

We are the Champions

Eight TVR Owners Drive 16 World Racing Stars around Wembley Stadium

Sunday 14th December 2008 and it was 45 minutes of pure magic by eight TVR owners as they weaved across the hallowed turf of Wembley Stadium....

- 13:44 Eight TVR Tuscan convertibles drive into Wembley stadium.
- 14:05 Lewis Hamilton drives past me in a Mercedes 7722 sports car.
- 14:10 16 Champions of World motorsport climb into the Tuscons.
- 14:11 Michael Schumacher; yes, seven times F1 World Champion Michael Schumacher, appears out of a crowd of photographers and is stood right in front of me.
- 14:12 I help Michael into the car as Sebastian Vettel asks me if he can drive it.
- 14:14 I slide into the drivers seat and chat with Michael and Sebastian.
- 14:20 The lead TVR, driven by Lee Allen, enters the stadium with Jenson Button and Andy Priaulx on board to rapturous applause from 46,000 fans and is simultaneously broadcast around the World on Sky Sports 2.
- 14:21 I enter the stadium as the last car and the crowd goes wild as Michael waves back at them from his position seated around the passenger roll hoop.
- 14:26 The Tuscons line up alongside the start/finish gantry and in front of the players' tunnel to allow the World Champion drivers to disembark.
- 14:29 Right on cue I exit the stadium via a tunnel behind the West goal and park the car.
- 14:30 The 'Race of Champions' Nations Cup action starts.....

.... and gained a lifetimes experience!

The 'Race of Champions'. What a spectacle; what an event! Glamour, power, passion and some of the best ever racing drivers in the World competing against each other in two separate race formats; a national team event and an individual knock-out challenge. Conceived by Fredrik Johnsson of IMP in Monaco, the event is now in its 21st year and has grown from relatively humble beginnings to become one of the most prestigious events on the motorsport calendar.... and eight lucky TVR owners drove the mega-stars around the temporary circuit minutes before the racing action started. How?

The Road to Wembley is Not Easy

It all started 12 months ago when I tried to get involved in the 2007 event but it was too late for the organisers to fit us in. So for this year's event I asked in January and was informed by ROC that we would be considered. After keeping in touch through the year things hotted up during late October and early November culminating in a decision by Fredrik to allow me to bring a group of TVRs to take part in a driver parade lap. This is the first time ever that ROC has done this and I am very proud that TVRs were the cars on display. Certainly Jenson Button was impressed if you go by his comment to Lee when he climbed into his Tuscan; but more of that later.

I was asked by ROC to provide cars for 8 or 9 teams that could take two drivers in each car and a flag girl, or the girl could go into another car. So that meant asking club members for 20 cars so we had cover. The initial response was (as you'd expect) fantastic and I had 31 provisionally

sorted within a week and confirmed back to ROC. Then I was asked to supply cars that were harmonious in colour so some of the more traditional TVR colour schemes had to be let go. I admit to being surprised by this, but when you saw the vastly multi-coloured ROC stickers on the cars it became clear why the organisers took that decision. It's worth remembering that whilst we know what the cars and colours look like; ROC did not and were making sure their multi-million dollar event was not compromised. It left me with some tough calls to make so the final selections were made based on model, colour and the order the offers were made to me which then gave me nine Tuscan 2 Convertibles in a mix of Black, Grey and Blue. ROC confirmed they were happy and we were ready to perform.

It's Official; We are Official

I travelled to London on Friday and met with ROC at Wembley for the first time to go through some logistics; passes, tickets, ROC branded shirts and to put faces to names. I was initially greeted by Philippe and Olivier from Belgium who led me under the stadium to the ROC offices. To get there we had to pass through the area allocated to the race-paddock.... And what a line-up: Fiat 500 Arbarths, KTM X-Bows (I want one), World Touring Cars, ROC cars, World Rally cars..... Millions of pounds worth of high-tech motorsport cars packed into a tight area between pillars and walls and as if that wasn't enough, passing by a tunnel I glimpsed the massive red-seated banks of the arena climbing high into the sky; a tingle ran down my spine as I momentarily thought about what we were actually about to do.

Concluding matters with Philippe and Olivier I was left to leave the stadium by myself so I went back to the main office to say goodbye to Yveline who had been my main contact after Fredrik. As I was waiting for her, Fredrik appeared and I introduced myself to him then he kindly introduced me to Michele Mouton, the famous World Rally driver, who is Fredrik's partner at ROC. They are both internationally famous in their own right and it was a pleasure to both meet and work with them.

