dijon-Prenois before heading on to the streets of Pau. The twisty Val de Vienne followed, before a trip to Paul Ricard (the circuit at one of its lower ebbs), then the airport perimeter track at Albi, Le Mans Bugatti circuit and the storied Linas-Montlhery.

The grid wasn't enormous, but the standard was impressive. Biela in a venerable Audi 80 took the title, winning five of the ten races – in so doing becoming the only non-French driver to take the crown. His main rival was Laurent Aiello who took four victories heading up BMW's effort. Third in the points was Marc Sourd ahead of Christophe Bouchut. The only other driver to win a race was Alain Cudini at Albi. Further marking 1993 as the year of star touring car cameos, Jean Alesi – then the darling of

Ferrari – appeared on the streets of Pau for Alfa Romeo, finishing sixth.

For the 1994 season the championship boasted four fully fledged works teams. The Fina BMW squad was led by Jean-Marc Gounon (who would also race in Formula 1 for Simtek on seven occasions during the season), with Yvan Muller in his first season out of single seaters.

Unsurprisingly, Peugeot's effort was very strong with three cars, for ex-Peugeot world sports car and 1992 Le Mans winner Yannick Dalmas (he would also race in Formula 1 twice during the year, as well as scoring his second Le Mans victory), Aiello, who had been so successful in 1993 in a non-works car, and Monegasque Stephane Ortelli. It was a good line-up at the time, but arguably subsequent achievements make the case for it being one of the strongest line-ups of the era.

SEAT France fielded a trio of Toledos for Jean-Denis Deletraz (who also raced for Simtek in F1 at the end of 1994, taking on the seat vacated by Gounon), the experienced Fabien Giroix and Olivier Thevenin. Meanwhile, the three-strong Opel team were the odd ones out, not loaning a driver to the turbulent 1994 F1 season. Instead, they had an F1 legend in Jacques Laffite, alongside Cudini and Eric Helary. Philippe Gache was also among the professional runners, in the sole Mondeo in the field.

The 12-round calendar took in the full sweep of French circuits, starting at Nogaro, before going to Magny-Cours, the streets of Pau, revisiting the faded glories of Dijon and Charade, the relatively new Val de Vienne, an overly tiny Croix-En-Ternois, Paul Ricard, the airport circuit at Albi, Le Mans Bugatti, an historic Linas-Montlhéry and finishing at the twisty Ledenon.

The title fight came down to a battle between Aiello and Cudini, with the Opel driver making a late-season surge to

try to overhaul the Peugeot. With 11 wins, Aiello took the title, a deserving champion who had been on the podium (a disastrous Dijon aside) at every event in the championship. With five wins, Cudini deserved his second place in the standings. BMW's Muller completed the championship top three; an early-season win aside, the car only really hit form too late in the year. Nonetheless, three wins was a good return. Dalmas was the other consistently competitive driver, also scoring three wins, and the bulk of his successes were front-loaded to the start of the year. Gounon and Laffite were the other drivers to find the top step of the rostrum.

After the high of 1994, 1995 saw a retraction with a stark reduction in the number of works cars (most dropping the number of entries and SEAT disappearing altogether), the field sustained by independent drivers.

Peugeot's line-up remained strong with 1994 champion Aiello returning, this time partnered by Philippe Alliot (who, yes, did race in Formula 1 in 1994 – for two teams). Muller was the sole works BMW, whilst Opel retained its line-up from the previous year. Gache meanwhile switched from a Mondeo to an Alfa Romeo 155, but only made it out to the opening few events. The calendar shrank too, with Magny-Cours, Le Mans and Ledenon all jettisoned.

As is sometimes the case with a smaller field, with fewer drivers to dilute the points distribution, it made for a thrilling title fight. Taking nine wins, Muller claimed the championship by just a couple of points from Helary. The Opel driver won five times, but was a more consistent podium finisher, running Muller incredibly close for the crown when the BMW driver had a poor final event at Linas-Montlhéry. Aiello and Laffite (and had he allowed Helary through to win in Montlhéry the title outcome could have been different) were the only other winners

and generally the only others consistently challenging for podiums.

By 1996, struggling to support multiple programmes, manufacturers were focused elsewhere and the FTCC moved back to being a largely amateur series, with a secondary Criterium Class for lower specification cars. For a couple of seasons the championship had burned brightly, and certainly served to launch the careers of Aiello and Muller, but ultimately it was the first victim of the rising costs of super touring and the inability or unwillingness of manufacturers to support too many programmes.

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Much as the mid-1990s French championship was a late career destination for the generation of drivers who broke into Formula 1 at the turn of the decade, so the brief period when super touring regulations were run in Spain served the same purpose for the talented generation of drivers whose careers peaked in the late 1980s.

Run since the mid-1960s, the early 1990s version of the Campeonato de España de Superturismos wasn't too far removed from the Australian pre-V8 Supercar era, with a field ranging from spectacular Nissan Skylines through to a 'run what you brung' spirit in some of the smaller classes.

From 1994, for four seasons the championship ran to 2.0l regulations, albeit sharing the grid with a class for more production-based machinery. Whilst small on numbers (just eight regulars), there was support from five manufacturers. Ex-Minardi F1 racer Luis Perez-Sala, who had taken the 1993 championship in a Nissan Skyline GTR, remained with the Japanese marque campaigning in Primera with Repsol backing. Two Opel Vectras were entered for Antonio

Albacete and Josep Arque. Long-serving Ford driver (and perennial front-runner) Carlos Palau was entrusted with a Mondeo along with experienced sports car racer Jesus Pareja. Alain Ferte had a Teo Martin-entered BMW, whilst Alfa Romeo fielded two 155s for Luis Villamil and another former Minardi F1 driver – Adrian Campos.

The ten-round, single-race calendar comprised of two visits apiece to the (then) state-of-the-art Circuit de Catalunya, Jerez, Jarama and the borderline go-kart circuit at Albacete, along with single rounds at Calafat and on the wild street circuit in Alcaniz.

The opening events in Jarama and Albacete were a study in Alfa Romeo domination with Villamil and Campos taking a win and second apiece. Ferte fought back, winning the next two races in succession at Calafat and Albacete. After retiring in Albacete, Campos took his second victory of the year in Catalunya before notching up his second retirement of the season in Jerez. That race (the sixth of the year) marked Ferte's third win, although by this point he'd also had two retirements to match Campos, keeping the title fight close. Also in the hunt was Perez-Sala who was on the podium four times in the opening six races and Villamil who matched that rostrum record.

Campos once more found success at the Circuit de Catalunya in round seven as Ferte was classified eighth following a late retirement. Ferte was back to winning ways in Alcaniz, leading home Campos from Albacete. The final two meetings saw a raft of wildcard drivers introduced into the mix, and they provided the winners for the remaining races. Gabriele Tarquini took the flag in Jarama, where Campos finished best of the regulars in fourth to score full points (Ferte finishing the equivalent of third). Ferte was even further back in the season closer at Jerez, in a race

won by Juan Ignacio Villacieros, to give Campos the title for Alfa Romeo.

In 1995 the Spanish championship experienced modest growth with a slight expansion in works entries. Falling in line with the now near-universal format, each of the ten events had two races. The only change to the schedule from the preceding year was Estoril replacing the streets of Alcaniz.

Campos and Villamil remained with Alfa Romeo and were joined by the experienced Italian Giorgio Francia. The Teo Martin BMW seat was taken on by Antonio Albacete as Ferte moved to pastures new with Toyota. Opel upgraded their driver line-up with promising Spanish youngster Jordi Gene, who had just failed to step up to Formula 1, paired with Italian Alex Caffi, who had dropped out of Formula 1 after a brief dalliance with the disastrous Andrea Moda team.

Pareja and Palau continued with Ford, but the semi-works Mondeos would only appear for the first half of the season. At Nissan, Perez-Sala was joined by Eric van de Poele, who retained the support of the Japanese manufacturer despite a frustrating part season in the 1994 BTCC, where his smooth style wasn't matched to the crash-and-bash approach of some of the regulars.

With eight drivers scoring wins and a four-way title fight, it was a good season of racing. Albacete swept the board at the opening event in Jerez, before being disqualified in the first race at Jarama. He recovered his weekend with a third in race two. The wins in Madrid were split between Francia and Villamil as the Alfa Romeos reasserted some of their 1994 form.

It was the turn of Nissan and Opel to shine at the Circuit de Catalunya as Caffi and Van de Poele took a win apiece,

both drivers enjoying strong weekends with a third and second respectively in the races they didn't win. The other podiums went to Gene, to cap a strong weekend for Opel, as Albacete, Francia and especially Villamil were off the pace.

Villamil fought back next time out in Estoril, with a win and a second, with Francia taking the other win to mark another clean-sweep weekend for Alfa Romeo. However, Gene was steadily bringing himself into the title battle, with two third places and a knack for staying out of trouble.

Gene's only win of the season came in the second race of the following round at Albacete. With a second place in the day's opener he had now enjoyed six podium finishes in succession, a streak of consistency unmatched by his rivals. In comparison, Albacete had been excluded from the races in Estoril and then retired on both occasions on the Albacete circuit, severely denting his title chances. Perez-Sala was the other winner in Albacete, having not really been a challenger thus far. Villamil, Francia and Caffi were the others to get on to the rostrum.

It was Perez-Sala who had the best of the next meeting in Calafat with a win and a second place; however, due to four non-starts across the pair of Barcelona meetings, he wasn't really a factor in the championship fight. Of the title contenders, Gene had a solid weekend with a brace of thirds, whilst Van de Poele took a second win of the season alongside a fourth.

Reigning champion Campos had barely troubled the podium but that changed with a clean sweep on the second visit to Albacete, with Gene again his biggest challenger (taking third and second) to conclude an impressive run of ten races in succession in the top three.

Villamil hadn't been on the rostrum since the first Albacete event but bounced back in Jerez with a first and

second. Like Gene he had the knack of staying out of trouble and ended up scoring points in all but one race of the campaign. Albacete was the other winner in Andalucia, securing a third as well.

Van De Poele propelled himself to the forefront of the championship with a double win at the penultimate round in Barcelona, the Nissan driver dominating the weekend. Gene finished second on both occasions, with Villamil off the rostrum (but being awarded the points for third in the later race after finishing fourth on the road behind wildcard Anthony Reid).

With Villamil, Gene and Van De Poele all closely matched for the title going into the final round, it was all to play for. The first twist was almost unbelievable. During official practice, Van de Poele crashed off into the guard rail and ground to a halt. Without registering a time he would have started at the back of the grid, however, perhaps feeling the pressure of the situation and in the hope of repairs being made, he allowed his mechanics to start pushing the car. This was counter to the regulations and resulted in automatic exclusion from the meeting. Nissan's manager Jordi Godayol decided not to appeal. Had he done so, Van de Poele would have been able to race pending the appeal, but the team didn't want to unduly interfere in the races.

After that bizarre start, Albacete was the dominant on-track performer, winning both races. With two thirds, Villamil outscored Gene, his cause further aided when Gene retired from the opening race. Gene's sole non-finish of the year was enough to give Villamil the crown, the Alfa Romeo driver a deserving champion with three wins and remarkable consistency.

Alfa Romeo would not repeat their success in 1996, the works team reducing their programme, spearheaded by

Fabrizio Giovanardi, to just five of the eight rounds. The smaller calendar saw both Jerez and Albacete reduced to a single round, but otherwise it was the same selection of venues.

Champion Villamil was recruited by Opel to front their works effort with the second car shared between Ni Amorim and Roberto Colciago. Gene meanwhile moved to a rejuvenated Audi team, taking on the potent A4 Quattro with team-mate Joan Vinyes. The sole Teo Martin-prepared BMW was driven by one-time Eurobrun F1 pre-qualifying hopeful Pedro Chaves, with Albacete moving to race a privateer Alfa Romeo. Nissan returned with their works Primeras and driver pairing of Perez-Sala and Van de Poele.

Gene and Van de Poele split the honours in the season's opening round at Jarama, the Audi comfortably the dominant car as Vinyes scored a second and third. That form continued as Gene won the next three races in Albacete and the day's opener in Barcelona. Behind, Perez-Sala and Villamil were the only others to be on the rostrum more than once.

At Barcelona it was Giovanardi who provided the main opposition, winning the second race in his first appearance of the year. With the works Alfas once more absent in Estoril, Gene and Chaves took a win apiece, the latter on fine form at his home event, notching up a second place as well.

Perez-Sala was the dominant force at Calafat, taking both wins in the Nissan, with Gene his ever-present shadow, finishing second in both races. Chaves and Giovanardi were the winners in Jerez, which proved to be the only meeting of the season where Gene was not in the top three. Chaves continued his good form into Jarama, claiming both races in the BMW; however, with four retirements from the

opening 12 races, he wasn't able to challenge Gene in the title standings.

Such was Gene's form that he wrapped the title up in Jarama leaving the fight for second in the standings to be the main order of business in Catalunya. Ultimately, Chaves's pace won out over Perez-Sala's consistency with a brace of thirds for the BMW driver being sufficient to jump the Nissan.

At season's close, Nissan, Audi, Opel and BMW all withdrew their works support, effectively spelling the end of the championship. It did attempt to limp on for 1997, where Alfa Romeo was the only manufacturer entry (Giovanardi and Antonio Tamburini being the drivers).

A calendar of eight events was scheduled but in the event only two of them – at Barcelona (ten cars) and on the streets of Alcaniz (11 entries) – were run, the remainder cancelled for lack of entries. For the record Giovanardi won three of the four races, with team-mate Tamburini claiming the opener at Barcelona – an inglorious end to an era which for three seasons had burned brightly.

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For the first two years of the class, Italy matched the UK for the quality of its touring car championship. Initially introduced in 1992 as supplementary to the Class A cars, with a cohort of ten or so regulars, super tourers became the primary class for 1993 and there was plenty of interest.

That year, the series was held over ten rounds and 20 races. Starting at Monza, the second round was at the Vallelunga circuit before moving on to Misano. Next up was the tight Magione circuit, and the tiny (under one mile in length) Autodromo del Levante where the lap times were well below 50 seconds. From there it was on to Imola, the

Dallara-factory-adjacent Varano circuit and then a return to Misano. The season was rounded out by a trip to Sicily's Enna track and the sweeps of Mugello.

The works competition was fierce between three marques. BMW's works support was split across three teams, each of which fielded a star driver – Roberto Ravaglia for CiBiEmme, Johnny Cecotto for Bigazzi (alongside a competitive Alexander Burgstaller) and Stefano Modena in his first season out of Formula 1 for Euroteam. Peugeot entered a brace of 405s for Fabrizio Giovanardi and Gary Ayles, whilst the Alfa Romeo effort was built around Gabriele Tarquini, Gianni Morbidelli and Tamara Vidali. The VAG Group under the Audi sport banner fielded two ultimately uncompetitive Volkswagen Ventos for Rinaldo Capello (whose loyalty to VAG would be more than rewarded in years to come) and Beppe Gabbiani (best known for his efforts trying to qualify a far from competitive F1 Osella in 1981).

Ravaglia made a blistering start to his campaign, winning three of the first four races: sharing the spoils with Cecotto in Monza, in races punctuated by close slipstreaming, before sweeping the Vallelunga round. Cecotto meanwhile finished second to each of Ravaglia's wins in those opening races. Instead of the season proceeding to BMW dominance, Ravaglia wouldn't top the podium again until the penultimate meeting of the year.

The honours in Misano were shared between Tarquini and Ayles, before Morbidelli underlined the Alfa's potential, scoring the double at Magione in what was comfortably his strongest weekend of the year. Tarquini was twice runner-up in Magione but, having missed the Vallelunga round, had a lot of ground to make up in the championship. Ravaglia was only on the podium once in this quartet of races (at

Magione), but finished in the points on each occasion, slowly adding to his total.

As the season hit the midpoint at Levante, it was Giovanardi's turn to find his stride, he and Tarquini each taking a first and a second. Giovanardi followed up with victory in the Imola opener, before Cecotto once more got BMW back to the front. Giovanardi and Tarquini again split the honours at Varano in round seven, whilst Ravaglia was steadily accumulating points (and at least one podium per event) to maintain his championship lead.

The second Misano event again saw Tarquini and Giovanardi as the winners. Tarquini was a retirement in the second race, whilst Giovanardi had only managed sixth in the opener, limiting some of the damage to Ravaglia. Fighting a continual rearguard action is a far from enjoyable way to claim the title, and Ravaglia fought back at Enna, scoring a badly needed brace of wins – albeit with Giovanardi second on both occasions.

This was enough to effectively take the destiny of the title out of Giovanardi's hands for the deciding Mugello round. Having been in the points in every single race, Ravaglia would have to drop his two worst scores. By contrast, a disqualification and two retirements meant Giovanardi could only add to his total. The Peugeot driver had a super weekend with a win (his fifth of the season, matching Ravaglia's tally), but the BMW driver stayed out of trouble, taking the crown by seven points. The other win went to Tarquini who finished third and surely would have challenged, but for five non-scores.

For 1994 Tarquini would focus his efforts on the UK and the British Touring Car Championship, while both Ravaglia and Giovanardi came back for more. The calendar was slightly shuffled; this time Mugello instead of Misano

would get two visits and Imola was replaced by a second outing in Vallelunga.

There were initially three professional Alfa Romeo teams on the grid, but the Top Run squad of Enrico Bertaggia and Giovanni Bonanno only lasted three rounds. The Euroteam Alfes of Stefano Modena and Marco Brand also went missing on occasion mid-season, leaving it to the Nordauto entry of Tamara Vidali and Antonio Tamburini to lead Alfa's efforts.

BMW again balanced its efforts between the CiBiEmme cars of Ravaglia and Emanuele Naspetti and Bigazzi cars for (mainly) Cecotto and Burgstaller. Giovanardi and Ayles both remained with Peugeot, whilst Capello and Emanuele Pirro were entrusted with a pair of Audi 80 Quattros.

As in 1993, the form which decided the championship came early in the season as Pirro won five of the opening eight races (twice at Magione and Levante, with a sole win in Vallelunga) and was second on two other occasions. It was the Alfa Romeos that won the opening three races with Tamburini sweeping the Monza round and Modena triumphant in Vallelunga but thereafter, both hit trouble. Tamburini blew hot and cold – he won six times, all doubles (dominating in Misano and Enna) but was only on the podium on two other occasions, meaning he never really mounted a title challenge to Pirro. Meanwhile, Modena, as was the way throughout his career, was either stunning or nowhere – two further wins followed in Misano and Mugello, but then missed rounds and lowly finishes sapped any momentum.

Pirro only won once more, at Vallelunga, but was helped by his Audi team-mates – Capello winning the season closer in Mugello, and Frank Biela who only appeared for the final four rounds doing the double in Varano – together with a steady stream of second places.

Pirro was a comfortable champion, wrapping up the crown with more than a round to spare. Tamburini took second but faded down the stretch. A winless, but consistent, Giovanardi was third for Peugeot with seven podiums and only two finishes outside the top ten.

The 1995 season promised much, as four full manufacturer entries from Alfa Romeo, BMW, Audi and Opel would battle it out over ten events. Misano would be visited twice with single rounds at a returning Imola, Monza, Varano, Levante, Enna, Magione, Mugello and Vallelunga.

Pirro returned to defend his crown alongside Capello in the new Audi A4 Quattro. BMW entered three cars with the CiBiEmme team for Emanuele Naspetti, Gianni Morbidelli and Swiss driver Yolanda Surer (now known as Jolanda Egger), who was the ex-wife of her compatriot (and former F1 driver) Marc Surer. She had progressed through the junior formula ranks, but was better known to the wider world as a former Playboy model. Morbidelli had lost his full-time Footwork drive, but impressively still managed ten races with the Footwork team alongside a full ITCC schedule.

Alfa Romeo's effort was split across three teams and four cars. The Nordauto Team of Giovanardi and Tamburini would be supplemented by a returning Tarquini running under the Alfa Course banner, and sports car ace Oscar Larrauri in a Jolly Club car. Roberto Colciago was entrusted with the sole Opel Vectra.

As had been the case a year earlier, Pirro made a blistering start to the season, winning seven of the opening ten races of the campaign, and finishing second in those he didn't win. To all intents and purposes that meant the championship was wrapped up by mid-summer particularly

as team-mate Capello finished runner-up to Pirro on six occasions in this period and took the flag in one of the races Pirro didn't win.

The main opposition to Audi came from the Alfa Romeos and particularly Tarquini who was twice victorious in the opening six events and also took three other third places. However, he failed to finish on six occasions, meaning that he was never really in the title hunt. Alfa Romeo withdrew him from the championship ahead of round seven as he was repurposed to the BTCC to try to rectify a disastrous sophomore season for the Italian team.

The other early-season winner was Colciago, whose Vectra was nowhere except at Monza where he claimed a win and second place, the high point of a year that eventually left him eighth in the standings.

Pirro took a further four wins during the second half of the campaign, only finishing off the podium on three occasions – meaning at season's end his dropped scores were two fifth places. Unsurprisingly, Capello was second in the points having added another couple of victories to his tally. Third in the points went to Giovanardi who became Alfa's lead driver once Tarquini departed, taking one win and five seconds. He actually ended the year level on points with team-mate Tamburini but got the nod on the basis of more higher finishes.

The BMWs had a more trying year, with the exception of the Enna weekend which Morbidelli completely dominated. Those results and fewer retirements than Naspetti gave him fifth in the standings ahead of his team-mate.

The manufacturer battle between Alfa Romeo, BMW and Audi remained as intense into 1996, but with a general scaling back of the size of the teams. Alfa's efforts were reduced to just a brace of Nordauto cars for Giovanardi and

Gordon de Adamich. With Pirro dispatched to Germany to lead Audi's efforts in the STW, Capello was joined by Yvan Muller who had made the switch to Audi following the withdrawal of manufacturer-backed cars from the French championship.

CiBiEmme retained Naspetti and Surer, who were joined by Johnny Cecotto, returning to happier pastures following a frustrating 1995 in the BTCC. Morbidelli would rejoin the team for the final few rounds to support the title effort. As the season reached its climax, both BMW and Audi would supplement their squads with other works aces to try to tip the title battle in their favour.

The roll call of circuits was unchanged for the ten rounds, but this time around everyone would have to make two trips to Sicily for races on the Enna circuit.

Starting the year in Mugello, Giovanardi scored a brace of victories, sweeping the weekend with what proved to be Alfa Romeo's only successes of the season. This was followed by six consecutive triumphs for Capello and Audi in Magione, Monza and Levante.

As was the case in parallel in the BTCC, at mid-season the A4 Quattro was pegged back with additional weight (in this instance, 30kg) to offer more balance of performance. This change meant that BMW emerged as the more competitive package for the second half of the season. However, both Cecotto and Naspetti were evenly matched, which diluted the overall title push. With six wins, Naspetti was the main challenger to Capello heading into the final round at Vallelunga; however, a combination of poor tyre choices and a collision with Muller meant he slipped down to third in the standings.

Cecotto won both races in Vallelunga (to supplement his three other successes during the season) but Capello was on

the pace too (the Audi now shorn of its additional weight), his second and third places being sufficient to give him the points he needed.

The same three manufacturer protagonists were back for 1997, but it was clear that the ITCC had slipped behind the STW and BTCC in importance for both Audi and BMW, and in turn both manufacturers were already looking ahead to imminent assaults on sportscars and Le Mans 24 Hours. The season would be contested over the same suite of circuits, this time with Imola hosting two rounds a fortnight apart.

Nonetheless, Capello was back to defend his crown, partnered with the Austrian Karl Wendlinger who had raced for Audi in the 1996 STW. Wendlinger, a former Mercedes rising star, had been seriously injured in a practice crash for the 1994 Monaco Grand Prix, an incident which ultimately led to the end of his F1 career.

Naspetti was also back for more, leading the CiBiEmme BMW team with a new team-mate in Fabrizio Di Simone, who had been a sometime Jordan F1 test driver over the previous two seasons. Giovanardi continued to lead the Nordauto Alfa Romeo squad, and after De Adamich departed the team ahead of round two would once more have Tamburini alongside him in the pit box. Roberto Colciago would also be in the mix in an independently run Honda Accord.

The season didn't come close to the competitiveness of the prior campaign as Naspetti romped to the championship. A disappointing weekend in Varano (a fifth and a retirement) aside, the BMW driver was on the podium in the other 18 races, winning ten of them. This gave him the crown by almost 100 points over runner-up Giovanardi. The Alfa Romeo driver took five wins along the way, together with

a formidable eight successive first or second-place finishes in the final eight races. Third in the standings was Audi's Capello, almost 40 points back from Giovanardi but with three wins to his credit. The other race winners were de Simone (fourth) and Tamburini (sixth).

At a point where many super touring championships were shutting up shop, the Italian championship continued for another two years through 1998 and 1999. The first of those was a mess with off-track contention overshadowing the on-track action. The root of this lay in a dispute between the incumbent promoter Salerno Course and their rival Sponsor Service, who were attempting to take control of the championship. In their favour, Sponsor Service were carrying the backing of the three manufacturers. With court arbitration ongoing, the racing got underway, but whether anyone could watch it was another matter.

Key to Sponsor Service's pitch to the teams was their ability to secure improved television coverage. Historically the races had been shown on TMC, but Sponsor Service were offering live RAI coverage (equivalent to the BBC). Whilst this eventually came to pass, the reality was that four of the rounds had no coverage at all, and some of the weekend formats were juggled to fit around RAI's F1 commitments. The coverage also brought grumbling from the privateer ranks who felt they were forgotten among the works cars.

Also changing, in line with the BTCC, was a move to a sprint and feature race format (in turn, this was now consistent with the STW). Again it was a ten-round championship with Monza getting two events. For all the format tweaks there was no getting around that the core product was once more diminished. Audi's effort was reduced to a single car for Capello ahead of the German

manufacturer withdrawing at season's end to focus on sportscars. Alfa Romeo introduced the new 156, its curves not necessarily seen as an improvement on the purposeful angles of its predecessor. Giovanardi continued to lead the team, being joined by Nicola Larini, making his first appearances since 1992. Naspetti and De Simone once more headed BMW's entry.

The first half of the year saw a close battle between Naspetti and Giovanardi and at the halfway point Naspetti had the advantage, having won five of the ten races to Giovanardi's two. However, from Magione onward, momentum swung in favour of the Alfa Romeo as Giovanardi won seven of the final ten races, with Naspetti suffering four retirements without any further visits to the top step of the rostrum.

A disastrous final round in Vallelunga almost saw Larini pip the BMW for an Alfa Romeo sweep in the standings, but despite the double win he was still four points adrift. De Simone took one win en route to a distant fourth, with Capello enduring a trying season to finish fifth, as the last of the works cars, with developing the car no longer a priority for the Alfa squad.

Then came 1999, the swansong year, with just Alfa Romeo and BMW providing works entries, the driver line-ups being retained from the previous year. The privateer ranks were also well down due to the cost of the more complex machinery (universal) and competitor frustration from being ignored on the previous year's TV coverage (Italy-specific), resulting in fields of ten cars or fewer for most races.

The slender entry meant far less scope for slip-ups and kept the title battle competitive, with fortunes fluctuating throughout the year between Naspetti and Giovanardi. The

BMW driver was fast out of the blocks, winning three of the first six races, before Giovanardi found form. At the antepenultimate round in Varano, Giovanardi suffered a double retirement, seemingly moving things in Naspetti's favour before the Alfa driver scored a double win in Monza, leaving the pair just a point apart for the finale in Vallelunga. There, Giovanardi's win and second outscored Naspetti's second and third to give him a second successive title.

In parallel to the BTCC, the dip in works cars left the door open to the more competitive privateers. This gave third in the points to Roberto Colciago in his Audi, who took four victories – the first for a privately entered driver in the Italian series. Larini (three) and De Simone (two) were also in the wins, finishing fourth and fifth respectively.

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Belgium also took on super touring regulations from 1994–2000 as the lead class in the Belgian Procar series. With a calendar that largely comprised of multiple rounds at Belgium's two permanent circuits – Spa and Zolder – the championship was initially dominated by the FINA BMW team with Thierry Tassin taking the title in 1994 and 1995. Supporting the Belgian Grand Prix in 1994, the series did notch up an odd historical footnote with Philippe Adams being the last driver to race in both the Grand Prix and one of its support races. With a strong domestic focus, whilst the series became more professionalised during the super touring era, it never attained the level of attention of some of the other European championships.

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Given Volvo's success in the UK, it was unsurprising that a Swedish Touring Car Championship (STCC) was added to

the calendar at the height of super touring mania. Launched in 1996, the first season consisted of nine races over five weekends with just over ten cars appearing for each event.

With double-headers at Mantorp Park, Falkenberg, Knutstorp and Kinnekulle, together with a sole race at Karlskoga, the circuits were short and twisty, varying in lap time from 44s to 1m 24s. The field was largely comprised of BMW M3s and 318s together with a number of Mercedes 190s. However, it was Jan Nilsson, driving the sole Volvo 850, who took the title. Combining his STCC campaign with the Renault Spider Eurocup, Nilsson won six of the nine races, including the first four, which gave him a more or less unassailable championship lead. Second in the standings went to BMW Junior Team driver Thomas Johansson who took a solitary victory, as did the driver who finished third – Mikael Dahlgren, the leading Mercedes runner.

The series expanded into 1997, to 12 races spread over six double-headers. Former Swedish Grand Prix venue Anderstorp was added to the calendar, whilst crucially television coverage was introduced, albeit playing second fiddle somewhat to BTCC action.

The field also firmed up with a core of ten drivers who appeared at every round, with the same number again making occasional appearances. Nilsson returned to defend his crown (indeed, he'd race in the championship for 15 consecutive seasons) in the Volvo 850. A second competitive 850 was added for Mattias Ekstrom for his first season in touring cars. Greater manufacturer interest was to be found in a brace of works-supported Opel Vectras and Ford Mondeos, including one for rally legend Stig Blomqvist.

After a disastrous opening round at Mantorp Park, Nilsson was never again off the podium, winning eight races as he swept to the title. All the other wins went the

way of Ekstrom, who was a clear second in the standings. Thomas Johansson, returning with the BMW Junior squad, was third overall for the year. The other two drivers who regularly challenged for the rostrum were Peggen Andersson (BMW) who had won the STCC in earlier incarnations together with the Thai touring car title, and Blomqvist.

The championship ballooned again into 1998, with the addition of a privateers' cup alongside the increasingly competitive main drivers' championship. This brought a near doubling of the field with more than 20 entries for each of the six events. The calendar was shuffled to include two races at Mantorp Park, Kinnekulle having been outgrown.

There was proper manufacturer representation too. Nilsson was now equipped with the latest Volvo S40, but would have to fend off his rivals alone. There were two strong Fords for Ekstrom and Blomqvist. Opel once more had a brace of Vectras for Johansson and Jan Brunstedt, whilst BMW fielded Andersson and Fredrik Ekblom, who was returning to Sweden having failed to break into CART (Championship Auto Racing Teams) racing in the USA. Audi, Nissan and Honda were also well represented, a manufacturer mix only matched by the BTCC and STW.

Once more Nilsson had a disastrous opening weekend at Mantorp Park, but this time around he couldn't claw back the lost ground. Despite winning four races, a further retirement and a couple of finishes off the podium meant he would take second in the standings. Despite one fewer win than Nilsson, offset by scoring more podiums, Ekblom took the crown on his first attempt, with a string of five rostrums in the run-in proving decisive.

Nilsson and Ekblom were comfortably the class of the field, with third-placed Andersson almost 100 points

behind the champion. He scored two wins, but finished on the podium on only one other occasion. The other victories went to Mats Linden and Jens Edman – the latter joining as Nilsson's team-mate for the season run-in.

In 1999 there was further expansion, this time to eight weekends and a trip outside Sweden. The season started and ended with visits to Mantorp Park and then included events at Knutstorp, Karlskoga, two rounds at Anderstorp, Falkenberg and a visit to Norway and the Arctic Circle Raceway. Opened in 1995, the track is the world's northernmost circuit, and somewhat uniquely supports daylight 24-hour racing in the summer months.

The sharp end of the pack was ever stronger. Nilsson and Edman led Volvo's charge, with Ekblom and Andersson doing likewise for BMW. Opel's commitment slumped to a single car for Brunstedt, whilst Honda and Nissan expanded to two-car line-ups. The Eje Elgh-prepared Primeras, on paper, looked particularly strong, with Norwegian former BTCC privateer champion Tommy Rustad leading the team's effort. Audi also upped their commitment, luring Ekstrom to join Tommy Kristoffersson.

As in 1998, there was another keenly fought battle for the title between Ekblom and Ekstrom, with Rustad very much in the mix. Indeed, it was the Norwegian who won more races than anyone else, with seven, including a late-season four wins on the bounce. However, a poor start and disastrous finale to the season ruled him out of title contention, the Nissan driver finishing in third.

The title fight came down to a decisive final weekend at Mantorp Park where a first and second-place finish were enough to give Ekstrom the crown, just six points clear of Ekblom. Ekstrom had enjoyed a superb start to the year, with three wins in the opening six races before a lengthy

mid-year barren spell which was only righted at the season finale.

Following the trend seen a couple of years earlier in the UK, the bubble started to deflate for the 2000 season. There was still plenty of machinery available, but the grids now began to fall back into the high teens.

Again run over eight rounds, Karlskoga got to host two rounds (including the season opener) instead of Anderstorp, but otherwise the championship was staged at the same venues. Volvo boosted its line-up with champion Ekstrom lining up alongside Nilsson. Ekblom moved across to Audi to join Kristoffersson, whilst Rustad continued to lead Nissan's effort. Both BMW and Ford scaled back their support, with Andersson being the sole BMW entry, and Edman doing the same for Ford.

Once more there was a close battle for the championship with the trio of 1999 protagonists battling it out for the crown. This time it was Rustad who took the honours, becoming the first non-Swedish champion. It was consistency that won the day for the Norwegian, who scored only one win, but was only off the podium four times and outside the top ten once.

Ekblom had the crown within his grasp, taking seven wins, including the opening four races of the campaign, but a disastrous final round at Mantorp Park enabled Rustad to pip him at the line. Ekstrom was in the mix, never outside the top ten, but without the podium consistency or explosive pace of his rivals, which meant he finished third, just two points back from Ekblom.

The close of the 2000 season saw the end of an era for the STCC. Ekblom and Ekstrom moved on to pastures new, with the latter becoming a multiple DTM champion before winning the World Rallycross title as well. Ekblom would return to the STCC once the series reverted to new

regulations. However, both the 2001 and 2002 seasons would still see the super tourers in action. Both titles were claimed by the Italian Roberto Colciago alongside his campaigns in the European championship.

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Eastern European super touring action came through the Czech championship, which was predominantly based on rounds at Brno and Most, the Czech Republic's two most prominent circuits. After Milos Bychl took the title in 1994, the series was later subsumed into the FIA Central European Super Touring Trophy – taking in rounds at Brno, Most, Hungaroring, Grobnik, Salzburgring and Osterreichring, before returning to a Czech focus.

## The Factory Invasion – 1993–94

WE LEFT the BTCC at the end of 1992 to jump ahead with the super touring's fluctuating fortunes in Europe. It's now time to return to the British championship and pick up the story at the start of 1993. That was the year when the BTCC transitioned from being a high-quality national championship to one of the foremost international touring car series. The expanded manufacturer involvement saw eight different marques represented across 11 manufacturer teams.

BMW had won the first two titles of the 2.0l era, but had to weather plenty of off-season drama to get on the grid for 1993. Disenchanted with the rules that they felt weren't in their favour, BMW withdrew their Prodrive-run works entry. For VLM's title-challenging BMW squad it was the end of the road. With legal proceedings following the team's drug bust in September 1992 coming to a close, the team was liquidated as Vic Lee was sentenced to 12 years for drug trafficking. The team's assets were sold to Steve Neal and Ray Bellm (the latter selling shortly afterwards) to form Team Dynamics.

This was further compounded in Germany as the Schnitzer team withdrew from the DTM for similar reasons. Boycotting multiple championships not being a good look

for BMW, the Schnitzer team were swiftly redeployed to the British championship. Whilst works-contracted VLM refugee Steve Soper remained in the BTCC, he was joined by the German Joachim (Jo) Winkelhock, a one-time Formula 1 entrant with the Zakspeed team who had subsequently built his professional career in touring cars.

The decision to enter was taken only four months before the start of the season, with the Schnitzer team, under the guidance of the Lamm brothers, splitting operations between the team base, almost a thousand miles away in Bavaria, and a smaller unit in Silverstone – although the nomadic team would also camp at Knockhill for five weeks mid-season.

There were also big changes at Toyota. Team owner/driver Andy Rouse was replaced by the TOM'S (Toyota's tuning and (just about) arm's-length racing arm) European Team, with Will Hoy and the 1992 season-closing Julian Bailey retained, the pair running in the remodelled Carina. The older-style Carina would be campaigned in a Toyota-backed junior team (Park Lane Racing) with James Kaye and Bobby Verdon-Roe behind the wheel.

New into the championship was Renault, who had a strong driver line-up with reigning champion Tim Harvey paired with Alain Menu. Menu, who had shown strongly during the first part of 1992, was on the recovery trail following his season-ending quad bike accident at Knockhill. The Renault 19 would be the weapon of choice, in a learning year before the introduction of the Laguna for 1994. The cars would be run by GB Motorsport who had previously run Renaults in production saloons in the late 1980s. Initially planned as a partnership with Lotus, this had dissolved by the second round; the Renault factory instead were closely involved. With limited permission for

local innovation, the team had to wait for improvements from France, which finally arrived in August.

Continuity was the order of the day at Vauxhall with John Cleland and Jeff Allam retained for another season. Having come so close to claiming the title in 1992, Cleland would surely be one of the favourites for the new season, particularly as the Cavalier was a well-sorted package. The David Cook Racing (DCR) team running the effort was only 12 strong, but had the expertise to deliver results.

The Vauxhall effort would be further bolstered through the Ecurie Ecosse team where David Leslie was partnered for the most part by Harry Nuttall, who was making the move to saloons after a strong 1992 in Formula Renault. The team, as in 1992, would be run by Ray Mallock Limited (RML) continuing the partnership with benefactor Hugh McCaig. The team still faced privations, with no budget for anything other than official TOCA pre-race testing from April onward.

Robb Gravett remained in the cockpit of the Peugeot 405, the team expanding to two cars with the addition of Eugene O'Brien, who had enjoyed a sensational 1992 winning ten Formula Forward races, catapulting himself into contention for the seat. Unique amongst the works teams, the Peugeot effort was run directly from the factory (albeit in Coventry, not France). As in 1992 the infrastructure, logistics and engineering experience were built around rallying, prompting Gravett to bring in former Trakstar (his 1990 title-winning team) engineers by season's end. A second Peugeot squad, the semi-works Roy Kennedy Racing, would enter the experienced and charismatic Ian Flux.

Kieth O'dor remained the lead driver for the Janspeed-run Nissan entry, where he would be partnered with the enormously experienced Win Percy, veteran of Jaguar's

touring and sports car successes throughout the 1980s. A third car would be fielded on a semi-regular basis for Tiff Needell, who was somehow managing to combine top-level motorsport with a burgeoning television career. As ever, behind the scenes there was a bit more to it than met the eye. With 2.0l regulations being adopted for 1994 in the Japanese championship, the Nissan factory started to develop a new engine for the following season. Needell would get to try it out at Pembrey in place of Janspeed's own unit, whilst O'dor and Percy would get their chance on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit. Needell's latter-season appearances would be on an arm's length basis run by Nissan Motorsport Europe, with the primary aim of testing further evolutions of the engine.

The only single-car works entry was the Mazda team with Patrick Watts at the wheel, although this time in the potentially more competitive Xeros, the elderly 323 having been retired. With his distinctive purple and yellow livery, Watts would certainly be easy to spot. The team was run by RD Motorsport Management with Roger Dowson responsible for running and engineering the car, whilst David Palmer rounded up sponsors. Given the scale of some of the operations, the Mazda squad impressively went racing with just three full-time team members.

Rounding out the works entries was the big unknown – Ford. Launched in November 1992 and available for sale from March 1993, the Mondeo would replace the Sierra as Ford's saloon car of the 1990s. Rouse Engineering would prepare the cars, with the journey to the grid an arduous one. Although Ford's first European front-wheel drive saloon, Rouse (at Ford's discretion) took advantage of the planned launch of a four-wheel drive version at the end of 1993 to make the racing Mondeo rear-wheel drive. The team aimed to be in action from the start of the year, but only if they

were competitive. Being off the pace in pre-season testing saw them withdraw from the opening rounds, before there were further delays with a backlog at Cosworth in preparing the engines. Once available the team were sufficiently competitive in testing, before another hurdle.

The front-wheel drive Mondeo was flying out of showrooms, meaning the four-wheel drive model was pushed back indefinitely, ruling out the rear-wheel racer's eligibility. The team rapidly converted the cars to front-wheel drive specification and appeared for the first time in Pembrey, with Rouse and Paul Radisich driving. Once the team switched from Yokohama to Michelin tyres in time for Knockhill, they were truly competitive.

The winter also saw one of the big 'what ifs?' of the super touring era, as the Prodrive team came achingly close to partnering with Mercedes and AMG (Mercedes racing arm) for a campaign with Bernd Schneider and Tim Sugden as the driver pairing. Originally planned as a launch year into a full campaign into 1994, the entry ultimately never materialised, as Mercedes instead became one of the pre-eminent manufacturers in the DTM and ITC.

Whole-season privateer entries were thin on the ground, with the three-car (ex-VLM BMW) Team Dynamics entry being the best represented with Matt Neal and Alex Portman competing for the whole year and Ray Bellm also driving for the first half of the year. Ian Khan was the only other ever-present, in his Vauxhall Cavalier, whilst Dave Pinkney (BMW), Ian Ashley (Vauxhall), Ian Cantwell (Mazda) and Bob Berridge (Ford Sierra) were seen more often than not. However, given the strength and depth of the works field, giant-killing would be a tall order.

The season would be run over 14 rounds and 17 races following a similar format to the preceding seasons. Whilst

it was using the same circuits there were some slight shuffles in layout, with all the action at Brands Hatch confined to the Indy circuit, and one fewer run out on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit. The two extra events went to Donington Park and Oulton Park.

The opening race of the year on the Silverstone National circuit saw Soper and Winkelhock comfortably clear of the rest as the pair battled for victory. Winkelhock led early on before Soper took the initiative. The German was arguably the quicker of the pair, but Soper's vigorous defence coupled with strict team orders ('don't take each other off') was enough to give him the win. The podium was completed by Cleland, who was five seconds back, but in turn ten seconds clear of fourth-placed Hoy. The field may have been closer, but O'dor in the pacy Nissan was the victim of first-lap over-optimism, with others (Gravett, Bailey, Leslie) all falling by the wayside.

Round two was in support of the European Grand Prix at Donington Park on an atrociously wet day. Today, it is unlikely that the cars would have left the pits at all. As it was, the race went from lights to flag, with the rain precipitating the most unlikely result. At Silverstone the Renaults had been marooned behind the works cars, doing battle with the privateers. However, in the wet their tyres perfectly suited the conditions, allowing Harvey and Menu to claim the most unlikely one-two, Harvey romping home 16 seconds up on his team-mate. Third-placed Soper had adventures along the way, but was able to edge out a fading Cleland. O'dor, Allam and Bailey (in that order) were the only others to finish on the lead lap. Winkelhock was one of many to crash out, the BMW becoming stranded on the exit of Redgate at the start of lap two.

Normal service was resumed in qualifying for round three at Snetterton, with Menu and Harvey the last of the

works runners in 14th and 15th respectively. The field were closely matched in qualifying and closely bunched on the grid, lining up in pairs, side by side, rather than one by one. This meant a lot of traffic on the narrow run towards Riches.

