

Patrick Watts

“I had a half-spin, pulling out of it by smoking the front tyres”

■ Australian Super Touring ■ Lakeside ■ April 18, 1999 ■ Peugeot 406 ■ Victory over works teams



I KNOW WHAT I'LL CHOOSE straightaway: the first round of the Australian Super Touring Car Championship at Lakeside in 1999.

I was driving Paul Grimm's Starion Team Peugeot 406 and there was a big space for us behind the pits between the massive transporters of the other teams. Paul turned up in a pick-up truck with the ex-Tim Harvey '98 406 trailing behind! In the back of the Ute were a few plastic chairs, a table and a cool box. Later on his friend turned up in a van full of pit equipment, a few wheels and spares, so things were looking better!

After a few familiarisation laps in testing we went into qualifying and, although it was starting to rain, I kept the slicks on as it was quite warm.

After a few laps I got 'P1' on the pit board and it was raining harder so was surprised that next time I was back to P3! I was aquaplaning in a few places, especially the sixth-gear sweeps behind the pits. With only a few minutes to the end of qualifying I started a lap that I thought would be unbeatable. The sweeps were a series of long, opposite-lock slides!

I could not believe that anyone

could have been near my time for that lap, let alone beaten it, but I was still behind Jim Richards in the works Volvo that Rickard Rydell had used to win the '98 BTCC title. Turned out everyone except me was on full wets!

So I lined up on the front row for race one alongside Jim's Volvo, with Paul Morris in the works BMW behind. I knew he'd be quicker off the line than the front-wheel-drive cars.

After a year away from racing all the nerves and tension were about to be released. As I started the warm-up

lap the engine dropped onto three cylinders — an injector pipe had blown off. I'd flown halfway around the world to spectate!

For race two, the grid was the same, with Paul's BMW behind me again. I blocked him at the start and he hit me up the back, which slowed him and catapulted me past Jim who was alongside. I led into Turn 1 from Paul and Jim and thereafter the Bee-Em sat on my bumper for lap after lap.

Then it started to rain. The track stayed grippy until we were down to

10 seconds off dry times. Paul was still on my bumper, but I had a half-spin, pulling out of it by smoking the front tyres. Which side would Paul pass? Relieved, I noticed in my mirror that he too had overestimated the grip on that corner, and was busy sorting out a slide!

We remained bumper-to-bumper for the rest of the race as the track dried and the grip returned and I held on to win by a few tenths.

It was a great day for Paul Grimm's Starion Team whose small resources but brilliant race engineering had taken us from spectators in the first race to beating the works Volvos, Audis and BMWs. For me, although two weeks later we had two second places at Oran Park, the Lakeside win was my professional swansong. I was hurt by being used as a scapegoat by Peugeot UK and I just wanted to prove to myself that I was as good as I knew I was. The Australian press named me 'Paddy the Pom', wrote lots of flattering stuff and left me content to move on from the sometimes insular world of professional racing. *Patrick Watts was talking to Henry Hope-Frost*

PROFILE



PATRICK WATTS WON TITLES

in a host of one-make tin-top series before settling in British Touring Cars in 1992 as reigning Production Saloon champion. He joined Peugeot's BTCC effort in '94, staying for four seasons, before finishing his professional career with outings in Australia. More recently, he has enjoyed success in historic racing and rallying and, now 56, still compete in historic.

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