Saturday morning and while the whole country awoke to pouring rain the rest of the TVR owners arrived at our hotel and met up for the first time. Having done events of this stature before where I bring together groups of strangers who initially only have TVRs in common, I am always left pleasantly surprised at how well the different personalities quickly gel and soon strike up friendships, some of which will last a lifetime, and this group was no exception.

At this point I must mention Graeme Bishopp, who later drove David Coulthard and Jason Plato, as he provided a complete range of clothing for us all that was fully embroidered with club logo, names and ROC logos consisting of: Jackets, fleeces, rugby shirts and hats. How authentic did they look? Two answers: First I was stopped by security inside Wembley on Saturday and asked why our cars were parked in the paddock and on replying that we had not been told by ROC to move them yet; was sternly asked "But you are ROC, you should know". Secondly on Sunday as a group of us walked through the players' tunnel, a woman dressed in McLaren Mercedes clothing stopped me to ask when Michael and Sebastian were coming out to sign autographs. I informed her that the racing had now started and that they had already been out between 11:30-12:30. She looked really sad and then asked if I could get the autographs for her. It was then that I realised she must have thought I was part of Michael and Sebastian's 'team' as I had their names stitched on my jacket. Quite a surreal moment!

We Practised in the Rain, then Watched in Awe

But back to Saturday; we travelled to Wembley in the afternoon to undertake a rehearsal and to allow ROC to put their stickers on the cars. Philippe collected us and we drove into the stadium and lined up at the exit of the paddock tunnel in readiness for entry into the stadium and onto the circuit. It was still raining!

Then we were told to enter the stadium! Suddenly 12 months of work had come to fruition as I put my Sagaris into first gear and slowly drove onto a race-circuit laid on top of Wembley's famous hallowed turf! I have been to Wembley numerous times for football matches but to be driving on the pitch was truly unbelievable and the view was amazing! From pitch level the banks of red-seats seem to climb forever like walls of the tallest fortress before finally changing into the grey steel structure that is the stadium's sliding roof, which for safety reasons had to be left open. Diane took picture after picture as we drove around the circuit: the stadium screens, the ROC bridge, the name of Wembley Stadium in large letters emblazoned across the stadium seating. These are fantastic pictures containing fantastic views and fantastic memories.... and we hadn't even got to the real event yet!

We were released in eight second intervals as ROC had to time us to make sure we got on and off the circuit in nine minutes. We had to do 1-1/2 laps and as I came round to complete a full lap I was stopped by an ROC girl who kindly informed me I was going too fast! Her colleague on the radio link was telling her to tell me "to slow down as they wanted the crowd to see the race-drivers happy smiling faces". I told her to tell him that "I had a happy smiling face" which laughingly she did before motioning me to go round again..... life is tough at times!

Practice over we watched in awe as several race drivers ran full paced practice sessions on the partially flooded, tight twisty circuit; not all making it round without hitting concrete barriers and bending panels on the cars. To see their highly tuned skills being put to the test in those conditions at such close quarters, just 2-3 metres away, was an unbelievable experience and one I and the group will never forget. You can't get that close at an F1 race.... or any other professional race for that matter and it's just one of many reasons why ROC is a fantastic spectacle for the spectator!

Practice over and cars all stickered we left to go back to the hotel and party. It was still raining!

Sunday – A Day with Champions

We woke to finally see a dry sky over London. After an early breakfast we set off in convoy for Wembley arriving at our VIP car parking area at 10:20. While I made a quick call to Philippe to let him know we had arrived, Andy Hills and Steve McGee, for whom I had arranged official media passes, got busy lining up the now clean and resplendent looking cars for a photo-shoot immediately outside the famous stadium and its magnificent arch.

Philippe came over and took us all onto the paddock walkabout with mega-stars Michael, DC, Jenson, Andy Priaulx, Sebastian Vettel, Loeb, etc all around signing autographs and allowing our group to take photographs. Debs Morgan, Andy and Steve taking full advantage of course!

12:30 saw the walkabout close and we all went off to our seats in the stand to watch the early demonstrations. ROC had given us a block of tickets so we all sat together and had a fantastic view of the whole circuit from half way up the first tier, then at 13:20 nine TVR owners walked back to the Tuscans for the business end of the weekend.

Suddenly Michael was Inches away from me

I led the cars into Wembley and up to the players' tunnel underneath the main stand. I was then told that Michael, my passenger, would be in the last car on circuit with Sebastian Vettel. After letting Lewis past in his Mercedes, I let the others through and Lee Allen took the

lead car followed by Simon Baker, Steve Best, Peter Reid, Woody, Richard Parker, Graeme Bishopp and myself. Suddenly the door to the tunnel opened and within seconds we were engulfed by some of the World's best superstar drivers and hordes of press and TV cameras. I had to pinch myself!