Pole position had gone to Watts in the Mazda, but he made a slow getaway and was jumped by the BMWs off the line. Behind, though, there was chaos, as one of the BTCC's most replayed accidents unfolded. Allam and O'dor sandwiched Bailey, who unavoidably pitched the Nissan sideways and into Allam. The Vauxhall was turned around and became a target for the oncoming pack, of whom Neal made the most substantial contact, but several others also took a bite of Cavalier bodywork.

As the start-line accident concluded, there was more to come at Riches as Soper ran wide on the exit, having a big moment in the BMW, whilst Watts, overcompensating for his poor start, endured a lurid spin in the Mazda, ending up to the outside of the circuit. As the rest came out of Sear, the red flags flew, meaning the capacity crowd would have to wait patiently for another go.

Allam, O'dor, Watts, Neal and Team Dynamics teammate Bellm all failed to take the restart, resulting in big gaps at the front of the pack. Thereafter, the bulk of the race was a replay of Silverstone, with the brace of BMWs in control, a feisty Soper asserting his authority over Winkelhock. Nonetheless, a one-two seemed secure until Winkelhock spun trying to apply pressure to his team-mate. Undamaged, Winkelhock rejoined in fifth, but this was enough to promote Bailey in the Toyota to second, ahead of the RML-prepared Ecurie Ecosse Vauxhall of Leslie.

The second visit of the year to Donington Park followed, with Winkelhock claiming a dominant maiden BTCC win

in what was one of the year's less-interesting races, although Allam in the Vauxhall was able to split the BMWs with a fine second.

Winkelhock's winning streak continued at a sold-out Oulton Park, where once more he had the legs on the field – the Cheshire venue rapidly established as the German's favourite UK venue. Soper's race was more dramatic when a steering rack failure flung him into the barriers at speed on the entry to Cascades. In a crash-strewn race, Hoy was also fortunate to walk away from a nasty off at Druids, his Toyota almost rolling after contact with the barrier. This left the way clear for Cleland and Allam to round out the podium.

Five events into the season, the rear-wheel drive BMWs were clearly the class of the field, with the works Vauxhalls and Toyotas leading the chasing pack. Nissan had shown flashes of pace, but been bogged down by bad luck, whilst, wet weather aside, the Renaults were still a work in progress. Peugeot meanwhile were off the pace and frequently mixing with the quicker of the privateers.

The first double-header of the season was next up, two races on the Brands Hatch Indy circuit, as in 1992 separated by just ten minutes, with the grid for the second decided by the finishing order of the first.

The twistier Brands Hatch layout gave the front-wheel drive cars greater parity with the BMWs, as both the Vauxhalls and Toyotas were much closer on pace. The intensity of 30 laps of the Indy circuit inevitably claimed casualties, most notably Cleland who slid into the gravel at Druids. At the front, Leslie led the way, his Ecurie Ecosse Cavalier fractionally faster than the works cars. Winkelhock was his ever-present shadow, eventually forcing the issue at Clearways. Winkelhock saw half a gap to the inside of Leslie and lunged, finding the door emphatically closed as

he arrived, tagging the rear bumper of the Vauxhall. This pushed a furious Leslie into a half spin, the subsequent damage eventually forcing him into the pits. This elevated Nissan's O'dor to second with third going to Hoy. The recriminations from this incident would fester for months to come.

The second race saw a rare error from Winkelhock as he clattered into the barriers entering Clearways, elevating team-mate Soper for his third win of the season (making it three apiece) and the lead of the championship. O'dor was once more runner-up, from Allam, whilst Cleland and Leslie made great progress through the pack to finish fifth and sixth.

The established order received a big challenge when the field reassembled a couple of weeks later at Pembrey, which marked the debut of the Ford Mondeo in the championship. The Ford was immediately on the pace, with Andy Rouse taking a fine fourth on the grid, just two tenths back from polesitter Leslie. Qualifying favoured the front-wheel drive cars, with Winkelhock in the first of the BMWs back in sixth. However, the German made a lightning start to lead the field into Hatchet's hairpin for the first time. Leslie fought back and was soon established in a semi-comfortable lead.

Unfortunately, the Ecurie Ecosse Vauxhall hit throttle trouble shortly before mid-distance and he was forced into retirement. This duly elevated Winkelhock for his fourth win of the season, as he retook the championship lead from team-mate Soper, who finished third, behind Hoy. Meanwhile, a furious Rouse retired on lap 18, due to suspension damage incurred after repeatedly being used for target practice by his rivals. However, the latent pace of the Ford was there for all to see. It was another lively race, and

one which brought down the curtain on Pembrey's brief two-year stint on the calendar.

The midpoint of the season came on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit as part of the F1 weekend, very much the blue riband race of the season. O'dor took pole position in a sensationally close qualifying session where the top 14 were covered by under 0.9s around the two-minute lap. This result was both testament to the competitiveness of the championship and the behind-the-scenes work on balance of performance, ensuring the cars were as evenly matched as possible – although the rolling discussion point was how much additional weight the BMWs would need to run with to compensate for their rear-wheel drive advantage.

In front of a capacity crowd and with the largest field of the season, it was perhaps inevitable that the race would be lively. The exception to the drama was a delighted O'dor who claimed a maiden BTCC victory for himself, and the Nissan team. After showing promise throughout the year, this was the first time the Nissan package had come together for the whole event. The day was made even sweeter by Percy finishing second – his only high point of a frustrating season.

In a sign of what was to come, Radisich was a superb third, following a frantic dice with Winkelhock. The BMW driver pushed all the way, but couldn't make a decisive move on the Ford and, with the championship to think of, didn't risk all.

The same couldn't be said of the Toyotas who conspired to come together at Brooklands in one of the BTCC's most replayed accidents. In fairness to Bailey it wasn't a malicious move, but by badly misjudging his braking he caught Hoy at just the wrong angle, tipping the Carina upside down.

Both drivers were out on the spot, costing the team at least one podium position.

Incredibly, another car went upside down on the same lap just a corner up the track. Harvey's Renault was running some three seconds a lap off the pace, and was thus caught amongst the privateers. Heading through the fast and demanding right-hander at Bridge, he collided with Alex Portman's BMW. Portman was dispatched into the barriers at alarming speed, whilst Harvey dug into the gravel and rolled over. All this within 100m of the Toyota which had crashed seconds earlier.

Also in the wars was Soper, who was fortunate to walk away from a huge accident at Abbey on the penultimate lap. The BMW was battered, and with Winkelhock racking up points in fourth, Soper's title chances had taken a huge knock.

For its showpiece event the BTCC had delivered everything the crowd wanted: close and unpredictable racing, plenty of incidents and lots of talking points.

A return to the popular Knockhill followed for another double-header. It was a trip not taken by the Renault team, who took the opportunity to focus on developing the car. Pole position for Bailey ahead of Watts and Cleland suggested this was front-wheel drive territory. With Soper and Winkelhock in sixth and ninth respectively, they had a lot of ground to cover on a circuit light on passing opportunities.

Perhaps inevitably, this led to a fraught start to the opening race, which was red-flagged just a few corners in after a multi-car incident. Percy and James Kaye were the big losers, both being eliminated from the meeting with heavy damage.

The battle for the win was one of the closest of the year thus far, with Cleland just edging Bailey, the pair having

been inseparable throughout. Third went to Winkelhock who had steadily climbed the order, the championship pendulum swinging his way after Soper collided with Radisich and finished outside the points.

For race two, however, Soper had the opportunity to redress the balance as clutch problems prevented Winkelhock from taking the start (the ten-minute gap between the two races making substantial repairs near impossible). However, Soper failed to progress further than eighth, a missed opportunity in the title battle.

Bailey, who had been the pacesetter throughout the weekend, deservedly took his first (and what would prove to be only) BTCC win in race two, a comfortable five seconds clear of Cleland at the flag with Toyota team-mate Hoy completing the podium.

The second visit of the year to Oulton Park followed, with the field contending for the Oulton Park Gold Cup, the first time that the prestigious trophy would be awarded to touring cars. Winkelhock had loved the Cheshire venue on his first visit earlier in the season, and so it proved again, the BMW driver taking a clean sweep of pole position, fastest lap and the race win. It was Winkelhock's fifth and final win of the season; it would prove to be the final moment of BMW dominance.

In one of the season's less exciting races, Soper was runner-up by four seconds, before third-place man Cleland arrived at the flag some 17 seconds later, having had the better of a decent scrap for third ahead of Menu, in the much-improved Renault, and Bailey's Toyota.

If Oulton Park hadn't quite provided the hoped-for entertainment, the second Brands Hatch meeting of the year certainly did. Leslie took pole position, but was slow off the line, allowing Radisich to jump into the lead. Trying

to defend second, Leslie was barged aside by an assertive Winkelhock at Graham Hill Bend.

Leading the way, Radisich could hold his own in the Mondeo, but couldn't pull away, a queue of squabbling rivals forming and fracturing behind him for much of the 36 laps. The biggest fracture came when Leslie got his own back on Winkelhock at Druids, rotating the BMW to the bottom of the order.

Second on the road went to Soper, but his bold last-lap move on Gravett was deemed to be overly robust, resulting in the positions being reversed by the stewards. Fortunately for Winkelhock, none of his title rivals, Soper aside, were able to gain much ground – Cleland was well out of the points in 12th, and Bailey could do no better than fifth.

For Radisich and the Ford team it was a red-letter day. The Mondeo had been competitive since entering the championship mid-season, but now just six races in it was a race winner – and unlike the Renault at Donington Park in April, it was a winner in dry conditions on the merit of the car's competitiveness.

Finally at Thruxton, Leslie's pace translated into good fortune and he took an overdue victory in the Ecurie Ecosse Cavalier, substantially outpacing Cleland and Allam, whose works cars finished eighth and 12th respectively. Once more the Fords were on the pace, completing the podium with Radisich heading home-team boss Rouse. The leading trio were covered by 1.2s at the line, but it was a race where inherent tension overrode outright excitement.

The BMWs were a beat off, Winkelhock in particular struggling on his first visit to the Hampshire circuit, finishing to the rear of the works cars in 14th, while Soper was able to capitalise somewhat, finishing in sixth.

However, the Fords' form, coupled with there being no consistent rival to the BMW pair, meant that with three races to go either Soper or Winkelhock would take the title.

A double-header at Donington Park followed, with the drivers grappling with tyre choice on a damp and windy day. The weather-beaten crowd were buoyed by the sensational announcement that Nigel Mansell would be taking part in the season-ending TOCA shootout at the end of October.

The first race was not a thriller. After the frantic opening exchanges, polesitter Radisich was able to pull clear to win by over 13 seconds, from the Renault pairing of Menu and Harvey. Once more poor weather at the Midlands venue suited the Renault 19 and the drivers were able to show off their speed. Crucially, with the finishing order setting the grid for race two, they wouldn't have to carve through the field.

It was mixed fortunes once again for BMW, as handling issues forced Soper into retirement, whilst Winkelhock stayed out of trouble to finish fifth, restoring the points gap he'd lost in Thruxton.

On a drying circuit the second race was more entertaining, as Menu took advantage of an error from Radisich at the Old Hairpin to sweep into the lead. Trying to reclaim the lead on the last lap, Radisich locked up under braking into the Melbourne Hairpin, the skidding Ford crunching into Menu and pushing him into a half spin. Spinning it as sportsmanship in the post-race interview (which it was, but had he made the pass stick it would have been a certain penalty), Radisich slowed to allow Menu to pull away in the lead and take his first BTCC victory.

Winkelhock was highly content with his lonely third – securing a decent points haul, whilst staying out of trouble.

Soper charged through to finish fifth, which left him with a mathematical tilt at the title in the final race.

As the field assembled at Silverstone, Soper faced an uphill task – he needed to win with Winkelhock finishing outside the points. For the German the task was easier – just score a point and the title was his.

The BMW pair would line up fifth (Soper) and seventh (Winkelhock) with Radisich, Hoy and Leslie heading the field. As the lights went green Winkelhock made a sensational start, fully exploiting the BMW's rear-wheel drive to challenge the leaders into Copse. It was a dream getaway for the German that was ultimately for nothing, as the red flags came out midway through the second lap with Gravett's battered Peugeot stranded on the entry to Luffield.

Second time around, Soper headed his team-mate into Copse as both focused on avoiding any first-lap incidents. There was a big accident, but it happened behind them as O'Brien was tipped accelerating towards Becketts. His Peugeot lurched sideways and cannoned into the luckless Percy, in a high-speed incident that destroyed both cars.

Thereafter for the title, it was high-speed chess. Soper was in a solid fifth but adrift of the leading quartet of Radisich, Rouse, Hoy and Leslie and therefore somewhat reliant on a multi-car shunt to deliver him victory. Winkelhock had a more precarious race; caught in the mid-field-dog fights, he picked his moments very carefully to eventually finish eighth.

Up front Radisich scored his third win of the season, his run of form enough to secure him third in the championship, despite having only completed half the season. Team-mate Rouse followed him home, and Hoy completed the podium.

Meanwhile, it was delight for the Schnitzer BMW team, who took both the manufacturers' and drivers' titles

– making it three titles in succession for BMW. Against pre-season expectations it was BTCC novice Winkelhock who took the crown. The success of the German squad signalled that the BTCC was in a new era: no longer a hugely popular domestic championship, it was increasingly viewed as the pre-eminent global touring car series – something that would be reinforced during 1994.

The BMWs won eight of the 17 races, but their domination was not absolute, and had the Mondeos been on the grid for the whole season, the title fight could have looked very different. As it was, the run of early-season victories coupled with there being no consistent challenger from elsewhere was enough for a comfortable title – and the second BMW driver in succession to take the crown.

Behind Radisich, fourth went to Cleland, who, aside from a standout weekend at Knockhill, had a patchy season. The David Cook-prepared works Vauxhalls were frequently outpaced by the RML Ecurie Ecosse entries, resulting in RML picking up the works contract for the following year. Despite finishing all but one race, Allam in the second works entry finished ninth in the standings.

Leslie finished one place ahead in eighth for Ecurie Ecosse, but the final standings weren't a fair reflection of the Scot's pace as numerous incidents throughout the season meant that some excellent qualifying positions weren't rewarded with race results. Team-mate Nuttall finished the year in 17th having struggled to break into the points in most races.

The Toyotas of Bailey and Hoy finished fifth and seventh in the standings, with both drivers having scored multiple podiums (Bailey the only win at Knockhill). The team's season would be best remembered for the Silverstone incident, but that and the Knockhill meeting were the

only occasions when both cars were on form together. Throughout the rest of the season it was a case of either/or for the team's performance. The TOM'S team were able to throw resources at the problem but, as with others on the grid, the team were used to racing in other categories (in this case, world sportscars) and found the adjustment to 2.01 touring cars a big one.

The beneficiary of the Toyotas' Silverstone misfortune was Nissan's O'dor whose mid-season purple patch gave him sixth in the standings. Later in the season, the Nissan's pace faded relative to the competition. Team-mate Percy had a similarly frustrating year, finishing 12th in the standings but enduring a miserable second half of the campaign. Ultimately, the Nissans' pace was dependent on the engines they were using – when O'dor had the latest Japanese power plant at Silverstone he flew, but the hardware was only sporadically available.

Renault meanwhile had a strange year. Most weekends the Renault 19 was well off the pace (although the decision to skip Knockhill to develop the car did deliver results in the second half of the year), but the two wet events at Donington Park delivered a win apiece for Menu and Harvey. The Swiss came out on top, finishing tenth in the standings to Harvey's 14th, but all watchers knew the drivers were better than the car. Had the team either been able to make developments autonomously or ship parts over from France sooner, they would have got to the sharp end earlier. With all the development taking place in France, the second version of the 19 was only available from August onward and, whilst an improvement, was already a step off some rivals.

Peugeot's season was a triumph for their parts suppliers, but not the drivers. Frequently in the wars, Gravett's Brands Hatch second place was the solitary high point in a difficult

campaign. When he and O'Brien stayed out of trouble, the 405 was in points contention, but never looked like winning a race. Whilst a noble effort, the team structure meant that, unlike others, circuit racing expertise and experience wasn't readily at hand, slowing development and at-track decision-making.

Similar tales of endurance were to be found at Mazda, where Watts occasionally wrung front-running pace from the Xedos, but also had more than his fair share of retirements. The tiny team was able to punch above its weight on occasion, but over a whole season would never be able to keep pace with an operation the size of Schnitzer's. Watts's summation of the year is succinct: 'The 92 323 was very underpowered but the 93 Xedos was better with the V6 engine but still not the best, but it handled well so I could push it in qualifying. Pushing that hard would eat the tyres so I always went backwards after qualifying.'

The privateers' battle was largely fought between Neal and Khan, with Neal taking the TOCA Challenge by just two points.

With championship business concluded it was on to the TOCA Shootout, featuring Nigel Mansell. With over 30 years' distance, it is worth re-emphasising just how huge a draw Mansell was in 1993. Having claimed the 1992 F1 title, he switched to IndyCar for 1993 and claimed that crown too (but lost out on the Indianapolis 500 following a late caution).

Arguably Britain's most popular sports personality at the time, the public had been starved of 'Our Nige' in 1993 – indeed, for those without Sky, updates of his exploits in the Indianapolis 500 were slotted between Open University lectures on Radio 5 in the days before it gained its news and sport focus (I remember well listening to a 15-minute lecture

that spanned the final laps). Thus the announcement that he would be entering the touring car fray and competing in the TOCA Shootout was big news.

A crowd of 60,000 fans was drawn to Donington Park for the final weekend of October to see Mansell in action. That Footwork F1 driver Derek Warwick would be making his touring car debut as well was almost a footnote.

Despite the interest, the entry for the 1993 event was actually significantly weaker than in 1992. Very few of the BTCC regulars were there, with only Ford, Ecurie Ecosse and Peugeot fielding full-strength squads – albeit with different line-ups: Mansell and Radisich at Ford, Leslie partnered by Tiff Needell and Hayden Measham at Ecurie Ecosse, and Formula Ford legend Dave Coyne alongside Gravett at Peugeot.

Watts, meanwhile, was out in his Mazda and a single BMW was fielded for Soper. Warwick would be out in Park Lane Toyota repaying a favour to team principal Roland Dane. The rest of the field comprised of some regular privateers (Neal, Portman, Khan, Ashley) and some irregulars including Klaus Zwart and rock singer Chris Rea. In truth, it wasn't the highest-quality line-up for the 30-lap race.

For the time, the format messed with the norms – the field lined up with a reverse grid (although Rea opted to start at the back anyway), the pace car would make frequent appearances to bunch the field up, and as the race progressed the last-placed runner would be black-flagged into the pits.

Leslie and Radisich had the pace of the field on the day, although had things panned out differently it is likely that Mansell (probably with some rearguard assistance from Radisich) would have won. As it was, Leslie took the flag and the cash prize, a deserved win at the end of a season when he had shone.

However, the race is remembered for Mansell's crash exiting the Old Hairpin, which, as Britain's sporting hero was removed to hospital, led news bulletins that evening. Throughout the race Mansell was giving the crowd what they wanted, a hard-charging drive as he wrung the neck of the Mondeo. Once an early fuel-pump issue had been rectified he was clearly one of the fastest drivers in the field.

He was also, in classic Mansell style, taking unnecessary risks. This was particularly the case at the Old Hairpin where more than once the Mondeo pitched sideways at the adverse camber right-hander. Eventually and inevitably, Mansell had a big moment: having just passed Soper, he slewed completely sideways and in over-correcting the error found himself in Needell's path. Despite slamming on the brakes, Needell ploughed into the back of Mansell, firing the Mondeo off into the wall at Starkey's Bridge, the driver's side smashing into the concrete.

It was a massive accident at one of the least protected (i.e. no one crashes there) parts of the otherwise very safe circuit. Fortunately, the direct impacts with the wall were just ahead of, and behind, the cockpit, as otherwise the outcome could have been very different. As it was, Mansell was knocked unconscious and was immobile in the car as it came to rest. The massed crowd, who moments before had been cheering their hero, fell absolutely silent, and there was an agonising wait for updates. To everyone's relief, Mansell was largely OK (although an interview for BBC's *Grandstand* the following weekend, not uncharacteristically, made the most of his injuries) escaping with concussion and cracked rib, and he was cleared to fly home to Florida the following day.

The aftermath was almost as substantial as the smash itself. Mansell took no time in blaming Needell – an accusation that didn't hold much water at the height of

Mansell-mania and which makes no sense now. From all the angles it is clear that Needell had nowhere to go and did everything he could to avoid the incident – there was no intent whatsoever on his part. Meanwhile, Duke Video made all they could of the angles, rush-releasing the highlights for Christmas on VHS, the marketing blurb trumpeting that the tape featured coverage of the crash from more than seven cameras.

Rewatching the footage now, the whole weekend comes across as somewhat unedifying, but as a ten-year-old watching on the bank at the Old Hairpin with my home-made Red 5 flag, it felt anything but. For all the peripheral drama that came with him, there is no doubt that Mansell's ability to draw and thrill a crowd was unrivalled – as would be the case again later in the decade.

If 1993 had been a year of accelerated evolution, then 1994 was a season of revolution, thanks to technical innovations around aerodynamics. The series also hit a high point of manufacturer and public interest that would be sustained for several years to come.

From Italy, the factory Alfa Romeo, Alfa Corse squad entered, with the controversial Alfa Romeo 155 TS, the cars running on a rumoured budget of £6m for the season. The required 2,500 models had been built for homologation purposes. If, in 1993, the near-showroom-esque styling of the cars had masked the rapidly evolving technology, the 155 TS complete with its aerodynamic spoilers was a racing car that was retrofitted for the road.

The regulations allowed for cars to be fitted with spoilers provided a sufficient number of road-going examples had been made available – a loophole which Ford, Toyota and Peugeot had exploited in the previous year. Alfa Romeo went a step further, designing an aerodynamic package that,

as would subsequently be seen, gave it a noticeable advantage over its rivals. A special ‘Silverstone’ edition of the 155 was duly made available – primarily a limited run of 2,500 kits that added 20cm of height to the rear wing, squeaking through homologation compliance, and ultimately triggering a step change of development for the following seasons.

Behind the wheel was F1 refugee Gabriele Tarquini and his compatriot Giampiero Simoni who was making the switch to touring cars after two Formula 3000 campaigns had failed to open the door to F1. The team was headed by Ninni Russo, principal of Lancia’s rally operations, and was largely growing out of the Abarth team that ran the rallying Lancias. Although very Italian, the team’s UK base was a corner of Prodrive in Banbury. Alongside the UK operation, cars were always in preparation back in Italy with models planned to traverse Europe throughout the season.

At the other end of the aerodynamic spectrum, Volvo entered the championship with a racing version of the 850 Estate car. The bulky looks were an immediate talking point, and the Swedish firm more than achieved its PR objectives with acres of column inches. The boxy design meant that a title run was unlikely, but the unusual layout did allow for a more even weight distribution across the car.

However, behind the novelty factor, this was a more-than-serious full works effort, run by Tom Walkinshaw Racing (TWR), the squad behind Jaguar’s touring car and Le Mans successes in the 1980s. TWR took on the Volvo contract with the ambition of securing the drivers’ title within three years. The 850 was designed by Richard Owen, but he would leave the team mid-season, leaving ex-Formula 1 and bike GP engineer John Gentry heading up the technical side of things. Although there was plenty of

technical firepower, most of the team had little to no prior experience of running 2.0l touring cars.

The driver line-up was a statement of intent, pairing 1988 Le Mans winner Jan Lammers and Swede Rickard Rydell, who knew the British circuits following a handful of British Formula 3 campaigns, before furthering his career in Japan.

Team Schnitzer would once again run the BMW operation, the team and lead driver Winkelhock hoping to retain their crown. Having been nomadic in 1993, this team consolidated around their Freilassing base in Germany, working trackside in the UK when they needed to. The operation would be further complicated by the team also taking on the BMW contract for the Japanese Touring Car Championship (JTCC). On the driving side, whilst Winkelhock prioritised the BTCC, Soper would miss several rounds to focus on the JTCC, being replaced on these occasions by Roberto Ravaglia.

Andy Rouse Engineering continued to run the Ford Mondeo, with continuity from 1993's part season the order of the day. Rouse signalled his intention to retire from the cockpit at the end of 1994, but would be wearing many hats throughout the year, with Radisich remaining the team's lead driver.

Outwardly at least, Vauxhall were also going for continuity, with the Cavalier still the car of choice, Cleland and Allam behind the wheel. However, behind the scenes there were big changes, with Ray Mallock Limited (RML) taking on the works contract from Dave Cook Racing Services. With a long-term contract in place, the team were already casting an eye towards the 1995 entry and the Cavalier update or replacement for 1996. Building everything bar engine and gearbox in-house, it was hoped

the team would push Vauxhall's performance beyond what DCR had been able to do. Mallock himself would be engineering Cleland's car.

The Renault entry would be run for the final time by GB Motorsport, who had worked wonders during 1993 to make the Renault 19 a race winner. For 1994 it was all change with the introduction of the Laguna, with the design and prototype work being undertaken by Renault Sport in France. However, GB Motorsport were entrusted with building the race chassis at their Buckingham base, albeit with the promise of close technical partnership with France. Menu and Harvey would remain as drivers, the pair having outperformed the car at times the previous year.

Toyota's effort would again be run by the TOM'S team, albeit on an underfunded basis (the two cars were run by a staff of ten, compared to 30 or so at Alfa Romeo), with Toyota's UK importer taking responsibility for the team. The unusual structure looked likely to cause tension during the season. Hoy and Bailey remained the team's lead drivers with Sugden also getting occasional outings.

Peugeot once again maintained its position as the 'true' factory team, still being based directly in the French firm's Coventry facility, with – having not rushed to learn the lessons of prior seasons – many team staff being Peugeot employees on assignment rather than specific motorsport hires. Watts made the move from the small RD Motorsport Mazda team with whom he'd enjoyed occasional success in 1993, to be partnered by Eugene O'Brien, staying with the team for a second season. As to how the move came about, Watts recalls, 'Basically, Peugeot realised their mistake letting me go after I won the Esso Saloon car championship for them in 91, so it was Gravett out, Watts in for 94.' At a time when Peugeot was enjoying success in the French

championship, few of the trick parts or technical innovations were finding their way across the channel.

The Nissan Primeras would once again be run by Janspeed, with Kieth O'dor the team's lead driver. He would be partnered by the Belgian Eric van de Poele who had spent the previous three years driving some very bad cars in the hope of breaking into Formula 1. With the contract to build Primeras for the German and Spanish championships alongside the British campaign, the team would certainly be busy, although, as ever, there was the hanging question as to how much technical support would materialise from Japan.

RD Motorsport had big ambitions for expanding Mazda's chances, partnering with Team Dynamics and Steve Neal to expand to a two-car project. This meant that Matt Neal would be one of the drivers, alongside David Leslie, who deserved more from the 1993/94 silly season. Despite ambitions, there was little money to fund the operation from Mazda, and the cars' all-white livery signified a dearth of sponsorship and likely tough times ahead.

Kicking off at Thruxton, qualifying at least seemed close, as despite the controversial aerodynamic devices, Tarquini's Alfa Romeo only took pole from Cleland by 0.1s. Tarquini led away as a fast-starting Radisich tried to challenge for the lead in front of a huge crowd at the Complex. The over-enthusiastic effort from the Ford brought Winkelhock into the mix, before he in turn was shuffled back by Cleland.

Up front, Tarquini had established a comfortable lead, pulling clear of Radisich and Cleland, with then more daylight back to the chasing pack. A brave move out of Church and up Woodham Hill was enough to give Cleland second, as Radisich fell into the clutches of a charging Simoni. The battle was hard fought, but came to a head at

the Complex as Simoni clattered into Radisich ending his race, whilst plunging the Italian down the order. Elsewhere, O'Brien escaped a massive head-on impact into tyres at the chicane.

With Simoni and Radisich out of the running, Tarquini took the win from Cleland (who closed late on through canny tyre conservation), with Winkelhock completing the podium.

The first double-header of the season followed a fortnight later at Brands Hatch, where ominously the Alfas locked out the front row for the opening race. From pole, Tarquini dominated to take a comfortable win, Simoni eventually taking second after a close battle, with Cleland completing the podium by edging out Rouse.

The grid set by the finishing order from race one, it was again Tarquini and Simoni on the front row in race two. Tarquini made a good start to lead away, but Simoni was slow off the line and lost more ground trying to cover the inside from a lightning start by Cleland. The Vauxhall slipped through and as Radisich then tried to follow into the same gap, there was contact, with Simoni spun into the barrier approaching Paddock before bouncing back into the pack.

At the front, Tarquini led from Cleland and Rouse, the rest of the pack closely bunched behind. Simoni's recovery was slowed by contact with Sugden at Clearways, the Alfa Romeo now somewhat battered. The main tussles were in the mid-field as Menu (briefly, until mechanical trouble struck) and Winkelhock pushed through the pack after race-one dramas.

The order for the podium remained unchanged, as Tarquini took a comfortable third win in succession, the Alfa Romeo's aerodynamic advantage coming to the fore at

the tight Kent venue. Second for Cleland added to his points haul, with Rouse and Radisich third and fourth respectively showing the Ford was on the pace.

Round four at Snetterton followed on a very muted May bank holiday Monday. Coming the day after Ayrton Senna's death at Imola, the last thing many in the paddock wanted to do was go motor racing. Despite that, a huge crowd assembled to enjoy the action.

Off track the Alfas were coming under ever more scrutiny with Ford and Vauxhall challenging the positioning of the car's rear spoiler, which was more extended than on the road-going version. For now, the team raced on with the extended spoiler, once more sweeping the front row with Simoni on pole.

It was Simoni who made the better start to lead from Radisich and Tarquini. Menu had qualified well up the order in the Laguna and made a good start, before the Renault's gearbox failed heading down the Revett straight on the opening lap. Having built a good initial advantage, Simoni ran wide at Sear letting both Radisich and Tarquini through. The Ford driver now had a job on to keep Tarquini behind him. Immediately, the Italian was on the offensive, giving the Ford a bumper dislodging bash into the Russell chicane. A lap later Tarquini was through at the same spot, while in the fight for third Simoni had O'dor, Harvey and O'Brien right on his tail.

The mid-field fights were as fraught as ever, Winkelhock once more in the firing line as he was drop-kicked from contention when Lammers's brakes faded into the chicane. Even more dramatic was the collision between Cleland and Harvey charging down the Revett straight, the Vauxhall spinning (several times) into retirement. To complete the set of Volvo accidents at the Russell chicane, Rydell and Sugden

collided in a near replica of the Lammers/Winkelhock incident with the exact same result.

Out front, however, it was comfortable once more for Tarquini, continuing his clean sweep for the season thus far, ahead of Radisich and Simoni. Four races in, Tarquini now had twice as many points as his rivals.

Another double-header followed, this time on the Silverstone National circuit. Finally, in qualifying the Alfa dominance was broken with Menu pipping Tarquini to the pole position. Tarquini made a better start to take the inside into Copse, but Menu carried superior exit speed to reclaim the lead, with Harvey slotting in to third.

For the first time Tarquini was matched for pace in race conditions and couldn't claim the lead at will. Menu was by now established as a wily and robust defender of position, using his Formula Ford experience to fend off the Alfa. In fourth, Radisich latched his Mondeo on to the leading group.

Simoni meanwhile was caught in the mid-field, losing several positions after running wide at Brooklands. Attempting to recover ground with an over-ambitious move into Copse, the Alfa Romeo flew off at near-unabated speed, slamming driver side into the tyre wall. Fortunately Simoni was unharmed (if winded), but the car was destroyed.

Tarquini managed to snatch the lead at Luffield when Menu left the door half open, the Swiss immediately under pressure from the now third-placed Radisich. Menu, having given his best shot, waved Radisich through, giving the Ford driver a chance of reeling in Tarquini.

They stayed in that order until the red flags came out following a massive accident between the Mazdas and privateer Chris Goodwin. Running out of Copse, Goodwin was sandwiched, ping-ponging between the Mazda pair and finally tipping Neal into a ferociously fast barrel roll,

the accident eventually finishing at Becketts. Neal was, fortunately, largely OK, but wouldn't appear again in 1994.

Rouse led into Copse for the start of round six as once more Tarquini needed to work if he was to make it six from six. Coming into Luffield, Radisich snatched second, before Menu also tried to clear Tarquini. However, the space wasn't there and Menu pushed Tarquini into a spin where he was T-boned by an unsighted O'dor. With two wrecked cars in the middle of the road, the red flags came back out.

With the Alfa Romeo beyond immediate repair, Tarquini wouldn't take the restart, so his winning streak was at an end. Rouse jumped the restart and received a five-second stop-and-go penalty, emerging in front of the battle for the lead between Radisich and Menu. The Renault driver was frustrated by what he regarded as Rouse's reluctance to move aside. Whether or not Rouse was the decisive factor, Menu couldn't overhaul Radisich, who took Ford's first win of the season, with Watts having a fine drive for third.

Alfa Romeo wouldn't triumph at Oulton Park on the next bank holiday Monday either. The protest lodged ahead of Snetterton found in favour of Ford and Vauxhall with the ruling that the 155's spoilers couldn't be used in the extended position. Rather than modify the car, the Italian team withdrew from the meeting, deciding to fight an appeal the following week. Pending that, Tarquini lost his Snetterton and Silverstone points, elevating (for now) Radisich into the lead of the championship.

The Renaults of Menu and Harvey locked out the front row, but the pair were jumped by Radisich into Old Hall, the Ford driver making the early running. The opening stages provided some great racing as Radisich was harried by Menu, the Swiss pushing way past into Cascades on the second lap. Menu duly claimed a much-deserved first win

of the season, a fine repayment for his pace during the year so far. Radisich claimed more good points in second, with Watts once more completing the podium.

The Alfa Romeos were back for the Donington Park double-header, with a partial vindication. Their points were reinstated, so Tarquini was back in the lead of the title race, but they had to race with a retracted front spoiler. This had an immediate effect as Radisich took pole, taking the initial advantage from Cleland with Tarquini in third. In fourth, Rouse was busy attempting to fend off the Renaults of Harvey and Menu, with the rest closely bunched behind. Into the second lap and the Renault pair were past Rouse and off after the leading trio, Menu soon passing Harvey.

At the head of the field Tarquini was a beat adrift in third as Cleland piled the pressure on to Radisich, the Vauxhall generally faster than the Ford through McLeans and Coppice, but in turn the Mondeo a little faster on the run down to the Esses. Meanwhile, Menu lost fourth following contact with Rouse, which plunged the Renault into a lurid spin. Finally, at Coppice, Cleland was able to force the move, which proved decisive to give him the win.

Mechanical issues prevented Tarquini from taking the start in race two, leaving the way clear for Cleland and Radisich to dispute the win. This time Cleland led from the start, before Radisich took the lead into the Esses towards the end of the first lap. The advantage for Cleland as the race wore on was his Dunlop tyres, which were longer-lasting in the hot conditions, allowing him to once more apply pressure in the latter stages. This time around the decisive move came at the Melbourne Hairpin as the Cavalier darted to the inside. It would stay that way to the flag, and the Donington double would prove to be Cleland's only wins of

the season. Third went to Allam who also took advantage of the Dunlops to come through the field late on.

The next stop was another double-header, this time on the Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit, returning to the calendar after skipping 1993. After a challenging weekend at Donington Park, Tarquini bounced back with a vengeance, taking second on the grid, to team-mate Simoni – the Alfas over a second up on their rivals.

At the start, Tarquini was the beneficiary of the legendary second slot on the grid, using the flatter profile of the circuit to lead Simoni into Paddock for the first time, with Watts and Radisich disputing third from Menu and Soper. The Renault's chances were dented due to contact with Soper heading on to the Grand Prix loop.

Watts prevailed over Radisich to take third in the early exchanges (albeit with the Ford hovering), and the front order remained unchanged, with Simoni content to run behind Tarquini. The main action proved to be the fight for third as Radisich moved through following a brave move at Dingle Dell.

At the front, the Alfa Romeos flew in formation unchallenged, Tarquini getting the nod, but there was last-lap drama for third. Running up to Druids, Watts tagged Radisich, the Ford driver plunging into the gravel and out of the race. It was only slight contact, and a genuine error from the Peugeot arriving into the braking zone too fast. Watts was immediately into Soper's clutches, but held off the BMW to claim his third podium of the season.

After the short break Tarquini started from pole for the second race. He led away as Simoni was dropped to fifth, being passed by Watts, Soper and Lammers, setting up the story of the race. Lammers was the first picked off by Simoni, demoted with a move to the inside at Surtees.

Soon Simoni was on Soper's tail, challenging down Pilgrim's Drop before finally making the move into Dingle Dell, with Lammers somehow also squeezing the 850 Estate past the BMW. The Volvo fairy tale ended on the next lap when Cleland tagged Soper into Druids, the ripple effect spinning out the Volvo.

Out front Tarquini was dominant, as Simoni passed Watts into Surtees, setting an identical podium for the second race, Tarquini scoring his seventh win of the season. Tyres forced Radisich out of race two, and Cleland struggled to escape the bottom half of the top ten, meaning Tarquini left Kent with a much-enlarged championship lead. Behind, there had been some brilliant racing in the mid-field, the super tourers enjoying an outing on the Brands Hatch Grand Prix loop before aerodynamic spoilers on the cars made passing all but impossible.

Round 12 was the blue riband race of the season, supporting the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. With the starting pistol fired on the aerodynamic arms race, both Renault and BMW brought uprated cars, the performance improvement being enough to give Winkelhock pole, ahead of sometime team-mate Ravaglia.

At the lights Ravaglia was faster away to lead into Copse, but behind all hell broke loose. Menu turned across Bailey for third, causing the Toyota to spin, triggering a multi-car pile-up, taking out at least seven cars. Fortunately, there weren't too many hefty impacts, so everyone escaped uninjured, but it was a much-depleted field. Not taking the restart, however, was Ravaglia, whose electrics had failed, forcing him to be pushed from the grid.

Once they were underway, Tarquini took the initial advantage from Winkelhock, but the BMW driver stayed right on his tail throughout, with a gap to the Radisich

and the Renault pairing. It was a great dice for the lead, Winkelhock taking it with a bold pass at Becketts, before Tarquini reclaimed the advantage at Stowe, then it was back in Winkelhock's favour at Club. That settled it and, thereafter, Winkelhock was challenged but unheaded – the BMW now very much a match at the front of the field.

From the expanse of the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit, it was on to Knockhill at the end of July and the tightest circuit of the season, together with a further glut of aerodynamic spoilers on the cars.

The opening race of the day was initially headed by polesitter Radisich from Winkelhock (who would subsequently retire with mechanical woes) and Menu, as Tarquini was down in the mid-field. As Radisich was forced into an increasing rearguard action, Tarquini was involved in one of the iconic moments of the season, as he was tipped into a destructive barrel roll by Harvey (who would subsequently be disqualified). The Alfa Romeo was completely destroyed, as Tarquini walked away uninjured. However, he would score no points from the double-header, allowing others to narrow his title lead.

The race was decided on the penultimate lap as Menu pushed past Radisich into Duffus Dip. Radisich then came under sustained pressure from Soper, but held on by a bonnet length for second ahead of the BMW. This gave Menu his second win of the season, the Renault, now alongside Alfa Romeo, BMW and Ford as one of the front-running cars.

Menu converted pole for race two into an early lead from Radisich and Soper, as the rest jostled for position. Soper's initial work was in keeping Harvey at bay for third, as Menu and Radisich tried to gap the field. Soper soon fended off the Renault and set off after Radisich, moving to second with a neatly executed move into the hairpin. Before long Soper

was on to Menu, setting up a battle for the win between two of the hardest chargers in the championship. Once more the move came at the hairpin as Menu was fractionally wide after a snatched brake, opening the door for Soper. That set the order to the flag, giving Soper his only win of the season but, in a signal of BMW's changing fortunes, their second win in three races.

More BMW domination was to follow. In the single-race meeting at Oulton Park, Winkelhock was second on the grid but jumped a slow-starting Menu to lead from Tarquini into Old Hall. The frantic first lap was punctuated by a spectacular spin from Cleland at Druids, as Winkelhock stretched his lead out front. From fourth, Menu set about recovering; his first target, Radisich, mounted a stout defence, but was eventually passed by the Renault – mechanical issues shortly thereafter forcing the Ford out. Menu soon cleared Tarquini, but couldn't do anything about Winkelhock who took a comfortable victory on a circuit he loved.

Next stop was a Brands Hatch Indy double-header, where BMW swept the front row from the Alfas. A less than exciting opening race saw Winkelhock take the honours from Tarquini and Simoni. Behind, both Radisich and Cleland hit trouble, opening the door for Menu to claw back ground in the fight for second, albeit with the loss of some points following a last-gasp loss of position at the flag.

The podium result was repeated in race two, but not after plenty of incident. The initial start was red-flagged following a collision between O'dor and Hamish Irvine, an accident triggered by Watts being spun by Hoy. Both O'dor and Irvine were completely blameless. At the restart Soper slotted in behind Winkelhock in the early running, as Allam was a victim of early-race jostling, pushed into a high-speed incident on the run to Surtees. Tarquini was quick to

clear Soper into Clearways, the BMW rapidly falling into the clutches of the Renaults, with Simoni close behind. As the order settled at the front, Simoni was on the march, dispatching Soper at Druids, before doing the same to Menu at Paddock. The podium was completed when mechanical issues struck Harvey, promoting Simoni to third.

The penultimate meeting at Silverstone was enough to give Tarquini the title. With the Fords' development outpaced by that of BMW and Renault, Radisich was well down the order, meaning Tarquini just needed to finish ahead of the Kiwi. A blast around the Grand Prix circuit was sufficient to draw the second-largest crowd of the season. Harvey took the early advantage in race one from Tarquini and Simoni, which he would hold throughout, despite early pressure, to score his sole win of the season. Likewise, Tarquini held second for the duration, the battle being the one for third, as Menu carved through to complete the podium. Behind, Radisich suffered a blown engine, his retirement conferring the title to Tarquini, with Menu gaining ground in the battle for second in the standings – his chances further accelerated as the Ford was unable to start the latter race.

Tarquini got to celebrate his title a couple of laps early, after a stricken Irvine was harpooned by Albon, the two wrecked privateer cars blocking the track, resulting in an inevitable red flag.

The short gap between races didn't give Tarquini much time to indulge in off-track celebration instead, the Italian marked his title success by scoring victory in race two. Without having to conserve points, Tarquini survived some first-corner rubbing with Harvey and Menu, leading thereafter to take his eighth and final win of the season. Menu continued his rich run of form, taking second, to ease

ahead of Radisich in the championship, as Simoni rounded out the rostrum. Behind, O'Brien was fortunate to walk away from a monstrous high-speed accident on the Hanger Straight after the Peugeot was pushed into a spin on a frantic first lap.

With both the drivers' and manufacturers' championships sewn up, only the remaining championship standings were left to play for at the Donington Park season finale. The Ford team wanted a strong weekend, both to try to secure second for Radisich and give Rouse a strong farewell in his last race before he retired from the championship.

Radisich did his part of the deal, taking the opening race, but with Menu coming home second, it meant that going into the last race they were tied for the runner-up spot in the points. Simoni took third after an error from Winkelhock, whilst an uncharacteristic mistake for Tarquini left him marooned in the Old Hairpin gravel.

Unfortunately, the much-hoped-for Radisich/Menu battle was ruined before it started, when the Ford suffered a mechanical issue on the formation lap, leaving him to start from the pit lane rather than pole position. Simoni took the lead from Menu into Redgate. Despite Menu's best efforts, Simoni had an excellent defensive drive, keeping the Renault behind to take his only win of the year. With Radisich's chase through the field yielding no more than ninth place, second for Menu was more than enough to take the championship runner-up spot. Winkelhock came through a frenetic dice to take third. From the back of the grid Tarquini charged through the order to fourth, enjoying pushing the Alfa Romeo to the limit. He also managed to squeeze in one of the iconic images of the season, launching the 155 on to two wheels after clipping the tyres at the Esses.

