

# Huff meets his hero

Britain's reigning World Touring Car Champion was inspired to race by the late-'90s generation of Super Tourers, so he was delighted to get to drive one at Donington Park. BEN ANDERSON was there to watch him drive Matt Neal's Nissan Primera



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Reigning World Touring Car champion Rob Huff was all smiles when he knew he was going to be allowed to thrash one of the Super Touring racers that inspired him to get involved in his youth





**M**att Neal's privateer heroics in late-'90s Nissan Primers inspired a generation of fans of the British Touring Car Championship. They certainly made an impression on Rob Huff, who went on to become a BTCC race winner and, last year, a World Touring Car champion.

Today, at Donington Park, Huff will sample Matt Neal's 1998 Team Dynamics Nissan Primera, one of the cars that turned him into a wannabe touring car driver.

"I told Matt about this when I was in Morocco for WTCC earlier this year and he was very excited," says Huff as he lays eyes on the machine that Neal carried to third in the '98 BTCC Independents title race. "It's lovely isn't it?" says Huff, as the car's current owner — club racer Dave Jarman — shows him around his steed. "Right, I'm going to take some photos — sorry!"

Huff is clearly excited by the prospect of what's to come. "It takes me back to the days when I used to stand at the top of Paddock Hill Bend and watch at Brands Hatch," Huff explains. "This era of Super Tourers is the reason I wanted to go touring car racing. Dad used to take me to Snetterton and Brands to watch BTCC in the '90s and I fell in love with the noise. I remember watching live when Matt Neal won overall as an independent at Donington in 1999."

This isn't quite the car that Neal used to do that famous deed (and scoop Alan Gow's £250,000 bounty!), but it's still an accurate representation of the high-bucks, high-stakes, high-tech latter days of Super Touring.

"It's exactly as Matt Neal used it," says Jarman. "It's one of the ex-works '97 cars rebuilt with a new shell for '98. Brian Chatfield did one club race with it before it got shipped off to New Zealand in 2003. I bought it in 2008 after it sat doing nothing for five years. There were various issues with corrosion, though, and it took me 12 months to get it back ▶▶



One for the album: smartphone pics came first



# SUPER TOURING SPECIAL

◀◀ to where it was.”

This is one of three Super Touring Primera Jarman has owned, the others being an ex-Ivan Capelli '95 model and David Leslie's '99 factory BTCC racer. Originally a telephone engineer from Stroud, near Castle Combe, Jarman began racing a historic Datsun 240Z Roadsport car in the late '80s and funded his hobby by preparing race and rally versions for others.

The Datsun link meant he was naturally curious about Nissan Super Tourers. This interest led to him racing them, and also starting a new historic series for the cars with current BTCC engineer Johnny Westbrock.

“Everything is bespoke on the car,” he explains. “The suspension, the brakes, the engine; even the headlamps are special lightweight components! Nissan spent £8million to win the title in '99, and Ford's budget to win with Prodrive [in 2000] was even bigger.”

Steve Neal's Team Dynamics outfit had this car built for the 1998 season in '97 spec. It was an ex-works car fitted with a new shell from Nissan Motorsports Europe, and a customer engine from International Engine Services that revs to 8000rpm and is capable of pushing out around 300bhp. RML provided some technical assistance and renowned BTCC engineer Dave Potter engineered the dampers on the car, which was also fitted with a '98 aero package.

Even a cursory glance over one of these machines reveals how customised they are – even the wheel hubs are shaped for aerodynamic purposes!

“I've driven other Nissans but there's nothing like it,” says Jarman. “The fact Patrick Watts and John



With a smidgen of oversteer exiting the final chicane, Huff gives the ex-Matt Neal Primera a proper workout

Cleland [who raced Super Touring Cars in period] have bought cars has got to say something for the experience. As far as I'm aware, they are the fastest steel-bodied touring cars ever produced.”

Jarman's pride and joy is wheeled out into the pitlane as Huff puts down his cameraphone and readies himself for a trip back in time – when men were men and touring cars were proper racers.

“It's evil when it's cold, but after

three laps everything comes to life,” Jarman tells Huff as the WTCC ace is strapped in. As Huff familiarises himself with Matt Neal's former surroundings, period Super Touring ace Anthony Reid wanders over for a chat having earlier sampled an ex-John Cleland Vauxhall Cavalier.

“I did 1m14s in the Cavalier!” he tells Rob before taking his place on the pitwall to observe Huff's run.

“Of all the cars I drove in the

Super Touring period this was my favourite,” Reid adds. “I got eight wins [on the road] in the 1998 season with the Primera – it was a fabulous car.”

Reid is keen to see the stopwatch as Huff ventures on track with an assortment of historics, Carrera Cup Porsches and Formula Renault and Monoposto single-seaters for company. “I can't say I'm not feeling a bit of adrenaline!” says Jarman nervously, as he watches

## ANTHONY REID: NISSAN WAS 'BEST CAR'

Having raced the Nissan Primera in Japan, Anthony Reid came to the BTCC in 1997 to drive the RML-built version. Over the next two years the car would evolve into one of the finest machines of the era and Reid narrowly missed out on the 1998 crown, after taking 11 poles and seven wins from 26 races.

He chose not to stay in 1999, leaving Laurent Aiello to win the crown in the ultimate iteration, but he has little doubt as to what was the best Super Tourer.

“The 1999 Primera was the best Super Tourer I've ever driven,” he admits. “I didn't drive it in period, but I've driven it more recently at the Goodwood Festival of Speed.

