

Brought to you by CarPlan



JOHN CLELAND

Donington Park BTCC June 14, 1998 Vauxhall Vectra Beating an F1 champion in a touring car classic



Cleland took his final BTCC victory that day

THERE WERE LOTS OF cracking races, like Bathurst – finishing second there was a fantastic experience. But the one for me is the 1998 Donington Park round, the ‘Mansell’ race.

Everything happened that could happen and I won it in a car that shouldn’t have won. The 1998 Vauxhall Vectra was not a particularly good car.

Donington is one of my favourite circuits, I just seemed to click with it. Even if the car was bad it seemed to work well.

It started with the warm-up. I got up in the morning, pulled the curtains back and thought, ‘This is going to be good’ because it was nice and damp and the car was actually quite good in the damp.

There’d been so much hype about Mansell. It brought people through the gates, but I was adamant he wasn’t going to take over my patch.

I followed Nigel out of the pits in the warm-up. Every touring car driver I’ve ever competed against dabs the brakes coming out of the pitlane to make sure everything is OK, but he didn’t. As we went down into the Old Hairpin I dived

“As the track dried he wasn’t flicking the brake balance to the rear. I could see he was getting lairy into the chicane. I thought the back-end was going to bite him and it did. He locked up and I got through”

down the inside of him and we touched wing mirrors. He chased me, but couldn’t catch me.

Afterwards he came stomping down into the garage and said, ‘What was all that about?’ I said, ‘Welcome to touring cars – that’s how it’s going to be all day.’

It was a fun-filled race and it had James Thompson, Rickard Rydell, the Nissans of Anthony Reid and David Leslie, Yvan Muller in the Audi, Will Hoy, reigning champion Alain Menu and Jason Plato. There were some seriously talented people in it.

IN PROFILE



JOHN CLELAND CUT HIS TEETH in hillclimbing before scoring success in production and Thundersaloon racing. He took the 1989 BTCC title in a Class C Vauxhall Astra before becoming one of the stars of the Super Touring era, clinching the title again in 1995. The 1998 Donington win was his last in the BTCC before spells in British GT and ASCAR, and a podium at Bathurst in 2001. He is now a WTCC driver steward and runs his own car dealership.

I got heaved off at Coppice at one point and I thought that was it, but managed to get back on. Before I knew it, Mansell was leading the race after the safety car period. There was a gang of us – Reid, Leslie, me, Mansell and Muller – and I radioed the crew and asked, ‘Is he leading this race?’ They said, ‘Yes’, so I said, ‘As long as I can breathe he’s not winning it’.

Tim Harvey, Hoy and Reid had all gone off at McLeans and I could see them waving for me to beat the non-touring car driver.

He was driving well, but as the track dried it was clear he wasn’t flicking the brake balance towards the front. He probably wasn’t aware, but it’s a big deal in a touring car. I could see he was getting lairy into the chicane. I thought the back-end was going to bite him and it did. He locked the rear up and I got through.

That race was a combination of the car not being that good and the Mansell hype. It would probably still have been a terrific race without Nigel, but him being there added an extra dimension. *John Cleland was talking to Kevin Turner*