

We go endurance racing



By Henry Biggs

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I imagine most people watching a touring car, GT or even Formula One race have tried to imagine what it would feel like to duel on a track at three figure speeds.

Sure, track days are more popular than ever but circling a track while under strict instructions not to race just isn't the same, especially with the bloke in the Caterham running rings round you. And besides, you need to keep your car in the same shape so you can drive home in it. Shredding the tyres and cooking the brakes would also be a bad idea.

But actually going racing is expensive, right? Well to be honest, none of us are likely to be jumping straight into the multi-million dollar world of Formula One on our first attempt. Set your sights a little lower and a year's racing can be yours for the same price as an oldish BMW 3-Series. And for the same money as a new Audi TT, you and up to five friends can share a car in the Uniroyal Fun Cup, taking part in six endurance races at circuits around the country. This includes 22 hours of racing, 16 hours of practice and all the fuel and support you need.

History and affordability

The Fun Cup started in Europe 10 years ago and has gone from strength to strength, with race series running in half a dozen countries. And one of the chief reasons for this has to be its affordability. All the cars are identical, built around a single-seater, tubular spaceframe chassis with a mid-mounted VW/Audi 1.8-litre engine and five-speed gearbox. The engine and gearbox are sealed units producing an identical 130bhp and the only changes teams can make are limited to suspension settings. The cars are clothed in fibreglass bodysHELLS based on old VW Beetles for the full-on Herbie fun effect.

How to get a racing licence

This, of course, is the other reason for the Fun Cup's popularity: with all the cars so evenly matched, the racing is very close indeed. Obviously the more skilled and experienced drivers do head for the horizon, but with a large field of between 20 and 30 cars and a number of drivers in each car, there always seems to be someone to dice with. And to prevent the better drivers zooming away right from the off, the grid order is plucked from a hat rather than being down to qualifying times.

The Fun Cup is also host to what Uniroyal claims is the longest race in the world, the Spa 25 hours. This takes place every July with entrants from Belgium, France, Italy, Germany and the UK all taking part. The field last year was a whopping 152 cars, which, despite being split into two grids, still necessitated some cars starting from the pit straight. This year the team run by Paul Rose, series organiser for the Uniroyal Fun Cup in the UK finished seventh overall, the highest placed British team.

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Excuses, excuses

To prove just how affordable and accessible its Fun Cup endurance racing series is, Uniroyal invited me to take part in the Oulton Park round in October. And actually let me just take this opportunity to get my excuses in first, in time-honoured racing driver fashion. You see, I had a little bit of a contretemps with the Armco during Friday's practice session. But it wasn't my fault. The team sent me out on dry weather tyres and just as I left the pits it started absolutely chucking it down.



Okay, so maybe spinning on the exit of the chicane at Foulstons on my very first lap should have warned me that grip levels were somewhat marginal. But no, three laps later I comprehensively outbraked myself into the notorious Druids double-apex right hander. With no choice but to turn in at too high a speed the car was instantly sideways and I was simply a passenger as the car slid along the grass on the inside of the corner before gently kissing the barrier. In fact the impact was so slight the only reason I knew it had happened at all was the sight of the front splitter pinging off and over the barrier.



Check out aerial map of Oulton Park

Fortunately the damage was slight and easily repairable and I was able to hand the car over to my team-mates for the weekend, Mick Baskeyfield and Dean Mannion, both being offered a seat as a thank you for being good Uniroyal customers. They of course managed to complete all their practice laps without incident while I practiced on the PC simulator in the Fun Cup bus. But they had wet weather tyres of course. Hey, I think I'm getting the hang of this excuse making. And to reinforce the down-to-earth nature of the series, the fact that it was the last race of the season was celebrated that evening with a hog roast and plenty of beer in plastic pint pots. Perfect.



Fun Cup computer simulator

It's the taking part that counts

Thankfully Saturday, race day, is an untypical Autumn day for this part of the world as it's dry and sunny. Having grown up a few miles away, experience had me expecting more of Friday's torrential rain. A few practice laps revealed a drying track and much more grip available than previously. In fact the Fun Cup cars, far from being the twitchy monsters that the mid-engined layout would suggest, are very stable while remaining enormous fun to drive. As Paul Rose informed us, the real point of the race was that that we, "step out of the car with smiles on our faces."



Mick, Dean and I would each get two 40-minute stints in the car and Mick volunteered to deal with the melee of the start which meant that all being well, I would be in the car to take the chequered flag. And from our lowly grid position, Mick got us off to a storming start, bulling his way up the field until we hovered just outside the top 10 by the time it came for a driver swap during the refuelling window. For safety's sake, no-one is allowed in the car during refuelling.



More information about the Fun Cup

After an hour and 20 minutes of watching Mick then Dean circling the tricky Oulton Park circuit, known as the mini-Nurburgring because of its challenging corners, it was suddenly my turn. Fireproof overalls, gloves and boots, check. FIA approved helmet, check. Dry mouth and sweaty palms, check, check. I admit that my spot of off-roading the previous day had knocked some of my confidence and I was nervous about how the car would handle on a track that was still drying out. As it happened I had nothing to worry about.



Henry, Dean and Mick in front of "their" car

Fun handling too

It goes without saying that the cars run on standard Uniroyal road rubber and these provide an astonishing amount of grip and a progressive loss of traction rather than suddenly snapping into oversteer as I'd feared. In fact the biggest danger of spinning came if I lost my nerve in a corner and backing off the throttle, throwing the weight forwards and lightening the tail, causing it to come round. But being brave out on the track is a lot easier said than done

when more experienced drivers are harrying you on both sides around a corner.

Aerial photography of the top UK racing circuits



No sooner had I started to get the hang of things and started to push myself and the car a bit harder than the pit signal came out and I had to come in to allow Mick his second stint. Despite being out of breath and soaked in sweat I couldn't wait to get back out on the track again. We were using the full 2.8 mile Oulton Park international circuit and I was lapping at around the two minute 14 seconds, mark so a 40-minute window only allowed a dozen or so laps. And I was five seconds down on the leaders.



By the time it was my second turn we were in 14th place and I was determined that we would at least stay there. But disaster struck, pushing too hard I spun again at the first chicane, allowing the Branston sponsored car to nip past me. Furious, I set out to try and chase it down but rounding Druids a lap later found that very car spinning in front of me. I was forced onto the grass but I regained the place I had lost.



More Fun Cup images from Live Search

From then on it was a case of having trying to reduce my lap times. I didn't have a hope of matching the times set by the leaders but I was having a lot of fun trying, encouraged by a trackside marshal who applauded my efforts at gathering the car in after exiting the Cascades left hander very sideways. It's difficult to convey how good it feels just shaving a few tenths of a second from a lap time or how absorbing is the quest to string together a couple of bends perfectly. In fact all the marshals deserve a thank you, not least for kindly applauding all the competitors on their victory lap.



Give it a go

I'm obviously never going to be a competitive racing driver, but I would jump at the chance to try it again. The Fun Cup really is aptly named and Paul Rose was spot on, I did get out of the car grinning from ear to ear. And the racing isn't the only close thing about it. Paul's family all help him run the show, plenty of tea is drunk before the race and more than one beer after it. So if you can persuade your own family you've been very good this year, ask for an extra special Christmas present and buy a drive in a Fun Cup race in 2007.



For more information on the Fun Cup, contact Paul Rose on 01625 511500 or see their website

www.funcup.co.uk

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