Then amongst the swarming throng, I saw Vettel striding purposely towards me with Michael just behind him. Michael Schumacher; seven times F1 World Champion Michael Schumacher was now stood inches away from me asking how to get in the car without standing on the pile of papers I wanted him to sign and had left on the front seat. My heart raced quicker than the Ferrari he used to drive! Sebastian asked me if he "could drive the car as he loved the look of it". I desperately wanted to say "yes" in return for his Red Bull hat but I wasn't sure ROC would be happy and on composing myself, told him he had to "get on the back like Michael". Seconds later, autographs all signed and with me, not Sebastian, sitting in the drivers seat we moved off to wait at the exit tunnel to the stadium. Suddenly realising I was now about to 'Live my Dream' I felt a cold chill run down my spine. Here I was, sitting in a TVR Tuscan just seconds away from driving the one and only Michael Schumacher around Wembley Stadium; something that had never been done before, in any car! What a moment!!

The noise was incredible as it erupted around me when I slowly drove the Tuscan onto the circuit in front of 46,000 screaming fans. "Michael, wave Michael wave" was all I could hear and it seemed all the fans in the first tier could almost touch the three of us. Both Michael and Sebastian duly obliged; so did I. Well why not!

I drove down the main straight and watched proudly as seven Tuscan's circled around the track in front of me, each with two superstars sited around the roll hoops and with national flags hanging out at the back. The screens at each end of the stadium flashed images from the live TV feed of the cars, race drivers and our owners while the crowd still screamed and waved as we completed the lap. It was a truly amazing experience! Finally we queued up at the start/finish line to let the drivers off, one car at a time, and then do another half lap to get to the exit tunnel where I received a big 'thumbs up' from ROC staff. I had done it and seven others had done something they never thought they would do in their wildest dreams!

The Race of Champions is the Spectacle of all Spectacles

Tuscan's parked safely outside, we walked back into the stadium to settle down and watch our heroes do their stuff; and boy did they just!

Different cars, different power, different handling characteristics..... little mattered as lap after lap the stars danced on the limit at every turn in cold, damp and oily conditions. Watching just metres away, I was stunned by Michael as he was unbelievably accurate placing every car within millimetres of the same piece of kerbing over and over again, lap after lap after lap. No wonder he has the phenomenal record he has.

DC too was top class. He stuck his F1 car in the wall doing demonstration doughnuts and his KTM on the last corner of a race lap (and still won) but he was masterful and entertaining all day. What was surprising to me was how well the bike riders did on four wheels against the top stars but I guess if you can drive.... you can drive anything. I would have loved to have seen Colin McRae or Jim Clark in action on that circuit and in those cars! Sadly...

But what an event! Team Germany won the ROC Nations Cup with Michael and Sebastian beating Team Scandinavia's Tom Kristensen and Mattias Ekstrom 2-1 in the final; then, in a tense but very exciting finale to the 'Race of Champions' event DC just lost out to Sebastian Loeb 2-1 by three tenths after four laps of the circuit in the third and deciding race. It really was fantastic to watch it all unfold!

The 'Race of Champions' is all about close, fast, knockout racing and you're sat just a few metres from the action able to see the drivers wrestling different machinery at all points of the circuit. It's a truly magnificent experience for any motorsport fan; and this year we were actually part of it!

There were also demonstrations by Lewis Hamilton in his McLaren F1 car and that awesome looking Mercedes 7722 sports car, DC in the Red Bull 'Wings for Life' liveried F1 car he used in Brazil, Terry Grant doing his inimitable doughnuts in a TVR Tamora, motorcycle display teams with one rider turning a full 360° while 40-50 feet in the air (how do you start to practice that?) and numerous guest drivers such as Frank Bruno and Patrick Kielty all adding fun and spectacle to the day.

To Fredrik, Michele, Yveline, Philippe, Olivier, Russ and Adam of ROC for allowing us to take part in your event and for all the hard work you put in to help make my dream come true; a really big thank you. We all had a fantastic weekend.

Thanks too to Colin Bowler of Racing Green for the loan of two Tuscans, Sara and Andy Neate for being my guests on the day and best wishes to you both for the future, to the team and your partners for a great job well done and last but not least; to Phil Tudhope who despite knowing he was reserve and unlikely to take part, still turned up on Saturday and stayed until we had completed our work. I applaud you all and thank you for a great weekend's fun.

Jenson's comment to Lee? Well, it's actually unprintable but went along the lines of "I've driven one of these and they're... erm; quick". Nice one Jenson! Now if you ever find yourself out of work....

Don Hastie
Lancashire TVRCC member