As a coda to the season, the TOCA Shootout would return for the third and final time. On this occasion it was held as part of the Touring Car World Cup event at Donington Park in mid-October. Supported by all the works teams bar Renault and Toyota, the race was won by Radisich, who claimed the £12,000 prize from Allam and Cleland.

Despite the non-fight for the title, 1994 was one of the great years of the super touring era, managing to straddle the worlds of being a top international championship attracting Formula 1 calibre drivers, whilst also still being full of local favourites. Likewise, the machinery was highly evolved, but only a step removed from something you'd find at your local dealership.

For Alfa Romeo it was a case of job done, benefitting as is so often the case from being a technical step ahead of their rivals in the early rounds and thus having a comfortable points' buffer once the others caught up. From the F1 round at Silverstone onwards, the 155 was on a more even footing, slightly pegged back as others caught up. Prior to Silverstone it was felt that the 155's aerodynamics conferred an advantage of some 0.3s. Along with Ford and Renault, the team made good use of the Michelin tyres, which were generally the most competitive of the three tyres on the grid (alongside Dunlop and Yokohama), albeit with a narrower operating window.

The team was, as is often the case when winning, a happy one, with 30 to 40 attending each race, the team's high-quality Italian catering a notable departure from the standard paddock fare.

It was evident that Tarquini was a standout talent, at a level that deserved a more fulfilling Formula 1 career than he endured. He made few mistakes en route to the title. Simoni was a solid backup, scoring enough top-three

finishes to prevent others from pressuring Tarquini, but non-scores in Silverstone and Donington Park double-headers meant he could do no better than fifth in the points.

For the final months of 1993 the Ford Mondeo was the most competitive touring car package, but by early 1994 it had already been surpassed. For the first half of the season it was still the best of the rest, with Radisich notching an impressive five seconds and a win. The double retirement at Brands Hatch mid-season proved to be a setback he never really recovered from and, once others made aerodynamic strides, the Mondeo slipped down the pecking order. Given the late-season run of retirements it was arguable that too much was being asked of a car that wasn't quite there – even so, Radisich was unfortunate to slip to third in the standings in the final race of the year. In his last year behind the wheel and carrying team principal duties, Rouse was 11th overall, an early-season rostrum at Brands Hatch the highlight.

Renault were arguably the surprise package of the season, Menu showing strongly at the one-third mark of the year, before a superb run-in when the upgraded Laguna was a near match for the 155. The biggest mid-season turnaround, though, came from 1993 champions BMW. Harvey wasn't quite at Menu's level, taking ninth overall, but a popular winner late in the year at Silverstone. The big advantage of the Laguna compared to the 19 was the much-improved rear suspension, although, unlike Alfa Romeo, Renault failed to homologate some parts in time – had they done so, the season could have been closer. GB Motorsport had done a fine job in making the new Laguna competitive, with second in the manufacturers' standings a super result. However, in a signal of the growth of the championship, they would be replaced for 1995 by the newly formed touring car arm of the Williams F1 team.

With just a solitary podium to show for the 1993 champion in the first half of the campaign, Winkelhock was nowhere in the points. A lot of this was due to the Schnitzer team trying to balance transcontinental priorities – and the race trucks making regular 2,000-mile round trips to Germany. However, the team knuckled down to what it does best, and once equipped with the transformed 318 for the British Grand Prix support race, the German won four of the next six races, with sometime team-mate Soper taking the flag in one of those he didn't. Winkelhock won more races than everyone bar Tarquini but only took sixth in the standings. BMW also benefitted from a dedicated programme from tyre supplier Yokohama to support the rear-wheel drive 318.

Fifth went to Cleland and Vauxhall. The Scot was ever a charismatic presence and crowd-pleaser, who also had a remarkably consistent year given the level of competition. Only twice outside the top six in the races he finished, all his podiums were front-loaded, the double win at Donington Park being the season's highlight. Cleland was consistently good at making the most of his more durable Dunlop tyres, which supported late-race charges. Team-mate Allam was similarly consistent – finishing all but one race, but most of his results were in the lower reaches of the top ten, meaning he would be replaced for 1995. For RML they'd done what they needed in their first season, but much of their effort had been focused on the years to come.

Watts impressed in the Peugeot, which was a regular visitor to the podium in the first part of the season, but, as with Ford, the French marque lost out in the mid-season technical revolution and fell back down the pecking order. Team-mate O'Brien had a torrid second season, his year bookended by massive accidents at Thruxton

and Silverstone. A lowly 17th, he exited the BTCC at season's end.

At least you knew Peugeot were there, which wasn't always the case with either Toyota or Nissan. The Toyota Carina, which had been a race winner a year previously, certainly looked impressive in Castrol colours and had two talented pilots, but neither Bailey nor Hoy could wrestle results from it. Behind the scenes, there were improvements, with the Japanese factory support increasing during the second half of the year. This made the car better, but came too late to turn the season around. Similarly, the Yokohama tyres were regularly off the pace, but team and tyre provider worked hard throughout the year to find improvements. A handful of fifth places were the highlights from a year that left them 12th and 13th overall.

It was even worse for Nissan. O'dor was the ever-present but only managed 16th from just four points finishes. Unfortunately, he and team-mates Van de Poele and Needell were often used as target practice by their rivals, with wrecked cars too often the result at the end of the weekend. The nadir came at Silverstone where the three-strong entry were all eliminated in the opening-corner accident at Copse, a crash in which the trio were entirely innocent. Frustrated with the contact-heavy racing in the BTCC, Van de Poele moved on mid-season, with replacement Needell hustling into the top ten on a couple of occasions.

Mazda's effort meanwhile was shuttered mid-season, Leslie having continued for a few more rounds following Neal's spectacular Silverstone departure. For the Scot, who had been the form driver at the end of 1993, it was a deeply disappointing way to follow up those successes. As is often the case, it came down to money; with the cars already towards the back of the works pack, sponsorship didn't

materialise, leaving no budget for testing or development. This would prove to be a quiet and disappointing departure from the championship for Mazda.

The privateers' cup was claimed by James Kaye following a highly competitive season-long battle with Nigel Smith and Chris Goodwin. Goodwin was arguably the fastest of the trio, but retirements and absences meant he slipped behind the ever-present Kaye and Smith. Kaye would be rewarded with a shot in the works Honda for 1995, while James Thompson would get his chance with Vauxhall having been quietly impressive in an outdated Peugeot. The field was also regularly bolstered by Hamish Irvine and Nigel Albon, who both had days in the sun, making it one of the most competitive years of the privateer cup.

## Touring Cars Rule the World – 1995–96

THE FIELD that assembled for the opening event of the 1995 season at Donington Park was almost unrecognisable from that which had kicked off the 2.0l class just four years earlier. It was now very much the era of the super tourers.

Following Alfa Romeo's controversial success in 1994, the entire field was now sporting rear spoilers and revised front splitters, seeking to match the aerodynamic advantage enjoyed by the Italian marque the year before. In practice, it meant the entries all took a further visible step away from anything you may see in the local showroom – the 1995 field were prototypes in saloons' clothing. Across the touring car landscape the FIA had given far freer rein on aerodynamics, with rear wings that fitted into an imaginary box of 150 x 150mm allowed, provided they didn't extend over the rear bodywork.

At least initially, champion Gabriele Tarquini wouldn't be back to try to retain his crown, with Giampiero Simoni in the cockpit for the first eight rounds, before Tarquini returned. The second Alfa would be in the hands of Derek Warwick, who had dipped his toes in touring car waters at the 1993 TOCA Shootout, and was now attempting a full

campaign. The all-enveloping resources plunged into the 1994 effort were somewhat diluted as Alfa Romeo switched focus towards its Class 1 (ITC/DTM) programme. All the testing was done in continental Europe – predominantly at Mugello and Monza – meaning that Prodrive (who would run the car day to day) wouldn't get its hands on it until March. Other changes would include a switch in engine management from Magneti Marelli to TAG, and moving shock absorbers from Bilstein to Penske – not necessarily gigantic changes, but adjustments that would need working through to find the right balance. Despite these difficulties, Alfa Romeo had been so good in 1994, so surely there was still some catching up for the rest to do?

The TWR-prepared Volvos jettisoned the attention-grabbing estate, switching to the 850 saloon model, with testing pace suggesting the Swedish cars would be front-runners. The TWR squad was still committed to its three-year objectives, with the focus for 1995 being on winning races. With the decision to move to the saloon taken well before the close of the 1994 season, the squad enjoyed more winter testing laps than their rivals and were the pacesetters of pre-season testing. Rickard Rydell remained with the team, to be joined by Tim Harvey.

The Williams Formula 1 team stepped in to take over running the Renault entry from GB Motorsport, with Alain Menu continuing alongside Will Hoy, who moved over from Toyota. Williams were, at the time, the dominant force in F1, having had the fastest car for much of the decade. The BTCC effort would be the Didcot team's first motorsport venture outside F1. Initially anticipating the need to replace 20 per cent of the 1994 car, the reality was closer to 80 per cent (which, given the Laguna finished 1994 as one of the front-runners, illustrates the pace of development), meaning

the build overran sufficiently for Menu's race car to only run the day before the season opener.

After appearing in selected rounds in 1994, Tim Sugden took over Hoy's vacated seat at Toyota alongside Julian Bailey, returning for his third successive season. Although continuing to be run by TOM'S GB, there was plenty of internal politics to navigate with on/off input from Toyota Team Europe (TTE), who were developing a touring car programme as a fall-back in case rallying regulations diverged from the company's interest in the future. This gave the team an enhanced budget and technical input – whether that could be used in the right way would be another matter.

There was also a change in drivers at Ford where Paul Radisich would be partnered by 1993 British F3 champion Kelvin Burt following the retirement from full-time racing of Andy Rouse. Rouse Engineering would still be preparing the cars, although the programme was only confirmed in the January. Compared to some of the other entries on the grid, the Fords were anachronistic and clearly not as technically advanced. Rouse, a master of engineering and set-up, was an expert in developing a base model, not necessarily designing and building a car from the ground up in an almost F1 standard environment – all of which would point towards a potentially trying season. In Rouse's corner, though, would be the punchy Cosworth engines and Michelin tyres.

Once more the popular John Cleland would lead the Vauxhall charge, but with Jeff Allam replaced by 1994's standout privateer James Thompson. The 20-year-old would repay the team's faith by being competitive from the outset. The cars would be run again by RML – the Cavalier in its sixth year of development and enjoying the benefit of years of improvement. There would be a switch of tyres (for the

third time in as many years, after Yokohama and Dunlop to Michelin, pre-season testing suggesting this would be a good combination with the aerodynamic package.

Following a disappointing 1994, it was an all-new driver line-up for BMW, with 1994 Simtek F1 driver David Brabham and 1975 350cc motorcycle racing champion Johnny Cecotto. Brabham knew the British circuits well, having claimed the 1989 British Formula 3 championship, but would have his work cut out transitioning to touring cars. For Cecotto it was the inverse, having won the 1994 German Super Touring championship (and coming close to the Italian Super Touring title), he was a renowned BMW touring car ace. His memories of racing in the UK were less fond, as a Brands Hatch accident qualifying his Toleman for the 1984 British Grand Prix had ended his F1 career. It was also all change in the BMW garage, with the Schnitzer stepping aside and the campaign being run by Gunther Warthofer's team, the Nürburgring outfit having taken Cecotto to the 1994 STW title.

Patrick Watts would continue to lead the Peugeot charge, partnered by newcomer Simon Harrison. The team would maintain its status as the only truly works team on the grid, albeit on a smaller budget than everyone else. The story of the winter was 'double pivot' suspension, which essentially enabled the steering to work on a different axis to the strut. This configuration had propelled the French team to the 1994 Supertourisme title and was due to be fitted to the BTCC cars, which had struggled badly with handling in 1994. During testing, the new suspension seemed to be working, but as a component that was at the discretion of local promoters rather than the FIA, it was banned by TOCA. This would put the team on the back foot for the start of the season.

Honda were the new manufacturer on the grid, with David Leslie and James Kaye behind the wheel. For Leslie it was a return to competitive machinery after a frustrating part-campaign for Mazda the previous year, whilst Kaye was able to make the leap up from the ranks of privateers. The effort would be run by Motor Sport Developments (MSD), a team better known for their success in rallying. The team would certainly have their work cut out as they had secured a Europe-wide contract from Honda, meaning they would also prepare cars for competition in Belgium and Germany. The Accord's inherent design (supported by legendary hillclimb designer Mike Pilbeam) was good, with centralised and lower weight distribution, a philosophy much in line with the design direction being followed by many others.

Two manufacturers would disappear from the grid, with Mazda not returning after their mid-1994 exit, and the withdrawal of Nissan to focus on other championships. In the latter's case, the Janspeed team had never really been given the resources required for a proper run at the title.

The Total Cup privateer line-up was refreshed for the 1995 campaign. Matt Neal returned to the ranks of the privateers after his 1994 Mazda (mis)adventures in a Team Dynamics Mondeo. The Ford was the car of choice among the Total Cup runners with Australian Charlie Cox, and Richard Kaye sporting similar machinery. Meanwhile, Hamish Irvine would return, but this time in a Peugeot 405, whilst Nigel Smith would be an ever-present in his smartly presented HMSO-backed Cavalier.

There was a notable change in format, with the move to double-headers at all events except for the British Grand Prix support race. A popular move with spectators, this brought the format into line with all other touring car series.

From a championship perspective this meant 25 (as opposed to 21) races across the 13 weekends.

The calendar was also re-ordered, with Donington Park kicking off the season in early April, and the campaign concluding at Silverstone in late September. The field would get one fewer event on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit, with both double-headers to be contested on the National circuit layout, whilst one of the Oulton Park rounds would be held on the shorter and more spectator-friendly Fosters layout.

The opening weekend at Donington Park served to highlight the advantages and drawbacks of the latest iteration of the regulations. On the plus side, with nine fully fledged manufacturer teams on the grid, qualifying was extraordinarily close with the entire pack tightly bunched in terms of times. The downside was that running on slick tyres and with increased aerodynamics, braking distances were noticeably shortened; the cars produced turbulent air in their wake, serving to make overtaking far harder than in previous campaigns.

On a sunny spring day the outcome of both races was decided within the opening corners. Starting from pole, Rydell was bogged down and swamped before they got to Redgate. Cleland took the lead in his Cavalier and, despite pressure throughout from Menu, took the first win. Radisich completed the podium, a frustrated Rydell in fourth unable to make progress. The main action came further back, where a competitive Bailey was drop-kicked out at the Melbourne Hairpin by an over-ambitious Leslie. There was no repeat error in race two, where Rydell converted his pole position to a comfortable victory from Cleland and Volvo team-mate Harvey.

The racing had been close and competitive rather than thrilling, but to an exceptionally high standard – given the extent of big-budget factory entries at the front.

A fortnight later the Brands Hatch Indy circuit presented a very different challenge, the super tourers almost outpacing the twisty 1.2-mile layout. On race day the weather turned, with rain forecast, ensuring that the tyre choice between intermediate or full wet tyres would be key.

It was dry when Cleland led the field away for the opener, benefitting from the lesser incline on the outside of the front row and jumping polesitter Rydell. Unfortunately for Cleland, he didn't get the opportunity to press his advantage, as the red flags came out following a collision at Druids that left Richard Kaye and Irvine stationary and blocking the circuit.

By the time the field was ready to go again, the rain had started to fall. Nonetheless, as the lights turned green Cleland once again led the first lap, but only until the entry to Paddock at the start of lap two when the Cavalier understeered off into the gravel. This allowed the Volvo pair to circulate in formation at the front of the field, but the outward comfort masked a major problem for Rydell, whose front windscreen was misting up to the point of eliminating forward visibility. Eventually, Rydell was forced into the pits, elevating Harvey for a comfortable victory. The podium was completed by the brace of works Fords, Radisich second ahead of a first BTCC podium for Burt. It was an impressive drive from Radisich, who charged up through the field following an early spin. Arguably, the star of the race was privateer Cox. Having made the right tyre choice, he was able to ease up the order as conditions worsened, taking an impressive fifth place, albeit a lap down on Harvey.

The weather wasn't much better for race two, as once more Rydell had pole position, but was again jumped by a fast-starting Cleland. However, his advantage would not last long as, coming on to the Brabham Straight, Brabham

(David) squeezed Watts, pitching the Peugeot into a spin. Rotating perpendicular to the traffic the inevitable contact came, as Radisich piled into the front of the Peugeot, the Ford slewing to a halt under the starting gantry. Fortunately, the angle of the contact, whilst severely injurious to both vehicles, enabled the drivers to walk away.

For the fourth time that day it was Cleland who made the best start. And somewhat ignominiously, for the fourth time he failed to gain any advantage from it. This time around he made contact with Harvey and spun at Surtees. Rejoining at the back of the field, approaching Paddock for the third time the brake pedal went to the floor and the Cavalier endured a sizeable accident. Fortunately, Cleland was uninjured, but came away with no points from a day that had promised much. Harvey was once again the beneficiary, leading home an impressive Thompson, who had seamlessly adapted to life as a works driver. Rydell completed the podium to make it a good day for Volvo, albeit a frustrating one for the Swede, who would have expected a better return for his two pole positions.

Three weeks later it was on to Thruxton for rounds five and six. Qualifying at the fast Hampshire circuit saw the Williams-prepared Renaults assert themselves at the head of the field, with Menu taking an impressive pole. Meanwhile, double Brands Hatch winner Harvey would start at the back of the pack, having missed a weight check in practice.

The opening race was close rather than thrilling, as Menu took his first win of the season, chased home by Cleland who finished just 0.33 seconds adrift. Menu performed masterfully, absorbing the pressure from Cleland without ever looking under undue threat. A 26s distant third was Watts, giving the Peugeot team something to cheer following a difficult start to the year. Elsewhere, it was a race

of attrition with both Fords, Hoy, Cecotto and Thompson all failing to finish.

Race two once again saw an early stoppage, this time following an enormous accident for Cox, who was pitched into a massive barrel roll climbing Woodham Hill on approach to the Club chicane. Cox emerged from the accident with concussion which would keep him out until Brands Hatch in August – given the violence of the accident it was fortunate that this was the extent of his injuries.

Once the race restarted, Thompson completed the gentleman's set (pole position, fastest lap and the win) on the way to his maiden BTCC victory. It was a hugely impressive and assured drive from Thompson, who was setting out his stall as a potential championship contender. Menu's excellent day culminated in a fine second, and Burt completed the rostrum with his second podium of the year. Cleland had a lively race, taking fifth behind Rydell's Volvo. After being the fastest package in the opening events of the season, this was a disappointing day for TWR, with neither Rydell nor Harvey major threats for the podium.

Just six days later, the next stop was the Silverstone National circuit, the 1.6-mile layout providing more action for the spectators, although less of a thrill than the full Grand Prix track. Volvo and Rydell were once more on the pace with pole position, ahead of the brace of Mondeos, who thus far had been competitive, but not obviously on the cusp of race wins.

Rydell had the better of the first race, leading home Radisich by one and a half seconds following an entertaining dice. Third went to Cleland, who was still recovering ground after his double retirement at Brands Hatch. The second Vauxhall of Thompson was narrowly fourth in a race punctuated by close battles. Notable retirements came in

the form of Burt, who was caught up in early contact, and Menu, who also departed early in the Renault's first non-finish of the season.

The order was reversed in a thrilling second race, as Radisich took Ford's first win of the campaign, with Rydell only 0.4s adrift. The Volvo driver had more than once swapped places with the New Zealander, but second was sufficient to elevate Rydell to the championship lead. Harvey made amends for a distant seventh in race one with third, Menu coming in one second later for fourth.

The scrap of the race, and one of the most entertaining battles of the season, came for fifth where Cleland eventually emerged on top of a six-car squabble ahead of Sugden, Burt, Leslie, Simoni (finally making the Alfa look at least semi-competitive) and Watts.

In pure racing terms the Silverstone round had been the best of the season. The two heavy-braking zones at Becketts and Brooklands allowed for the sort of side-by-side racing that the aerodynamically reinforced class of 1995 struggled to achieve on more flowing circuits.

After eight races, the TWR Volvos were the form package, Rydell and Harvey having taken two wins apiece. The Vauxhalls were also fast, with Cleland and Thompson having both notched up victories, Menu (Renault) and Radisich (Ford) being the others to grace the top step of the podium. Away from the front thus far there had been woes aplenty: the Toyotas were fast, but unlucky, Bailey in particular consistently being the victim of over-optimistic moves from others; Honda had blown hot and cold, with Leslie showing a good turn of speed.

Meanwhile, Alfa Romeo were having a nightmare campaign. The car was off the pace, whilst new signing Warwick was struggling to get to grips with the required

driving style. Drastic measures were taken for Oulton Park, with Tarquini briefly diverted from his Italian campaign to provide reinforcement.

The first visit of the year to Oulton Park was another May bank holiday event for the BTCC, the sinuous and narrow Cheshire circuit highlighting the limitations of the current breed of cars. Qualifying for round nine was ferociously close with under 0.4s covering the top five, Thompson pipping Rydell for pole ahead of Burt and Cleland.

It went wrong as soon as the lights turned green as fast-starting Burt tried to squeeze between Rydell and Thompson, with the inevitable contact rotating Thompson into an accident and damaging Burt's car beyond repair. The benefit for those that gained ground from the melee was short-lived as Leslie and Warwick came together through the high-speed left-hander at Island Bend. Both were launched into the barriers, the Honda vaulting them, the Alfa Romeo impacting with such velocity that Warwick required medical assistance. Unsurprisingly, the red flags came out and everyone got to try again.

This time Rydell didn't hang around, taking one of the most dominant wins of the year, just shy of ten seconds clear of Cleland. Menu took a largely uncontested third, almost eight seconds ahead of Bailey. It was far from a thrilling race – the early accidents arguably being a reflection of how hard it was to overtake, resulting in the drivers taking big risks through the first few corners.

Round ten was a bit closer, Menu capitalising from his front-row start to snatch an unheaded lead from Rydell early on. Cleland kept the pair close company, with the leading trio covered by just over 2.5s at the flag. Thompson took a very distant fourth ahead of the Ford pairing of Radisich

and Burt. As for returning champion Tarquini, 11th and last of the works runners in race one was compounded by a retirement in race two – although it did serve to show that Prodrive had been making some progress with the car.

Two weeks later and it was time for the solitary visit to the Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit. Once more Brands Hatch was deluged, with the field competing in conditions that would in the modern day be likely deemed unraceable.

Both races were messy, with red flags plaguing them. Menu was victorious in the first (Sugden initiating the red flag with a roll at Clearways) with Cleland close behind on the aggregate result. Harvey claimed third, whilst Rydell lost major championship momentum, being pushed down to seventh. This was no fault of his, as he was involved in a multi-car pile-up at Graham Hill Bend on the first lap when Thompson ran wide due to a puncture incurred from contact at Druids. With cars spinning and colliding everywhere, both works Fords, Brabham, Neal and ultimately Thompson were all eliminated.

Race two went no more smoothly as Menu had pole from the brace of Vauxhalls. The first attempted start was curtailed after Nigel Smith was beached precariously close to the edge of the circuit at Stirlings following contact with Richard Kaye – without the safety car to call upon, there was no option but to stop the race. The second attempt brought more bad luck for Rydell, who inverted his Volvo midway through the first lap after his throttle stuck open heading into the scarily fast Westfield – fortunately escaping injury.

At this point the officials decided enough was enough, with three red flags on the day, and plenty more in the season to date, Clerk of the Course Pierre Aumonier gave the field a very public dressing-down on the grid, stating that another red flag would see the race cancelled.

Not surprisingly, this went down not at all well with the drivers, who pointed to the atrocious conditions, and that two of the three red-flag incidents (Sugden, with a misted windscreen, and Rydell) had been caused by mechanical rather than driving issues. It could also be argued that it was right argument, wrong day. With the field so closely bunched on time, and overtaking increasingly difficult, it was not wholly unsurprising that there had been a rise in early-race incidents.

Once the racing did get back underway, Cleland took his second victory of the season, followed home by Thompson and Menu, the trio covered by under one second at the finish. Hoy was a close fourth from Harvey and Bailey.

At least the sun was out at Donington a fortnight later for the second visit of the season. It was a weekend dominated by Cleland who swept the board with two wins, two pole positions and two fastest laps. The championship momentum was starting to shift in favour of Cleland, who fully capitalised on Rydell's disappointing Brands Hatch weekend.

It was championship contenders to the fore in the first race, however, with Rydell second and Menu third, although neither of them meaningfully challenged Cleland. The second race was far more entertaining, albeit not for the win. Instead there were race-long multi-car scraps for the remaining top-ten placings. The podium was completed by Radisich and Burt, both of whom had had to race their way through. Menu, Thompson and Rydell completed the rest of the top six, but hadn't been able to match the Fords for race pace.

Despite a post-Grand Prix deluge at Silverstone, the overwhelming majority of the crowd who'd cheered Johnny Herbert to his maiden F1 win stayed on to watch

the BTCC race that would bring the curtain down on the weekend.

Having won the last three races, Cleland was the form driver, his pace having been enhanced by the all-round consistency of the Vauxhall, which didn't blow hot and cold according to circuit or conditions like some of its rivals.

Cleland duly took pole from Menu and Radisich, with (as ever) the top ten being covered by under a second. In atrocious conditions, the early running was between Radisich and Cleland, the pair swapping places several times in the opening laps, backing themselves into Hoy. At one-third distance Cleland and Hoy both passed Radisich as part of the same manoeuvre, from where the Ford dropped away having hit trouble.

Thereafter, Cleland was able to steadily pull clear of the Renault, with Thompson moving up to third after an energetic dice with Burt in the second Ford. The star of the race was Bailey who fought up from tenth to fourth (and very nearly third), the Toyota coming to him as the track dried a little as the race progressed.

A fourth win in succession for Cleland was amplified in the title battle by both Menu and Rydell hitting trouble with misting windscreens and finishing well outside the points.

Cleland's title cause would be further aided next time out at Knockhill from within the Vauxhall awning. During official pre-event testing, Thompson had an enormous accident, barrel-rolling the Cavalier and sustaining an eye injury that kept him out for the rest of the season. The least desirable of circumstances, but Thompson's absences did mean Cleland had one fewer challenger.

Jeff Allam returned to the team as a last-minute call-up, before South African champion Mike Briggs took over the

seat for the final four rounds. Thompson's incident, one of many big crashes during the season, led for calls from within the paddock for a review of safety standards, both in terms of the available medical cover and the driver protections within the cars themselves.

From the longest circuit of the season to one of the shortest, Knockhill would present a completely different challenge, with overtaking opportunities few and far between.

The qualifying pace was held by Rydell and Menu who locked out the front row for both races, whilst Cleland started in the lower reaches of the top ten. Menu was comfortably in control of the first race, with Rydell in close attention, but manageable, until the leader suffered a gearbox issue at mid-distance. This promoted the Volvo driver for his fourth win of the season, ahead of Harvey and Burt. Cleland was a somewhat fortunate fifth after Radisich and (a completely innocent) Hoy collided at the hairpin late on when the Ford locked its brakes.

Race two saw Menu get his rewards, this time taking the plan from race one through to its conclusion, snatching the lead early on and keeping Rydell at arm's length. The pair were comfortably the class of the field, finishing almost 20s clear of third-placed Harvey.

Fourth went to Brabham, the BMW slowly starting to show some stronger pace. It was a disastrous race for Ford, with both cars retiring, Radisich and Burt once more unable to take advantage of good grid positions. This allowed Cleland to take sixth, which was flattering to his pace. Alfa Romeo had a truly wretched weekend, with Tarquini once more drafted back into the squad. At least he was able to get the car into the top ten, taking eighth in race two, after retirement earlier on. Meanwhile, Warwick failed to see

either chequered flag once again, most dramatically in race one when he collided with Simon Harrison.

Heading to Brands Hatch with four races to run, Cleland still had a small, if closing, buffer over Rydell and Menu – however, down the stretch all the title contenders would need wins and consistency to take the title.

In a welcome contrast to the first two visits to Kent, August sunshine beamed down on to the Indy circuit, another track where a good grid position would be critical. Qualifying was extraordinarily close with the top 20 covered by less than one second. Rydell had pole from Cleland, whilst Menu was down on the fourth row, the Williams Renault team having gone in the wrong direction with set-up.

The opening race was decided by the exit of Druids. Hoy in third made the best start, taking the wide line through Paddock, whilst Cleland jumped Rydell. Heading to Druids as Cleland defended from the Volvo, Rydell gave the Vauxhall several bumps, damaging both cars and delaying the pair as Cleland slid sideways. This enabled Hoy to accelerate down to Graham Hill Bend in the lead, which he held thereafter.

Hoy's first win since 1992 was far from inevitable as he was chased all the way by Cleland and Rydell. An impressive opening few laps from Menu allowed him to climb to fourth, whilst the BMW of Cecotto (liberated from its weight disadvantage) was a close fifth. Hoy was understandably delighted, whilst Cleland was furious, pointing to his damaged car and remarking, 'This wasn't designed by Vauxhall, it was designed by Volvo.'

Race two promised more of the same. This time Rydell converted pole and pulled clear with Cleland, while Hoy was once more in close attendance. The decisive moment came late on as the leading pair entered Clearways. Cleland

tapped Rydell just as the Volvo was setting up to turn right. It was very light contact, but at just the right angle to pitch Rydell into a half spin, allowing Cleland and Hoy to dart through. This gave Cleland his sixth win of the year, from Hoy, and a furious Rydell submitted an ultimately unsuccessful protest to the stewards (although by current standards Cleland would almost certainly have received a penalty).

Meanwhile, Menu was in the mid-field wars, finishing out of the points after a pit stop to repair his battered Renault (much of the damage sustained when he drop-kicked Cecotto out of the race running down to Graham Hill Bend). This gave Tarquini a superb fourth as he managed to wrestle performance from the Alfa Romeo (Warwick finished 14th following a collision), and Briggs capped a hugely impressive debut weekend for Vauxhall with sixth.

So with six races to run, Cleland's title advantage was further extended, Rydell hadn't conceded much ground, but Menu needed others to falter to meaningfully re-enter the title fight.

Even though 1995 was one of the UK's driest-ever years, what little rain did fall seemed to hit BTCC weekends. The opening race at Snetterton provided the teams with a tyre dilemma: heavy rain just prior to the race, but the likelihood of a dry line emerging at the perpetually windswept Norfolk venue gave the competitors an invidious choice.

The title protagonists had the first three places on the grid, covered by just 0.14s in qualifying in the order of Rydell, Menu and then Cleland. Generally in wet/dry situations, the tyre gambles become more lurid the lower down the grid you go – this meant the leading trio went with wet tyres whilst those further back went for intermediate, cut slick or full slick options.

Initially, ‘wets’ were the way to go but, as the race progressed, those who’d gambled on tyres came to the fore – resulting in none of the title contenders finishing in the points. Cleland and Rydell faded as their tyres went away, the Vauxhall holding out a little longer than the Volvo at the front. Meanwhile Menu was torpedoed into retirement by Harvey early on, mechanical failure launching the Volvo into the Renault at Sear.

In a topsy-turvy race it was Burt (making the very most of his intermediates) who claimed his first BTCC win, providing some much-needed cheer for the beleaguered Ford squad. Watts was runner-up, scoring his second podium of the year for Peugeot. Gravett, running in a privateer Mondeo, was a remarkable third, the beneficiary of a post-race penalty which demoted Leslie from second on the road after a collision with Briggs.

Conditions had fully cleared by race two, with once more a Rydell/Menu front row – and once more neither was able to benefit. Rydell made a good start, whilst Menu was caught in the pack heading into Sear, where again he was punted into a spin by Harvey. This time the cause was biological rather than mechanical, but with the result of the pacesetting Renault rejoining at the back of the pack.

Rydell meanwhile led the way, in a position to claw some points back from Cleland, who was running in fourth behind Hoy and Harvey. Heading into Riches on lap 16, the Volvo suddenly spun mid-corner, flying off at speed and scarily finishing up in a field having somehow squeezed through a gap between the barrier and an attending ambulance. It could have been a truly horrific accident: as it was, the main outcome was frustration.

This elevated Hoy to take his second victory of the season, ahead of Harvey and Cleland. The result for Cleland

was important as, despite not having the pace to edge Renault or Volvo, he had outscored his rivals and headed on to Oulton Park with the championship within his grasp.

The penultimate meeting of the year saw the first outing of the super touring era BTCC on the Foster's layout at Oulton Park. This shorter version of the track had been used extensively during the early 1980s, before being revived at a national level. Exiting Cascades, instead of flowing to the left along Lakeside and into Island Bend, the road went right into the tight Fosters turn, before a short acceleration into the chicane-free Knickerbrook. From a fan's perspective, shorter laps meant more action, whilst a case could be made that the circuit was more naturally flowing without the two disruptive chicanes. It would certainly be busy for the drivers, with no straights to speak of.

In the battle for the title, provided Cleland finished ahead of, or conceded little ground to, Rydell and Menu, he would leave Cheshire as champion. Although Menu's Renault package had the pace, bad luck earlier in the season meant he really needed Cleland to hit trouble in order to keep the fight alive. Rydell's prospects, on paper, were brighter, but gearbox issues in qualifying largely thwarted his chances before the racing had even started.

Cleland jumped polesitter Menu (in qualifying, the top 15 cars were covered by under 0.9s) to lead early on in race one, before Menu slid through into Lodge – Cleland not noticeably vigorous in defence. A few laps later, Hoy repeated the move, setting the order to give Renault their first one-two of the year. Meanwhile, Rydell was down in fifth and unable to apply pressure to Cleland. Further back, Matt Neal's privateer win secured victory in the Total Cup for the private entries, a deserved result as Neal had been the class of the field throughout the year.

Race one's result ruled Menu out of the title race, but Rydell's hopes were alive. However, he would need to beat Cleland by a wide margin to retain an outside shot heading to Silverstone. Starting in 18th on a circuit where passing was tricky at best, made this a near-impossible job.

After the obligatory start-line shunt (the primary victim, Sugden, had the dubious honour of not completing a single racing lap at the meeting), which was notable for the introduction of the first safety car to the BTCC, the race followed largely the same pattern as race one. Menu was the comfortable winner from Cleland, who had absorbed race-long pressure from Leslie and Bailey. Rydell meanwhile was able to climb to tenth, but it wasn't enough and at the flag a delighted Cleland claimed his second BTCC crown.

With the drivers' title settled, the main business at the final meeting of the year would be to determine who would claim the manufacturers' title. Renault's strong end to the year meant they had a good chance of overhauling Vauxhall, the latter's hopes having been under pressure since Thompson's season-ending injury.

On the Silverstone National circuit it was a dream weekend for Renault. In the first, not overly exciting race, Menu scored his third win in succession leading home teammate Hoy. Cleland took a comfortable third. Further back, Rydell's run of poor luck gave him seventh place, elevating Menu up to the championship runner's up spot.

The second race was more entertaining, but still finished as a Renault one-two, this time Hoy from Menu – giving the French marque the manufacturers' title. Hoy's strong weekend was also enough for him to leap Harvey for fourth in the standings. Third once more went to Cleland, who finished on the rostrum in all but six races.

It had been a spectacular year, and arguably was the most competitive season of the 1990s. Whilst the cars would evolve, and spectator popularity was sustained, never again would nine factory teams line up on the grid.

The 1995 season had been an arms race: the super tourers were always high-cost and well-developed propositions, but the evolution of aerodynamics and the introduction of world-class teams throughout the grid had pushed the costs ever higher. Was the racing better? The aerodynamic developments had made the cars a bit easier to tame – grip and power were now better balanced – but this was a season when no dry race really stood out for excitement. The best racing was when it was wet and the cars once again had a surfeit of grunt over adhesion.

A particular complexity for the manufacturers was that whilst the base package was the same from series to series, minor variations (e.g. different tyre suppliers) meant that the cars racing in the BTCC would necessarily need to be developed differently to those racing in France or Germany. This was already starting to drive a consolidation in effort – Alfa Romeo withdrawing from super touring to focus on Class 1 touring, and the smaller domestic championships that didn't have a homegrown manufacturer base already beginning to struggle.

With 18 works cars in 1995, there would always be winners and losers. If 'win on Sunday, sell on Monday' was the maxim, then 'qualified 18th and shunted on Sunday' doesn't quite have the same ring to it, making it a hard sell to HQ.

The sheer competitiveness of the series was a concern for TOCA chief executive Alan Gow; talking to Paul Fearnley for *British Motorsport Year*, he reflected, 'If you have too many manufacturers, there is a greater chance of

them pulling out at the same time,' before commenting that his ideal balance would be six manufacturers running three cars each. Three-car efforts would be in place by the end of the era, but not with that number of teams. Gow's concerns would prove to be well founded over the winter, with both Alfa Romeo and Toyota withdrawing, although BMW were coaxed back for another year.

Gow and the TOCA team certainly deserved plaudits for the way they'd kept a lid on technical disputes during the year. After the messiness of the Alfa Romeo situation in 1994 (admittedly because the FIA were involved), barring a couple of flashpoints, disagreements were kept between the teams and TOCA, with all parties presenting a united front to the outside world.

Vauxhall, Renault and Volvo were consistently the strongest packages throughout the season. Vauxhall had been on form from round to round, with Cleland, Thompson and Briggs rarely qualifying down the order. Cleland had driven superbly with only a few missteps (mainly at Brands Hatch), and was a popular champion. With an everyman demeanour and seemingly effortless ability to deploy one-liners for the camera, Cleland was arguably the best-known driver in the series. Thompson had been an early-season revelation, before his Knockhill incident. Unsurprisingly, Briggs couldn't quite match his pace, but got up to speed quickly enough to ensure the squad sealed the team title.

Meanwhile, once the Williams team had overcome their limited pre-season time with the Renault, the French car was arguably the fastest in the field from Thruxton onward – the manufacturers' title being the reward. With luck going his way a couple more times, Menu would have stood a very good chance of taking the drivers' crown. Mechanical failures cost the Swiss at times and the team rued some of

the compromises they'd had to make to get the cars ready for season's start. Hoy's season meanwhile was transformed by a last-ditch set-up change he made at Brands Hatch – resulting in his first win. By season's end the Lagunas were imperious, the Sodemo power units arguably the fastest in the field (the Renaults were observed to be using more rear wing than their rivals) with the handling to match.

Raw pace was rarely a problem for the Volvo, with Rydell scoring an impressive 13 pole positions (from 25 races). The challenge throughout the year was converting the poles in victories, Rydell scoring just four wins. Some of this was self-inflicted by the Swede, who developed a habit of making bad starts. Even more crucially for the title, when Rydell didn't finish in the top two, he was generally nowhere, suffering a litany of incidents and mechanical issues. Team-mate Harvey also blew hot and cold, the early-season double at Brands Hatch proving the high point. Unlike his team-mate, who was spectacular over a single lap, Harvey struggled with qualifying pace, but generally made ground in the races.

There was certainly plenty of paddock rumour surrounding the team during the year – the TWR squad was notorious for pushing mechanical legalities to and beyond the limit. An unprecedented £10,000 fine was levied by TOCA at Snetterton for a breach of sporting regulations (although, it was stated, this was not a performance-related matter), and this only fuelled the paddock gossip, particularly as the team's form dropped as the season progressed.

Ford were the only other manufacturer to score wins, with one apiece for Radisich and Burt. The latter acquitted himself well in his debut season, whilst Radisich endured a testing run-in, scoring points only once from Knockhill onward. The team had some high points, with the combination of driver skill and pit-box nous serving them

well when the weather turned. In the dry, the car was only really front-running material on the Silverstone National circuit, a layout perfectly suited to exploiting the Cosworth engine. The team tried hard to cure the many challenges (mainly understeer and engine packaging) but was just at too small a scale to maintain the required pace of development. Perhaps it wasn't hugely surprising that Ford would move team from Rouse Engineering to West Surrey Racing for 1996, but, likewise, the pace had been there at times and the drivers had been used as target practice more than once. A clear fourth in the standings was as much as could have been expected from what was available.

Fifth went to Toyota in what proved to be their final super touring year in the BTCC. The TOM'S-prepared cars were being evolved right to the last, with both Sugden and Bailey trying out a right-hand drive variant before season's end, which represented a huge forward step. Although never with title-winning pace, a season bereft of podiums was harsh on both drivers, Bailey in particular, although the pair did have a habit of being involved in other people's accidents far too often. In the garage, development was slowed by internal politics, with TOM'S GB's experience and instincts being overruled by Toyota Team Europe – but when the British squad got their way, the development occurred.

Ultimately, Toyota would withdraw from the BTCC ahead of 1996, although Bailey's late-season performances gave some hope. However, multiple layers of politics eventually drove the decision. Firstly, it was clear that to get to the title, Toyota would have to up their budget considerably – a decision that would have been tricky to navigate at the best of times, but was near impossible given the increasingly fractious relationship between Toyota GB and Japan. The other decisive factor was the shock ban of

Toyota from the 1996 World Rally Championship following the discovery of a sophisticated cheating mechanism in the engine – causing something of a retrenchment from motorsport activity.

BMW endured a trying season, made all the tougher as the package had been among the fastest at the close of 1994. Despite extensive development effort (including instigating a parallel test team), the car faced a fundamental issue that could only be worked around – not cured – namely that the new aerodynamic rules dramatically favoured the front-wheel drive cars. In 1993 a 100kg weight penalty had been insufficient to peg back the BMW to its rivals; two years later, with the penalty dropped to 25kg, the BMW was still uncompetitive. The best results came on the tight and twisty circuits, Knockhill and Brands Hatch, but they struggled everywhere else. Cecotto and Brabham both did their best, but with little return. At season's end there were questions about whether the BMW programme would continue (indeed, there had been discussion of a mid-season withdrawal), but ultimately the cars would appear in 1996, run once again by Schnitzer.

If both Ford's and BMW's seasons had been about wringing every drop of performance from the cars, Honda's was more one of promise unfulfilled. The Accord was immediately impressive and clearly had race-winning potential, so a sole podium for Leslie was not representative of what the car or driver was capable of. At times the MSD team almost seemed surprised by its performance, resulting in some strange tactical decisions. The biggest drag on the car was its tyres, with the Yokohamas failing to deliver performance that matched the mechanical potential. When the right tyres were available, Leslie generally delivered, whereas James Kaye was often left frustrated as insufficient

rubber was available. However, it was abundantly clear that the potential was there for 1996.

Alfa Romeo had a torrid second and final year in the championship. The Class 1 focus left much of the development work to Prodrive – and they did make progress, as illustrated at Oulton Park where Tarquini's Italian-specification car was miles off the two Prodrive entries. Fundamentally, however, the car just didn't work: winter testing at Mugello and Monza, possibly the two circuits the least like British tracks, resulted in an aerodynamic package that delivered too little downforce, in turn highlighting some underlying mechanical grip issues which had been hidden the previous year. For the drivers it was a tough year: Simoni was replaced by Tarquini at mid-season, whereas Warwick plugged on with little reward. Possibly the most frustrating moment of all came post-season, when Warwick lapped Silverstone in a revised version of the car that would race (but not with him behind the wheel) in the Touring Car World Cup, and was promptly half a second faster than he had been in any of the BTCC rounds at the circuit.

Peugeot propped up the manufacturers' standings, largely on the basis of a number of self-limiting decisions. Admittedly the loss of the planned suspension on the eve of the season was a blow, and given this was the final year of the 405, there weren't many other development avenues available. Watts was still able to wring out the occasional result (as seen with the Thruxton podium), but was also in the wars a fair amount, pushing the car to its limit. Running to a smaller budget than everyone else and without the benefit of testing or a spare car, there was only so much that could be done. With the 406 being introduced for 1996, greater investment would be needed if the results were to be any different.