It has a fantastic rear end and I can well understand why it won the title.”

Although Mallock was a key figure in making the car so good, Reid says good foundations had been laid before the project moved to RML.

“I developed that car from the outset in '96, when we were racing for Nissan Motorsport Europe in the German championship,” he says. “At times it was very strong, but it wasn't consistent in 1996. Through developing that year and over the winter, racing in South Africa, Alec Poole, Glyn Hall and I started the evolutionary process of the car that went on to win the championship.”

The development continued with RML, with Reid still working closely



Reid toughs it out with Rickard Rydell's Volvo into Paddock Hill at Brands Hatch during 1998

with the likes of Richard Divila, Derek Gardner and Bob Neville at NME.

“In hindsight one of my regrets was not staying for 1999,” admits Reid. “But I did know there was only one

more year on the contract and Ford offered me two years on very good terms that were difficult to turn down.”

● Kevin Turner





GRIFFITHS/LAT

There's sadness as Huff realises his all-too-brief taster around Donington is at an end

his car building speed around Donington's 1.957-mile National Circuit. "I bet he gets out with a smile on his face!"

Reid's grin rapidly evaporates when Huff posts a 1m12.4s lap on his seventh attempt to smash the Scot's Cavalier effort out of the park. Reid then skulks off back to his Chevron GT3 garage muttering something about hard tyres.

"If he was on new tyres Rob would be a second per lap quicker," offers Jarman. "That's no bullshit, that's a fact."

Huff is in ebullient mood when he pulls the Primera back into the pitlane. "That was proper!" he enthuses. "Why can't touring cars be like that now?! It's got so much

**Rob Huff**

## 'I think the Craner Curves could be driven flat out, but it's not my car!'

grip – you get on the power and the diff just pulls it through the corners. I think the Craner Curves could be flat, but it's not my car! The engine is really nice and all the induction noise is brilliant – it sounds like it's going to explode!



GRIFFITHS/LAT

Huff was only too happy to autograph the bootlid of Dave Jarman's Primera

## RAY MALLOCK'S SUPER TOURING VIEW

Ray Mallock has successfully run cars in Super Touring and S2000, so how does he think they compare?

"When we started in the BTCC the cars had the big weakness of having to rely on production-car aero, leading to homologation anomalies like the Alfa Romeo coming in [for 1994]. It allowed everyone to use big spoilers and wings, creating a much more level playing field.

"The cars were quick – mega quick – but even so we had a real edge given our aero experience from sports car racing. The traditional teams took a while to catch up. I still remember John Cleland's first run in the 1995 Cavalier, which had the full front spoiler and rear wing. He couldn't believe the laptime after his first flyer – he was convinced there must have been a malfunction. The car was just so quick.

"The cars were great, but it was also a fantastically competitive time given the number of different manufacturers and concepts. It was tremendously satisfying to win during that period and have a team capable of winning championships.

"Eventually the budgets did start running away with themselves, and



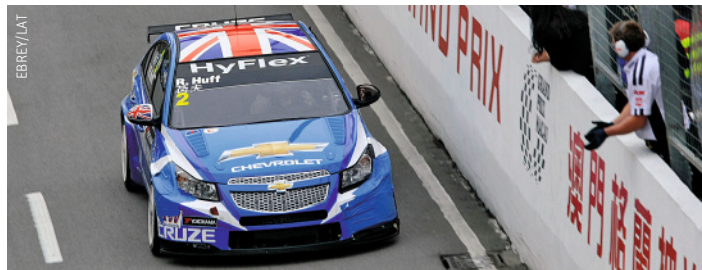
WOOD/LAT

Mallock has fond memories of Super Touring

it needed a fresh start – and that was S2000. The challenges today are still remarkably similar to the Super Touring era – OK you have less freedom, but it all still comes down to the quality of the engineering and the depth of the budget in terms of getting the most out of your package compared with the opposition.

"Will we ever top Super Touring? Well, we've probably never surpassed it. The cars were excellent and the level of manufacturer involvement was fantastic. It was a golden era, no doubt.

● Sam Tremayne



Ray Mallock's eponymous RML outfit ran Rob Huff to last year's WTCC title with the Chevrolet Cruze

"It's got short gear ratios and you can really stand on the brakes," he continues. "I like the idea of the driver-adjustable rollbar too; it's a bespoke racing car, like a single-seater with a roof. I think we could do a 1m10s lap (the pace the cars did at Donington in period) balls-to-the-wall with new boots.

"It does everything you want it to do – it's an amazing car. I bet Dave spends evenings just sitting in it in the garage with a cup of tea – that's what I would do! He's a very lucky boy."

Jarman gets Huff to sign his autograph on the inside of the boot lid (before even Matt Neal has had the chance!), and the two say their goodbyes before Rob heads over to the Donington cafe for lunch with AUTOSPORT and more reflections on a wonderful experience.

"Everything about that car is

lovely," he gushes. "I could feel the aero in the Craners, and on the good laps I did I could feel the car squatting into the track. We've got to the point where we have more grip than power in touring cars, but these were the other way around. It was incredibly easy to drive compared with what we have now.

"The Primera was doing what it was supposed to do; it was built as a race car, not a road car adapted for the track. Just because it looks like a Primera, doesn't mean it is one! All the electronics, data-logging, pumps and adjustability just shows the level of technology that went into these cars.

"Nothing has changed in 15 years, apart from what they have turned away. I grew up watching these cars and it's lovely to see them out again. I think I was definitely born in the wrong era." ❧