After a spectacular 1995, the off-season was a turbulent one, with plenty of manufacturer, car and driver changes.

The biggest newcomer was Audi, who were looking to follow the path set by BMW and Alfa Romeo by entering a continental works team to sweep to the title. Although new to the BTCC, the A4 package was fully developed and had won the 1995 season-closing World Cup meeting. Added as a third programme alongside German and Italian campaigns, the team would be run by Audi Sport UK, with Richard Lloyd heading up the team and John Wickham running the operation day to day. Assembling a team from scratch meant no expense was spared – although technical and development work was still done in Germany.

Lead driver Frank Biela had been the pilot for the World Cup triumph and had taken the A4 to third in the German STW series after a late-season dip in results saw him lose the championship lead. Partnering Biela would be John Bintcliffe, giving some British flavour to the German squad. Bintcliffe, however, was no token hire, having won the 1994 Clio Cup and 1995 Fiesta Trophy, two of the most keenly contested one-make series. The four-wheel drive A4 was a formidable prospect from the start of testing, setting the scene for ongoing balance of performance wrangles throughout the season. What was beyond dispute is that, done well, the four-wheel drive conferred an advantage, and of all the manufacturers Audi had the most experience in making it work.

Renault meanwhile had the benefit of continuity, with the Williams squad once more fielding a brace of Lagunas for Menu and Hoy. Throughout 1995, Menu had just had the advantage, but Hoy was a multiple race winner on his own merits. Crucially, unlike in 1995 when the Laguna was inherited from GB Motorsport (albeit with 80 per cent

changed over the course of the year), the 1996 car would be built from the ground up. Once again Sodemo would provide the engines and Michelin the tyres. Given that the Renault had been the class of the field at the end of 1995, Menu was indisputably one of the pre-season favourites.

Evolution was also the focus for the TWR Volvo squad, the 850 going into its third year, and second with the saloon body. At the outset of the TWR programme, the third year had been designated as the title-challenge year. The main off-track technical changes would be a switch from Dunlop to Michelin and the development of a new differential in partnership with Xtrac. Team leader Rydell returned, again as a tip for the title, partnered by Kelvin Burt who made the switch from Ford after an impressive 1995 debut.

Moving on to his third team in as many seasons, Harvey headed from Volvo to Peugeot to join Watts. Introducing the new 406 model, after a number of challenging seasons (this would be the fifth works campaign and the squad was still without a win), it was hoped the new car would present new opportunities. Although a truly works team, requests that the French side of the operation would build the cars were rebuffed, and all that arrived were drawings. Consequently, testing was limited to the final few weeks before the start of the season, the team heading into the race programme on the back foot.

Whilst the outward appearance of the Ford remained the same (i.e. a Mondeo), everything else was new. West Surrey Racing (WSR) took over the works contract from Rouse Engineering. With essentially an all-new car it would be something of a developmental season, particularly as the planned build partnership with Reynard was delayed a year – STW Ford team Schubel ended up building the 1996 cars at short notice. As a result, the car first turned a wheel

only three days before the start of the season. Radisich was retained and would be partnered by Steve Robertson. The well-funded Robertson had enjoyed success in single seaters, including taking the 1994 Indy Lights championship, without ever quite breaking through – he is one of just three Indy Lights champions who never started an IndyCar race.

Rouse Engineering were still a paddock presence, overseeing a pair of semi-works Nissan Primeras, which for the first half of the season were essentially the 1995 model that had been campaigned in Europe. As such, the team would occupy something of a no-man's land, being neither a manufacturer nor privateer entry. The promise and arrival of a 1996-spec car would eventually split the team, but for Donington Park the line-up consisted of Gary Ayles, returning to the championship (and the Rouse team) after his 1991 Toyota campaign. In the interim, Ayles had been racing for the works Peugeot team in the Italian championship (taking second in 1992) and the BPR sports car series. The second car would be driven by Owen McAuley, making the switch to tin-tops following a successful single-seater career (including the Formula Vauxhall Junior and Formula Vauxhall titles).

Not unsurprisingly, reigning champion Cleland remained at Vauxhall, alongside Thompson, who had now recovered from the eye injury that had ruled him out of the second half of 1995 (and in turn probably meant that Vauxhall missed out on the manufacturers' title). This would be RML's third season running the Vauxhall campaign, but the Cavalier would be replaced by the Vectra – which had raced in some other series in 1995. For 1996 RML would be building the Vectras for Vauxhall/Opel campaigns in Belgium, Spain, Germany, Japan and South Africa – which led to some worrying moments when the BTCC cars were first tested

and were some way off the pace. Once fully running, testing had been inconsistent: sometimes the car was there, but sometimes it wasn't, with no clear reasons why.

BMW also saw behind-the-scenes changes, with the Schnitzer team once more entrusted with the BTCC campaign. The 1993 champion Jo Winkelhock returned, having taken the 1995 German crown in his year away from the BTCC. He would be partnered by the Italian Roberto Ravaglia, who had been a BMW works driver (often with the Schnitzer team) since 1985. Having won the World Touring Car Championship in its sole 1980s year and three European titles during the 1980s, his primary super touring honours had come with the 1993 Italian title.

Up against this firepower, Honda opted for steady continuity with MSD once again running the cars. Leslie had unobtrusively moved the Accord up the order through 1995, while team-mate James Kaye also earned a second year as a works driver. MSD had done a superb job the previous year, with a car that was immediately quick out of the box; the key now was converting it into a winner.

With ever-increasing works spending, it was unsurprising that the privateer ranks were strained – second-hand car availability was diminishing whilst the costs were increasing. At most races there were only three independents on the grid – 1995 Clio Cup champion Lee Brookes in the 1995 TOM'S Toyota, Richard Kaye in the aged RML-built Cavalier, and then one or two of the Team Dynamics Mondeos for Matt Neal and Robb Gravett. With the Mondeo proving a handful (read nightmare), the Total Cup would be decided between Kaye and Brookes.

The Audi had looked ominous for the other teams throughout winter testing, being well sorted from the competition in other European series. However, Rydell

edged out Biela for pole position for the opening race at Donington Park, although Biela would start at the front for the second encounter. As the lights went green for the first time, Biela took full advantage of the Audi's four-wheel drive to take an immediate lead. Rydell and Burt in the Volvos gave chase, but the former overcooked it through the Old Hairpin on the first lap, spinning into the path of Leslie's Honda. With nowhere to go, the cars had a wheel-to-wheel collision, deranging the suspension on both cars, resulting in immediate retirement.

With Rydell's Volvo precariously close to the edge of the circuit, the safety car was deployed to bunch the already spread field. Once the race was properly underway, it became a battle between Biela and the brace of Renaults who, unlike much of the field, were benefitting from continuity of machinery and drivers from the previous year, allowing them to be right on the pace. The timesheets made it look closer than it was, and in a race without much overtaking amongst the front-runners, Biela took a debut win from Hoy and Menu, with Burt a distant fourth.

The main action came further down the order, with Bintcliffe and Cleland, and James Kaye and Thompson enjoying good dices. Enjoyment was not a word that could be applied to the new-look Ford works team. After an early (assisted) spin at the Esses for Radisich, he was recovering up the order, catching (sluggishly off the pace) team-mate Robertson into Redgate. Somewhat incredibly, Robertson span right into Radisich's path, the pair colliding and ending their races in the gravel.

At the front, the second race was pretty much a replay of the earlier encounter. Biela was a lights-to-flag victor, chased all the way by Hoy, but never under serious threat. The sister Renault of Menu had mechanical trouble and was a mid-

race retirement, allowing Rydell to partially compensate from race one by completing the podium. Bintcliffe was a fine fourth, with Burt fifth but another eight seconds back. Winkelhock provided the bulk of the entertainment with a lively drive that went unrewarded following a last-lap spin at the Esses after being punted off.

Despite the big crowd and the 20-plus car grid, the class of 1996 on first glance appeared thinner. At the front, Audi, Renault and Volvo had the pace to challenge for victory. The rest of the field all had, to a greater or lesser extent, a degree of development to become title contenders, meaning the field looked somewhat stretched.

For once the sun shone at Brands Hatch for the second round of the season, the Kent venue absolutely heaving, the BTCC being the biggest four-wheel spectator draw of the season (the World Superbike round in August was the year's biggest event).

The day's opening race was a demonstration of the level and talent of the series front-runners. Biela took his third win in succession, after a sensational start enabled him to translate fourth on the grid into a turn-one lead. Menu and Winkelhock slotted in behind, and for the 38-lap duration the trio circulated with less than a second between them. On a track which offers little respite to drivers, and punishes errors, this was formidable driving – truly illustrating why the BTCC was regarded as the world's premier touring car series. Although the order didn't change, the closeness of the cars and the rising tension made for a thrilling race.

Rydell, in fourth, was the only other driver who could get close to them on pace, with fifth-placed Radisich almost 18 seconds behind the winner. The race was fortunate to flow without safety car interruption after Thompson drop-

kicked himself and Burt into retirement on the entry to Paddock Hill Bend at one-third distance.

Finally, in race two, the series got a different winner. This time around, Biela couldn't take the lead into the first corner, and this allowed Winkelhock to once more return to the top step of the BTCC podium – returning to winning ways on his first visit to Brands Hatch since 1994. In second, Menu was able to keep the BMW driver honest, whilst third went to Rydell who impressively fended off Biela for the duration. Burt's day in the second Volvo went from bad to worse after an early lock-up into Druids left him stranded in the gravel. Also experiencing a disappointing weekend was Hoy, who failed to score points, being disqualified from ninth in race two. Unfortunately, Brands Hatch rather than Donington would signpost how much of his season would pan out.

A massive bank holiday crowd greeted the first of a brace of visits to Thruxton. Qualifying for round five followed the trend from Brands Hatch with Biela, Menu and Winkelhock setting the pace – in that order, once more confirming the international standard at the front of the field. At a track where power, and the application thereof, is always an advantage, it was unsurprising that the Audis took a one-two with Biela comfortably clear of team-mate Bintcliffe, and six seconds ahead of third-placed Rydell, who just edged home Cleland and Hoy following a very tight battle. Meanwhile, Menu in the second Renault retired with mechanical issues that couldn't be resolved, meaning he wouldn't start the second race.

It looked all too comfortable at the front, and the question of whether the Audis had something in reserve was answered in race two. Starting from the back with a ten-second penalty, Biela unleashed the Audi's potential to finish

a brilliant third (even with a strong car, picking through the mid-field battles takes some doing), albeit aided by an early safety car to retrieve Robertson's crashed Mondeo. The spoils went to the BMW pairing of Winkelhock and Ravaglia, who took full advantage of Menu's non-appearance. Biela was only two seconds back at the flag and with another couple of laps could have challenged for the win. Fourth-placed Cleland was the only driver who was able to sustain front-running pace, with fifth-placed Leslie 11 seconds back and Thompson seven seconds further back in sixth.

The fourth event of the season was a newish challenge for the field: their first outing on the new-for-1996 Silverstone International layout. Taking the hitherto undiscovered third way out of Becketts, the fast complex concluded with a 100-degree right-hander, which fed into a rapid chicane before a sprint across the facility to rejoin the Grand Prix circuit at Abbey. Instead of the fast left-hander, Abbey was reset as a tight right-handed hairpin, before heading on to Bridge and the remainder of the Grand Prix circuit.

The new circuit meant the established order was disrupted somewhat in qualifying, as the BMWs locked out the front row for round seven; Winkelhock 0.1s up on Ravaglia, Rydell taking a very close third.

Over the 20 laps it was the other Volvo, of Burt, which emerged triumphant after a very closely fought battle with Ravaglia in greasy conditions. Third went to Leslie, who was finally starting to reap the benefits of the development work on the Honda. Meanwhile, for the first time in 1996 the Audis were anonymous, with Bintcliffe in seventh and Biela 11th.

Burt didn't get too long to savour his triumph, as his second race ended in an opening-lap beaching at Abbey. In treacherous and worsening conditions, the weather

played into the hands of the four-wheel drive Audis whose traction allowed that bit more stability when applying the throttle. Similarly flying was Ravaglia who had opted for intermediate tyres, the car coming to him as the rain came down. However, despite dogged defence, Biela was able to pass the BMW before benefitting from the circuit drying a little, meaning the edge came off Ravaglia's pace. Biela duly claimed his fifth win of the season.

Next stop was the Oulton Park International circuit, the narrow Cheshire Parkland track arguably on the cusp of being outgrown by the super tourers. The big news heading into the weekend was that the Audis' performance would be somewhat pegged back by the addition of a 30kg weight penalty.

During a changeable qualifying period for the opening race, the weight penalty was trumped once more by the four-wheel drive enabling greater traction on a drying circuit. Given the width and layout of the circuit, passing would be tough, making the start all-important. Past seasons had seen multi-car accidents before the field made it to Old Hall and 1996 was no exception. A fast-starting Hoy made it almost four wide in the mid-field, with the inevitable squeezing and contact resulting in him and Radisich spearing into the barriers on either side of the circuit.

Once the safety car had completed the clear-up, the race was settled as Winkelhock moved clear of Biela and the Audi, then became the cork in the bottle, with Rydell, Menu, Burt and Bintcliffe all tucked up behind him. Burt and Bintcliffe tried to make progress, but their battle came to a head as they went down Cascades at the start of lap 12. Trying to find a way around Menu, Burt clipped the wide Renault, putting the Volvo off balance and on to the grass. At speed and with zero grip, Burt slewed sideways,

slamming broadside into the barrier in a colossal impact. Fortunately, the hit was on the passenger side, but, even so, Burt was badly injured, being knocked unconscious for 15 minutes and missing the next round at Snetterton. The red flags came out immediately and the result was declared at 11 laps, giving Winkelhock victory from Biela and Bintcliffe.

After another sizeable accident (this time befalling privateer Richard Kaye) the second race was more sedate. It was Rydell who was able to navigate past Biela, who was once more runner-up. Third again went to Bintcliffe who was in the post-race crosshairs for what was perceived to be some over-assertive defence.

The opening race at Snetterton proved to be the best of the season to that point. With the Audis' additional weight, and development throughout the other teams having an impact, the field was tightly bunched and jumbled in qualifying.

Winkelhock took the lead into Riches and should have romped into the distance. However, he was caught out by dust on the racing line into Sear on lap two, slithering wide – allowing Ravaglia, Rydell and Menu through and into the battle for the lead. Winkelhock proceeded to have a yo-yo race, moving back into the lead before sliding off again (more than once), eventually finishing in fifth.

With the leading group bunched together throughout, the race was fantastically close, although, as was becoming the norm, passing opportunities were few and far between. The decisive moment came heading into Riches. Menu, taking the outside track into the right-hander, turned across Ravaglia and made hefty contact with the BMW, which in turn knocked Rydell off course. As Rydell recovered, he crunched into Ravaglia, rotating the pair of them into retirement, with Menu also slowing to a halt shortly

after. Needless to say, tempers were high post-race, with a justifiably furious Ravaglia remonstrating with both Menu (deservedly) and Rydell (maybe less so).

The carnage promoted Thompson to an unlikely but popular win, the first for the Vectra, and Thompson's first since his return from injuries sustained at Knockhill the previous year. Despite being well off the pace, Biela took second, with Cleland completing an unlikely podium.

In race two Winkelhock (you'd imagine with threats from Schnitzer team principal Charlie Lamm ringing in his ear) did not repeat earlier errors and took a very comfortable fourth win of the year, bringing him up into title contention, but ultimately the Snetterton weekend would be the high point of his season. For now, though, the title fight looked like it was coming together, especially as Biela was excluded from the result for punting Leslie into retirement at the Russell chicane. In a generally calmer race Cleland was a fine second, ahead of Menu in third – salvaging something from his weekend.

Brands Hatch Grand Prix circuit was the next stop, where for the first time Menu was able to put together a perfect weekend, being the comfortable winner in both races. The Grand Prix circuit made for spectacular viewing and a formidable driving challenge; however, there was a dearth of overtaking in both races.

The podium in race one was completed by Biela and Rydell, who enjoyed a close battle for second with Hoy not far behind in fourth. Almost all the main runners made it to the flag. The exception to this was Radisich who was nerfed off into the tyres at Druids on the opening lap following some robust defence from Ravaglia.

A challenging qualifying session for Biela meant that he could only manage eighth in race two (this was achieved

courtesy of some incisive passing), with Winkelhock finishing runner-up five seconds back, having never really put Menu under pressure. Third went to Hoy ahead of Cleland and Thompson, capping Renault's best weekend of the season to date.

The addition of the 30kg weight penalty to the Audis had certainly closed up the field with a finely poised balance of performance throughout the pack (only the Nissans and occasionally Peugeots seemed cast adrift. Ford's pace was harder to judge given the drivers' propensity to finish the race in the wall). The upside of this was qualifying sessions where the top ten to 14 runners would be covered by well under a second – a parity of pace unthinkable even five years earlier. The downside was that in race conditions, with so little to choose between the runners in pace, overtaking was ever harder. This was especially the case at circuits like Brands Hatch and Oulton Park which had fewer obvious passing places, coupled with high-speed sections and adjacent Armco barriers that would punish the incautious.

So far, 1996 had been a mixed bag, with a couple of excellent races (Silverstone, Snetterton) offset by weekends where the podium places had been pretty much settled midway through the first lap.

The next event was the blue riband meeting of the season, and arguably the apogee of the super touring era – a first double-header at Silverstone supporting the British Grand Prix. With interest in motorsport buoyant on the back of Damon Hill's title challenge, the packed Silverstone crowd stayed after the F1 finished on both Saturday and Sunday to watch the BTCC.

Both races were in keeping with the season – extremely close and competitive, with world-class driving at the front

of the field, but with actually relatively little in the way of overtaking for the upper positions.

Ravaglia was the deserved winner in race one, absorbing race-long pressure from Rydell, with Biela completing the podium after making ground from seventh on the grid. Despite the closeness, the racing was fair, with none of the lunges or excessive contact that would later come to characterise the BTCC.

Double polesitter for the weekend, Leslie finally got his due rewards with a popular victory on Sunday. The Scot had been relentlessly developing the Honda into front-running contention, with his driving matching the car's pace and that of the international works drivers assembled around him. Once more he had to work hard for the win, with runner-up Biela, then Ravaglia and Rydell all within two seconds.

The performance of the cars was almost unrecognisable from a few years previously: the aerodynamics and stiff suspension was more aligned to a prototype sports car or single seater. If in 1992 the cars had gone a bit sideways and if you were so motivated, a charge through the field had been on the cards (copyright Steve Soper). Now they were glued to the racing line, with ever-shorter braking distances and the opportunities to progress up the order limited once you hit the top ten. Seen through the lens of traditional touring car racing, maybe something was missing, but, in reality, super touring was the number one manufacturer priority outside Formula 1, and the BTCC was the world's top motorsport series (outside F1) disguised as a national championship.

From 1996 onwards this would start to dilute – the revised FIA GT Championship brought life back into sports car racing, turning the heads of BMW and Audi amongst

others, whilst the World Rally Championship would start to vie for the attention too.

In this context, the sunny Silverstone weekend was as good as it got (at least for the BTCC). There would be no space on the F1 bill in 1997 (indeed, no races in July at all), manufacturer numbers (already down) would drop off gradually, then precipitously as the costs of going racing rose. That's not to say there weren't great moments to come, but, overall, super touring would never scale these heights again.

If perspective is available 30 years after the event, it was also available in real time to the drivers, with the next rounds coming a fortnight later at the short and rustic Knockhill circuit. The weekend was utterly dominated by Biela and Rydell, the Audi and Volvo pair being the class of the field on pace, with only Bintcliffe and Ravaglia able to get near them.

Rydell made the early running in race one, with Biela on his tail, before the Volvo started to go away from him, elevating Biela to head an Audi one-two, with Ravaglia completing the rostrum. The TWR squad made sure there would be no such misfortune in race two as Rydell led home Biela and Ravaglia. Once more, at the front of the field the driving standard was world class and mesmerising: absorbing and applying pressure for 35 laps without putting a wheel wrong.

Elsewhere, the big talking point from the weekend was the spate of retirements caused by the cars being a bit too tightly sprung for Knockhill's bounces – Cleland and Richard Kaye being very visible examples in race one.

With just four events to go, whilst the racing was a lot closer than at the start of the season, the title was still Biela's to lose. The Audi driver was formidably consistent, picking up wins and podiums almost every time out (his tyre management allowing the full 4WD potential of the Audi

later in the race was masterful). Even if others were taking the chequered flag, he was still there on the podium. There were challengers – Rydell, Ravaglia, Winkelhock and Menu were all having their days, but none of them had been able to put together a consistent title run.

Next up was a familiar venue with a new look, with the revival of the Oulton Park Fosters layout. As the circuit had fallen into hard times in the early 1980s this had been the default layout, but it had been superseded in more recent seasons by the full circuit. The addition of the Foulston's and Knickerbrook chicanes had been essential safety measures, but they disrupted the flow of the circuit. The Fosters layout (turning right immediately after Cascades, then flowing through a chicane-free Knickerbrook) had the potential to provide better racing, whilst also offering the spectators, who were typically based on that side of the circuit, more value.

Having become a 'Renault' circuit it was no surprise that Menu took victory in the opening race, a win that initially looked comfortable, but became ever more precarious as Biela chased him down late on. Heading into the final lap the pair were nose to tail, but with Biela first and foremost ensuring he safely netted the points for second, the German was content to try to pressure Menu into an error rather than launching for a move. Third went to Leslie, whose Honda was increasingly a podium challenger. Elsewhere, the early scrambles led to disappointments, most notably for Watts, who spun at Knickerbrook following contact with Thompson. The impact was sufficient for both to retire from the race, and in Watts's case remove him from proceedings for the second weekend in succession.

Despite starting fifth on the grid, the fast-starting Biela was the impressive winner of the second race. Once in the lead he absorbed race-long pressure from Leslie and Menu,

the trio covered by less than two seconds at the line. With his seventh win of the season, and sixth successive podium, Biela remained firmly atop the championship table. Things did move a degree closer in the constructors' championship, as the BMW pair continued to keep the Audis honest.

A second visit of the season to Thruxton followed, the August bank holiday crowd packing the Hampshire venue. With the Renaults locking out the front row, the start of race one saw one of the most replayed incidents of the super touring era. On a largely dry track, albeit with plenty of damp patches, the fast-starting Winkelhock split the Renaults heading up to the Complex. Three wide is ambitious at the best of times, but when it's slippery off-line it's generally a bad idea. Trying just a bit too hard to hold the outside line, to give himself the inside for the Complex, Menu slid sideways and tagged Winkelhock, the BMW then bouncing off Hoy, slithering sideways and spinning Menu into the path of his team-mate. Both Renaults clattered into the barrier, with Winkelhock retiring a couple of laps later. Further behind at the same corner, Radisich, Burt and Thompson were all eliminated in a separate incident.

The beneficiary was Leslie who was able to slip into the lead as Winkelhock's sideways BMW delayed the rest of the field. Unsurprisingly, there was a fairly lengthy safety car to clear up the wreckage. Once the racing got back underway, Leslie held the advantage from Biela, Rydell and Ravaglia.

Provided he stayed out of trouble, second place would be enough to give Biela the title; however, the Audi driver was determined to seal the crown with a win. Applying the pressure to Leslie over the final couple of laps, on more than one occasion it appeared as if Biela would slip past, only for a fully committed Leslie to hold his line. By just 0.17s, Leslie

scored his second win of the season ahead of the Audi, with Rydell withstanding Ravaglia for third.

Duly confirmed as champion, Biela would have liked to round the day off with a win, but from seventh on the grid that would be tricky. Instead, it was Rydell who took his third win of the season, strengthening his chances of taking second in the standings. This was a hard-fought win for the Swede, who was under race-long pressure leading a six-car pack. Early on, the primary challenger was Winkelhock, but when he over-committed in his bid for the lead, Thompson was elevated to second ahead of the canny Biela (who had been the class of the field in making progress without incident during races).

With the title settled, a blustery day for the penultimate event of the season at Donington Park drew one of the smaller crowds of the year. Taking the lead into Redgate in race one, Rydell gained a huge advantage as team-mate Burt slotted into second. As Burt fought a rearguard action, Rydell cleared off into the distance. Burt hadn't been on the podium since his Oulton Park accident, but looked set for second, until Hoy made an over-ambitious move into the right-handed Goddards hairpin. It was a move born of a frustrating season, and was never really on, with the end result that both he and Burt lost near-certain podium finishes. This promoted Leslie to take second, with Menu keeping his hopes of second in the standings alive with third.

The second race was less entertaining for the upper positions, as Leslie continued his strong finish to the year with his second win in as many events. Menu was a rather lonely second but crucially was able to make up ground on Rydell as the Volvo retired early on. Third place for Biela retained his record of scoring a podium in every single event of the season. This result was also enough to give Audi

both the team and manufacturers' titles (the manufacturers title points being awarded to the best scoring car from each marque, whilst all cars entered by the team counted towards the teams award).

With everything settled, the season-closing trip to the Brands Hatch Indy circuit could have been written off as a dead rubber. Instead, the opening race proved to be one of the most controversial of the season.

At the lights it was third-placed Ravaglia who timed his start to perfection, jumping Winkelhock and Menu into Paddock Hill Bend. Absolutely on the limit, both Ravaglia and Menu span as they crested the right-hander, triggering an almighty pile-up behind as too many cars tried to squeeze into too little space. The most alarming incident happened in the mid-field as Thompson was clipped sideways by team-mate Cleland, before being hit at speed by Robertson and Ayles. Unsurprisingly, the red flags came out, and it was a much-depleted field that would take the restart. Winkelhock was among the absentees as, independently of the accident surrounding him, he'd suffered an engine failure.

The survivors made a great race of it, with the third BMW driven by factory-test driver Peter Kox (who'd first appeared at Thruxton) piling the pressure on to Menu. It looked like Menu had it in hand until a remarkable last-lap incident. Recovered from the gravel and repaired in the garage, Ravaglia was allowed out with a handful of laps to run. Whether or not this was with the express instruction of baulking Menu would be up for debate. What was indisputable, however, was that the leading pair caught Ravaglia into Clearways for the final time. The Italian egregiously blocked Menu allowing Kox to draw alongside, forcing the Renault driver to swerve across the circuit to shut the door, pushing Kox on to the grass. Thus Menu

took a deserved win from Kox with Leslie an unobtrusive third. It was an incident unbecoming a driver of Ravaglia's ability; however, the downside of being a works driver is the possibility of sometimes being instructed against your better judgement.

The second race was a less-dramatic affair as Winkelhock and Biela tussled for the win. As was the case several times during the year, Winkelhock passed Biela but was having to drive the BMW on the ragged edge. A sideways moment trying to fend off the Audi at Druids was all it took for Biela to reclaim the advantage, which he held to the flag for win number eight, rounding out a season where he'd finished all bar one race in the points in style. Ravaglia took advantage of Winkelhock's moment to take second from his sideways team-mate. Further back, Rydell suffered mechanical failure early on, allowing Menu with fourth place to pip him to second in the standings.

That double podium would be the last the BTCC would see of BMW in the super touring era, as the marque withdrew from the championship, focusing on the STW championship and their emerging sports car effort. Winkelhock would continue as a works BMW driver for several years to come, remaining their super touring ace in the STW, before taking victory in the 1999 Le Mans 24 Hours. Immediately, and enduringly popular with the fans 'Smoking Jo' would be a huge loss to the BTCC. Ravaglia meanwhile stayed with the Schnitzer team for 1997 as part of their FIA GT effort in a McLaren. As the most successful marque to this point of the super touring era, BMW, and particularly the Schnitzer team who had transformed the championship's professionalism, would be a big loss.

Second place in the manufacturers' and teams' championships was proof positive that BMW had been

Audi's biggest challengers throughout the season. The strength of the driver line generally saw both cars home in good points-scoring positions, but neither Winkelhock nor Ravaglia was quite able to put together a title challenge. Winkelhock certainly had the pace, but too many spins from winning positions cost him a true tilt at the crown.

Audi had enjoyed a year of dominance, their early-season results – before the 30kg weight penalty was applied – leaving the rest of the pack with a massive catch-up job. Biela underlined his status as a world-class driver and was a deserved champion. Team-mate Bintcliffe meanwhile finished seventh in the standings having secured five podiums along the way. Fading down the order from a mid-season purple patch, it was an impressive debut year, but Audi would be looking for more in 1997. The Quattro had entered six championships in 1996, winning every single one of them – prompting four-wheel drive to be banned from the end of the 1997 season. Albeit forcing a redesign to stay relevant, a necessary rewriting of the rules is probably the greatest tribute that could have been paid to the team.

Renault had been expected to be Audi's main challenger but it never quite came together. Despite four wins, Menu was never really in the title hunt. Hoy meanwhile had a year to forget, three podiums and ninth in the standing an unfair reward for his speed. Although excelling at the shorter and twistier circuits, the Laguna was a beat down at the higher-speed venues. Technically, the big issue was the Sodemo engine, which failed 40 times over the course of the season, costing both points and track times, whilst also being down on power and torque. The compensation came from a trick rear-end suspension, which gave the cars a big advantage through faster turns. A frustrating but learning

year for Williams, as the setbacks all gave data points and focus for the 1997 campaign.

Volvo also had a strange year. In its final season, the 850 was definitely showing its age, but still secured five wins (four for Rydell and one for Burt). Arguably, the 850 was the best of the front-wheel drive runners, benefitting from mid-range torque, a hugely effective front splitter, and making the most of an exclusive agreement with suspension provider Ohlins. Rydell matched Menu for retirements, but somehow his felt more costly, particularly with two non-finishes in the final three races. As with Menu, there was no doubting Rydell's class as a driver: he was firmly in the upper echelons of the international class. Victory at Silverstone highlighted Burt's talent, but the Oulton Park accident derailed his season and, despite only missing a handful of races, he didn't feel fully recovered until the final rounds.

Honda's year, although impressive, was once again a case of what might have been. Behind-the-scenes politics consistently rubbed the gloss off what was an otherwise impressive year. The MSD-built Accord, in combination with the Neil Brown engines, took a clutch of well-deserved wins. The politics were primarily between Honda UK and Honda Motor Europe, the latter casting an eye towards a broader pan-European programme for 1997. This led to a split testing programme and multiple behind-the-scenes clashes. Leslie, for whom this was far from his first rodeo, knew he had a winning package and managed to block out the noise, focusing on the job at hand. Arguably the best of the British drivers in the championship, fourth in the standings was fair reward for his late-season run of wins. James Kaye finished almost 130 points behind his teammate having borne the brunt of the garage turmoil, but without the experience to push it away. At season's end it

was confirmed that MSD had lost the Honda contract for 1997 – a harsh result seeing as their Accords had won in Belgium, Germany and the USA, together with informing the all-conquering JTCC version. The team would move on to running Peugeot's effort for 1997, the French marque finally outsourcing their racing operation.

It was a transitional year for Vauxhall as the squad introduced and got the Vectra up to speed. Having been entrusted with building the Vectras for the entirety of Vauxhall/Opel's super touring programme, it could be argued that it took the team a while to fully focus on the BTCC. When on song, the Vectra was impressive, particularly once re-shelled versions were available mid-season. A strong racer, both drivers were often among the fastest on the circuit at the chequered flag. However, this race pace didn't translate into qualifying, and in a year when overtaking was a challenge, this left them trying to make ground against difficult odds. For champion Cleland, two podiums (both at Snetterton) were a far cry from the success of the previous year. Thompson scored the team's only win, in the opening race at Snetterton when most of the others fell off, but was largely frustrated in the bottom half of the top ten. As the year progressed, Thompson began to assert himself into more of a team-leadership role, driving friction with Cleland and generally unsettling the team. The Vectra was on the pace, but not quite ahead of it.

At least they weren't Ford. WSR's first year running the factory team was an absolute disaster. Receiving the Schubel-built cars at the last minute, they would have been on the back foot even if they'd worked perfectly. Unfortunately, they didn't and, whilst on paper, everything seemed in line with Ford's rivals, the reality was that the 1996 Mondeo ate tyres and gave its pilots no confidence in

its handling. With Reynard in the wings to build the 1997 model, Schubel were not minded to rush developments (and were also running their own STW programme), whilst both the engine (Cosworth) and gearbox (Hewland) also caused issues. For WSR it was a baptism of fire, not helped by an ever-tighter budget squeeze as the year progressed. Radisich retired 14 times, more or less evenly split between accidents (often other people's) and mechanical issues – but when he made it to the flag he mostly had the car further up the order than it deserved. He and the base Mondeo had shown over the three previous years they were quicker than this. Teammate Robertson had a disastrous year, frequently matching the privateers for pace and never seeming comfortable with the car – his confidence shot early on, his BTCC career was effectively over with most of the rounds still to run.

Tied on points with Ford (but ahead due to higher finishes) in the manufacturers' championship were Peugeot. Retirements torpedoed any momentum Watts and Harvey built up – the late-season nadir coming when neither car finished either race in successive weekends at Oulton Park and Knockhill. As with Ford, the combination of mechanical issues and mid-field pace that made it easy to get involved in early-race incidents added up to a frustrating year. The inability to find a workable set-up was at the heart of Peugeot's uncompetitiveness – the car either worked over kerbs or had good balance, but never both. Front-end flex further compounded the problem, meaning that the car tended to go away from the drivers as the race progressed. Despite the best efforts of the team, the limited budget, workforce and assistance from Peugeot HQ (even though this was an in-house operation) meant that a solitary fourth was the high point of the year. Both Harvey's and Watts's ability was greater than their results showed.

The Rouse Sport Nissans had an odd year, which played itself out on the race track with the Primeras adrift of the works runners, but generally clear of the privateers. The first half of the year was run with 1995 spec cars, with Rouse Sport's eyes half averted to the development work they were doing for Nissan's German and Spanish programmes. Ayles only finished in the points once all year, whilst McAuley left the team mid-season in protest at Ayles being given the sole 1996 specification car when it arrived in time for Silverstone. The biggest issue for the team was the engine, which was woefully underpowered compared to what was required to be competitive. After the team skipped Oulton Park in August, a Japanese specification engine was made available – generating an extra 60bhp in some gearings. In testing, this propelled the Nissan to top-ten pace, but it never came together at a race weekend. It was an oddly incongruous note for Rouse Sport to exit the paddock on, with the Nissan contract heading elsewhere for 1997.

The privateer battle was decided in warm-up at Brands Hatch. Brookes and Richard Kaye had been the front-runners all year – Kaye winning more races than Brookes, but also falling off more frequently. The pre-race shunt at Brands Hatch forced Kaye out of the meeting and, with Brookes already retaining a slender points advantage, he claimed the Total Cup.

So, 1996 was another high watermark year for the championship, and super touring as a whole, with the collapse of the Class 1 ITC by season's end ceding supremacy to the super touring regulations. The performance of the cars was spectacular, generally a second up on the lap times set a year previously – the machinery of 1996 was impressive. It was also a huge step removed from the cars that had taken to the grid five years earlier, and to many journalists the

balance was beginning to tip a little too far in favour of the machinery rather than the drivers.

With exposure still largely driven by the hugely popular BBC *Grandstand* highlights packages, there was always enough action across the weekend to provide an entertaining 30 minutes (or sufficient to allow smart editing to cover the rest). However, for those in attendance, the ‘show’ wasn’t always so good, with too many processional races and non-contests for the race win. With live TV on the horizon for 1997, this was something to ponder – particularly as, with the loss of F1 to ITV, the BTCC was in line to become the BBC’s flagship motorsport product.

## Global Expansion and European Decline – 1994–2001

WITH A ruleset that coalesced in 1993, and then continued to evolve, it was almost expected that a global, or at least European, touring car championship would be launched off the back of super touring's success. Toyota certainly thought so, withdrawing from the BTCC at the end of 1995 in the expectation of a championship that never was.

Aside from the World Cup events covered earlier in the book, there was never a gathering of the super touring clan on an international footprint. Whilst at first glance surprising, in reality there were as many, if not more, reasons not to establish a multi-national championship as there were to press forward with one.

Firstly, there was the matter of cost. As the collapse of the DTM/ITC had shown, any world championship commitment is prohibitively expensive and unless backed up by fantastic promotion doesn't necessarily offer a great return for sponsors – if you're trying to sell car stereos to the British public, you don't really want the cars racing overseas 11 times a year.

Given that domestic programme budgets were comfortably exceeding £5m, it is hard to believe that anyone

going for the title would have got much change out of £15m–£20m in a world championship.

Secondly, although running under tight FIA homologation, there was always a degree of local promoter wriggle room – which meant that the Peugeots appearing in Germany, for example, were different to the ones racing in the BTCC. Bringing the cars into a true single specification would have been unduly costly and alienated many industry backers (e.g. tyre companies) who were working on specific championships.

Just as compellingly, the air had started to come out of the super touring bubble almost as soon as it was fully inflated. From the end of 1995 onward, manufacturers were starting to look elsewhere, which only accelerated as the decade progressed. For BMW, Audi and Toyota there were hugely successful sports car programmes that (for the German firms at least) would yield great success at Le Mans. Likewise, Formula 1 always remained a tantalising, if ruinously expensive, prospect. For the Japanese manufacturers, the growth of what became Super GT overtook all else as the domestic racing priority, whilst the relaunch of the DTM similarly diverted attention. Ultimately for the marketing team in Ingolstadt, a Le Mans triumph outranked a win at Knockhill for public cut-through.

With super touring declining and on track to be phased out, it was perhaps surprising that the European Touring Car Championship (ETCC) was resurrected under super touring rules for 2000. In reality, it wasn't really a full-blown European championship, rather an evolution of the Italian championship, which pulled together others who wished to race their now increasingly redundant super tourers.

Comprising ten rounds, six of which were in Italy and the remainder in central Europe, the ETCC title was

barely justified. This was compounded by a thin, if high-quality, field that, Peter Kox aside, was all Italian. The notable addition to the calendar was the new airport circuit Mobikrog near Novo Mesto in Slovenia – an obscure venue which never again appeared on international schedules.

Alfa Romeos, run by Nordauto Engineering, covered four of the entries, with a strong leading squad of Fabrizio Giovanardi and Nicola Larini looking likely to feature at the front. Strong works-supported BMWs in the hands of Emanuele Naspetti and Gianni Morbidelli would be in the mix. As would the single JAS Sport (read works) Honda for Kox and a competitive Audi Quattro for Roberto Colciago.

Thereafter, the likely front-runners dropped off precipitously with the rest of the regulars compromising Italian gentleman drivers, although some hot-shoe ex-works drivers (David Leslie, Johnny Cecotto) would make one-off appearances later in the season.

Pace and consistency proved an unbeatable combination for Giovanardi as he took the title, scoring points in every race and winning five. His closest title challenger was Kox who also took five wins and kept the title fight close all the way to the wire. Ultimately, two early-season non-points finishes for Kox and a stronger run down the stretch for Giovanardi proved decisive.

For 2001 the ETCC pivoted to boost numbers with a new super production class alongside the super tourers, which were no longer the focus of development. Although the series entry remained Italian-centric, the schedule was far more international, featuring races in ten different countries with rounds at Monza, Brno, Magny-Cours, Silverstone, Zolder, Hungaroring, Red Bull Ring, Nürburgring, Jarama and Estoril.

Professional interest was largely slimmed to two squads – the Nordauto Alfa Romeos of Giovanardi and Larini, and the JAS Hondas of Gabriele Tarquini (returning with the team from the BTCC) and Fabrice Walfish. Colciago would also appear in his BMW alongside his STCC commitments.

Despite the sparse numbers, there was a three-way title fight to enjoy. Giovanardi claimed his second crown, consistency proving key with only two finishes out of 20 worse than fifth, plus three wins. Team-mate Larini finished second and was the early-season pacesetter with two wins and four second places in the opening six races. Thereafter, he only scored one more win and struggled to find the podium in the second half of the year, allowing Giovanardi to overhaul him. Third in the standings, Tarquini won nine times in his Honda and was only off the podium twice in the races that he finished. Unfortunately for Tarquini, four retirements during the year, compared to his title rivals, cost him. Colciago and Walfish both scored wins, as did Matt Neal who completed a part season in his Nissan and was always on the pace when out of trouble.

The 2001 ETCC season was truly the swansong for the super tourers, who were replaced for 2002 by the Super 2000 regulations. The championship took full advantage of this, growing a roster of works teams and, in partnership with Eurosport, evolving to world championship status by the 2005 season. Although successful, the World Touring Car Championship (WTCC) was never quite the dominant touring car class. Unlike the peak of the super touring era, the WTCC was never in regulations harmonisation with the strongest domestic championships, like the BTCC and DTM, ensuring a fragmented landscape through the 2000s and early 2010s – with no manufacturer-supported entries split between the three championships.

Whilst from the mid-1990s onwards super touring was in decline in Europe, championships in Australia and the USA were either launched, or started to receive more professional backing.

Perhaps no nation loves its saloon car racing as much as Australia, where the touring car-only Bathurst 1000, dubbed 'The Great Race', is a borderline national holiday. Unlike in Europe, where touring cars co-exist with single-seater racing, the latter largely being regarded as the top flight, the pinnacle of Australian motorsport has long been the Australian Touring Cars/V8 Supercars/Supercars championship.

Touring car racing in Australia evolved into a single class formula from 1993, adopting Group 3A regulations and shifting the format away from the multi-class, lengthy single-race events which had predominated. The 1993 regulations were still broad, with super tourers accepted alongside the 5.0l V8s which would come to dominate. By 1994 the few 2.0l cars that had been in the field were gone, and the pack was (to the delight of the fans who had resented Nissan's Group A success in the early 1990s) split between the old rivals Ford and Holden.

Whole books have been written about the V8s which have undergone various guises and names, but are best known as the V8 Supercars. Although, as we'll see, a super touring championship was established and ran for many years, it was always secondary to the V8 Supercars. The 1990s were a great era for them, with Glenn Seton, Craig Lowndes and Mark Skaife the standout drivers, but supported by an ever-growing field.

The super tourers, no longer sharing a grid with the V8s, were instead catered for through a newly created super touring championship that would run for ten seasons, the

1993 2.0l title having been decided as a separate class of the ATCC. For 1994 the series would be known as the Australian Manufacturer's Championship, comprising 12 races over six weekends. The calendar took in the new Sydney suburb circuit of Eastern Creek, the wonderful Phillip Island (which had recently lost its motorcycle Grand Prix to Eastern Creek, before it returned for 1995), the twisty Winton, Queensland's fast, compact and somewhat hairy Lakeside, the rural Mallala and Sydney's other circuit Oran Park (sharing its crossover feature with Suzuka). Whilst a varied calendar, Mallala and Lakeside were solidly second-tier circuits. Crucially, the super tourers would, as in 1993, be allowed on to the grid at Bathurst.

Most races saw ten or so cars taking part, but, for 1994 at least, it was a second-tier series with the bulk of the star drivers competing in the main ATCC championship. However there was quality in the field with 1988 Bathurst winner Tony Longhurst in a (surprisingly!) Tony Longhurst Racing BMW, the team's second car going to the rapid Paul Morris. A Toyota Carina was entrusted to the versatile Greg Murphy. Continuing the theme of imaginative team names, Steve Ellery in the Steven Ellery Racing Ford would make the step up from Formula Ford (en route to a successful V8 Supercars career), whilst Phil Ward Racing fielded Phil Ward in a far from contemporary Mercedes 190E (the car had in fact been purchased from Helmut Marko in the mid-1980s).

The title battle was ultimately fought between the Tony Longhurst Racing pair, who took the win in every single race. Team principal Longhurst prevailed, despite the pair claiming six wins apiece. The decisive factor was Morris having one more non-finish than Longhurst (who was disqualified from both races at Winton) after a pointless

outing at Lakeside and then retirement in the opener at Mallala.

There was an explosion in the popularity and professionalism of the championship in 1995, boasting much-larger grids and an expansion to eight championship and two non-championship events. The points-paying calendar started the year at Phillip Island, before a trip to Oran Park, then across the Tasman Straight to Tasmania's Symmons Plains and then the Calder Park circuit (the road course part of a complex that also included an oval for NASCAR-style racing). The second half of the season returned to 1994 venues at Mallala, Lakeside, Winton and Eastern Creek. The two non-championship events were an early-season support to the IndyCars on the streets of Surfers Paradise and a season-ending return to Calder Park.

The field was stronger too: Morris set up his own team to run BMWs with Diet Coke backing for himself and Geoff Brabham. A brace of works Audi 80s would be piloted by Greg Murphy and Brad Jones. BTCC refugee Jeff Allam was entrusted with a works Mondeo entered by Ross Palmer Motorsport alongside former motorcycle Grand Prix winner Gregg Hansford. Volvo Cars Australia entered one of the already legendary 850 estates for Tony Scott, whilst the pick of the privateers were likely to be Steven Richards in a Garry Rogers Motorsport Alfa Romeo and Graham Moore in an Opel Vectra.

Tragedy struck in the opening moments of the season at Phillip Island, as Hansford was killed in a first-corner incident, his Mondeo being struck heavily in the driver's door. It was an impact sadly foreshadowing O'dor's similar incident later in the season.

Morris won the restarted race in an extraordinarily close contest, heading home the Audi pairing of Jones and Murphy

by 0.01s and 0.2s respectively. It was more comfortable for Morris in race two as he was almost five seconds clear of Jones with team-mate Brabham completing the podium.

Despite starting from pole, Morris had to settle for fifth in the opening race on the short layout at Oran Park, as Jones took his and Audi's first win of the year from Brabham and Charlie O'Brien in a privately entered BMW. Later that day Brabham scored his first win of 1995, from O'Brien and Morris, giving the BMWs a clean sweep of the rostrum.

Diet Coke BMW's dominance continued in Tasmania with Morris and Brabham taking a win apiece at Symmons Plains, the same pattern repeating at Calder Park. Worryingly for the rest of the field, these weren't narrow wins, but victories by a not insignificant margin. The Diet Coke BMWs would continue to sweep the honours in Mallala, where Brabham scored both wins, and Lakeside where Morris did the same, before making it three in a row in the Winton opener. Finally, in the second race at Winton, the BMW dominance was broken as Brad Jones won for Audi, which he followed up with another triumph in the Eastern Creek opener.

Jones would finish third in the standings, tied on points with Brabham, his consistency compensating for the occasions when Brabham retired or finished outside the points. However, on countback, Brabham's five wins gave him the nod for second. The title went to Morris whose eight wins marked him out as the dominant driver, it being clear from early on that the crown would go to one of the BMW drivers.

For 1996 the cast of characters remained largely the same, with the BMW works-supported team continuing with Morris and Brabham and Audi doing the same with Jones and Murphy. Other competitive entries would come

from Richards, splitting his season between a Honda Accord and Alfa Romeo 155, and the legendary Peter Brock in a Volvo 850. Aside from the BMW and Audi quartet, Richards was the only driver to score a win (in the second race at Winton).

Unlike the previous year, it was Audi who were on the front foot, with Jones comfortably the dominant driver of the season. Triumphant in nine of the 16 races, when the going was good Jones was the driver to beat. However, he only took the title by 11 points, needing a double win in the season closer at Oran Park to seal the title. This was due to Morris's consistency: whereas Jones racked up two retirements and a ninth (a catastrophic result given the size of the field), Morris finished in the top five in all bar one race, taking three wins along the way.

Third in the standings went to the second Audi of Murphy, who more often than not finished runner-up to Jones, but a late-season slump left him detached from title contention. Brabham rounded out the top four, ahead of Richards and Brock. Another notable cameo in the final round came from the appearance in a Ford Mondeo of Kevin Schwantz; the 1993 500cc bike GP world champion had been forced into retirement at the end of 1995 and was tentatively exploring a four-wheeled career, following in the wheel tracks of former rivals Wayne Gardner and Eddie Lawson.

In 1997 it was a case of more of the same, with Audi and BMW being the dominant squads, although Volvo expanded to a two-car works effort for Jim Richards and Scott. Morris and Brabham continued with BMW, whilst at Audi Jones was joined by new team-mate Cameron McConville.

Over the 16-race, eight-event season, fortunes were firmly back in favour of the BMWs. Morris took his second

title, with seven wins, ahead of thrice-victorious team-mate Brabham. Finishing first and second on six occasions and each suffering only one retirement, the pair's pace and consistency left no way into the title fight for the Audis. In their dispute for third, whilst Jones had more wins (four), McConville was more consistent in racking up the podium finishes and had fewer retirements, giving him the edge over his team-mate. Volvo's Jim Richards took fifth in the points in a remarkably consistent season where he was outside the top six just once, but only three times on the rostrum.

The BMWs would not be back to defend their title for 1998, as the manufacturer scaled back their support, leaving Morris to move over to the V8 Supercars championship. A semi-works entry for Cameron McLean would be the extent of BMW's focus. On paper, this left the way clear for the Audis of Jones and McConville to dispute the title between themselves, although Volvo's effort was bolstered with a move from the 850 to S40 for the experienced Jim Richards.

He had a superb season, retiring only once (in the final race) and finishing in the top four on the other 15 occasions. He only won twice and wasn't able to match the Audis' pace, but his consistency ensured there wasn't margin for slip-ups. For the title it was desperately close between Jones and McConville with both taking seven wins. The decisive factor in Jones's favour was McConville's disqualification at Lakeside and scoring one more second place than his team-mate – enough to give him the title by seven points.

For 1999 the championship was as well supported as it ever had been with mid-teens entries for most rounds, but with manufacturer input again limited to Volvo and Audi, although Morris was back with a privately entered BMW. With the Audi A4 increasingly long in the tooth, Jones, and new partner Matthew Coleman, faced an uphill task. The

eight-round championship started with three double-headers at Lakeside, Oran Park and Mallala, before five three-race events at Winton, Queensland Raceway and two at Oran Park. If nothing else, with eight races around the Sydney venue, you could guarantee by season's end the drivers would know Oran Park well.

Once more, with a smaller field within which to distribute the points, the title fight was extremely close. Morris's BMW prevailed over Richards's Volvo by just two points, the difference coming from Richards having two retirements to the single non-finish by Morris. Richards won ten races to Morris's nine, with Jones in the Audi the only other driver to claim the silverware.

Heading into 2000, the championship suffered the blow of withdrawals of the works-supported Audi and Volvo entries, leaving just seven cars, with the field made respectable by the addition of the Future Touring cars. Morris returned to retain his crown, in an eight-round championship that would run from May 2000 to February 2001. Other than Morris, the bulk of the field was made up of enthusiastic privateers in machinery of varying vintage, so it was no surprise that Morris won all bar one race to utterly dominate the championship – his fourth Australian Super Touring title.

The 2001 championship barely counted as one – just four races, split between Winton and Calder Park. Peter Hills (Ford Mondeo) won three of those races to take the crown, with Grant Johnson (Ford Mondeo) the only other winner – taking the flag in the only race he finished. Luke Searle (BMW) took the runners-up spot.

By 2002 the series was clearly on the way out, but nonetheless bounced back somewhat from 2001, with 15 races split across five rounds, two of which were at Oran

Park and Mallala, Wakefield and Queensland Raceway also featuring. Alan Gurr (BMW 320) was the dominant driver of the year, winning 12 of the 15 races, using the season as a stepping stone to V8 Supercars. Championship runner-up was Hills in his Mondeo, who, alongside two wins, finished runner-up more often than not. The only other race winner was Luke Searle who made two appearances in an elderly BMW 318. Propped up once more by cars from the Future Touring category, the Super Touring Championship was wound up at the end of 2002 as V8 Supercars and its feeder series claimed supremacy. The V8 Supercar hegemony wouldn't be challenged again until 2019, when TCR Australia was launched.

The twist in the tail to the Australian super touring story is its Bathurst years. Known as the 'Great Race', the Bathurst 1000 is part national holiday, part tribal ceremony (for believers in Ford and Holden), and undisputedly one of Australia's largest sporting events. Run on the Mount Panorama circuit on the edge of the town of Bathurst in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, the 6km circuit features high-speed blasts up and down the mountainside, interspersed by a thrilling, narrow and technical traverse of the mountaintop.

The super tourers initially co-existed with the Bathurst 1000, forming the secondary class for the 1994 race, albeit with only a handful of cars. For 1995 the event was fully focused on establishing the V8 Supercars, before, in 1996, the super tourers were invited to run two standalone support races. The first of these was claimed by Craig Baird in the Diet Coke BMW, after team-mate Geoff Brabham spun away his chances at the top of the mountain. The second race was held in atrocious conditions, where Jim Richards came through to take Volvo's first win in Australia.

Although immensely popular in its own right, the story of Bathurst is intertwined with that of developing television coverage, with segments of the race first being shown from the mid-1960s and colour broadcasting from 1975. The race took a further leap forward in the public consciousness when it was broadcast in its entirety in 1977.

This coverage was led by Channel Seven, whose presentation pushed the boundaries of what had previously been seen in a motorsports broadcast with the introduction of in-car cameras, in-race interviews with the drivers – talking from their cars to the commentary box – and a plethora of other innovations.

Such was Seven's commitment to Bathurst, they held a stake in the race, their coverage being part of the national consciousness. It was a state of affairs that suited everyone until the mid-1990s. During 1996, Touring Car Entrants Group of Australia (TEGA) signed a deal with sports promotion monolith International Management Group (IMG) to promote the ATCC. This led to the championship being rebranded as V8 Supercars, with one of IMG's first orders of business being to cast around for an improved TV deal for the championship – signing with Network 10 for a higher-value contract with far expanded coverage.

This deal was no problem for most of the calendar, but it was for Bathurst, where Seven had an exclusive broadcast deal in place for well into the new millennium. Network 10 also had the rights to broadcasting Bathurst action as a cornerstone of their deal with V8 Supercars. As a crown jewel of both the Australian motorsport calendar and the Seven broadcasting schedule, this created a major impasse.

With no resolution found, the end result was that for 1997 there would be two Bathurst 1000s. The V8 Supercars would hold their own 1000km event a fortnight

after the ‘traditional’ Bathurst 1000, which would be run to super touring regulations – with TOCA Australia tasked with assembling a field. It wasn’t just a case of sorting the cars: the drivers would be a challenge too, with all the home favourites committed to the V8 Supercars event, meaning the promoters would need to look overseas, and particularly to the other TOCA-promoted championship in the UK.

By a fortunate coincidence, the BTCC had wrapped up in the third weekend of September leaving many of the drivers free to make the trip to Australia. In all, 30 cars were entered, of whom 27 took the start, the Australian regulars being joined by several BTCC entrants and a number of New Zealand teams too.

This led to an intriguing entry list. The Diet Coke BMW team were the dominant squad of the super touring era. For Bathurst, Geoff Brabham was partnered with brother David, who was no stranger to a BMW super tourer after his 1995 BTCC campaign but had most recently been establishing himself as one of the lead drivers in Panoz’s sports car effort.

Audi drafted in Frank Biela to partner Brad Jones, and at Volvo Jim Richards was joined by Rickard Rydell, whilst Cameron McLean had Swedish champion Jan Nilsson for company in what would be something of a swansong outing on the international stage for the 850.

The Williams team brought a pair of Lagunas, with Menu and Plato partnered together, whilst the second car saw Williams’s 1980 Formula 1 world champion Alan Jones with fellow countryman Graham Moore. With General Motors’ Holden brand in V8 Supercars, their brace of entries were Vauxhall Vectras. The legendary Peter Brock, an immensely crowd-pleasing addition to the field, was

alongside Derek Warwick, whilst John Cleland and James Kaye had the other car.

The other significant works presence came in the form of two Peugeots, one for the departing Patrick Watts partnered by the versatile Neil Crompton, and the other for Watts's replacement Paul Radisich (now released from Ford duties) and Tim Harvey.

As was perhaps to have been expected, the British entries by and large struggled when pitted against local knowledge and teams who had been steeped in Bathurst mythology from birth – although Menu did get to within 0.1s of Morris during single-lap qualifying. Continuing the run of the season, the Diet Coke BMWs dominated the race, with the Morris/Baird car having the edge of pace over the Brabhams. The team duly took a one-two at the chequered flag only for Morris and Baird to be disqualified. The regulations stipulated that no single driver could do more than three hours of consecutive driving. During the final pit stop, Baird was mistakenly left in the car, exceeding the three-hour limit. It was an incredibly painful way to lose the race.

The disappointment was softened for the team as they still won the race, with Geoff and David Brabham inheriting the win. Second went to the Jones/Bielä Audi some 12 seconds back, the other Audi of McConville and Jean-François Hemroulle completing the podium.

The super touring regulations continued into 1998 but, reflecting a slightly lower level of international interest, the grid was filled out by cars from the New Zealand touring car championship and production entries, to give a three-class race.

With BMW not providing a works entry, homegrown Audi and Volvo teams led the field. For Audi, regulars Jones

and McConville were paired together with a second car for Morris (seeking revenge) and Radisich. At Volvo the Richards/Rydell pairing was reunited, the second car going to Jan Nilsson and Tim Harvey. Vauxhall again brought two Vectras for Warwick and Cleland, and Greg Murphy and Russell Ingall.

The remaining BTCC interest came in the form of the Team Dynamics Primera for Neal and Steven Richards, and Lee Brookes's Honda Accord for the team principal and Robb Gravett.

Unusually, given the rigours of the race, the top two in qualifying were first and second home after almost seven hours of racing. Rydell was 1.5s clear of Steven Richards in one-shot qualifying, and it was the Volvo that took the flag just shy of two seconds up on the Nissan. Third went to the Audi of Jones and McConville, the only other car on the lead lap.

With the rival V8 Supercars race continuing to draw a full field of home favourites, and a stronger field, it was the end of the road for the super touring Bathurst experiment. There simply wasn't the market for two rival 1000km races a fortnight apart and, whatever was printed in the contracts, for the fans the Bathurst featuring local favourites doing battle in Fords and Holdens was the 'true' race.

Perhaps, had super touring had a stronger foothold domestically, or had it continued to attract sustained global manufacturer investment, the race may have continued and thrived – in the vein of today's sports car manufacturer-supported Bathurst 12 Hours. However, with a weak Australian championship and a general global drift away from super touring regulations, the experiment had run its course.

For 1999 what needed to be sorted by the lawyers was done, and there was once again just one Bathurst 1000, and

for the overwhelming majority of Australian fans just one class of touring car racing.

If introducing super touring was bold in Germany and Australia, in the USA it was near unthinkable. The dominance of NASCAR as the pre-eminent motorsport championship, let alone roofed car series, would, on paper anyway, make it near impossible for another series to really gain a foothold.

However, Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) tried, launching the North American Touring Car Championship (NATCC) for the 1996 season. Running over eight weekends and 16 races, the championship would largely be on the same bill as the hugely popular CART series (itself entering a transitional year having split with the George family and losing the Indianapolis 500 from its calendar, the legendary May slot being filled by the nascent Indy Racing League), together with a couple of standalone events.

The inaugural season would have an even split of permanent circuits in Lime Rock, Portland, Mid-Ohio and Laguna Seca, and street-course rounds in Detroit, Toronto, Trois-Rivieres and Vancouver.

The first year struggled for numbers, with only four ever-presents and a further four or so regulars – only Dodge and Honda had regular multi-car entries, although Ford and BMW were frequently represented. The Pac-West run Dodges were arguably the strongest team, on paper, operating under the same umbrella as the successful IndyCar team.

Honda's Randy Pobst claimed the inaugural title with five wins, ahead of one-time IndyCar campaigner Dominic Dobson (four wins) and his Dodge team-mate Davie Donohue (son of legendary racer Mark Donohue). Ultimately, there were just too few cars to make the season

truly exciting, with generally no more than three or four front-runners at each round – the nadir arguably coming in Vancouver where an accident eliminated half the field.

Season highlights can still be found online, and benefitting from tight editing they are worth a watch, if only to appreciate some impressive camera angles which truly capture the speed of the cars.

CART kept the faith into 1997, with an expanded nine-event calendar. Eight of these (Long Beach, Detroit, Portland, Cleveland, Toronto, Mid-Ohio, Vancouver and Laguna Seca) would be alongside CART, together with a standalone event at the Savannah circuit in Georgia.

There was expansion, with at least nine cars starting each round. Pac-West had continuity with Dobson and Donohue and were the only squad with the same pair of drivers each time out. Reigning champion Pobst and TC Klein Racing switched to BMW, the second car being occupied by a revolving cast. Darren Law was another ever-present in his BMW, as was Ford's David Welch and Honda's Peter Cunningham. Two Schader Motorsport Mazdas were to be found each time out, with Bob Schader predominantly partnered by the nomadic Desire Wilson. Quick competition was also to be found in the form of Australian Neil Crompton for Tasman Motorsport.

Indeed, it was Crompton who scored the most wins through the season, with seven of the 18 races going his way, including a clean sweep of the final four of the season. Ultimately, missing the midway round at Cleveland would prove decisively against Crompton, as it enabled Donohue and Cunningham to overhaul him in the points. The pair were remarkably consistent, scoring points in every race. Cunningham reached more podiums than Donohue, but a combination of Donohue's improved win total and

Cunningham's poor opening round at Long Beach swung the title in Donohue's favour.

Despite the improvements in 1997, the series had never caught the public imagination (at the time the parent CART organisation was increasingly perceived as 'too European', despite being seen by European fans as a wonderful low-cost alternative to F1) whilst the cost of running a contemporary super touring car was ever increasing. Consequently, it wouldn't return in 1998 having never really made an impression on the public consciousness.

The early 1990s saw a boom in Japanese motorsport with lavishly backed sports car and Formula 3000 championships, which provided a lifeline for many drivers (Eddie Irvine and Mika Salo among them) whose prospects of making a living from the sport were beginning to run out of road in Europe. As the bubble recession was starting to become more than just a blip, some of the support had waned by the mid-1990s but there was still enough manufacturer and sponsor involvement to cover the sportscars, F3000s as well as thriving Formula 3 and touring car championships.

In 1994, Japan too jumped on the super touring bandwagon, albeit mainly as a reaction to the decline of the Class A regulations where Nissan provided the works support. Nissan, Honda and Toyota were all on board with the super touring, where their main competition would come from a substantial BMW works effort, together with a Vauxhall Cavalier (then Vectra after a mid-season switch) for Anthony Reid.

The BMW team, run by Schnitzer, was headed by Steve Soper alongside Leopold Prinz von Bayern, who would stand aside when Jo Winkelhock was available. A handful of other well-run, locally prepared BMWs were also in the field. Nissan focused on their Primera although a brace of

works Sunnys would appear in selected rounds. Masahiro Hasemi and Kazuyoshi Hoshino would lead the team – both legends of Japanese motorsport, both had made late 1970s F1 appearances at Fuji.

Toyota had two works teams, both running the Corona. The TOM'S team ran Masanori Sekiya and Aguri Suzuki, the latter still very much in the midst of his F1 career. Sekiya meanwhile was a stalwart of Toyota's programme and would win Le Mans 24 Hours for the marque later the following year. The Cerumo team focused on youth with Tom Kristensen, who was starting to see the benefits of his relocation to Japan, and Takuya Kurosawa. Honda's effort concentrated on the Civic and was split across a number of single-car teams, with Naoki Hattori, Tetsuya Tanaka and Osamu Nakako the main drivers.

Running in a Vauxhall Calibra for HKS was Anthony Reid, who like many at the time, found the thriving Japanese motorsport scene a great place to further his career: 'I missed out on a potential Formula 1 opportunity with Eddie Jordan. We'd had a meeting and been offered the seat subject to sponsorship. This was in October 1990 and I had a Japanese sponsor teed up with a cheque for £2.5 million, but the sponsor went bust so the seat went to Bertrand Gachot, who then got locked up and in came Michael Schumacher. I went to Japan and raced in Group C and then in 1992 won the Japanese Formula 3 Championship – beating Jacques Villeneuve, Rickard Rydell, Tom Kristensen and others. In 1993 I did Formula 3 again and also some Formula 3000, then for 1994 I was offered the touring car opportunity with HKS.'

'HKS were very well funded, a major tuning house. The market for tuning was huge in Japan so there was no shortage of budget. It was an incredible scene back then, the calibre

of drivers was superb – both Schumachers, Irvine, Krosnoff, Ratzenberger, Herbert all came to race there during that period. We were getting paid well, and the recession didn't seem to have affected the motorsport scene. Having missed out on Formula 1, super touring was a great opportunity and I was lucky to find it at the time.

‘Alongside the JTCC, I was also racing in GTs for Team Taisan, which was owned by Ricky Chiba who had made a fortune from air conditioning. It was this incredible team of Porsches and Ferraris – we won a lot of races and in the end they changed the rules because of us.’

The nine-event, 18-race championship kicked off at the relatively new Autopolis circuit. Constructed at the height of the 1980s property boom, the track opened in 1990 but was immediately plagued by financial difficulties. The high standard of facilities brought a World Sportscar round for 1991, and the circuit was pencilled in for an Asian Grand Prix in 1993, but financial turmoil meant the race eventually went to Donington Park.

It was Reid who dominated the opener, winning both and setting the fastest lap as well. Sekiya was on the podium in both encounters with a second and third, with Hasemi and Hoshino also finding the podium.

Reid's title hopes then took a huge blow second time out in Sugo, where a race-one retirement put him out for the day. The wins at the wooded circuit, best known to European fans for hosting the World Superbike Championship, were split between Soper and Kristensen. Sekiya also had a disastrous outing, failing to score in either race.

The year's third event also went to a relatively new venue; opened in 1993, the Tokachi International Speedway was a technical three-mile circuit, largely flat, with a layout not wildly dissimilar to Anderstorp or Nogaro but with fewer

hairpins. Both Reid and Sekiya bounced back from their Sugo disappointments, taking a win apiece, with Sekiya also claiming a second and Reid a third. Suzuki rounded out the podium in both races.

The fast and flowing Suzuka was next up, and proved to be a weekend dominated by Kristensen. The Toyota driver took both races, with Soper achieving a pair of runner-up finishes. Hoshino and Sekiya salvaged a third place apiece.

The now defunct, twisty, two-mile circuit at Mine followed. This time it was the turn of Soper to sweep the weekend with a pair of wins, Sekiya and Kristensen taking a second apiece. Meanwhile, Reid had started to slip from contention, having only broken into the top five once since Tokachi.

Quite how the Ti Aida circuit was ever homologated for Formula 1 will remain a mystery, given the circuit's brevity (under 2.5 miles) and relatively rustic set-up. However, it had hosted the Pacific Grand Prix earlier in the 1994 season before the touring car visit. It had a tight layout that barely allowed the super tourers to stretch their legs, and Kristensen took both wins, to put himself to the fore in the championship battle. Sekiya, representing the other Toyota camp, struggled. Instead, it was his team-mate Suzuki who was best of the rest with two seconds, Soper and Hattori splitting the third-place finishes.

The Tsukuba circuit is best known to a generation for being a perennial in the Forza Motorsport and Gran Turismo games. At 1.2 miles the track is about the same length as the Brands Hatch Indy circuit, but far twistier, and is now most often used for time attack events. Sekiya was the double winner – making it seven wins in nine races for Toyota – a result that gained importance as both Kristensen

and Soper faltered, the former gaining the pair's only points with a fifth place.

The penultimate event took place at the Sendai circuit, the JTCC rounds being the highlight of the year for the mountain-set 2.5-mile circuit (which closed in 2014 following earthquake damage). This time it was Soper who swept the board with his second double victory of the year, bringing his win tally up to five overall. Kristensen with a second and Sekiya with a third both had a solitary podium, but conceded a lot of ground to the BMW driver.

This set things up perfectly for a three-way shootout for the title at Fuji. As is sometimes the way, all three struggled, with Reid, after a prolonged period in the lower reaches of the top ten, re-emerging as a front-runner with a win and second place – enough to jump him to fourth in the standings. Hoshino was the other race winner. In the title fight, Soper and Kristensen failed to score in the opening race, whilst Sekiya gained some ground with a sixth. He duly followed this up with third in the finale, ahead of Kristensen (sixth) and Soper (seventh) to take the title by just one point from the Dane, with Soper just two points further back.

‘It was a very strong year,’ remembers Reid, ‘with the Japanese manufacturers and the Schnitzer BMWs.’

In 1995 the calendar was consolidated to eight rounds with Autopolis and Tsukuba banished and Fuji topping and tailing the season. BMW returned with the same driver line-up of Soper plus Von Bayern/Winkelhock, with the Schnitzer team running the cars. Reid would lead the HKS Opel charge again, but this time with a team-mate in the form of Justin Bell.

Toyota again had two works Corona squads: the TOM'S team of returning champion Sekiya who would be partnered by the German Michael Krumm, and the

Cerumo outfit where Kristensen had a new team-mate in Hidetoshi Mitsusada, who was also juggling Formula Nippon commitments.

Hoshino would once again lead Nissan's effort in a sole Team Impul Primera, with Hasemi in a separately self-run works car. There was also a brace of factory-run Sunnys for Akira Iida and Toshio Suzuki.

Kristensen started the year as the driver to beat, taking both wins at Fuji, with Sekiya and Reid taking a second and third place each. Toyota's rich form continued on to Sugo, where this time it was Sekiya's turn to win both races, although both Kristensen (a fifth and retirement) and Reid (no points at all) had days to forget. Toyota then made it six from six at Tokachi where Kristensen and Krumm split the honours, ahead of Sekiya and Soper. The BMW driver's season had been steadily improving with a brace of fourths at Sugo, followed by the pair of thirds.

Soper then took his first win of the year in the next event at Suzuka, with Reid claiming the honours in the day's opener – both were also on the podium in the races they didn't win, shared each time with Hoshino. Kristensen had a bad day with a retirement and eighth, whilst Sekiya had a fifth and fourth.

Everyone struggled for consistency at Mine, where no driver was on the podium twice. Iida won the opening race from Hattori and Kristensen. Soper was down in ninth whilst Sekiya languished in 22nd. Fortunes then reversed somewhat in race two as Reid scored his second win of the season ahead of Soper and Sekiya – leaving the duo incredibly close at the top of the standings.

Of the pair, Sekiya had the better meeting at Aida, with a win and third place. Hoshino, who had been nowhere at Mine, took a pair of seconds, whilst Soper could only

manage a third and a ninth. The other win went to Reid, his third and final win of the year.

That was the final high point for Reid: 'There were shenanigans, it all got very political towards the end of the season. However, as soon as I left HKS I got the call from Nissan, so it was a sliding doors moment.'

Racing all the way to season's end was Kristensen, but after his storming start, the year went downhill with a fourth and sixth being his only points scores in the final six races, dropping him to fifth in the points.

The meeting at Sendai swung events back in Soper's favour – he had a win and third, but crucially Sekiya had a poor weekend with a fourth and 11th, ceding ground to Soper in both races. Riding shotgun for Soper at Sendai was Winkelhock. Drafted into the BMW squad for the second half of the campaign, he only came good at Sendai with a win and second, maximising the points gain for Soper.

Soper then crowned his year in style at Fuji with a win and second place giving him the title ahead of Sekiya. On dropped scores there were only seven points in it but, with those removed, the gap was a fair bit larger. Sekiya had a retirement and fifth, meaning Soper was able to just focus on what he needed to do. Taking third in the series was Hoshino who finished the year in style with a win and a second, enabling him to move ahead of Reid.

For 1996 the championship was trimmed to seven events, twice racing at Fuji, then Sugo, Suzuka, Mine, Sendai and Tokachi also featuring. The drivers' championship would draw on the competitors' ten best results, giving some leeway for dramas. The field was huge, but with a much-reduced international flavour. With BMW withdrawing their works team, Opel had the only non-Japanese factory-supported presence on the grid, the leading driver being

Hasemi. The Honda effort was split across a handful of single-driver satellite teams. For Castrol Mugen Honda, the pilot was Nakako, with Hattori representing Mooncraft, and Kurosawa for Nakajima. After a disappointing 1995, the pressure was on for Honda to perform.

Toyota again had the TOM'S and Cerumo works teams – Sekiya and Krumm being the TOM'S drivers, whilst Hionori Takeuchi and Erik Comas drove for Cerumo. Comas, who had spent the first half of the decade in Formula 1, had moved to Japan to further his career, a move that was starting to bear fruit.

Nissan were beginning to focus their efforts solely on the Primera – a consequential decision for the firm's European racing efforts. Masahiko Kageyama and Satoshi Motoyama were the Nismo drivers, whilst Hoshino was entrusted with the Impul entry.

The opening round at Fuji was an almost total Honda clean sweep. Hattori won both races (from pole and including the fastest lap) from Nakako, with Kurosawa taking third in the opener. The opposition wipe-out was only prevented by a third for Sekiya in the second race.

Hattori repeated the trick in the Sugo opener leading home Sekiya and Nakako. Toyota finally struck back in the second race with Krumm taking his only win of the season, heading Sekiya and Nakako. Having been the only podium ever-present of the year, Nakako made it five rostrums in a row with victory in the first race at Suzuka ahead of Hattori and Krumm. Honda were triumphant again in race two, with Hattori taking his third win of the season, from Kurosawa and Krumm – the German being the only driver consistently taking the fight to the Hondas.

The rest would get their opportunity next time out, however, at Mine. Following an inspection of the circuit,

Honda decided to withdraw from the meeting on safety grounds, specifically the lack of run-off in the higher-speed sections. With the drivers able to drop four scores, and no retirements in the season thus far, it was a relatively low-risk decision. Hoshino and Kageyama made it a day to remember for Nissan, taking a win apiece, the manufacturer finally breaking through as a front-runner. Hoshino and Krumm were the runners-up, whilst an inconsistent Sekiya and Masami Kageyama (in a Tsuchiya Engineering-entered Toyota Corona) were the third-place finishers.

The form book was further upended at Sendai, when Akihiko Nakaya won race one in his private BMW ahead of Nakako and Krumm. Honda hegemony was restored in race two with a one-two-three of Kurosawa, Hattori and Nakako.

Those three drivers would dominate at Tokachi with Hattori and Nakako taking a win and second apiece and Kurosawa a brace of thirds. This, however, would prove to be Honda's swansong – post-race scrutineering in the finale at Fuji found the Accords of Hattori and Nakako to be running an illegal front suspension geometry and they were struck from the results. Although visually insignificant, it was felt that the illegal components did confer performance benefit.

The disqualification followed season-long discontent within the paddock. The car had passed initial technical examination and post-race scrutineering in other events; however, the specific change was quite discreet and it would have been relatively easy to miss in a cursory post-race examination. However, such had been Honda's performance advantage throughout the year that the other teams decided to launch a formal protest at Fuji, leading to a much more detailed review of the car.

Only the Fuji results were affected, somewhat irrelevantly as all the drivers had two more scores to drop – but questions would remain about whether the cars had been technically compliant at other rounds in the year.

As a result, the wins were awarded to Comas and Reid, who was making a one-off return with the BMS team, with whom he'd been racing a Primera in the Italian Championship.

Once dropped scores came into account, Hattori was the comfortable champion from Nakako with Krumm in third.

Undeterred by 1996's controversy, Honda, Toyota and Nissan were all back for 1997, albeit with a reduction in support. Reigning champion Hattori's only outing would be at the season finale, with the main Mugen effort being led by Nakako and Kurosawa. A satellite Mooncraft car was run for Ryo Michigami. At Toyota, the TOM'S squad retained Sekiya and Krumm, whilst the Cerumo team had Takeuchi and Argentine Juan-Manuel Silva as the drivers. There were big technical changes with the Chaser largely replacing the Corona. The Nissan effort was down to just two Nismo-run cars for Motoyama and Hoshino.

The schedule was expanded to eight rounds, with Ti Aida added to the otherwise rolled-over calendar with Fuji starting and ending the season. Once again drivers would be allowed to drop their four worst scores, with just 12 results counting.

As it turned out, drivers would only count their ten best scores, after the opening rounds of the season at Fuji were cancelled due to bad weather. Thereafter, it was a close four-way battle for the title, with no one driver having the consistency to run away with the championship. Nakako eventually prevailed, having scored four wins and two seconds, but not otherwise appearing on the podium. This

gave him the honours by five points from Kurosawa who also took four wins and one second, but otherwise added to his points tally from the bottom half of the top ten. Third and only seven points off Nakako was Motoyama, who took two wins and five other podiums. A further five points back, also with two wins, was Hoshino.

At the end of the year both Honda and Nissan withdrew from the championship. In part, both manufacturers had specific reasons to do so; in Nissan's case the company was facing financial challenges, cutting expenditure where it could, with the JTCC campaign being an obvious target. Honda meanwhile had their sights set elsewhere, not least Formula 1, where, after an expanding engine involvement, they would take over running the BAR team from 2005. What both shared in common was a belief that super touring was increasingly distant from the interests of Japanese consumers, making the cost of competition hard to justify.

This left an all-Toyota championship for 1998, albeit still with four works cars on the grid across the TOM'S and Cerumo teams (including one for Kelvin Burt following his BTCC exit). Comprising 11 races across seven events, Sekiya bookended the era by claiming his second title from Katsutomo Kaneishi.

## Big Money and Fast Cars – 1997–98

THE PROFILE of the British Touring Car Championship continued to grow into 1997, although the cost of competition once more chipped away at the number of works entries, with BMW taking its team back to Germany and the STW championship.

Reigning champions Audi Sport returned to defend their title with Frank Biela and John Bintcliffe as the driver pairing. Williams continued to prepare the Renault entry, where Alain Menu returned for his fourth season with the marque, alongside new team-mate Jason Plato who had claimed the 1996 Renault Spider championship. Plato emerged triumphant from a three-way battle for the second Renault seat, seeing off Formula 1 alumni Gianni Morbidelli and Jean-Christophe Boullion. There were changes on the pit wall, however, as team director Ian Harrison moved to run the Vauxhall entry and was replaced by the Belgian Didier Debae.

TWR continued to operate the Volvo entry with Rickard Rydell and Kelvin Burt returning for a second year as the driver pairing. However, after three seasons and two different body shapes, the angular 850 was retired in favour

of the new, non-right-angled S40. It was an almost entirely new car, which meant there would likely be a long list of teething troubles for the team to work through.

Surface appearances also hid behind-the-scenes changes at Peugeot where, after a miserable 1996, Patrick Watts's and Tim Harvey's 406s would be prepared by Motor Sport Developments (MSD) who had run the Honda entry for the prior two years. Peugeot were hoping they could develop the 406 into a competitive proposition, as they had the Accord. There was an improved budget to support the effort, but the French manufacturer was still going racing for a far lower sum than its rivals.

Whatever Peugeot's woes, Watts remains insightful about what was needed to be competitive: 'In a front-wheel drive racing car you want the front wheel doing the traction and the rear the steering so that's why an intrinsically oversteering car is quickest. One way around this is to have massive rear toe out but parallel on the straights. So we tried making the rear suspension pickup points suspended on little springs but it didn't work as the car was undrivable! It was as if there was a demon in the boot trying to steer you off the track at every opportunity.'

'The two big changes in the BTCC were aero packages and burying the engine as low and far back as possible. The aero was to stop manufacturers doing what Alfa Romeo had done, adding it to a mass-production model. For Peugeot it was the start of us being less competitive with a combination of making the cars too easy to drive and advantaging those that had better wind tunnels!'

On his rivals, he added: 'They were all good drivers who had got there by results but I knew I was as good as the best – but sometimes I felt a little separation as I had come from one-make club racing and some had come from F1!'

‘Having been first or second in about seven one-make or national championships I knew how to win, I just needed an equal car and I didn’t get one!’

For 1997 it would be all change at Honda, with Prodrive re-entering the championship and taking on the Accord with the all-new driver pairing of 1994 champion Gabriele Tarquini and James Thompson, moving on from Vauxhall after a frustrating 1996.

The Triple Eight team took over the works Vauxhall contract from RML. The team, formed by Roland Dane, Derek Warwick and Ian Harrison, was established at the end of 1996, although an earlier version, as Park Lane Racing, led by Dane, had entered Warwick at the 1993 TOCA Shootout, together with a brace of semi-works Hondas throughout the 1993 season. Warwick would return to the cockpit hoping for better fortunes than his wretched 1995 with Alfa Romeo. Vauxhall lifer John Cleland would return to lead the brand’s challenge.

RML meanwhile would oversee Nissan’s return as a full works entry. The 1996 season with semi-works Rouse Engineering cars had seen the Primera mixing it with the privateers. The driver pairing was solid too, RML veteran (from the Ecurie Ecosse days) David Leslie returned, and would be partnered by Anthony Reid who was little known to British fans having spent much of his career racing with great success in Japan.

Reid picks up the story: ‘At the end of 1995 I got the call from Nissan. It would have been Kieth O’dor’s seat, but he had been tragically killed at AVUS. I’d been fighting tooth and nail with them and now they were employing me. It was a two-year deal, with a building year in Germany (in the STW) and then on to the BTCC. In 1996 the car was run by Nissan Motorsport Europe – there were some fabulous

engineers on that team: Alec Paul, Bob Neville and Derek Gardner who had designed Jackie Stewart's championship-winning Tyrrells. When RML came on board for 1997 it was a great set-up.

‘The BTCC was massive, more popular than Formula 1 in the UK – more people were tuning in to the super tourers. [It had] all the unique ingredients: Murray Walker, Steve Rider, the established stars and then the F1 drivers who also raced.’

The West Surrey Racing (Reynard-built) Ford Mondeos returned, surely to have a better year than the atrocious 1996 campaign. Gone was Steve Robertson (soon to re-emerge as a driver manager, his stable including Jenson Button and Kimi Raikkonen) to be replaced by Will Hoy, with Paul Radisich returning. There were still the tensions to navigate between WSR’s role, and how this would align with other contributors to the project.

The merry-go-round meant there was no place in the paddock for Rouse Engineering, a sign of the scale of team now required to mount a bid for the championship, but borderline unthinkable even four years earlier.

The news was brighter amongst the privateers with five season-long entries secured. Reigning champion Lee Brookes returned, albeit freshly equipped with a Peugeot 406. His main competition would come from Matt Neal, who would switch from a Mondeo to Primera mid-season, Jamie Wall in a Cavalier, Robb Gravett in a Honda Accord and Colin Gallie in a BMW 318i.

The championship would be contested over 12 rounds and 24 races (one event less than the previous year), with the whole weekend’s TOCA package firmly established as the premier national motorsport event. The calendar looked somewhat different to the previous year, with a

general drift towards shorter circuits, which would keep the cars bunched up and give spectators more action for their money.

There would be two visits to Donington Park (one apiece on the Grand Prix and National layouts), with a similar brace of trips to Thruxton, Silverstone (using the International circuit both times) and Brands Hatch (both on the Indy circuit with the Grand Prix loop dropped). Oulton Park would receive just a solitary visit on the Fosters layout, whilst Knockhill and Snetterton both retained their rounds.

New to the calendar was the Croft circuit. Situated in the north east of England, just outside Darlington, like so many venues it had been a Second World War airfield, before the perimeter roads started being used for racing in the late 1940s. The circuit became best known for hosting rallycross events, but it had fallen into disrepair in the early 1980s. Once agreements had been made with local farmers, the rallycross track was resurrected within a few years, becoming one of the UK's pre-eminent venues, but circuit racing would only return in 1997. Completely redeveloped, the 2.1-mile circuit presented the drivers with a technical challenge through multiple mid-speed corners that fed into lengthy straights, punishing the untidy.

The opening rounds of the season would once more be held at Donington Park, where the Renaults' performance set an ominous trend for the year. Locking out the front row for the season opener, the surprise was that Plato was able to outpace team-mate Menu. In third, Rydell's Volvo was the only other car to get within half a second of the Renaults' pace.

Unable to get off the line as well as his more experienced team-mate, Plato was passed by Menu into Redgate, setting the order between the pair as the Renaults hared off into the

distance. Behind, the rest of the field were finding their feet, in many instances the team/car/driver combinations being tested in race conditions for the first time. The best of the rest were the brace of Volvos with Burt eventually taking third (albeit 24 seconds back), after Rydell ground to a halt climbing out of Starkey's on the last lap.

Others had potential but were fragile; the Prodrive Hondas clearly showing promise, but working through teething issues, and the same for the Nissans. Having finished every race in 1996, champion Biela retired his Audi with mechanical issues. However, saddled with 95kg of ballast compared to the front-wheel drive cars, the A4 wasn't on a par on pace.

Although there were plenty of talking points (the Peugeots looked exponentially better than in 1996, the Fords not), the season opener did not provide great entertainment. The same, unfortunately, could be said for race two. Menu ran out the dominant winner once more, with Rydell taking second, although the Volvo never mounted a challenge for the win. Third went to Biela in the Audi, with Tarquini taking fourth – the top international drivers once more rising to the top.

Round two was at the Silverstone International circuit where again in qualifying Plato edged Menu to pole for the opening race. Unfortunately, Plato stalled as the lights went green, allowing Menu to surge through to lead into Copse. As at Donington, Menu controlled the race at will, building up a sizeable early advantage before measuring his pace later on, allowing Rydell to get within a second thanks to last-lap backmarkers. The main entertainment in the early stages came from the Volvo pair, with Burt mounting a spirited defence to his team-mate before Rydell forced the issue at Abbey. Thereafter, Burt faded

and was passed by Leslie, the Nissan driver claiming the final podium spot.

The pattern repeated in race two, with Menu making it a clean sweep for the season so far, with Rydell once again claiming the runner-up position without really giving Menu cause for concern. Plato notched up his second podium of the season, with third, the leading trio finishing 20 seconds clear of everyone else. With fourth place, Harvey was steadily showing the Peugeot's potential, having seen off team-mate Watts, who in turn was subsumed into an entertaining battle for fifth that was eventually claimed by Warwick. The controversial incident of the race came at the Island chicane as Bintcliffe and Leslie collided at speed after the Audi barged the Nissan at the start of the corner sequence and Leslie kept his foot in, being launched airborne by the kerbs and into the Audi.

Two events into the year, and the field spread was already a concern. Managing balance of performance in a multi-marque championship is frequently one of the biggest headaches for the organisers – however, broadly speaking over the past four years, barring the runaway early-year successes of Alfa Romeo and Audi, on times the field had been closely bunched.

The concerns were further exacerbated in qualifying at Thruxton where Menu took a brace of pole positions, on each occasion posting a time more than half a second faster than anyone else. In Menu's and Renault's defence, this was the year of the Laguna and the third season of Williams running the team, the Swiss having been an ever-present in the cockpit. This continuity heading into a season with significant behind-the-scenes change elsewhere certainly magnified the gap. That Volvo were generally the nearest challenger was also unsurprising

given that the TWR team had been testing the S40 since the previous autumn.

Nonetheless, the public weren't deterred and a huge crowd came to enjoy the bank holiday Monday action. There had been showers throughout the weekend, and as the cars assembled on the grid for the opening race the clouds gathered. A notoriously abrasive circuit for tyre wear, the punishment for wrong tyre call (such as running intermediates on a rapidly drying track) would be severe.

With moments to go, the rain started to fall, but initially only on half the circuit. The field duly set off on slicks, relying on the cars' aerodynamic grip to counter the lack of tyre grip. At the lights Biela took full advantage of the Audi's four-wheel drive to shoot into an early lead, with Tarquini and Menu giving chase. This trio quickly moved clear of the rest (the Volvos were weirdly off form) and as the weather worsened, the balancing act became nearly intolerable, as everyone tried to navigate the fearsomely fast circuit with the bare minimum of mechanical grip. Despite a multitude of spins, Burt was the only accident casualty, although others pitted for wets following adventures.

With championship point accumulation already at the forefront of Menu's mind, he was content to allow Biela and Tarquini to fight for the win, whilst maintaining a secure third. As the rain eased and a dry line formed, Tarquini took the fight to Biela, the Honda sliding (literally) through into the lead as the Audi's weight penalty began to strike. However, Tarquini couldn't break clear and was pushing the Honda right to the limit, with the consequence of slithering off-line, allowing Biela back through.

The final laps saw both judging the grip on a corner-by-corner basis and pushing as fast as they could. Fortunately for Biela, the pair caught some dicing privateer runners,

giving him a decisive advantage and his first win of the season. It was easily the most entertaining race of the year to date, showcasing the driving standard at the front of the championship, which was still world class.

Race two became even more precarious. Tarquini took an early lead from Menu as, exiting the Complex at the end of the first lap, Biela was sideswiped into the barriers by team-mate Bintcliffe. The wrecked Audi being to the edge of the circuit prompted the intervention of the safety car. As the field bunched up, the rain began to come down, soaking the circuit in comparison to the race one conditions. Several drivers towards the rear, particularly those who'd had off-track excursions, took the opportunity to pit for wets, whilst those at the front tried to press on with slicks.

After three or four laps at the limit of what was raceable, the rain abated and the circuit slowly dried. Whilst those at the front largely focused on getting to the flag in one piece, some of those behind on wet tyres were flying, most notably Harvey taking the opportunity to shine. The Peugeot driver charged up through the order, carving into the top positions in the final laps and eventually climbing to second after passing Menu late on. Meanwhile, out front Tarquini took his first win since 1994, and the first for the Prodrive Honda project. Immediately post-race, the Italian's enthusiasm was tempered by frustration that the race had continued through the worst of the weather.

A fortnight later it was on to Brands Hatch for the first of two events around the Indy circuit. An incredible 37,500 fans packed into the compact Kent venue, enjoying the May sunshine and further highlighting just how popular the BTCC had become.

As Reid recalls, 'If you weren't in the circuit by 7am, you'd be stuck in a massive queue. One time I was late

leaving the hotel and got stuck on the M25. In the end I had to ditch the car, and the team had to send a motorbike – I came into the circuit riding pillion. At the time I was very fit, a lot of exercise and personal trainers, so I had the energy for it, but race days were busy. You'd have warm-up, engineering debrief, on to hospitality, then pit-road autographs where you'd sign 1,000 posters in 40 minutes, and then the two races.'

Reid's fame extended away from the circuits: 'When I drove into London at the time, I'd see these huge posters of me standing by the Nissan. I'd get stopped in the supermarket or the petrol station, and it still happens – it happened at the train station last week when someone overheard my name. Looking back, it was a fantastic era.'

Watts's memories too aren't that distant from Reid's: 'We were paid well enough to have the life of a professional sportsman. Race, test, PR, training, golf. Life was good.'

The crowd was all the more impressive as the Brands Hatch round would be the first of three (with Donington Park and Knockhill to follow) with live coverage on the BBC's flagship *Grandstand* programme. There was certainly no expense spared in the production with 25 cameras (in pre-digital camera days this was a major commitment), and two helicopters. Of the planned technical innovations, the split-screen pictures worked well, but the commentary box-to-car link-up rather less so (this would be fixed for Donington Park and Knockhill).

Unfortunately for the watching crowd at the circuit and on TV, the first race was another Menu demonstration, the Swiss pushing hard to build an advantage following a good start, and then managing his buffer once he had gapped the field. Instead, the tension came in the fight for second position where a five-car train circulated within tenths of

a second of each other for the 38 laps. Given the calibre of drivers and nature of the circuit, passing was at a premium, as Thompson took an impressive second, holding off Plato, the Nissans of Leslie and Reid and team-mate Tarquini.

Race two saw Menu's first setback of the season. The Hondas scored a one-two with Thompson comfortably leading home Tarquini, in what would prove to be the high point of their season. The talking point was Menu failing to make the podium for the first time. It wasn't his fault; whilst battling with Reid, the Nissan driver misjudged his braking into Clearways and clouted the Renault, rotating Menu down the order. Menu still recovered for fourth, which, given the heft of the impact and fragility of the cars, was a result – but he was still hugely frustrated, waving away Reid's apologies.

Eight races into the season Menu held a commanding championship lead, and whilst the fight had been taken to him at Thruxton and Brands Hatch, there was no single challenger taking enough points to mount a title bid.

The next round, the sole visit to Oulton Park of the year, did little to loosen Menu's grip on proceedings. The Laguna had always gone well at the Cheshire circuit, and Menu duly scored his third double of the season. Most dispiritingly for his rivals, he never looked particularly challenged around the shorter Fosters layout. The opening race was a Renault one-two, with Biela and Bintcliffe next along in their Audis, in a race perhaps best remembered for Thompson being cannoned into the barriers at Old Hall in the run down from the start. Thompson recovered well later in the afternoon to finish runner-up, with Rydell completing the podium from Plato. Once more the incident of greatest note came from an accident at Old Hall, this time Burt comprehensively failing to shake off his demons from 1995, enduring a sizeable shunt

in the S40. Fortunately, Burt walked away, but it was yet another instance of a poor result whilst his team-mate got on to the podium.

Whilst the dominance of Renault wasn't yet impacting spectator numbers or interest in the series, it was symptomatic of some of the storm clouds brewing over super touring. Trying to balance the increasingly sophisticated machinery with the crowd's appetite for biff and bash left TOCA in an invidious position. In truth, many of the clouds had burst, as only the British and German series were enjoying full manufacturer support, as the French, Belgian and Italian series were experiencing low numbers and a slide towards importer-backed rather than manufacturer-backed teams. For those continually developing their machinery, the rule allowing only one homologated aerodynamic kit across all series was serving up problems for BTCC stalwarts.

Both Peugeot and Vauxhall were having to follow the lead of their German STW counterparts who had led on the homologation. For Peugeot this meant a package that worked well on fast, open and preferably flat circuits – ideal for Donington Park and especially Thruxton, but not ideal for Brands Hatch. At least the Peugeot worked occasionally, unlike the Vauxhall, where the 1997 developments were a retrograde step. To add insult to injury, in the STW the Vectras could revert to 1996 specification, whereas the BTCC team had to persevere, despite having had no choice but to inherit.

By motorsport standards the super tourers were still 'cheap' but had also become increasingly complex from a technical perspective, with some fantastically ingenious engineering. This was coming at the cost of any relationship to something that could be found in a dealership, and with a driving experience that was closer to a single seater with a

roof than a family saloon. Consequently, manufacturers were beginning to ask questions about their ongoing commitment to super touring – questions sharpened by the emergence of the FIA GT Series and the possibility of challenging at Le Mans. Already BMW was starting to divert its resources towards the sports car effort, whilst Audi split the difference, developing a front-wheel drive version of the A4 in the STW, alongside starting the development of a generationally defining sports car effort.

Fortunately, the next few meetings dealt up the crowd-pleasing entertainment that had drawn the fans to the BTCC. The second visit of the year to Donington Park served up the most competitive qualifying of the season thus far, and an opening race in damp but drying conditions. Taking full advantage of their four-wheel drive, the Audis rocketed off the line to lead into Redgate for the first time and were quickly established in command as behind, a great battle formed to settle the placings for much of the top ten. With no more rain forthcoming, a clear dry line soon emerged and the weighty Audis were rapidly reeled in by Menu. Bintcliffe succumbed to the Renault, but Biela was able to maintain the advantage for his second win of the year.

The second race was somewhat chaotic due to a combination of stop-go penalties (taking early leader Burt out of contention for the win), and a wild safety car restart as leader Tarquini pulled into the pits causing confusion behind. Ironically, it was the Honda team who doubly lost out as Thompson was nerfed into a spin by Plato.

All this, almost inevitably, allowed Menu to romp clear at the front to score victory, as Harvey took a popular second place – the Peugeot driver benefitting from the car being suited to the circuit in combination with his wet-weather

prowess. Biela took third, scoring his first double podium event of the season.

Donington Park was the BBC's second experiment with live TV coverage, and the first time in which the BTCC shared a weekend with Formula 1. When the viewing figures came in they were positive: the BTCC was the sixth most-watched sporting event of the weekend, with a 23 per cent vote share.

Next up was a trip into the unknown as Croft hosted its first international circuit racing event since 1971, on the newly redeveloped layout. The weekend produced some of the most action-packed racing of the season, with incidents throughout.

However, race one ended as a Renault one-two with Menu leading team-mate Plato home. Their cause was aided somewhat by Biela punting his colleague Bintcliffe off towards the end of the first lap, thwarting the Audi charge on a circuit which suited the four-wheel drive. For a long time it looked as if Tarquini would take second, but the Honda driver slithered into the deep mud (one of many to do so) after momentarily moving off the dry racing line. Rydell took third for Volvo, having challenged Menu in the early stages.

The second race also went Menu's way, which meant he could mathematically take the title next time out at Knockhill, after controlling a race where all hell broke loose behind him. His cause was aided early on by a first-corner spin from Rydell. After an early pause to retrieve Hoy's Mondeo from the Clerveaux gravel, the front of the race settled into a pattern until two-thirds distance when Tarquini had a huge off in the Honda heading through the chicane. Putting a wheel on to the damp grass he was off-line, clipped the tyres and was pitched into the barrier. This brought out a late safety car to bunch the field.

On the restart, the second Honda, and second-placed runner Thompson experienced a near-identical accident to his team-mate, smashing the front of the Accord into the barrier. On a cold day the temperature had gone out of the tyres, particularly the rear right, and the car unloaded grip as he tried to stay with Menu. Heavily bruised, Thompson required medical attention, bringing out the red flags. With the result counted back a lap, he was classified second behind Menu, with Leslie completing the podium.

Another huge crowd and better weather greeted the visit to Knockhill, where for the first time all season the Renaults were on the back foot. Instead, it was a weekend of Audi dominance, with Bintcliffe and Biela taking a win apiece, the pair flying in formation well clear of allcomers in both races.

Bintcliffe scored his maiden BTCC win in the opener, fending off parries from Biela to successfully convert his pole position. Menu took third, continually building up his points tally. However, the Swiss wouldn't leave Scotland with the title as he suffered his first retirement of the year in race two. Pushed on to the grass by Thompson on the opening lap, he then clouted Rydell as he rejoined, causing substantial damage to the front of the Laguna. Karma was immediately served for Thompson as seconds later the suspension on his Honda failed, flinging him into the tyre wall. All this left the way open for Biela to score a comfortable win from Bintcliffe and a semi-distant Tarquini, the Honda driver finally having some good luck.

Despite the Audi's results at Knockhill, it was clear it would take a disastrous shift in fortunes for Menu not to wrap the title up next time out at Snetterton. The opening race was one of the Swiss driver's most dominant performances of the year as he led Thompson home, always maintaining

a comfortable buffer over the Honda. However, Biela kept the championship mathematically alive by passing Plato on the last lap to secure third.

Menu duly completed the job later in the afternoon, securing a very well-deserved title – reflecting not just his 1997 performances but the multiple years as runner-up leading to this point. The win went to Plato, who took the lead at the lights and fended off half-hearted parries from his team-mate to score his maiden BTCC triumph. Honda were once more on the podium, Tarquini taking third and making amends for his race-one collision with Burt.

The manufacturers' and teams' titles were still in play as the championship made its return to Thruxton. As had been the case earlier in the year, the weather was a big factor. A heavy shower but very rapidly drying circuit just before race one meant there were tyre gambles throughout the field. Despite this, these were perfect Audi conditions, where the benefit of the four-wheel drive outweighed the car's additional weight.

In a close race Bintcliffe led Biela to the flag. This hadn't been formation flying and more than once Biela had 'love tapped' his team-mate into the chicane. Bintcliffe, driving a perfectly controlled race, withstood the pressure, scoring his second BTCC triumph. Biela's hurry-up was in large part driven by the close proximity of the Hondas, who took third and fourth respectively, Thompson heading Tarquini.

Menu, having lost out due to tyre choice in race one, was much more of a factor in the fully dry race later on. However, with half an eye on securing the manufacturers' crown, he kept Biela honest rather than really threatening the Audi, enabling the German to score his fourth win of the season. The Hondas followed in the same position and order as earlier.

Despite the double win for Audi, the Thruxton results were enough to give Renault the manufacturers' title, and Williams the teams' crown. What was left to play for in the remaining two rounds of races was the fight for second in the standings and whether Renault could assert a complete clean sweep if Plato could move ahead of Biela.

With only that to be decided, the post-mortems could start early. Renault had enjoyed an utterly dominant season, some of which was of their making – the Laguna being primarily developed and homologated for the UK – but also in part a result of all the off-season changes made by their rivals, with model and team swaps galore. That's not to say that Renault had slowed on development – in particular, the work done over the winter from engine builder Sodemo delivered a unit that was second on power to Honda's, but utterly reliable. Nonetheless, Menu and Plato had delivered on the track, with Menu in particular only having one retirement all season.

Audi had been the nearest rival, with the A4's main deficiency being the weight penalty it had to carry to offset the four-wheel drive system. Essentially this meant they were unable to challenge for the title, and by the time the weight came off the cars at Oulton Park in May, Menu was long gone. However, it was still a hugely impressive season, particularly as most of the development activity was focused on the front-wheel drive A4 that would replace the Quattro.

In its first year with Prodrive, Honda's season had been mixed. The Accord was competitive and high tech having been built from the ground up over the winter. There were mechanical failures, but also driver errors too – for example at Croft, on the one weekend of the season when the Honda was definitively fastest, both Thompson and Tarquini had victory-costing accidents. More often than not one of the

cars was in the hunt for the podium, but only once all season would both drivers stand on the rostrum. However, as it was just the first year of the project, the future was bright.

The Volvo S40's debut year had been mixed. Rydell was right up there in the standings, but this came from consistency and driver ability more than the car's inherent pace. With four races to run he was yet to score victory. Burt meanwhile had endured a mixed season, only one podium, with several strong top-ten drives offset by retirements. As a developmental year there were lots of positives to take forward to 1998 (particularly as the team's assessment was that all the challenges were fixable), but relatively speaking the TWR squad had slipped down the pecking order as the season progressed.

Nissan's season, with the cars prepared by RML, had blown hot and cold. Given a fraught pre-season – when RML had to do more of the design work (supposedly Nissan Motorsport Europe's responsibility) than expected, meaning the Primera was the last of the 1997 cars to appear – there were moments to celebrate. There was no doubting Reid's and Leslie's talent, with both capable of challenging for podiums when the opportunity presented. The difficulty was that more often than not both drivers found themselves in the mid-field dogfight and the attendant collisions. Coupled with numerous mechanical retirements, it had been a frustrating year, albeit, as with Volvo, one pointing positively to 1998.

On its day the Peugeot had been genuinely competitive in 1997, enjoying a big step forward from 1995 and 1996. With the car's homologation based on the demands of the German STW series it was no surprise that Harvey's podiums came at the flowing and expansive Thruxton and

Donington Park circuits. At the twistier venues the 406 was less of a factor. Harvey had been impressive throughout the year, whilst Watts's season was plagued by incidents and retirements – a fifth place at Donington being the best he could manage.

The close of the 1997 season would see Watts departing from the Peugeot squad after four years, leaving mixed memories: 'A few podiums in 94, less in 95 and none in 96 or 97 reflects the team's trajectory. All the gear, no idea comes to mind.'

'Any decisions made at Peugeot were invariably the wrong ones. We had the option in 97 to work with the French who went on to win the DTM with Aiello, but it was turned down, incredibly due to MSD not wanting their secrets known!'

'Tim and I were at Thruxton doing a BTCC test day. I was about sixth quickest and he about 15th at lunch break. Me and my "YTS" engineer had gone on very soft springs and wondered whether softer for the afternoon might be better. So in the briefing it was decided logically that Tim would use my soft spring rates as a control against a change in track conditions and I would drop down a further ten per cent.'

'At the end of the afternoon I was just as quick as the morning times but Tim was slower than even his morning times. Confused, I asked why this could be and the answer was that his engineer had put on stiffer springs against all logic. This attitude was just one of the self-inflicted problems at Peugeot, without getting personal.'

'A weird thing happened at Brands GP testing. I was quickest in both the wet and dry! My car was fitted with the latest combi differentia. Eureka, we know the secret! Quickest from everyone! No understeer apart

from mid-Druids in the transition between brakes off power on.

‘Tim tested it at Snetterton the following week and it didn’t seem to make a difference. Then back to Brands for the race weekend and we are mid-field, understeer everywhere! WTF?’

A couple of years earlier you’d have been hard-pressed to believe that Ford and Vauxhall would be bringing up the rear. For the Ford squad, 1997 was a marginal improvement on the previous year, with West Surrey Racing building their own car (rather than the Schubel Motorsport cars run in 1996), but both Radisich and Hoy were far too frequently in the wars. The fragility of this class of super tourer meant that mid-field contact often had race-ending consequences for the Mondeo pair. This was compounded by a shortage of spares, limiting testing opportunities. When released from mid-field scraps the car had good race pace, but it was a beat off in qualifying, meaning races would always be an uphill struggle. However, neither gave up, and both drivers probably deserved an award for somehow managing to smile for the TV cameras as they explained yet another retirement.

Vauxhall meanwhile had been entirely anonymous. Saddled by an uncompetitive aerodynamic package from Opel, Warwick’s and Cleland’s best results had come early in the season, before the Vectra slid towards the back of the pack as others picked up speed.

There would be no late-season redemption for the pair either, as the Brands Hatch Indy circuit provided another fraught day of racing. Biela took victory in the opener from Plato and Menu, the Renault pair switching places at the line to give Plato the extra points to chase the Audi in the standings. Elsewhere the race was somewhat chaotic. The grid for the second race would be set by the fastest laps from

the opener. That meant that many of those not in contention for the podium opted to peel into the pits (in Rydell's case, from well up in the top ten) to put on fresh slicks and go for a lap time.

This gambit gave a jumbled grid for the second race, with the logic being that if you could hold place through the opening turns, track position would trump pace given the difficulty of overtaking. This logic paid off handsomely for Rydell and Reid who finished first and second respectively. This gave Rydell and Volvo their only win of the season, whilst Reid demonstrated the Nissan's potential when not in the mid-field battles. Menu took third ahead of a rejuvenated Radisich who couldn't quite fend off the Renault.

Another huge crowd turned out for the season finale at Silverstone, where the Total Cup for the privateers was still up for grabs. Colin Gallie and Robb Gravett had been the most consistent performers throughout the season, although Lee Brookes and Matt Neal had generally been quicker. However, with just the quartet as ever-presents, retirements had an outsized impact, which took Neal out of contention.

With business settled, the Renaults were allowed to race without team orders, as Plato tried to fend off Menu. The decisive move came on the run from Becketts through the Island chicane as Menu drew alongside and forced Plato to blink first. The Swiss shot into the lead, whilst the loss of momentum allowed Reid to slip past Plato to snatch second. This move also emphatically confirmed Biela as runner-up in the title standings.

The lack of team orders did briefly cause some sourness in the Renault ranks, particularly as Plato had assisted Menu earlier in the year. However, for a driver as competitive as Menu, as Plato edged ever nearer on pace, there was a point to prove – hence the pass for the lead.

The race was then red-flagged late on as Brookes had a huge accident at the same spot, his Peugeot launched towards the barriers by the concrete kerbing as he did battle with Neal. Brookes was able to walk away and, amazingly, after much of the paddock pitched in, managed to take the start of race two. However, this incident, plus another strong performance, was enough to give Gravett the points he needed to claim the Total Cup.

Renault honours were reversed in race two with Plato claiming his second victory of the year from Menu (their fourth one-two of the season) with Tarquini completing the podium. It was a fitting performance to conclude Renault's utter dominance of 1997.

The season didn't quite end there, with the return of the RAC Tourist Trophy at Donington Park at the end of October. Running to a novel three-race format of two heats (including one with a reverse grid) and a final, with a £25,000 prize for the winner, some teams took the opportunity to mix things up.

Renault and Ford fielded their 1997 BTCC drivers, whilst Vauxhall entered just a single car. At Audi, the Quattros of Biela and Bintcliffe were joined by the front-wheel drive variant of the A4 with Yvan Muller at the wheel. Nissan's regulars Leslie and Reid had Paula Cook as an addition to the team for the weekend. At Volvo, Rydell was accompanied by the hugely experienced German Armin Hahne, whilst Honda completely switched their drivers, entering World Superbike star Aaron Slight (who was beginning to evaluate a move to four wheels) and newly crowned British Formula 3 champion Jonny Kane. The other notable entries were a brace of Abt Audis for Christian Abt and Kris Nissen.

In tune with the rest of the season Renault dominated, with Menu winning a heat and the final, whilst Plato

followed him home to take second in the final. Completing the prize podium was Rydell, ahead of Biela and Muller.

The other heat winner was Reid, who could do no better than sixth in the final. Of the novelties, Hahne was an impressive eighth, whilst Nissen ran in the top ten all day. Slight had a far less enjoyable outing with the damage incurred in his heat-one retirement ruling him out for the day.

Although packing in tens of thousands every weekend, with millions more watching on TV, it was a computer game that further propelled touring car racing into popular culture. The early to mid-1990s was already a fertile time for motorsport-themed games. In 1996, *Grand Prix 2*, based on the 1994 Formula 1 season, offered PC gamers an unprecedentedly realistic simulation experience with cutting-edge graphics and hitherto unseen set-up possibilities. A year earlier MicroProse (*Grand Prix 2*'s publisher) had released *Grand Prix Manager* which took the Football Manager format to four wheels. However, both these games required a home computer to run, and, as anyone who gamed in the era will recall, getting a game installed and up and running was not necessarily a straightforward exercise. In short, whilst PCs had the capability, it wasn't straightforward.

The launch of the Sony PlayStation in late 1995 represented a seismic shift to the gaming landscape, offering three-dimensional graphics on an instant-loading console. Once one could be sourced, the PlayStation soon became a living room staple globally, and a hit game meant a gigantic audience.

Capitalising on the popularity of the BTCC, Codemasters started developing a touring car game in 1996. Eventually released in late 1997, the finished game featured the works teams of the 1997 BTCC season in hitherto

unseen detail, built from scanning the cars to the millimetre. Similarly, the circuit maps were built from Ordnance Survey data, again providing a realism that set a new standard for racing games. Rarely for games of the era, the cars had a sophisticated damage model, meaning players couldn't just barge their way through to win.

Released under licence as *TOCA: Touring Car Championship*, the game was an immediate hit, selling over 600,000 copies within the first few months of release across the PlayStation and PC. In 1998, copies of the game sold in the European Union generated more than €21 million of revenue. The finished product was worth the hype and positive reviews, although many gamers found it to be a steep learning curve, with the process of unlocking new circuits (just two were available at the start) becoming an obsession. As one of the top PlayStation games of 1997, *TOCA* became part of the playground language throughout the UK, bringing touring cars to an entirely new audience.

A year later *TOCA 2: Touring Cars* arrived, which provided a substantial update on the original game. Alongside the expected car and livery updates to reflect the 1998 season, a further improved damage model was incorporated – a crucial differentiator to the showroom-pristine *Gran Turismo*. Also added were some of the cars from the wider TOCA package (Ford Fiesta and Formula Ford), a test track and several other fictional circuits. Slightly less demanding than the original, the second iteration of the game was generally more enjoyable on a pick-up-and-play basis.

Sadly, although the TOCA franchise continued (*TOCA Race Drivers 2* and *3* were both great), the second iteration of the game was the final one to feature actual cars from the BTCC, a move unfortunately on trend with motorsport

gaming which generally either covers F1 or fictional racing on real-life circuits.

In profile and status 1997 was arguably the BTCC's peak season, attracting massive manufacturer and sponsor investment, a full grid of star drivers and an ever-growing public profile. The reality was a little less rosy. Away from the UK and Germany the super touring category was starting to wane precipitously, as manufacturers struggled with the investment to support multiple parallel domestic programmes, particularly with F1 still on the agenda for many and sports car racing starting to awaken from its mid-decade slumber.

Perhaps more worrying was that the on-track product wasn't that great. Yes, the cars were wildly impressive, the driving was world class and the qualifying times closely bunched – but too many of the races had been processional, with order changes generally instigated by accidents rather than overtaking. There was a real risk the casual audience, of whom there were millions, who had been hooked by the BTCC as an exciting alternative to dull Formula 1 races, would find something else for their entertainment.

During 1997 the super touring technical ruleset governed by the FIA had been under extensive review, not least recognising that the racing needed to improve. However, reflecting the complex and competitive stakeholder environment, the 14 manufacturers involved in the ruleset ultimately decided to not change very much at all – a decision ratified by the FIA. This duly put the onus on to series promoters to see what they could do to try to up the excitement.

For 1998 TOCA made the decision to revise the race format. Thus far in the super touring era, all the races had been run to a sprint format, without planned pit stops,

meaning the drivers had to sort themselves out on the track. For 1998, instead of two equal-length races, there would be a sprint and a feature race. The sprint race was fairly self-explanatory, but the feature race would be longer and include a mandatory pit stop where teams would have to change two tyres. This would introduce both an element of strategy (pitting early to escape traffic or pitting late to see if the weather changed), jeopardy (a few seconds lost in the pits could equate to multiple places) and chance (a pit stop the right side of a safety car could be game-changing). However, long-suffering motorsport fans (and if you're reading this, you almost certainly are one) would struggle to point to many examples of when a mandatory pit stop has genuinely improved the show.

After the major shake-up of the team and driver rosters for 1997, there was a bit more team stability rolling into 1998. The only substantial outward change at Renault was that the car was now green and sponsored by Nescafé – otherwise, it was still prepared by Williams with Menu and Plato behind the wheel. Of course, that wasn't the whole story, with the 1998 specification car having been evolved in almost all areas. Whether merely improving on the previous year would be enough was open to question.

The Volvo S40 returned for its second campaign with TWR once more preparing the cars. TWR had come into the BTCC targeting the title in their third season; this now being their fifth effort, the clock was starting to tick on achieving that success. The S40 had been substantially uprated over the winter, impressing in pre-season testing. Rydell remained with the squad for his fifth season, but this time was partnered by ex-Formula 1 podium finisher (Adelaide 1995) Gianni Morbidelli in place of Burt. Whilst Burt's second season had been a disappointment, the prior

experiences of F1 converts suggested that Morbidelli would have his work cut out.

Audi Sport were back for a third campaign but with a very different car. Recognising the weight penalty for the 4x4 model would preclude a title challenge, Audi campaigned a front-wheel drive version of the A4 in the STW throughout 1997, with the car and its driver (Yvan Muller) moving over to the BTCC. Bintcliffe remained in the second car but had a lot of learning to do to adapt to the new machinery. Bintcliffe's task would be unaided by the Audi GB team operating at more of an arm's length and on a lower budget – with much of the front-wheel drive A4's development being undertaken by the French ROC team.

The RML-prepared Nissans remained as was, with Reid and Leslie continuing for a second season. Having blown hot and cold during 1997, the team were aiming for more regular podium challenges. Pre-season there were concerns of a repeat of the tensions of 1997, with the Nissan Motorsport Europe cars arriving late for RML to get them race ready. However, as Reid recalls, the team spirit was strong: 'RML was my favourite team, lots of young, bright, people. The car was developed around my driving style, they worked towards giving me the car where I could perform; when you get a car that's at one with you as a driver it's easy to put it on pole.' Very true words, as events would prove.

Triple Eight would once more run the Vauxhall challenge, with team co-owner Warwick and Cleland returning to the cockpit. Their 1997 campaign had been torpedoed by the homologated aero package, but with new developments aimed at better suiting the British circuits, the pair were hoping for better results.

Ford had had a wretched time since moving on from Rouse Engineering at the end of 1995. West Surrey Racing

once more prepared the cars, with Hoy continuing for a second campaign, whilst Radisich sought greener pastures. Alongside Hoy would be the reigning and four-time New Zealand touring car champion Craig Baird, whose only prior experience of British tracks had been in the 1992 British Formula 2 Championship, a title which was claimed by Muller. The Kiwi would have a near-vertical learning curve, which was not helped by the fact he would have to concede the seat on three occasions to returning folk hero Nigel Mansell. Back in touring cars after his 1993 one-off at the TOCA Shootout, Mansell was box office, his return being a major coup for Ford and the championship.

Prodrive were back running the Honda Accords with Thompson partnered by Peter Kox, who would have a first full campaign in the championship having left BMW's sports car programme. Pre-season testing boded very well for the team, who were pacesetters in the run-up to the opening race.

Peugeot meanwhile retained Harvey, who was joined by Radisich – a quick driver pairing where the limiting factor was most likely to be the reliability of the machinery. MSD returned for their second year, running the works effort, but, as always, Peugeot had to make do on a lower budget and limited support from the French factory.

The privateer field was inching ever closer to the works cars in terms of competitiveness, with three strong full-time entries for the season in the form of Tommy Rustad in an ex-works 1997 Renault Laguna, Matt Neal in a Nissan Primera and Robb Gravett in a Honda Accord prepared by Lee Brookes. Mark Lemmer would appear more often than not, with Roger Moen completing the first half of the season.

Thirteen events were scheduled with two rounds apiece at Brands Hatch, Silverstone, Donington Park, Thruxton and Oulton Park, plus single weekends at Snetterton, Knockhill and Croft.

Once again three of these would be shown live by the BBC – an awkward halfway house for the championship. On one hand, this was an era when many sports were moving from highlights to live coverage (not least due to dedicated satellite sports channels needing to fill their schedules), and the BTCC wanted to move with the times. On the other hand, the tightly edited highlights had frequently flattered dull races, of which there were currently too many to keep the audience tuned in. As it turned out, the BBC cameras would show live one of the best races of the era.

The season kicked off on a cold mid-April weekend at Thruxton, where Rydell and Menu were the class of the field on pace. However, a poor qualifying session left Menu well down the order for the sprint race; his subsequent charge through the pack to fifth being a highlight. At the front, Rydell was a comfortable winner from Plato with Thompson claiming third for Honda.

The first pit stop race of the super touring era was never going to be as dramatic as the hype but did serve to highlight how pit stops added uncertainty. The battle at the front was exclusively between Menu and Rydell, with Menu largely having the upper hand. The pair pitted together and the teams did their job, sending them back out line astern. Rydell did briefly move ahead of the Renault but, as the weather closed in, Menu reclaimed the lead which he then held through a precarious final couple of laps as the rain and snow started to come down. Second place for Rydell propelled him into a decent early championship lead with the podium once more completed by Thompson.

The changeable weather continued into the second round on the Silverstone International circuit. Once more a one-shot qualifying mishap for Menu dropped him to the back of the grid for the sprint race (along with Reid and Radisich), whilst Thompson had pole from Leslie.

A damp track with a dry racing line confronted the drivers, with Abbey being particularly treacherous. Leslie took the early lead, having good feel from his Nissan in tricky conditions. An impressive opening lap saw him open up a decent advantage, before the safety car was deployed to retrieve Kox from the Copse gravel following first-corner contact with Muller. Once back underway, Leslie quickly set about stretching the field, converting his lead into a comfortable win ahead of Thompson and Plato, who enjoyed a close dice for second. Warwick claimed fourth heading an entertaining multi-car battle.

There was to be no repeat of Thruxton for Menu, who was an early retirement following contact with Neal at Brooklands as neither driver gave the other enough space, with the inevitable outcome. Menu's day got even worse in the feature race, where an early collision with Leslie at Bridge saw both pitched into retirement. Menu had always had a reputation as one of the most robust dicers in the field, but this, his first double retirement of the double-header era, was enough to already dent his championship chances.

After the Menu/Leslie incident the feature race took an even more dramatic turn. Declared a wet race, at around the five-lap mark, the rain started to sweep in, turning the circuit into a skating rink. With a mandatory pit stop, no one would lose time by gambling on a pit stop, but there was a tyre choice to be made. Due to the aerodynamic grip, intermediates would be sufficient unless conditions worsened. Alternatively, wet tyres would give immediate

grip and confidence, but if the track dried out, those drivers would plummet down the order.

In the initial chaos it was Hoy who eased to the front. The Mondeo's handling was well suited to the conditions, and Hoy could draw on his vast experience to avoid trouble. Pitting later than many of his rivals he opted for intermediate tyres, coming out ahead of his rivals. He would likely have had closer competition from Plato, but the Renault driver, who was leading in the early laps, had the misfortune to be the first to arrive at a sodden Becketts, spinning wildly off track as a result.

After a few laps of chaos, the race settled down, with remarkably few casualties, and Hoy out front with a clear lead which he held to the flag. This was the 1991 champion's first win since 1995 and a fine reward for two difficult seasons. Recovering from his spin, Plato took a strong second, to give him three podiums in four races. Third went to Reid, a further signal to the field that the Nissan and both its drivers would be highly competitive throughout the season.

It was a more frustrating weekend for Rydell: having taken the early championship lead, the Volvo wasn't quite at the front on pace at Silverstone. A hard-fought fifth in race one was compounded by a feature race retirement – which at least limited some of the damage Menu had incurred.

Elsewhere, the early skirmishes were leading to mixed emotions in the pit lane. A fourth in the feature race for Radisich signalled that the Peugeot was getting there (and the team would have had more but for a 30-second penalty for Harvey), whilst the Honda was also impressive, with Thompson steadily racking up the podiums. Vauxhall had also enjoyed a good start to the year with both Warwick and Cleland consistently in the upper reaches of the top ten, a massive improvement on a year earlier.

For many teams the difficulty appeared to be having two competitive drivers. Bintcliffe was in amongst the privateers as he struggled to get to grips with the Audi, whilst Baird was having a miserable time in the Ford, also running at privateer pace.

The third event of the season on the Donington Park National circuit was the scene for a popular resurgence of Vauxhall and Cleland. Rydell took pole for the opening race, but once again the Volvo was slow off the line, meaning he was jumped by both Cleland and Thompson in the opening skirmishes.

Thereafter, the battle for the lead was close, with a six-car train, also including both Renaults and Leslie well clear of the rest. Up front, the Vectra seemed perfectly dialled in to the Leicestershire track, and whilst Cleland never put much daylight between himself and Thompson, he never had to defend too hard either. Rydell applied a bit more pressure to wrestle second away, but couldn't prise an opening to demote the Honda.

The fight for fourth ended rather more dramatically, as a few laps from the flag Leslie got a run on Plato down to Redgate. Attempting to swoop around the outside, Leslie's right rear tagged the front left of the Renault. Leslie was spun into the gravel and immediate retirement, whilst Plato limped round before being forced into the pits with damage from the incident. This compounded a disappointing race for Nissan as Reid had retired only moments earlier with mechanical issues.

Leslie more than made amends in the feature race, scoring his second win of the season with an assured and dominant drive. Pit stop sequence aside, Leslie led throughout and was never challenged. Menu took second, his Renault six seconds back from the Nissan, but a further

12 seconds up the road from the battle for third, as Cleland fended off Thompson and Plato. However, the Vauxhall driver enjoyed his best weekend since 1995, scoring another podium.

Whilst the first two feature races of the season had been weather enlivened, this was not a thriller. Notwithstanding the action of the pit stops, the field became strung out over the 36 laps, with 43 seconds covering the top ten – not really what the new format had hoped to achieve.

The fourth round was live on BBC's *Grandstand*, not that the option to watch from home put off the large crowd which piled in to Brands Hatch.

As had been the case for much of the season so far, Rydell dominated qualifying, taking pole for both races. However, the Swede, having conceded the championship lead to Thompson, needed to start converting qualifying performance into more race victories.

Pole position at Brands Hatch can be particularly tricky, with the polesitter leaving the line heading uphill towards Paddock Hill Bend. Folklore suggests that the flatter, outer front-row position better lends itself to a good start.

Fortunately for Volvo supporters, Rydell made an excellent start to the sprint race to lead into Paddock from Reid and Hoy. Rydell immediately got his head down and started to try to manage his gap to Reid. A brave move from Neal into Paddock wrestled third from Hoy, who was then further demoted over the following corners by the chasing pack. This was disappointing for Hoy, who had felt the Ford would go well at the tight Kent circuit.

Neal couldn't hold on to third for long before he was pushed aside by the Renaults, and he then got involved in overly robust dicing that led to his retirement with damage. Also retiring was Leslie, causing more frustration for the

Nissan team who would surely be in contention for the manufacturers' title if both drivers could make it to the flag.

With Reid's pressure unable to force an error or opening, Rydell took his second win of the season, just 0.7s clear of the Nissan, with Menu a more distant third ahead of Plato.

As at Donington Park, the feature race flattered to deceive. Rydell romped home a comfortable winner having managed a decent gap at the front throughout. The double win was enough to give the Swede a restored championship lead. Thompson was runner-up, with his fifth podium in eight races. He had to work for it; after having been on Rydell's bumper following the pit stops, he faded to come under pressure from Reid in the closing laps.

Next up was Oulton Park, a circuit that, after BMW's dominance in 1993, had often seemed to favour Menu and the Renault Laguna. This was certainly the case in the sprint race, where the Swiss led from lights to flag. In one of the least exciting races of the season, Menu headed Rydell and Leslie for the podium, but there was only one place change in the top eight throughout the entire race, and that was when Thompson's engine blew. The Fosters layout, whilst certainly a challenge to master, was once more arguably too narrow and short of passing places to provide truly great racing.

In the early stages of the feature it appeared as if Menu was on course to take the double, and in doing so turn up the title pressure on Rydell. Through the early stages of the race and the front-runners' pit stops, this is how it was playing out, with Menu heading team-mate Plato and Rydell, the latter using experience to wrestle the Volvo up the pecking order despite being behind the Renaults and Nissans on pace.

It all changed mid-race, when Radisich, staying out late to score an extra point for leading the race, was caught by

Menu heading into Fosters. Menu charged to the inside, tagging the Peugeot as he moved it aside. Momentarily delayed, Menu lost sufficient ground to be challenged by Plato into Knickerbrook. Once the pressure had been seen off, Menu reasserted his lead only for lightning to strike twice. Radisich having finally pitted, then acquired a stop-go penalty for pit lane speeding and was caught again by Menu, this time to be lapped. The Renault driver repeated the same manoeuvre but misjudged it and ran wide, allowing both Plato and Rydell to sweep past – the latter pair remaining in that order through to the flag. It went from bad to worse for Menu as he was then caught and passed by Reid, the Nissan giving the Renault a sufficient bump to dislodge the rear bumper and leaving Menu little option but to settle for fourth.

Donington Park would prove the setting for another of the BTCCs iconic moments. The sixth event of the season in mid-June saw the circuit subsumed by an unseasonal deluge as a huge crowd poured in for Nigel Mansell's return.

Reid had pole for the sprint race and led into Redgate, holding the lead for the duration as the pack navigated the spray. Mansell's race ended in disappointment with an early trip into the tyre wall after the front wheels locked, stalling the engine. Once the safety car had finished the clear-up, Reid led away from Cleland and Rydell. Before long the Nissan had a comfortable advantage as Rydell moved up into second, slipping to the inside at the Goddard's chicane. Before long Hoy was also ahead of Cleland. At the same spot a few moments later, Warwick misjudged the Vectra's stopping power, sending both Menu and Thompson into the tyres. As the race wound down, Reid was caught by Rydell and Hoy, but was never under real threat as the podium

trio took the flag in a near train, giving Reid his first win of the year.

It was the feature race that people would remember, though. Reid and Leslie locked out the front row from Thompson and Plato, with Mansell down in 19th. At the start the conditions were greasy rather than drenched, as Reid led away. Initially, the best start was from Thompson, but he couldn't find space into Redgate as Reid squeezed out Leslie to maintain his lead. A big slide from Thompson at the Old Hairpin moved Warwick up to third. As the race warmed up, Mansell began to make progress through the order, finding the Mondeo to his liking, engaging in a robust scrap with Neal and Morbidelli. Rydell was also in trouble early on, being spun on the exit of Goddards by Warwick as the pair encountered rain falling at the chicane, forcing his retirement. Menu also hit trouble early on, serving up his second double retirement of the season.

When the pit stop cycle began, the rain started to fall with intensity, soaking the circuit. Reid was the first of the Nissans to pit, handing the lead to Leslie. As the Nissan pit stops cycled through, Thompson was another victim of the conditions, caught in the gravel after understeering off at Coppice. Leslie emerged from the pits just as the safety car was scrambled to clear the beached cars around the track, bunching the field. When racing resumed, Reid had the lead from Leslie, then Cleland, then Mansell. Immediately, Mansell was on it, challenging Cleland at Redgate, finding grip on the wet line. Mansell challenged again at McLeans, he and Cleland both passing Leslie as Muller joined in too.

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Getting the better run through Goddards, Muller was on to Reid into Redgate but took the outside line and was eased on

to the kerbs by the Nissan, dropping him down the surging pack. This moved Mansell to second, positioned right under Reid's rear spoiler. Coming into McLeans, Reid aquaplaned on to the grass and spun into the tyres putting Mansell in the lead. Muller tried to take second from Cleland but overcooked it at Goddards, dropping back behind Leslie.

It was just possible that the most remarkable result could be on the cards, but with the rain easing off, Mansell – covering the inside line – went into Goddards too hot, promoting Cleland into the lead,. Before long Leslie challenged under the Dunlop bridge and was up into second, with Warwick then taking his turn to try and overhaul the Mondeo into Redgate as the pair started the last lap. Into McLeans, Warwick was tapping Mansell every which way, but without effect. Then in a repeat of the earlier move, Mansell again over-committed to the inside line at Goddards and slithered wide, giving Warwick a final turn podium. Taking fourth on the road, Mansell was demoted to fifth behind Muller following an earlier yellow-flag infringement.

It would prove to be Cleland's final BTCC victory, but one taken in consummate style in what was arguably the race of the decade – a race of changing conditions that favoured the 'old guard'. Whilst other races may have served up more drama or incident, the fight for the lead, whilst robust, never stepped over the line, providing a thrilling, swirling battle that showcased the BTCC at its very best. Although Cleland took the spoils, the day surely belonged to Mansell, who had everyone at the circuit, and many more at home, believing that maybe he could pull off the unlikeliest of upsets. It wasn't to be, but it had been a superb race.

After the heights of Donington, Croft hosting the BTCC for a second time would do well to match the excitement.

Nonetheless, the sprint race was entertaining, except for the win. That was settled in favour of local favourite Thompson, who led throughout in the Honda, although Reid did briefly apply the pressure when a rain shower passed over the circuit.

Once the weather settled, the battle to watch was the one for second. Having failed to oust Thompson, Reid fell into Rydell's clutches, the Swede challenging at the hairpin. The right-hand side of the Volvo became intertwined with the left of the Nissan, leaving both cars with plenty of cosmetic damage. Despite the bump from Rydell, Reid was able to see off the Volvo to hold on to second. Rydell then got a taste of his own medicine, under attack from Menu. The Renault's first attempt at Tower was robustly fended off, but Menu's second effort at the hairpin was successful, with Rydell barged aside and obliged to settle for fourth. Further behind, the second Nissan of Leslie was an early retirement, which would prove consequential later on.

The feature race was a bit more settled, and this time was decided in Rydell's favour. Leslie made the running until well after half distance, but then paid a further penalty for his race-one retirement. The 1997 season had been heavily weather disrupted, so the teams had been using the opening race to better understand tyre wear on longer runs, with many drivers getting through their rubber more quickly than expected. This led to a lot of them adjusting set-up, but without the data from a full first race, Leslie kept his car as was. In the latter stages of the feature race his tyre wear ramped up and he was eventually unable to keep Rydell behind, the Volvo driver sealing the win with another aggressive move at the hairpin. Leslie did take a well-deserved second ahead of Reid, with Menu in fourth from Thompson.

The Croft round marked the midway point of the year, with Rydell holding a 42-point championship lead from Menu. Thereafter, it was very tight with both Renaults, both Nissans and Thompson all in the mix – all six drivers still firmly in the title hunt.

After a month's pause in the action, the feature race at Snetterton on the final weekend of July proved to be one of the closest races of the season. Reid in a Nissan that was clearly a beat slower than some of its rivals managed to hold off a sustained race-long challenge from the Renaults of Plato and Menu. Running at odds to some of the team orders that had been seen throughout the field, the Williams squad opted not to switch the cars, costing Menu a few championship points. For Reid, scoring his second win in five races, a title challenge was starting to emerge.

However, both Reid and Menu would hit trouble in the second race with neither making it to the finish. Reid was in mechanical trouble, whilst Menu was caught in a first-lap incident when Cleland tried to take the outside line through Coram and tagged the Renault as he spun towards the barrier. Menu walked away with damaged title chances, whilst injured ribs would be enough to prevent Cleland from racing at Thruxton next time out.

The race itself was fairly settled with Thompson scoring his second win of the season ahead of Rydell (who unobtrusively racked up the points on the day with a fifth and a second) and Plato. The Renault driver came out ahead from a superb late-race dice with Leslie and Muller. The Audi driver was continuing to make the front-wheel drive A4 ever more competitive whilst having a knack of staying out of trouble.

The second visit of the year to Thruxton followed. Once more it was Reid who took the sprint race win, steadily opening

up the advantage over Menu and Rydell as the race progressed. Having made a good initial start, the main pressure on Reid came following an early safety car after Baird slammed into the barrier at Allard (Plato also failed to complete the opening lap, grinding to a halt with mechanical issues).

An early safety car also provided much of the excitement in the feature race, where a chain reaction started by Plato and Warwick coming together resulted in Rustad slamming into the barriers on the exit of the Complex.

Strategy and bravery would decide the feature race in Menu's favour. It was Thompson who took the early lead, moving ahead of Reid at the start and using the Accord's strengths (excellent top speed) and managing its disadvantages (not as fast as the rest around a whole lap) cannily to maintain the lead up to the pit stops.

Thompson emerged in the lead, but the Williams team had done an excellent job with Menu and he came through the pit stop cycle right on Thompson's tail. Menu then swept into the lead following an exceptionally brave move between Goodwood and Church (a section where miscalculation is likely to lead to an ambulance ride). Thereafter, the Renault eased clear. Thompson was deprived of a deserved second when the Honda's gearbox started playing up. Leslie, who always went well at Thruxton, took second having raced up from sixth, whilst Rydell took an unobtrusive third – the Volvo driver once more using consistency to his advantage to outscore all his rivals bar Menu over the course of both races. His championship situation was aided by Morbidelli scoring a season's-best fourth and duly taking points off Thompson, Reid and Plato.

From the sweeps of Thruxton it was on to the twists of Knockhill, where once again the weather would prove to be a factor.

The sprint race was wet throughout, which at least gave consistent conditions, albeit consistently challenging ones. This didn't deter Reid, who took his third sprint race win in succession (and fourth overall), with another comfortable lights-to-flag performance. The action in the race was behind, in the battle for the rest of the top six.

Having generally struggled to be competitive all season, the front-wheel drive Audi in Muller's hands was on the pace at Knockhill. The Audi Quattros had dominated at Knockhill in the two previous seasons but, following their ban, Audi had thus far been playing catch-up to its rivals who were more attuned to the secrets of making a front-wheel drive car work. At Knockhill the work started to pay off, although ultimately not in the sprint.

Starting sixth, Muller's climb up the order could charitably be described as assertive. Having moved clear of Leslie for fifth, fourth was claimed when Menu was pushed sideways at Butchers, before Kox was rotated out of third. Attempting a similarly aggressive move on Thompson for second, Muller met his match, losing momentum and allowing Menu to slip through into third. The podium was thus settled for Reid, Thompson and Menu, the trio's points gaining added value as Rydell retired following a first-lap accident.

The weather truly came into play during the feature race. As the cars formed on the grid the track was dry enough for slicks, with almost all the field starting on the smooth rubber – although Baird would be an exception.

The start was messy as Thompson stalled on the line, setting off a chain reaction that saw Cleland punted into the barriers by team-mate Warwick. This led to the introduction of the safety car, keeping the field bunched. With recovery work ongoing, the rain started to come down, lightly at first, but enough to send a few drivers into the pits for treaded tyres.

The battle at the front as racing got underway was between Reid and Menu, the latter taking the lead, pushing Reid on to the grass in the process. All the while the rain was intensifying, forcing the rest of the pack into the pits to change tyres – with two notable exceptions. Of the works runners, Baird had gambled on starting on intermediates, and with no racing laps on a fully dry circuit had kept his tyres well preserved. Now was his moment and he surged into the lead, chased by Neal, who, with an eye on the £100,000 prize for an independent race winner, had also made the same gamble.

As the rain intensified, both came up snake eyes. Neal slid off the track and into the barriers, whilst Baird eventually had to give in to the conditions and pitted for full wets. This propelled another dice roller – Warwick – into the lead. The Vauxhall driver had opted for full wets when he first came in to change tyres and now he emerged out front as others had to pit for a second time.

Menu had the pace to reel Warwick in, but a jammed wheelnut in his final pit stop dropped the Renault down to fourth, promoting Muller to a fine second following a less-obtrusive run, and Rydell once again found the means to slip on to the podium. For Warwick this was a superb, if unexpected, result and a fine reward after the trials of 1995, and two years of hard work with Triple Eight pulling the Vectra up the order.

With just three rounds to go, Mansell-mania struck again with a gigantic crowd pouring into Brands Hatch on a sunny August bank holiday. For both Reid and Motor Sport Vision's group motorsport event manager David Willey (essentially, if it happens at an MSV circuit, he organised it), the weekend was super touring's greatest.

As Reid said: ‘The absolute zenith was Brands Hatch, August 31st, we had the third Nissan with *Top Gear*, massive crowds and the racing was intense.’

Willey, who was then an enthusiastic teenager, among the spectators, recalled: ‘My first ever visit to Brands Hatch was on August bank holiday in 1998. I arrived with a friend and his dad in a Capri, and as soon as I walked through the gates I was hooked. The scale of the event was incredible, not an inch of space available, there were vast trade stands, displays and people everywhere.

‘That day was magical – the ingredients included Nigel Mansell racing in the Mondeo, Tiff Needell making a guest appearance in a works Primera for BBC’s *Top Gear* and Rydell vs. Reid (which was the day after Schumacher had an altercation with Coulthard at the infamous Spa race, which Damon Hill won for Jordan). Support races that day also featured many future stars, including Jenson Button in the British Formula Ford Championship.

‘Mansell-Mania had hit Brands Hatch. I was amazed spectators were allowed to walk on to the track for the public grid walk, and as soon as the ambulance gates at Paddock Hill opened, I’d say 90 per cent of the fans rushed to Nigel, who was standing out the sunroof of his road-going Mondeo. This meant all the other super touring stars were easy pickings for me to grab their autograph! Menu, Plato, Thompson, Cleland, Muller, Leslie, Hoy, Warwick, Radisich, Harvey, to name a few ... I came away with so many signed posters and stickers – it was amazing.

‘Both the sprint and feature races were full of drama, and I’ll never forget the huge cheers from the crowd when Reid overtook Rydell.’

Despite the acclaim, Mansell himself would have a bad day; with no weather to level things out he was

understandably off the pace, his races both concluding with accidents exiting Druids.

Reid, almost inevitably, won the sprint race from pole position, now four on the bounce. It was a comfortable win, with Thompson and Rydell completing the podium, the Indy circuit again offering up few passing opportunities.

The feature race was far spicier and was ultimately decided in the stewards' room. Rydell had pole and led from the lights, but immediately came under pressure from Reid, who picks up the story: 'Rydell backed me into the pack and brake-tested me in the middle of Druids and I dropped down to seventh. It was the feature race and the RML team did a great job with strategy and after the pit stops I was back with Rydell. Again at Druids he braked early, but this time I was so close and couldn't slow in response so we made contact and I got through. When you're running that near to someone, if they do something unexpected, you don't really have the margin to react. Anyway, I was through and then we came across Tiff Needell in the third Nissan for *Top Gear*. He let me through before slowing Rickard.'

'I won the race and then in *parc fermé* Rickard was furious and came to try and strangle me on live TV in front of Steve Rider. After the race the paparazzi were everywhere, in the press conference we had [venerable F1 journalists] Alan Henry and Nigel Roebuck – it shows just how big the BTCC was.'

Inevitably, the pair were summoned to the stewards' office. Rydell received a £2,000 fine and severe telling-off for assaulting Reid – but escaped disqualification or a ban. In fact, he was elevated to the win, after Reid received a time penalty for the incident at Druids, duly dropping him down to second. This meant that despite his pace, Reid had only

shaved a handful of points off Rydell's championship lead. Behind the pair, Menu took third, keeping him in the title hunt, whilst Thompson dropped from contention after his fourth turned into ninth following a track limits penalty.

Looking back at the incident now, it certainly wasn't malicious on the part of Reid, and far less blatant than many subsequent BTCC flashpoints. As for Rydell's reaction in *parc fermé*, it was great TV – the battle and its aftermath encapsulating why the championship was so beloved.

Only utter disaster for Reid could hand the title to Rydell at Oulton Park, the field once more having to contend with the Fosters layout. Instead, the day swung the title momentum back into Reid's favour.

It wasn't to be a sixth sprint win in a row, though, for Reid, as despite starting from pole, he was led into Fosters by Thompson. Sitting on the Honda's bumper for much of the race, Reid couldn't find a way past, and wouldn't risk anything too dicey, so had to settle for second. Behind, Menu was third, ahead of Leslie, but the real story was Rydell, who had started 19th after a disastrous one-shot qualifying lap and could only progress to 11th, out of the points.

The feature race wasn't one of the more exciting of the year, the result being more consequential than the action. Reid took a comfortable first feature race win without coming under any pressure. The result not only set up a drivers' title showdown at Silverstone but also was enough to give Nissan the manufacturers' championship, the squad feeling the benefit of two consistently strong drivers.

The podium was completed by Plato and Muller, both of whom benefitted from hustling drives, and taking advantage of early accidents which had eliminated Leslie, Thompson (together) and Menu (in a separate three-car incident). Rydell

had held second for a while before dropping down to fourth, in this the only weekend of the campaign where he didn't feature on the podium at least once. The remainder of the top six gave plenty to cheer for longer-suffering supporters with fifth and sixth going to Warwick and Hoy.

This set up a final-round showdown at Silverstone, the title going to the last weekend for the first time since 1995. Given Reid's form, the thought of him taking both wins wasn't off the table – if he achieved that, then Rydell would need to finish on the podium in both races, a tall order if his Oulton Park form were to continue. However, provided Rydell could stay close to Reid, the maths was in his favour.

It was all settled in the sprint race. After the disaster of Oulton Park, Rydell was on the pace throughout the weekend, taking pole for the opener. The Volvo led away, but from third, Reid soon dispatched Thompson and was on to Rydell's tail. For a few laps it looked as if the crowd would be treated to 1992 levels of drama, but then it all unravelled for Reid.

Heading into the fast right-hander at Copse, Reid got too close to Rydell, costing him front downforce in the dirty air behind the S40. This forced him to get out of the throttle, giving Thompson the opportunity to slip back into second. Unsurprisingly, Reid tried to fight back but tagged Thompson at Abbey and dropped to fifth.

At this point Rydell would have hoped for a smooth run to the flag, but it wasn't to be. Gravett's Honda expired expensively at Becketts and dropped oil all over one of the most intimidating sections of the circuit, bringing out the safety car. With the field tightly bunched on the restart Rydell was under pressure from Muller and Thompson. It was Thompson who came out on top,

twice using the slingshot out of Copse to move ahead of first Muller and then Rydell to take his fourth win of the year.

However, Rydell had still secured the drivers' title and with Rustad having also taken the privateers' crown following a remarkably consistent campaign, it was all over bar the shouting by the time the final race got underway. There was shouting, though, as Menu and Cleland came together acrimoniously, the poor weekend costing Menu any hope of third in the standings. The race itself was a Nissan demonstration run with Reid taking a comfortable win from Leslie, and Rydell completing the podium.

The 1998 season had been the best since 1995, with unpredictable results, no runaway car or champion and, particularly in changeable weather, some thrilling racing. But it was also the beginning of the end of an era. Nevertheless, the round-12 Donington Park feature race can stake a strong claim to being the best race covered in this book – others had unrivalled drama, but for sheer quality of racing this was hard to match.

Having steadily improved throughout 1997, RML's Nissan effort was the class of 1998, with the team taking four more wins than anyone else – although, of the top teams, only Renault also had two consistently strong drivers. The team struggled with teething problems early on, as they found the snag list in converting the Nissan Motorsport Europe-built cars to BTCC racers longer than hoped. Engines also proved troublesome with some interchange between Engine Developments and the initially more reliable International Engine Services units. Between Reid and Leslie there was a drivers' title-winning campaign, but split across the pair it wasn't quite to be. Nonetheless, RML did a brilliant job and achieved their just rewards.

Reflecting on his time with RML Nissan, Reid recalls, 'My favourite team was RML. In 1998 we certainly had the car to win the championship, but some things cost us – fitting the wrong tyres at Donington Park in the wet and aquaplaning off, Rydell leaving an oil slick on my windscreen when, in a typical TWR move, they overfilled the car, spraying me at the start.'

Second in the manufacturers' standings (but third in teams behind Renault) were Volvo. The TWR team's effort in its fifth year was rewarded with the drivers' championship (originally targeted for year three in 1996). TWR and Rydell made a superb combination, with no mechanical retirements during the campaign and only one race weekend without a podium. Of the pack, TWR's greatest strength came arguably from exploiting the pit stops in the feature races – where canny strategy and trouble-free stops frequently served to propel Rydell up the order. Morbidelli charged hard, but, as with so many, found the transition from power-abundant single seaters to the super tourers a bigger than expected change, and he would leave the team at the end of the year.

After the domination of 1997, Renault hadn't quite matched those heights in 1998. Unlike others, you couldn't point to a single factor, but rather a combination of circumstances which cost them. Despite being the first 1998 car to run in anger, it was designed around the 1997 specification Michelin and lost a bit of edge when the 1998 compound was subtly different. Likewise, Menu, having driven faultlessly in 1997, made a few mistakes, overdid the aggression at times and suffered from bad luck – Radisich at Oulton Park, the stuck wheelnut at Knockhill. Plato was impressive once more, but struggled for podium pace late in the season. Although Williams kept the teams'

championship in play until the final round, they were just a beat off throughout much of the year.

Honda's eye-catching pre-season form didn't translate into a title-winning run. The Accord's impressive top speed didn't translate into whole-lap pace often enough, and over a race weekend was behind the Nissan, Volvo and Renault. Engineering changes, plus the announcement of the Ford contract going to Prodrive for 1999 meant that development wasn't in line with other front-runners. Thompson was impressive, but never really looked like title contending, something he tacitly confirmed by focusing on wins from mid-season onwards.

The second season of Triple Eight running the Vauxhalls saw a significant leap forward from 1997, albeit one which blew hot and cold. At Donington the Vectra was the class of the field, with Cleland scoring wins in both rounds at the Midlands venue. Elsewhere, the Scot struggled with balance and rear grip, stymying his hopes of a title challenge. Warwick also scored a most unlikely victory at Knockhill, with inspired strategy paying dividends for the team, although this was offset by the squad generally being poor performers in the feature race pit stops.

Sixth in the standings were Audi, who announced their withdrawal from the series at season's end. This was not wholly unexpected, given that the German marque had come into the series to promote the Quattro – which it had done with devastating success. Even during 1998, the bulk of the marketing associated with Audi's BTCC activities still focused on the Quattro. Nonetheless, the team made great strides in moving the front-wheel drive version of the A4 up the order, with Muller scoring some impressive late-season podium finishes. Muller was indisputably the team leader, working closely with the French ROC team who were doing

all of Audi's super touring development. In contrast, the UK effort only went testing at the official TOCA test days, giving Bintcliffe little time to get to grips with and develop his car. This led to a frustrating season for him, and he exited the championship with Audi. Muller meanwhile had been sufficiently impressive to be snapped up by Vauxhall for the following year.

Ford once again had a trying year, albeit one punctuated by their first win since 1995. The best results came from the benefit of wily drivers in Hoy and, occasionally, Mansell, who knew how to get the best out of changeable circumstances. Baird meanwhile had a miserable year, only twice in the points and winding up his season with three rounds to go. Behind the scenes, politics didn't help matters. With WSR only receiving the cars late from Reynard, there was no time for pre-season development, but some improvements were made mid-season. It was then announced, to WSR's disappointment, that for 1999 Prodrive would be both building and running the cars – at which point Ford's investment and focus turned to the following year, leaving WSR to finish the year with what they'd got. WSR could feel hard done by: through no fault of their own, they'd never had the right conditions to make a decent tilt at the BTCC with Ford.

Adrift at the bottom of the manufacturers' standings was Peugeot, who once again had a fraught campaign. The first half of the season was a catalogue of engine failures, resulting in a change in engine builder, and car redesigns at mid-year. This improved reliability, but with the car already uncompetitive, the time lost making changes to get it to the chequered flag meant any hopes of improving pace were long gone. The MSD team frequently had to endure the sight of their 1998 Peugeots struggling to match

the pace of their 1996 Honda Accord now in the privateer hands of Robb Gravett. Peugeot's BTCC effort had long been underfunded in comparison to the far more successful French and German campaigns, and with no step change in budget forthcoming for 1999, the decision was taken to withdraw from the championship.

At season's end, with both Peugeot and Audi withdrawing, and with nobody coming in to take their place, the manufacturer ranks would drop to six. The pattern would be repeated elsewhere in the touring car universe, with the STW – the only other substantial series at this point – also having a big drop in numbers for 1999. Furthermore, if not publicly announced, it was known within the paddock that others too would depart the following year, at the end of the currently committed programmes.

Arguably, the summer of 1998 represented the end of a 12-year era of massive public interest in motorsport built around a succession of eminently relatable heroes. In late August Damon Hill would score his final Grand Prix win in Belgium, starting a success drought for British drivers that only really ended a decade later with the emergence of Lewis Hamilton. The Donington BTCC round was arguably also Nigel Mansell's last hurrah. For one final time, millions of fans were glued to the live BBC coverage watching their hero defy the odds in a spectacular multi-car dice. He didn't win, but he entertained, showing he'd still got it and bringing back the memories.

Subsequent years brought a definite drop in mainstream interest in motorsport – Hamilton and Button were popular, but not to the extent of Hill and Mansell. If in 1998 the likes of Cleland were almost household names, his 2008 successor in the Vauxhall, Fabrizio Giovanardi, was barely known outside the motorsport world. Looking through car, sports

and lifestyle magazines of the time, so many of the adverts feature manufacturers or industry businesses, promoting themselves through their BTCC exploits.

## Decline and Fall – 1999–2000

BY 1999 the motorsport winds were blowing away from super touring and the increasingly eye-watering costs needed to be competitive in what was still a domestic series. Most of the European championships had either wound down, reverted back to an owner-driver model for older machinery or pivoted to lower-cost regulations. Concurrently, manufacturer heads were being turned by other options – Formula 1 was becoming increasingly attractive again with BMW, Honda and Toyota all massively ramping up their investment. Likewise, sports car and GT racing was on the up – Audi in particular were starting to reap the rewards from their investment. For the German manufacturers there was also the revived DTM which would relaunch in 2000 replete with works Audi, Mercedes and Opel teams. This meant the German STW series was down to just three manufacturers for 1999, its final year, and in the BTCC the likes of Nissan, Volvo and Renault were heading into the final year of their contracts.

Despite this background, which would play through with a vengeance for the following year, there was an impressive roster committed for the 1999 campaign, the last great season of the era.

TWR and Volvo were back to defend their crown. Rickard Rydell would return for his sixth year with the team,

having led the Volvo BTCC effort throughout. He would have a new a team-mate in the form of Belgian Vincent Radermecker, who was no stranger to British circuits having been backed by Marlboro in the British Formula Ford and Formula 3 championships. A switch to the Belgian Procar series had yielded promising but unspectacular results and he did well to secure the drive.

The Ford badge switched teams again, in an effort to try and revitalise results since moving away from Rouse Engineering. The Prodrive team took over the contract and completely revamped the effort, with a two-year deal in place. Alain Menu was tempted away from Renault together with several of his engineers and was partnered with Anthony Reid, who had come close to snatching the title the previous year with Nissan. This was a serious effort, but there was a lot of ground to cover with a new car, team and drivers for Ford.

For Reid it was a big move: 'Ford made an offer I couldn't refuse. I knew Nissan were going to pull out at the end of 1999, whereas Ford offered me a two-year contract. I thought by the end of year two I would be in a position to win the championship – and I did score more points than anyone else but lost out to dropped scores.'

'To drive for Prodrive and the blue oval was a great experience. Prodrive and RML were on an equal level, but had slightly different cultures. Prodrive was harder edged ... a bit more businesslike and less friendly. Alain Menu came across with a number of people on the engineering side, whereas I came on my own, which probably didn't help. I learnt a lot from Prodrive about the dynamics of race cars, where to put ballast and suchlike.'

Menu's place at the still Williams-run Renault team was taken by Jean-Christophe Boullion. The Frenchman had

been waiting in the wings of both Williams and the BTCC for some time, having narrowly missed out on the drive taken by Jason Plato in 1997. Known to Williams from his Formula 1 testing duties, he was at this point in his career acknowledged as a very quick driver who had never quite got the breaks. For his third campaign Plato was now thrust into a team-leader role, in the knowledge that his undeniable speed would need to be combined with more consistency and fewer accidents.

Nissan filled the Reid-shaped hole with Laurent Aiello: the French driver had already taken two Super Touring titles, in France in 1994 and Germany in 1997, together with winning the 1998 Le Mans 24 Hours. Despite having never raced on most of the British circuits, he was immediately installed as a contender for the title. Alongside would be David Leslie, who many hoped would finally secure the title that his years of service surely warranted. Once again it would be RML running the car, continuing the successful partnership with Nissan.

The Triple Eight Vauxhall team would have its work cut out to progress up the pecking order from a mixed 1998 season, where some of the best results were weather-assisted. Investment in driving talent for the Vectra came in the form of Yvan Muller – who had impressed in the front-wheel drive Audi the year before – alongside John Cleland, for what would be his final season, ending his decade as a BTCC front-runner and crowd-pleaser.

With Peugeot's and Audi's withdrawal, Honda were left to complete the grid. The Accords would now be prepared by West Surrey Racing (WSR), who would be hoping for a more enjoyable time than had been the case with Ford – they and Prodrive essentially swapping contracts. Behind the wheel, things stayed the same, with James Thompson and

Peter Kox continuing, to be joined by Gabriele Tarquini in the final rounds.

The £250,000 cheque for the first outright privateer race winner was still unclaimed, but there was speculation bordering on expectation that 1999 could be the year. Throughout 1998 Matt Neal had increasingly mixed it with the works cars in his Primera and he was back for another shot in 1999 with the family-run Team Dynamics car. Two other privately entered cars would be ever-present – a Vauxhall Vectra for Mark Blair and an Arena Motorsport Renault Laguna which would start the year with Russell Spence before switching to Will Hoy mid-season.

The schedule remained over 13 rounds, with the sprint and feature race format from the previous year retained (although the impact this made on the quality of the racing was open to debate). Donington Park (National and International), Silverstone International, Brands Hatch Indy, Oulton Park (Fosters and Island) and Thruxton would each get two visits, whilst Croft, Knockhill and Snetterton had a single visit. The Snetterton event would be particularly noteworthy, representing the BTCC's first foray into night racing – with the feature race getting underway very late into the mid-July night. The Norfolk venue was no stranger to nocturnal saloon car action, having hosted the popular Willhire 24 Hour race for many years – but the spectacle of the super tourers on the limit in the dark promised to draw a sizeable crowd.

Thompson and Neal had the front row for the season opener at Donington Park, with reigning champion Rydell down on the fourth row. Thompson made a good start, to lead Menu into Redgate as Neal got bogged down and slipped to fifth behind the Renaults of Plato and Boullion. The order largely stayed that way in a fairly settled race, the

main action coming when Neal nerfed Boullion into the gravel at Coppice, giving fourth to Leslie ahead of Neal.

Neal had pole for the feature race, but this time he made a better start to lead Thompson and Menu into Redgate, the field staying closely bunched for the opening exchanges. The works Nissans had a wretched time with both Aiello and Leslie in trouble early on, ending their races in the gravel – the latter with no small assistance from Reid. For the opening segment of the race, Neal was in control, pitting later than his rivals from the lead. The pit stop was smooth, but Neal stalled as he pulled away, rejoining in fifth – elevating Thompson to the lead. The dream of the outright independent winner looked like it would have to wait until another day, but it was clear that Dynamics Nissan was the fastest car around Donington Park – whether Neal could clear the necessary traffic was another matter altogether.

Neal was soon up to fourth as Muller was slowed by bonnet damage to the Vectra, following contact with third-placed Rydell. As is sometimes the case, the drama all happened at once; Menu slowed heading to Goddards, but as he prepared to pit, Muller's bonnet flew up obscuring his view and blocking Menu's path into the pits.

On track, whilst Thompson was comfortable, Neal was released to hassle Rydell, eventually forcing the move at Redgate as the Volvo ran fractionally wide. Within four laps Neal was on terms with leader Thompson and tried to force the move at McLeans, elbowing Thompson into a slide before backing out. Behind, a puncture forced Rydell into retirement, costing a surefire podium finish and elevating Plato to third. The pressure from Neal was relentless and a lap later he made a brave move to the inside at the Old Hairpin to take the lead.

The remaining laps were agonising for Team Dynamics, but Neal came through to score a landmark win, the first for an independent in the super touring era, scooping the cheque for £250,000 from championship promoters TOCA for the honour. It was a hugely popular win, one which was all the more impressive given it was fully on merit and pace, rather than happenstance following a safety car or in poor weather.

Next up was the Silverstone International circuit. After the disastrous outing at Donington, the Nissans locked out the front row for the sprint race, proceeding to pull well clear of the rest – Aiello leading Leslie. The closest battle was for third between Neal and Rydell, a robust fight that was eventually decided in Rydell's favour.

The start of the feature race was messy as the rain started to fall during the warm-up laps, with several drivers heading into the pits in order to fit wet tyres. Aiello had pole but lost out into Copse to a fast-starting Rydell, but as the pair made contact on the exit, this opened up space for Plato to come surging through to take the lead into Becketts. On slick tyres the front-runners navigated a slippery opening phase, the weather starting to settle ahead of the mandatory pit stops. By the time the pit window opened, Plato held a comfortable lead from Rydell with then plenty of daylight to Kox in third. Aiello and Neal among others pitted for wets, dropping them down the order (in Aiello's case, a double whammy as he also picked up a drive-through penalty for missing his pit).

It was close enough for the lead that the mandatory pit stops would be decisive if Plato's went wrong. Rydell pitted first and had a smooth stop of just over five seconds. The Williams team weren't quite as fast in servicing Plato, at over 7.5s, but it was just enough for him to re-emerge in the lead.

The challenge for Plato was to now get his new tyres up to temperature whilst fending off Rydell. It got very close into Abbey, Rydell right on Plato's tail into Brooklands. Rydell was still on the hunt and on the following lap challenged once more into Abbey. There was slight contact between the pair, which was enough to break Rydell's front right suspension, ending his race, whilst Plato continued out front. This duly elevated Muller to second, with Boullion in third, the trio holding that order to the flag.

The third meeting of the season was at Thruxton. The main action in the sprint race came from accidents at the ultra-fast Church, where Plato, Leslie and Muller all had frightening spins. With Leslie's departure, Aiello was untroubled to take his second win of the season, some way clear of Rydell and Neal.

For the feature race Rydell had pole, which he converted into an early advantage, but a precarious one as both Aiello and Leslie were right with him. Leslie tried to force a move to the outside into the Club chicane, but was over-committed and ran wide, rejoining into Reid's path. The pair made hefty contact and retired on the spot – Reid being almost completely innocent.

Two laps later Aiello attempted the same move, but this time he was through by the time they hit the braking zone. Rydell opted to pit immediately, changing all four tyres on the notoriously abrasive circuit. Nissan gambled on a quicker stop, changing just two tyres, trading off with giving their driver the buffer of a few seconds to defend on track. It was Nissan's gambit which paid off as Aiello won by almost six seconds from Rydell, with the second Volvo of Radermecker completing the podium a second clear of Plato.

The Brands Hatch Indy circuit was the next challenge. The pecking order was upset in qualifying as the Prodrive

Fords locked out the front row. Menu made the early running from Reid, but an error at Graham Hill Bend from the Swiss driver promoted Reid. Moments later Aiello shot through to second at Paddock, with Menu immediately under pressure from Muller. With the safety car deployed, Menu tried too hard on the restart, spinning down the order at Surtees whilst pushing too hard.

Aiello was soon on to Reid, with Muller hovering. Aiello forced a move at Clearways, but as he and Reid rubbed on the exit, the pair's loss of momentum created space for Muller. In an astonishingly brave move, of the type for which Brands Hatch is famous, Muller made it three wide on the run into Paddock Hill Bend. The Vauxhall had the inside line and swept into the lead, to be followed by Reid, Aiello and Plato. It was a costly moment of impetuosity from Aiello, as four wins in a row would have netted him a £250,000 bonus from TOCA.

Heading into the final lap, Plato led Aiello for third, the pair both on Reid's tail. For the final time into Paddock, Aiello broke astonishingly late to make the move up to third – a robust move that did earn him a slap on the wrist from the stewards. At the flag Muller took a deserved first win of the year from Reid and Aiello in one of the best Brands Hatch Indy races of the super touring era.

Unfortunately, the feature race was a far tamer affair. Aiello led in the early stages from Plato and Rydell. The Volvo was the first to falter when the S40 developed a misfire that eventually led to retirement. Heading into the pit stop cycle Plato was still keeping the Nissan honest, but the Renault driver stalled, dropping down the order before a blown engine put paid to his chances altogether. This left a fairly stable Nissan one-two-three for the closing stages of the race with Aiello ahead of Leslie and Neal.

Grid position would be all-important for the fifth event of the season, on the Oulton Park Fosters circuit. Nissan's form continued into the sprint race which Aiello took from Leslie, once again the Primera being quicker than the others when pit strategy or the weather didn't come into play. After early pressure from Menu, the Nissans were able to ease clear, with the Ford driver completing the podium from team-mate Reid.

The feature race seemed set to provide a repeat for Nissan but an air jack failure for Leslie dropped him down to eighth. Menu's hopes were also thwarted following a first-corner coming together with Plato and Cleland. The primary challenge once more came from Rydell, who was again thwarted by mechanical issues. This time it was a power steering failure that forced his retirement. The battle for what became second was between Neal and Muller; it was the latter who had the advantage prior to the pit stops but a good stop for Neal moved him ahead of the Vauxhall. Aiello's points position was further aided by a double retirement for Plato with engine issues and an incident-strewn day for Thompson that left him out of the points.

Donington Park would be the first repeat visit of the year, but it was a frustrating weekend for Aiello. Fresh from Le Mans 24 Hours with Audi, he qualified a little lower down the field than he would have wished. Starting fast from the second row, Aiello attempted to clear the slower-starting Thompson, but, in so doing, tangled with Plato. The end result was a crumpled Nissan against the pit wall, and in this pre-HANS device era, a driver was fortunate to walk away with little more than aches.

After the safety car to clear up the mess, Rydell led, before yet another failure on the Volvo – this time the engine

– ended his charge. This promoted Thompson into the lead from a closely following Plato. The Renault driver pushed a bit too hard into the Old Hairpin promoting Leslie into second, before rejoining in third. Leslie was soon on to Thompson's tail but, with pole in the feature race to come, the experienced Leslie settled for second.

The feature race came with plenty of controversy, almost all of it within the Nissan team. Having switched to a spare car (a once-a-season privilege), Aiello trailed Leslie into Redgate, with Thompson a present if unchallenging third. Team orders then came into play with Aiello told to follow Leslie. The French driver abided by the letter but not spirit of the instruction, bobbing and weaving behind his teammate but never initiating the move. Nissan, with half an eye on a drivers' one-two and the constructors' championship, had their reasons, but from Aiello's perspective, with the title race not even half over, it was too early in the season to be pulling such stunts. Irrespective of that opinion, it finished Leslie from Aiello with Thompson in third. Hero of the season opener at Donington, Neal could only manage a tenth and a seventh.

Nissan's Donington decision came home to roost somewhat at Croft. Thompson was dominant in qualifying, taking pole for both races. He took a lights-to-flag victory in the sprint race, although was kept under constant pressure by Leslie. By the end the pair were well clear of the second Honda of Kox.

Pit strategy came to the fore in the feature race. Stopping early favoured both Rydell and Aiello, the Swede only just keeping clear of the Nissan immediately post-pit stop. Electing for the later stop, Thompson still emerged behind Rydell, notwithstanding a good stop from the Honda team. Despite being expected to challenge, Aiello struggled with

understeer on used tyres, needing the assistance of team-mate Leslie to help him maintain third. With the pit stop buffer, Rydell duly claimed his first win of the year, from Thompson, the latter closing ground back on Aiello in the title fight over the weekend.

Two weeks later and it was a voyage into the unknown with the Snetterton night races. Before the racing had even got underway the decision was vindicated with a huge crowd and party atmosphere. For the teams and drivers it would be a very long day, running well into the small hours – and good luck to anyone trying to go to sleep with the adrenaline pumping. In qualifying, the momentum swung back in Aiello's favour with pole position for both races.

The sprint race was held in twilight, but the photographer's dream was Aiello's nightmare. A clutch issue pitched him out early on. This left the way clear for Leslie to take his second win of the season. For second there was a good four-car dice between the Volvos and Renaults – a battle that was decided in Sweden's favour with Rydell heading team-mate Radermecker to complete the podium.

The feature race meanwhile got underway in the dead of night. The pre-pit stop battle was a four-way affair between the Nissans and Hondas, Leslie leading from Thompson, Aiello and Kox in the early stages. Once the pit cycle had worked through, it became attritional. An incorrectly fitted rear wheel (it fell off) put paid to Thompson's chances, whilst Aiello, having taken the lead through the pit cycle, had to pit again after his bonnet came loose. Leslie was also in the wars, when his front suspension collapsed, giving Kox a fairly free run to the flag and his first BTCC win. Somewhat incredibly, Leslie nursed the Primera home to second after a remarkable display of mechanical sympathy.

Third went to Muller who came out on top of a frenetic mid-field scrap, which, as others fell by the wayside, became the one for third.

Watching on the spectator banks was MSV's David Willey: 'The atmosphere was something else at the Snetterton night race in 1999. It was strange to attend such a huge race event so late in the afternoon. Again, the weather was perfect – I arrived just in time for the pit walk, and this time I got Matt Neal's autograph. Due to the layout of Snetterton the BTCC paddock was extremely accessible to spectators, and I'll never forget getting David Leslie's autograph immediately after he won the first race with the winning laurel wreath around his neck. I must have also asked for Cleland's autograph about four times: we just kept bumping into the stars! Andy Priaulx also won in the Renault Spider support race that day.'

'Snetterton was my local track and not only was I starstruck by the BTCC stars, but also Kevin Piper who I met in the paddock – he was the main sports presenter for *Anglia News* at the time.'

'Once darkness fell, the atmosphere went up another notch, and to see the red, scorching heat from the brake discs was a sight to behold, as well as the sounds of airhorns and cheers from the huge crowds. A very special night at Snetterton, and for Norfolk!'

The BTCC's first night race proved to be an overwhelming success, TOCA had risked a £50,000 investment in lighting and infrastructure for the event, but that had more than paid off with the number of fans coming through the gates. Speaking to *Autosport* at the time, Alan Gow said, 'I've never had such a positive reaction from the drivers and teams. The crowd loved it, the drivers loved it and we were lucky with the weather.'

The drivers enjoyed it, once they had adjusted to all the camera flashes from the crowd trying to capture the moment. Just as importantly, the late start hadn't diminished the action, with the feature race proving to be one of the most exciting of the year.

The next outing was a return to Thruxton and for Aiello there was increasing urgency to get back into winning ways, as both Leslie and Rydell were beginning to make up ground in points. Fortunately for Aiello, the sprint race was fairly straightforward as he took the lead from Rydell. The pair duly pulled clear of the rest to settle the outcome, but without really engaging in battle, giving the honours to the Frenchman.

Third was more entertaining – Thompson passed Leslie early on, but the Honda was a beat off the pace, building a queue behind him. Radermecker was the first to have a shot, attempting to move ahead of Leslie for fourth at the Club chicane. Both gave as good as they got and, after being barged aside by the Nissan, Radermecker simply straight-lined the remainder of the corner to take fourth. The move for third was cleaner, as the Belgian successfully completed a brave move at Church to complete the podium.

If the pace was there for an Aiello double, it didn't play out that way in the feature race. Rydell converted his pole position to lead from Aiello and Leslie, the trio fairly stable in the early stages. Behind, it was inevitably busier and Neal spun to a halt attempting to depose Thompson. This duly brought out the safety car. At the restart Rydell's engine almost immediately blew – another mechanical retirement for the Swede, pushing him to the periphery of the title fight.

With the Nissans now running one-two at the head of the field it was looking good, until it all went wrong at

the pit stops. Pulling away after his stop, Aiello failed to give way to Radermecker, consequently earning a drive-through penalty. With the red mist well and truly down, the Frenchman was then penalised for pit lane speeding whilst serving his penalty, earning him another low(er) speed trip through the pits. Despite this and in a sign of the Nissan's pace he still finished fifth, clocking up more points.

For Leslie there were no such dramas and he took a comfortable third win of the campaign, his mid-season form having been such that he was keeping his team-mate well in sight in the title battle. The fight for second was also settled by a pit lane speeding penalty. Radermecker and Plato had been in close contention, but the Renault was caught by the radar gun, giving the Volvo pilot a comfortable second and elevating Menu to third – the first Ford podium since Oulton Park. Plato slotted into fourth.

The mid-August trip to Knockhill was a little later in the season than usual, once more attracting a large crowd. Despite struggling at Thruxton, Thompson still had a shot at the championship, prompting Honda to draft in Tarquini (who was leading the manufacturers' efforts in the STW) to try to take some points off Aiello.

Best-laid plans and all that. Tarquini was the strongest of the Hondas in sprint qualifying, but Aiello had the pole. The Nissan driver duly took another lights-to-flag sprint victory (his fifth sprint win of the year – repeating a similar pattern to Reid from 12 months earlier) ahead of Tarquini who'd had to fight past Reid in the early stages. Reid then relinquished third to Menu on the final lap. Tarquini made a fight of it, really harrying Aiello in the early stages, but the relentless pace of the Nissan was enough to build a buffer.

Behind, there had been early incident: in the ripple effect following Tarquini's move on Reid, Rydell and Kox tangled

between Duffus Dip and the chicane, the Honda spinning into the path of Thompson and Plato. It forced Thompson into retirement, with a detrimental impact on his title chances (the path to the title became even trickier following a first-lap accident in the feature, attempting to pass Neal). Rydell was initially disqualified but was reinstated to fifth on appeal.

The feature race was also far from uneventful, but not for the winner. Qualifying had given a slightly jumbled grid, with – in a damp session – the track at its fastest and grippiest mid-session, rather than at the end when the circuit was slightly drier. This gave the front row to Menu and Reid.

Menu took the early lead, with Plato quickly recognising that he didn't have the pace to fight the Ford. Instead, he set about consolidating second with an impressive defensive drive. Aiello, bottled up behind, was increasingly frustrated about his inability to get through (not helped by sniping from the rear by Boullion). Eventually, frustration got the better of Aiello and he punted Plato off at McIntyres – a move that was blatant, even by the BTCC's biff-heavy standards. Not unsurprisingly, Aiello was disqualified. With Menu 20 seconds clear of the rest, Kox was runner-up ahead of Leslie, who benefitted from a late error from Boullion. Rydell was fifth and unable to take too much ground from Aiello's points lead.

However, the weekend's results were enough to secure the constructors' championship for Nissan, the Japanese manufacturer having been the dominant force during the season (and for much of 1998 as well), with both the most competitive car and arguably the only driver line-up where both pilots were consistently able to challenge for wins.

Further celebration for Nissan came in the form of Neal claiming the privateers' title at Knockhill – an unsurprising

result given Neal was the only privateer to consistently match the pace of the works cars. However, he had done well to largely keep out of trouble having been in the midst of several ferocious top-ten battles.

Going into Brands Hatch, whilst mathematically there were paths for others, realistically the drivers' title was a four-way battle between Aiello, Leslie, Thompson and (just about) Rydell – with Nissan's focus now being on making certain of a one-two.

Aiello had pole for the sprint race, but it was Rydell from second who got the better start. Having been burned a couple of times already for impetuosity, Aiello decided to settle for second, only being prepared to pounce if Rydell made an error. None was forthcoming as the Swede took his second win of the season. Thompson had been a factor early on but couldn't quite stay with the pace of the leading pair, taking third. Leslie was fourth, following a late switch of position with Neal – the Nissan pit wall leaving nothing to chance.

For the title protagonists, the feature race was more tense than exciting. This time around it was Rydell's turn to be slow away from pole as Aiello took the early lead. The battle was immediately neutralised due to a safety car which was dispatched to clear up the aftermath of clashes between Menu and Plato, and Tarquini and Muller.

At the restart it was an inverse repeat of the sprint race, with Rydell on Aiello's tail, but with more than one eye on the points situation, he was unwilling to risk a move. It would likely have stayed that way, but the TWR team had an unusually poor pit stop, dropping Rydell down to fifth. This promoted Leslie to second, much to Nissan's delight, with Thompson third. Thompson had the pace to challenge Leslie, but once more the decision was not to risk a collision and non-finish, so the pair held station.

The results from the weekend meant that the drivers' title would be decided between the Nissan team-mates, with Rydell and Thompson now focused on the battle for third.

The penultimate round was at Oulton Park on the full international circuit. It proved to be Aiello's weekend – but it didn't look that way after qualifying, as Leslie took both pole positions. However, a wheelspin from Leslie at the start of the sprint was enough to give Aiello the lead, the Scot also being passed by Thompson. Aiello duly disappeared over the horizon, whilst Thompson was left to defend from Leslie. The decisive moment came in a mid-race lap of drama. Leslie finally forced an opening at Lodge, pulling alongside the Honda, the pair running side by side almost all the way to Island. However, their dicing slowed them sufficiently for Plato to join in the fun, and it was the Renault which emerged from Island with its nose in front. By Hilltop it was all change, as Plato speared off the road into retirement after contact instigated by Thompson, which gave Leslie second.

Nissan duly clocked up their sixth one-two finish of the season, and Aiello squeezed out a couple more points over Leslie. Third on the road for Thompson became disqualification in the stewards' room following the Plato collision. With the Honda expunged from the results, Rydell was promoted to third.

Thompson made amends in the feature race. Again, wheelspin cost Leslie, but this time Aiello wasn't fully clear by Old Hall. Thompson got his nose alongside enough to slow the Nissan on the exit. With points on his mind Aiello was content not to force the issue with the Honda as Thompson swept through. Thereafter, Thompson dominated, taking an impressively comfortable fourth win of the season. Aiello, likewise, was clear in second, crucially ahead of team-mate Leslie. Fortunes swung even more in

his favour late on, as Leslie struggled with fading brakes, allowing Rydell to sneak through to third.

This gave Aiello a 26-point advantage heading into the season finale at Silverstone, meaning that to take the crown Leslie required an almost perfect weekend for himself and a nightmare for Aiello.

After largely dry conditions for much of the year, the weather was atrocious, once more proving the point that the weather at Silverstone always veers in some direction away from calm. In qualifying, Aiello had managed to get all but the last fingertip on the crown with two pole positions. If the points for those poles weren't enough, Leslie had done his single shot lap in the worst of the weather so qualified to the back of the field for the sprint.

A mix-up on sighting laps (specifically, doing one too many) saw Aiello sent to the back of the grid for the sprint alongside his team-mate. With fellow front-row dweller Plato unable to fire up the Renault, it was a fairly easy run to Copse and the lead for Rydell. On a drying track Thompson gave chase, before being deposed by Neal who saw half a chance of bookending his season with wins. Thompson soon slipped into Muller's sight as the weather turned, with heavy rainfall washing out the circuit. Pushing a bit too hard, Neal spun out of contention, followed in quick succession by two further spins, illustrating the deteriorating conditions. The Primera's third rotation proved the trigger for the introduction of the safety car – but the weather didn't improve and the race was red-flagged and a result declared without any further racing.

The couple of points for ninth were enough for Aiello to clinch the drivers' title with a race to go, Nissan having successfully completed a clean sweep of constructors', drivers' one-two and also – via a dotted line – the privateers' crown.

For Aiello this triumph more than staked his claim as one of the pre-eminent drivers of the era, having now claimed the BTCC on top of his French and German triumphs. He would follow up these successes in 2002 with the rebooted DTM title too.

With the pressure off, Aiello made an uncharacteristic error at the start of the feature. Contesting the lead with Rydell into Copse, the Nissan sailed straight on, ending the year in the gravel. This left the way clear for Rydell to confirm third in the championship with a hugely impressive double win. On a weekend of goodbyes it was a near-perfect close to Volvo's BTCC adventure. The first half of the race saw a decent fight for second between Leslie and Plato. Plato managed to find a way past Leslie, before stalling in his pit stop and plunging from contention. This promoted Reid into third.

A late safety car bunched the field up, but the leading trio were able to ease clear after a ferocious fight for fourth developed, from which Radermecker prevailed. Mightily impressive in both races with a sixth and seventh had been Will Hoy in the Arena Motorsport Renault Laguna. Having taken over the car from team boss Russell Spence mid-season, Hoy took full advantage of the weather-levelled conditions to show that even in a year-old car he had what it took to mix it at the front.

Another driver relishing the conditions at Silverstone was Cleland. This was the popular Scot's farewell meeting, signalling the end of an era, as his presence behind the wheel of a Vauxhall had been a feature of the championship since 1989. A fifth and tenth were good results to sign off with, at the end of what had at times been a frustrating final season, with Cleland feeling that the development focus had been a bit too much in Muller's direction.

With Vauxhall being one of the few teams committed for 2000 and Muller signed to lead the team, it wasn't altogether surprising that he was the favoured driver. The 888 team had endured a trying year. Extensive winter testing in South Africa had shown promise, but the Vectra was down on single-lap pace and fell foul of the scrutineers a little too often (mainly on ride height). In race conditions the car went well, with Muller in particular more than happy to fight his corner, but somehow able to stay out of trouble. Muller took sixth in the championship, with just one win and a handful more podiums, but he had consistently racked up the points.

For 2000 he would be joined by Plato, who was released on to the drivers' market by Renault's decision to withdraw from the championship and Williams's decision to shutter their touring car arm. During the super touring era Renault had been one of the consistently strongest manufacturers, with a roll call of 38 race wins, two manufacturers' championships and one drivers' championship across its seven seasons of participation.

Commitment wasn't lacking during the final season, with an array of ex-F1 engineering talent supporting behind the scenes to ensure that the Laguna was one of the fastest packages on the grid. Plato stepped into the role of lead driver well, taking fifth in the standings – but arguably deserving more than just one win and three other podiums. Three successive mid-season engine failures and misfortune in the season finale at Silverstone robbed him of at least a few more trips to the rostrum. Tenth overall for Boullion was far from unimpressive given his jump from F1 testing duties and he was consistently able to bring the car home in the top ten.

Also departing from the BTCC would be Volvo and TWR, ending an impressive six-year collaboration. The loss

of both manufacturer and team was a blow to the series and a reflection of the increasingly choppy waters of going touring car racing on multi-million pound budgets – especially in a category that was falling from favour elsewhere.

But for some atrocious luck and a couple too many mechanical failures, Rydell could have gone at least one better than third in the points. With 18 wins and one championship in his time with TWR Volvo, the programme couldn't have asked for a better leader. Debutant Radermecker was also impressive, and by season's end was more or less on Rydell's pace – making it no surprise that both would find a home for the following season.

Rydell's destination would be Ford, who concluded the year propping up the manufacturers' championship. The new partnership with Prodrive was built on a multi-year commitment, with the pieces coming together during the season for a push towards the 2000 title. For 1999 that meant Menu and Reid had to contend with a well-handling but underpowered Mondeo – evidenced by the sole triumph being Menu's win at the twisty Knockhill. By season's end the engine build had been insourced to Prodrive from Cosworth, the results being clear in Reid's form in the final few races.

Menu and Reid took 11th and 12th respectively in the standings, not a fair reflection of their capabilities – and when the going was good both found their way to the podium more than once. Unfortunately, a combination of mechanical issues and a propensity to fling it at the scenery in search of the last bit of pace led to a litany of retirements.

West Surrey Racing's first year running the Honda programme was, in the moment, more successful than Prodrive's with the Ford they'd struggled with in previous years. Fourth and seventh in the standings were the rewards

for Thompson and Kox, both drivers making it to victory lane. For much of the year Thompson was in the title fight, his case strengthened by brilliant mid-season weekends at Donington Park and Croft, before his hopes faded. The Honda was up on power and mechanical grip, but the aerodynamic package (particularly at the rear) and wet-weather performance held the team back at times. Much was expected of the squad for 2000.

Nissan, in various guises, had supported the BTCC since the start of the super touring era, but its final three years with Nissan Motorsport Europe overseeing design and build and RML responsible for running the cars was the high watermark of the effort. Aside from a difficult opening round at Donington Park, the team were either the benchmark or in the fight for the wins at every other round – although with 13 victories they fell one short of matching Renault's 14-win 1997 campaign. With no more lands to conquer, the Japanese manufacturer withdrew from the championship at the end of the year, leaving both drivers in the lurch. Aiello was in the running for the Honda seat that ultimately went to Tom Kristensen before landing in the DTM, whilst Leslie was undeservedly left on the sidelines for 2000 – an unsatisfactory state for the championship with the top two drivers of 1999 unable to return for the following year.

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Through the winter of 1999 and into 2000, it was clear that this would be the final season for the super tourers – with TOCA already well advanced in the development of the new regulations that would take over for 2001.

Despite the continued popularity of the championship, the cost of competition was becoming too high for works and

privateer teams alike, with just Honda, Ford and Vauxhall fielding works entries for 2000. The trio would all enter three cars, ensuring nine ever-presents on the grid. Whilst not the largest field, there was once again high quality behind the wheel. Dropped scores would once more be a factor with a driver's four worst results being discarded. Compared to previous seasons, with a smaller grid and more scope for team positioning, these would be more consequential.

Honda had two ever-presents in the form of 1994 champion Tarquini and 1997 Le Mans winner Kristensen, for his only year in the series. Thompson was installed in many pundits' eyes as the pre-season favourite, but events would almost immediately prove otherwise. Strictly speaking, the Honda effort was running under two banners – a JAS-prepared car for Tarquini and West Surrey Racing operating Thompson's and Kristensen's cars.

Ford had a similarly high-powered driver line-up, recruiting Rydell alongside the returning Menu and Reid. Vauxhall were also beneficiaries of others withdrawing, signing Plato from Renault and Radermecker from Volvo, whilst retaining Muller. With Prodrive now fully into its stride running the Mondeo, having gone through a year of development pain in 1999, and with such a strong driver line-up, they would be hard to beat.

Whatever the long-term fortunes of super touring, there was no lack of commitment or investment: 'It is reputed that Ford's budget was £12m – I can tell you, all that budget didn't go on the driver salaries, although they were generous – it went on the racing,' remembers Reid. 'The data logging was the equivalent of Formula 1.'

'For 2000 we weren't allowed to test but were allowed a 30-minute shakedown, which we did at Prodrive's private test circuit near Warwick. There was a truck full of engineers.

We had transducers on the driveshaft which would allow them to evaluate the engines to make sure they had identical power and torque. It was the same with downforce; we'd do drag evaluation runs and then if there were any differences, we'd change parts until all three cars were the same. We had the engine behind the drivetrain, and for central weight balance could achieve something like 52 per cent on the front wheels. At the end of 2000, all the Formula 1 teams came in and hired the super touring engineers.'

Vauxhall, again under the guidance of Triple Eight, had Vectras for Muller, as the designated team leader, Plato – a crowd-pleasing signing, who at the least would challenge for wins – and Radermecker, who had enjoyed a solid debut season with Volvo, but would need to adjust to being third in the pecking order.

The independents were similarly depleted with Neal the only ever-present, although another Nissan from PRO Motorsport appeared regularly in the hands of Colin Blair and occasionally Leslie.

To bolster the grid, a Class B was introduced, which was for cars running to the FIA Super Production or British National Saloon Car regulations. The field would build over the course of the year, but Alan Morrison in a Touring Car VIP Club (actually run by Vic Lee Racing, the successor team to 1992 champions VLM) Peugeot 306 was the only ever-present. Other regulars would include a brace of Bintcliffe Sport Nissan Primeras for Rob Collard and Marc Nordon, together with the Barwell Motorsport Hondas of Mark Lemmer and James Kaye.

The schedule was slimmed to 12 rounds with two trips to Brands Hatch – once apiece on the Grand Prix and Indy circuits – two visits to the Oulton Park Island layout, two trips to Donington Park (one National, one Grand Prix),

rounds at Thruxton, Snetterton, Croft and Knockhill, and then two rounds on the Silverstone International circuit including the season finale.

To help keep the racing competitive, success ballast was introduced with 40kg for the winner, 30kg for the runner-up and 20kg for third place, applied at the next meeting. This together with rules around engine changes and testing restrictions was intended to curb costs and prevent a runaway champion. Also supporting cost management was the decision to ban tyre warmers, which meant the drivers would have to navigate cold tyres at the start of the race and after the feature race pit stops. This would prove a talking point at the chilly season opener.

Despite the innovations, the thin grid led to a noticeably sparser crowd for the season opener at Brands Hatch, with the cars taking on the Grand Prix circuit for the first time since 1996. The weekend once more followed the sprint and feature race format, together with one-shot qualifying.

Menu took pole for both races from Rydell, the Prodrive-prepared Ford being the class of the field on pure pace. The opening sprint race was fairly straightforward for the Swiss as he took a comfortable lights-to-flag victory, building up a buffer in the opening laps before matching his pace to the chasing pack. Holding second in the early stages, Rydell backed up much of the field behind him, before Muller was able to pounce. The Vauxhall driver set about reeling in Menu and whilst he closed the gap he never really posed a threat. Rydell briefly lost third to Thompson, who then had a massive half spin at Hawthorns, giving the Ford driver the final spot on the podium.

The feature race initially promised to be more of the same as Menu shot into an early lead and once again built an apparently effortless advantage over the pack. His lead

was then pegged back when Neal and Kristensen collided at Stirlings, as the former launched to the inside – both drivers blaming the other in the TV interviews, but the footage suggested it was at best a highly optimistic move for Neal.

With the field bunched post-safety car, Plato decided to gamble with an early pit stop, the Vauxhall being released into clear air, with the opportunity to set some traffic-free flying laps. The strategy was vindicated when a couple of laps later Morrison in the Class B Peugeot rolled on the exit of Stirlings, bringing out the safety car once more. With the field closed up, and everyone bar Plato needing to pit, this would cycle him through to the front of the field.

This was playing through when the safety car came out once more after Thompson had a massive accident at Dingle Dell. Caught out on cold tyres immediately after his pit stop, the Honda launched into a spin and half cleared the barriers. Fortunately, he and the TV cameraman immediately behind the barrier impacted were able to walk away. An angry Thompson railed against the tyre warmer policy when intercepted for a television interview. Once the adrenaline had faded, injuries from the incident would keep Thompson out of the cockpit for weeks to come.

The crash meant that Plato's potentially sizeable on-track advantage had whittled away to nothing. Immediately post-safety car, he was put under pressure by second-placed Reid (who had jumped his Ford team-mates in the pit stops) and was given a few taps through Paddock. Having withstood the initial onslaught, Plato was able to build a couple of seconds' lead, which he held to the flag. Reid took second, with Muller completing the podium, meaning that, leaving Brands Hatch, honours were even between Ford and Vauxhall whilst Honda had a lot of damaged cars to repair.

The Donington Park National circuit was up a fortnight later on Easter Monday, minus Thompson, who would miss this, and the next round at Thruxton, recovering from the Brands Hatch accident. He was replaced by Peter Kox, but otherwise the field was unchanged.

The sprint race was dominated by Ford with Menu taking advantage of a lightning start to lead his team-mates into Redgate and on to the finish. Behind Neal, the Hondas and Vauxhalls all found plenty of time to drive into each other, Plato and Kox having the most notable incident, with the Honda rotated to the tail of the field.

The feature race was entertaining with the Ford armada disrupted by a late-stopping Tarquini, as the mid-field battles were once more contact-strewn. Menu scored the double win, capitalising on a poor weekend from Plato to build a decent points cushion. Tarquini used the pit stops to great advantage, coming out just behind Rydell in third and splitting the Fords. With slightly fresher tyres and no weight penalty, he was able to move ahead of the Swede to take second, but couldn't make inroads into Menu. Compared to the previously processional races at Donington, the weight variations and tyre rules did seem to be making for better racing, with performance variations amongst the pack as the race unfolded.

The super-fast Thruxton was up next, with Leslie taking over from Kox at Honda in Thompson's absence. Ford's dominance was finally broken by Vauxhall as Muller converted pole position into an easy sprint race win, followed by Reid. Plato completed the podium after a charging drive which saw him pass both Rydell and Menu at the Complex. The move on Rydell was beautifully judged, the pass on Menu rather less so. Plato tapped the Ford into a high-speed spin in front of the field, where contact was fortunately

avoided, but it meant the first setback of the year for Menu with eighth.

Vauxhall domination continued into the feature race, where Muller scored the double. It was a win heavily assisted by team orders as, following the pit stops, Plato slowed and then, indicator on, pulled aside opposite the pits to allow Muller through. On pace it was clear that the race had been Plato's. Coming so early in the season, the reversion to team orders certainly raised some eyebrows. A scary tyre failure for Radermecker at the scarily rapid Church corner prevented a Vauxhall clean sweep. Third, instead, went to Menu, who finished clear of Reid for the final podium spot.

It was a far more disappointing race for Rydell who was dispatched into the Allard tyres at speed on the first corner. Kristensen was squeezed on both sides by the Fords of Rydell and Reid with the consequent accident being almost inevitable. Meanwhile, Leslie and Neal somehow avoided having a monstrous accident at Church late on. Leslie had just moved ahead of Neal when the Honda broke traction into a 120mph spin, bringing Neal with him for company. Amazingly, both cars avoided contact with each other and the barriers.

Knockhill was next on the agenda, presenting a very different challenge to the sweeps of Thruxton. Qualifying was dominated by the Fords, who clearly had a step on pace over their rivals. However, with Menu and Reid both saddled by weight penalties, race pace would be a different matter given the multiple heavy-braking points around the circuit. Thompson was back, but missing two rounds had effectively ruled one of the pre-season favourites out of the title fight.

The sprint race, however, was a Ford benefit as Rydell made a superb start to lead Menu into Duffus Dip with

Reid slotting into third. Thereafter, the podium order stayed the same, as, whilst the Ford trio were not subject to team orders, they were under strict instructions not to collide with each other. Behind, the rest of the field were embroiled in the battle for fourth, which was taken by Neal in his best drive of the season thus far, impressively defending from Kristensen. Tarquini was the only casualty, sustaining suspension damage in an opening-corner brush with Reid. Fortunately, the Honda would be fully repaired for the feature race where the Italian had pole.

The key for the Honda driver was to make a good start and lead into the first turn. This he duly did, before absorbing sustained pressure from the Ford trio for the first half of the race. Eventually, the gaps began to open up a little and it became more comfortable. It was Menu who hit trouble, the 40kg of additional weight taking its toll as he increasingly struggled to get the Mondeo stopped and turned to his liking. Eventually, he slithered off into the gravel, resulting in his first retirement of the season. This allowed Rydell to take second in his best weekend of the campaign to date, with Reid notching up another third place. Muller was fourth in the Vectra after a hard-charging performance to move up the order.

The first of two visits to the Oulton Park Island circuit followed a fortnight later on the second May bank holiday weekend. The Cheshire circuit had never been the easiest place to pass for the super tourers, so qualifying was all-important.

The front of the grid was tightly matched on times for race one, but for the third time in five sprint races Menu was able to convert pole to victory. It wasn't easy running for the Swiss as Radermecker and Kristensen were on his tail throughout. However, the Vauxhall driver, with his mirrors

filled throughout, couldn't mount a decisive challenge on the Ford. Menu's victory gave Ford their 500th win in the BTCC.

The race didn't all go Ford's way, as Rydell was eliminated in a first-lap incident at the Island hairpin. Plato was too late on the brakes and tagged team-mate Muller, who in turn spun Rydell around, making further contact. Muller was also out on the spot, whilst Plato rejoined, effectively out of the running. That allowed Thompson to take a lonely fourth, ahead of Reid, who spent much of the race fending off Neal.

As had been the case throughout the season, the feature race proved to be livelier. Kristensen had pole position and used that to good advantage to take the early lead. Meanwhile, both Rydell and Menu started from the back of the grid after their qualifying times were disallowed due to irregularities with their front spoilers.

As Kristensen eased away with Plato and Reid, the rest of the field were tightly bunched behind, prompting a flurry of early pit stops to try to improve track position, resulting in some hair-raising moments as cars returned to the circuit with cold tyres, particularly when mixed in amongst the Class B runners.

The race was decided in Kristensen's favour when he was able to fend off a charging Plato as he got his Honda's front tyres up to temperature. Having seen off the attack he managed to rebuild his advantage. It wasn't plain sailing, however, as the Honda began to smoke over the closing stages, and by the final lap was pumping out a plume of oil smoke. Had the race been a couple of laps longer it is quite likely Kristensen would have been black-flagged; as it was, he took his first BTCC win.

Kristensen wasn't the only driver leaving an oil slick late on. Marc Norden's Nissan expired too, leaving a trail of oil

on the racing line to Island. Plato was caught out, losing several seconds, but recovering without hitting anything or conceding his second place. Reid in third, running in clear air, stayed out of trouble too.

However, since his pit stop Neal had been fighting a tough rearguard action in fourth. Having kept Thompson at bay he was twice caught by the oil. The first time he recovered to hold his place, but the second time around the Primera was dispatched off on the full circuit, dropping to the tail of the field by the time he'd recovered. It was a frustrating moment for Neal, as he'd been more than holding his own to that point.

Silverstone marked the halfway point of the year, the first of two rounds on the International circuit. For the first time since Thruxton the Fords weren't the dominant force. The sprint race went the way of pre-season favourite Thompson, meaning that every Honda driver had now scored a win. Reid and Kristensen completed the podium, as Menu was forced to retire with mechanical issues.

Race two was more dramatic as Muller took his third win of the year, the Vauxhall driver being somewhat aided by dramas befalling the Fords. Following contact with Reid, Rydell was (harshly) black-flagged for a loose rear bumper, having looked well set for a podium. This, Rydell's fourth non-score of the season, meant he would need a very strong second half of the year to challenge for the title.

The end of Reid's race was rather more dramatic as he was harpooned at Brookland by an out-of-control Radermecker. Pushed on to the grass by Thompson, the Belgian was a passenger as the rear of the Vectra slammed into the side of the Ford. The in-car footage showed that Reid saw the impact coming fractions of a second before it occurred.

Fortunately, thanks to the post-1995 improved side-impact protection, he was uninjured, whilst Radermecker somehow got the wrecked Vectra (all the damage was to the rear) back to the pits, but the car was a write-off.

This left the podium to be completed by Tarquini and Menu, with Reid's retirement allowing Menu to just hold on to the championship lead.

The next stop, at Croft, was one of those strange events where neither race was particularly exciting, but there were plenty of dramatic incidents. Qualifying started the intrigue with the Vauxhalls falling foul of the scrutineers, leading to Muller and Radermecker starting from the back for both races (although, in Radermecker's case, this was a result of not setting a time for the opener).

Rydell took the win from Reid in the sprint race, the pair flying in formation as the third Ford of Menu dropped back with the balance of the car not right. In third and taking his first podium of the season was Neal, the Nissan seeming well suited to the North Yorkshire circuit. Behind, the Hondas and Vauxhalls were closely matched but squabbling for the minor placings.

Two huge crashes defined the feature race. Firstly, there was a lengthy early safety car when Plato suffered a stuck throttle arriving in the Complex. With no good options, Plato chose the least worst, colliding with the rear of Tarquini's Honda (to scrub speed off and avoid a head-on impact), which put both cars heavily into the barrier. Both drivers were shaken but largely uninjured.

Once the race was underway the Fords were in control at the front of the field, with Rydell fending off Reid. Heading into the latter stages, a failure on Radermecker's Vauxhall launched him into the barriers at Barcroft, turning the Vectra on its side. Again, the driver escaped injury, but in order for

the recovery teams to get to the scene of the incident the red flags came out. For the Vauxhall team two new cars were required, including a replacement for the brand-new one they'd built for Radermecker for the weekend.

The race was restarted as a ten-lap sprint, which was swept on the track by the Fords; however, a technical infringement saw Reid disqualified, so it was Rydell who claimed the double from Menu and Neal, completing his best weekend of the season.

Snetterton followed and for the second year it would be a night race. Even though the feature race was due to get underway in the middle of the night, a huge crowd was again drawn for the spectacle.

Plato scored his second victory of the year in the sprint, which was most notable for an incident exiting Riches that eliminated Menu, Muller and Radermecker. The podium was completed by Kristensen and Rydell.

The feature race was much delayed as heavy rain hit the circuit just as the cars were forming up on the grid. Fortunately, once tyres were changed, there wasn't too much of a tyre-choice dilemma as a dry line only started to emerge late on.

Despite close pack racing in the early stages, the race evolved into a battle between Menu and Plato, the Vauxhall driver enjoying one of his best weekends of the season. Despite applying plenty of pressure in the closing laps, there was no way through for Plato as Menu took his fifth win of the campaign. Thompson rounded out the podium as the night-racing experiment was once more a success.

Live BBC coverage was in place for the next round at Donington Park, together with a slightly increased Class B field to tackle the Grand Prix circuit. Unfortunately for the watching viewers, and sparse crowd who made the trip to

the track, the pair of races was among the less interesting of the season.

The sprint was settled on the opening lap when polesitter Tarquini ran wide at Coppice, dropping down the order, promoting Reid into a lead that he'd hold to the flag. Second place went to Neal, with Thompson in third. Behind, the fragility of the final class of super tourers came to the fore with several cars picking up extensive panel damage following light contact. The most notable of these was Menu, the front of whose Mondeo was completely rearranged, necessitating a trip to the pits.

The feature race was even more settled, with the result sorted at the start as Tarquini led away from Reid. This time around the Italian kept within the circuit on cold tyres and held his lead thereafter. Reid's best opportunity came immediately following the pit stops when he emerged to get on to Tarquini's tail, but couldn't find a way through. Instead, the Honda pulled clear and Reid slipped into Neal's clutches. Despite Neal applying the pressure it never really looked like the Nissan would get through until, defending tightly into the Melbourne Hairpin on the final lap, Reid slid wide, allowing Neal to cut back and snatch second. Menu meanwhile had another tough race, the 40kg of additional success ballast seeming to really unsettle the Ford.

Nonetheless, the double podium served to push Reid ahead of Menu in points scored, but when dropped scores were factored in, the title battle remained the closest it had been since 1992. Of the Fords, it was Rydell who would enjoy the most consistent weekend next time out on the Brands Hatch Indy circuit.

The season run-in saw a surge of Class B entries, including a brace of Alfa Romeos for Gavin Pyper and Tom Ferrier run by ex-Nissan and Toyota driver Gary Ayles. It

was Pyper's 156 which provided the talking point in race one. With overtaking opportunities few and far between, navigating the Class B traffic was going to present both risk and opportunity.

It was lapping traffic that decided the outcome, as Kristensen, who had overhauled early leader Rydell, was caught by Mark Lemmer braking early into Clearways, tagging the Class B driver and creating space to the inside for Neal to dart through. This gave Neal his second BTCC victory, which was thoroughly deserved as he had matched the pace of the works cars throughout the season. Kristensen took second, whilst polesitter Rydell took third – one of many victims of an oil slick at Clearways after Pyper's engine let go.

The track was slippery for the feature race, but this time it was the rain to blame. From sixth on the grid and with a smart pit strategy Menu cleared early leader Plato and took full command of the race, his car unafflicted by the steamed windscreens affecting others. Despite those pitting later being able to put on slicks to take advantage of the drying line, Menu had enough in hand. Team-mate Rydell was second, holding off Plato in a tight battle. Reid meanwhile finished fourth to add to his eighth in race one, a disappointing return from a weekend where he needed to take points off his team-mates.

The Brands Hatch weekend had brought Rydell back into the title fight, but within metres of the start of the Oulton Park sprint race he was back on to the periphery. The Fords had locked out the front of the grid, with Reid in pole position. As he led away at the start, Rydell immediately chopped across to the right from second to close off the inside line from Menu into Old Hall. Rydell left the margin too tight, leaving Menu nowhere to go, as he tagged the

Swede, sending him heavily into the concrete wall. Not 50m into the race and Rydell was out with a battered car. Slowed in the melee and nursing damage, Menu faded to fifth as Tarquini and Muller completed the podium behind Reid in one of the more processional races of the season.

The feature race was also light on drama, Tarquini leading throughout to take his third win of the season. Reid was quite content to take second, outscoring his title rivals and ensuring his points tally after dropped scores continued to grow. Muller completed the podium, some way clear of team-mate Plato. Menu meanwhile struggled with the 40kg of success ballast, slipping down to sixth, whilst Rydell, having started from the back of the grid, could go no further than eighth.

Heading to Silverstone all three Ford drivers were still in the title battle. Reid had the most points, but only two non-scores from the season so would see his meaningful tally reduced. That said, provided he finished ahead of his team-mates, the title was his. Menu had three DNFs and some low scores, so all good finishes would help him. Rydell meanwhile had accrued six non-scores but had arguably just had the edge on his team-mates for raw speed, so could overhaul them if they faltered.

It is not often that a sporting era closes by literally fading to black, but this was the case at Silverstone. Following the night race success at Snetterton the previous year, the Silverstone finale had been added as a further night event, with the feature race playing out in the mid-September darkness.

The plot twist for Silverstone was that for the first time all year the Fords weren't the class of the field, with the Hondas being more than a match. The sprint race had a definite touch of end of term about it, with plenty of contact throughout the field. The opening incident came on lap one

at Becketts where a chain reaction led to Plato punting Menu into a half spin. Jumping on the anchors to try to avoid the sideways Ford, the Vauxhall driver unavoidably made side-to-side contact, seriously damaging Menu's suspension and putting him out of the race (making it four DNFs for the season, so all points finishes would count).

At the front, Rydell led to midway before Kristensen flew past him and disappeared into the distance. Rydell then had to fight a stern rearguard action to fend off an aggressive Thompson, which he duly did to claim second and keep his title hopes alive.

Everyone else more or less found someone to have an accident with. This included Reid, who was busy fighting for the bottom of the top five with Tarquini. Coming out of Priory at mid-race, Tarquini turned Reid into a spin, the Ford (in an exact replica of Reid's incident with Radermecker earlier in the year, except this time it was Reid on the grass) shot across the grass and slammed back into the Honda. Tarquini was out on the spot, but Reid continued, eventually finishing seventh and losing out on some crucial points.

The deciding race was not a thriller, but was punctuated by dramatic incidents. The first of these came before the start. Between races the Prodrive team had elected to switch both Menu's and Rydell's engines; however, the latter's developed a water leak on the grid, forcing the 1998 champion to non-start.

The race itself was dominated by Kristensen, bringing his win tally for the season to three as he got ready to depart the BTCC to become a Le Mans legend. Menu spent much of the race in second, but was reeled in late on by Plato. With the points situation in hand, he let the Vauxhall through to second knowing that third would be enough for him to take the drivers' title.

The reason for this was that Reid, running fourth, had been punted into the gravel on the penultimate lap by Radermecker. It wasn't the most substantial contact, but at the wrong angle it shot the Ford across the track at speed and into the gravel. Reid had been a beat off the pace in both races and on both occasions had been embroiled in mid-field dices that he'd been largely able to avoid during the season. In a replay of 1998, Reid would again be a narrow runner-up.

The Class B title had gone all the way to the final meeting of the season, with Morrison doing what he needed in the opening race to take the crown.

So the final season of the super tourers ended in dramatic fashion with no little acrimony. As is often the way with the end of an era in motorsport, 2000 was a shadow of the glory days, evidenced by far sparser crowds and a sharp drop in wider public interest.

Neal had been the sole competitive independent so it was perhaps unsurprising that he took the independents' trophy. However, eighth in the standings was impressive with the Team Dynamics Nissan always on the pace of the works cars. Neal was one of only two drivers to start a race in each of the super touring years, although it was really from the late 90s that he came into his own. The first two decades of the millennium turned out to be Neal's time to shine in the BTCC, where, racing predominantly with the family Team Dynamics, he claimed three titles and remained a front-runner through until 2020.

The other driver to mark a decade of super touring was David Leslie. The withdrawals at the end of 1999 meant that far too many quick drivers were left on the sidelines. For the previous season's runner-up to make only three appearances was a clear indicator of the series' decline. Nonetheless,

when he got the chance Leslie acquitted himself well and was always on the pace.

Still, it had been an intriguing season. Only Vauxhall would continue a works team into the new era of the BTCC, with Plato and Muller retaining their seats for the new Astras. History hasn't been kind to Radermecker, but it would be wrong to suggest he had a disastrous campaign. True, he didn't win a race, but the Vauxhalls weren't in a position to do so that often, and, when they were, team orders came into play. Plato was the team's designated number two, but had a season on a par with Muller's and would potentially have finished ahead of him in the standings but for the Thruxton controversy. Muller meanwhile would go on to be a mainstay of Vauxhall's effort for years to come and, like Plato, one of the BTCC's marquee drivers of the 2000s.

The Honda effort split across two teams seemed to deliver diminishing returns. The Accord was the second-best car in the field, and on its day had the beating of the Mondeo. Pre-season favourite Thompson had a miserable season, with one win and three other podiums. At the time, no one knew quite how good his team-mate Kristensen was and, with hindsight, Thompson did extremely well to match him on pace. Kristensen, once he'd adjusted to the rough and tumble of the BTCC, was the foremost of WSR's drivers, excelling once clear of mid-field scraps. An island within Honda, Tarquini's year could be crudely summarised as win or crash. On his day he was phenomenal, but rogue moments, such as his opening lap trip through the Donington gravel, prevented him scoring more than three wins. Of the trio, only Thompson would return to the BTCC, in an Egg:Sport-run Astra.

The Prodrive-run Fords had been the class of the field for the season. Of the three drivers, Rydell was arguably

the fastest, but through a combination of incidents and mechanical bad luck was always an outsider in the title fight. He would depart the BTCC for adventures in European touring cars, remaining with Prodrive for sports car racing. Reid meanwhile had been the most consistent of the trio, deploying circumspection over explosive pace more than his team-mates. He was certainly one of the strongest British drivers of the BTCC's international era, continuing for another four campaigns as an MG works driver. Reid is still actively involved in the sport, at the time of writing in his 50th continuous season as a racing driver.

It was perhaps fitting that Menu took the final crown as he was unarguably the premier stalwart driver of the super touring era. Holding a works seat – BMW, Renault and Ford – from 1992 to 2000 was a formidable achievement and from 1993 onward it was clear he was one of the BTCC's premier drivers. The 2000 title wasn't anywhere near as straightforward as his 1997 triumph. Early-season wins were tempered by frustrations in the second half of the year as he struggled to get the Mondeo comfortable with success ballast. Nonetheless, it was a fine performance and he was a deserving champion. Menu enjoyed two touring car after-lives, firstly in the DTM and then eight years leading Chevrolet's works team in the WTCC.

The decade of super touring came to an end. The evolution from 1991 to 2000 had been astonishing on all levels. The cars had leapt from something that wasn't too far derived from a showroom model to prototype sports cars in all but appearance, with running costs shooting from being reasonably affordable to the independent to over £1 million per car for the season. The driving level too had transformed. In 1991 the BTCC was largely the domain of the best national drivers; by 1996 and onward it was home

to the world's best touring car racers with an astonishing level of speed and consistency.

Since 2001 the debate has raged about whether the BTCC has been in decline. On one hand, the answer is definitively 'yes'. Since the high watermark of 1995 the level of manufacturer involvement has declined, the days of fully funded teams and more than 15 drivers drawing six-figure salaries long gone. On the other hand, 'maybe not'; the level at the front of the championship has always remained high, with the top drivers being immediately competitive whenever they've turned their hands to other things.

## After Super Touring

THE INTENSE British public interest in motor racing which, had burned so hot from James Hunt's triumphs, through Mansell-mania, and Damon Hill's world championship, had started to dim by the turn of the millennium. For a brief period in the mid-1990s Formula 1, the BTCC and, on two wheels, the Carl Fogarty era World Superbikes were all box office – guaranteeing five-figure attendances.

By the end of 2000 that had turned – Fogarty was forced into retirement in April following a crash in the second event of the season in Australia. That accident occurred on the morning of the mud-marred British Grand Prix – which left thousands of spectators marooned in quagmire car parks at Silverstone. At the same venue in mid-September the curtain came down on the super touring era, bringing to a close one of the most spectacular eras of British motorsport.

The BTCC had a trying year in 2001 – championship promotion passed to British Motorsport Promoters (BMP), with all-new regulations for the BTC-C cars, which were designed to be lower cost. With just Vauxhall and Peugeot providing whole-season works entries, it was very much a transitional year, leaving fans to adjust to new cars, new

formats and a somewhat confusing relationship with the production class.

Things were much improved for 2002, with four fully fledged manufacturer-supported entries from Vauxhall, MG, Proton and Honda, with that cast continuing for 2003. In 2004, Super 2000 specification cars were welcome, attracting a SEAT works team, bringing manufacturer interest back towards its 1990s levels.

Thereafter, with manufacturers having to choose between three competing rulesets in Europe – BTC-T, Super 2000 and the DTM (which was mechanically very different but did hoover up the budgets of the German manufacturers) – there was a tendency towards the Super 2000 rules, which were adopted by the revived World Touring Car Championship in 2005.

In terms of being the apex of competition, this confirmed the slide away from the BTCC. Between 1996 and 1999 it was largely unrivalled as Europe's, if not the world's, premier touring car championship (one could argue the 1994 and 1995 BTCC seasons were of a similar calibre, but at the time many perceived the DTM to be just as strong). By 2009 it was a very different story, with Vauxhall being the only manufacturer who had stayed the course, before bowing out at the close of that year. Thereafter, there have been a handful of manufacturer-supported teams, but the days of full works efforts, employing star drivers on large salaries, largely departed with super tourers and were certainly at an end by the mid-2000s.

The BTCC has nonetheless remained popular and continues to be the UK's biggest national four-wheel spectator draw. The three sprint race format introduced in 2004 has endured for more than two decades (albeit with various flavours of reverse grids and success ballast), giving

fans plenty of action for their money. The TV coverage has also found a great home, with ITV4 broadcasting the whole day's action live – the knowledgeable and entertaining commentary and presentation crew speaking to both enthusiasts and casual viewers.

By and large the grids have been big and competitive too, although at the time of writing (late 2025), the championship has had a couple of tougher years, sporting fewer cars and not wholly exciting racing. Whilst the drivers aren't the household names they may once have been, the standard at the front remains extremely high and there is no doubt that the likes of Jake Hill, Ash Sutton and Colin Turkington would have been right up there had they been racing in the 1990s.

With each passing year it has become harder for drivers to make a living from touring car racing. With few multi-million pound budgets on offer, there are few rides that offer a salary, with, in many instances, drivers either needing to fund their wages through sponsorship or making a living elsewhere. Indeed, with the exception of a few sports car manufacturers, few marques keep a roster of salaried works drivers on the books in the way they did in the 1990s.

But ... but ... but you can't unknow what you know, and for the generation that drove in, worked and watched the super touring era, today's BTCC is a long way removed from the glory days of the 1990s. There is certainly an argument that it's not worse, just different. In many ways it's better – the racing is consistently less processional, the grids are often bigger, and the championship more often than not goes down to the wire – although several have suggested that such spectator-friendly contrivances may put off manufacturers.

However, the 1990s era had features that will likely never be repeated – the massive and direct manufacturer support to the championship, multi-million pound budgets being spent on every facet of performance, a star field of drivers drawn from across the globe (handsomely paid for their efforts), and popularity that made many of the drivers household names. There was also a purity to the action – never reverse grids, until 1998 no pit stops, and success ballast only in 2000 – it was survival and success of the fastest.

What then of the heroes of the super touring era?

Tragically, the inaugural champion Hoy would die far too young, from a brain tumour in December 2002, just a couple of years after his BTCC swansong. A chartered surveyor by trade, Hoy had always been regarded as a gentleman of the paddock and would surely have continued as a front-runner in historic racing.

Leslie's untimely death would also send shockwaves through the sport. Alongside team owner Richard Lloyd and data engineer Chris Allerton, he was the victim of a small aircraft crash en route to testing at Nogaro in 2008. Leslie had been unlucky to be left without a full-time seat for 2000, and after spending 2001 making occasional appearances in a variety of championships, he was back in the BTCC for 2002 and 2003 with the Proton team, the uphill struggle resulting in a quartet of podium appearances.

Soper's run at BMW came to an end in 2000 after he and new BMW head Gerhard Berger didn't see eye to eye, ending an astonishingly successful partnership between manufacturer and driver. This prompted Soper to retire, as he couldn't envisage racing with anyone else; he then made a shock return to the BTCC in 2002 with the Peugeot team. Subsequently, he's become a regular on the historic circuit.

Harvey has never left the BTCC paddock. Upon retirement he initially worked as team manager, then enjoyed great success in the Porsche Carrera Cup, before picking up the microphone as part of ITV's extremely popular BTCC coverage. Amusing, informed and articulate, Harvey is a great ambassador for the sport.

After leaving Peugeot, Radisich returned to Antipodean racing, joining the V8 Supercars championship for Dick Johnson Racing in 1999. His 2000 and 2001 seasons were the high point, when he finished fourth and seventh respectively in the ultra-competitive championship and he retained a full-time ride until the end of 2006. Reverting to the endurance races, a massive accident qualifying for the 2008 Bathurst 1000 left him with multiple fractures and a lengthy recovery, ending his career. He's subsequently gone on to present BTCC coverage for New Zealand television.

After finishing STW runner-up in 1997 and sixth in the same championship a year later, Winkelhock's final triumph for BMW came when he won the 1999 Le Mans 24 Hours alongside Pierluigi Martini and Yannick Dalmas. Moving to Opel for the revitalised DTM in 2000, a win and fifth in the championship were followed by three further frustrating seasons, and he retired at the end of 2003. Since then he has focused on running his family's truck recovery business.

Tarquini's career as a professional driver continued until the end of 2021, totalling 21 seasons in the World Touring Car Championship (in its various guises), including three championships, the most recent coming in 2018. Racing at a high level from 1983, Tarquini's 38-year professional career has remarkable longevity, when many drivers' time at the top will be a decade at most.

Having retained his business interests in parallel to his driving career, Cleland continues to run his car dealership

and garage in Peebles, whilst making occasional appearances at super touring and Vauxhall revival events. He was also well ahead of his time – his on-camera enjoyment of an ice cream after his retirement from the 1994 British Grand Prix support race pre-dating Kimi Raikkonen by more than a decade.

Biela remained an Audi works driver until the end of 2008, moving to their sports car project from the 1999 season. It was a move that paid off for Biela, who won Le Mans 24 Hours five times, in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006 and 2007, firmly establishing himself as a legend of the sport. There were missteps, notably in 2003, when he missed the pit lane ahead of the team's first pit stop, retiring through no fuel after just 15 laps.

Aiello also found his home in the DTM, running with the Abt Audi team, where he claimed the 2002 title before hanging up his helmet at the end of the 2005 season.

There is certainly still a market for the cars and drivers of the super touring years, as the extraordinarily successful Super Touring Power event at Brands Hatch, which held its third edition in 2025, has proved. David Willey picks up the story:

‘Myself, and colleague Tom Arron at MSV are huge super touring fans, and we had noticed the Classic Touring Car Racing Club (CTCRC) were doing a great job rejuvenating a championship for super tourers. I approached Stuart Caie, the chairman of CTCRC about putting on a touring car festival featuring all of the club’s touring car categories, headlined by the super tourers.

‘Fortunately, Stuart could see what we envisaged, and Super Touring Power was born. As soon as we announced the event it snowballed from there and, with the help of Peter Still, we were able to curate fabulous touring car displays

and demonstrations to complement the racing. The whole event is organised by super touring fanatics for super touring fanatics! I can honestly say I have never been to a race event where everyone looks and sounds so happy to be there.

‘Incredibly, the super touring era is 30-odd years ago, and we as fans have such fond memories of that time. With many of the famous cars and drivers still around, and happy to be involved, we are fortunate to be able to relive a special time in touring car history, which makes Super Touring Power such an enjoyable and successful event.’

It is hard to see the BTCC returning to its former household familiarity in 2026 either, given the headwinds against motorsport in general and touring car racing in particular. Climate consciousness is likely to make justifying the business of going motor racing ever harder, unless it is at least carbon neutral. Certainly for manufacturers, motorsport programmes walk an ever-finer line of what is acceptable in the court of public opinion – that said, national programmes that don’t involve flying cars all over the world could make a comeback. There is also the changing face of the automobile industry to consider – the new generation of Chinese manufacturers are yet to invest in motorsport as a brand builder in the way the earlier generation of European, American and Japanese firms did.

All-electric touring car championships are probably the way forward. The technology and performance is still a few years off, and then there are the hearts and minds to be won: EVs by and large not getting racegoers’ pulses pumping. However, if the cars are reliable, have a close balance of performance and look good, then it could be a good evolution.

For touring car racing today there is an even more acute challenge – where are the cars going to come from? In the 1990s, the Mondeo and Vectra were the dominant cars on

British roads, with most families driving around in saloons, and when you needed a bit more space an estate would do the job. Today, the majority of new car sales are for SUVs – which do not make for great racing cars. Across the board, cars have got larger and heavier, and the models on which the 1990s racers are based look dainty in comparison. The large family saloon which was the template for the super touring regulations has largely disappeared from the roads, and that's even more the case for the smaller hatchbacks, where many drivers initially cut their teeth. There is a widening gulf between the cars that race and what people drive around in.

So, there are challenges, but there always have been; ever since the first motor race there have been crises of conscience, but they've all been weathered. Just after the period featured in this book there was talk that the Isle of Man TT was on its last legs, and now it is arguably at its strongest in 50 years.

Motorsport has always been ferocious in its evolution and survival. Whatever the regulations, teams will always try every trick in the book, and more, to wring out that extra tenth of a second. When times are good, as in the 1990s, this means multi-million pound programmes, expensive innovations and extensive testing. When times are tougher, all that is still there, just at a lower scale, but still looking for the next opportunity.

So, whilst this book celebrates a very special period of touring car racing, this is a sport that isn't solely lived in the past; the great races are there to be rewatched, enjoyed and celebrated – as, after all, every weekend, every season brings new innovation, intrigue and excitement.





