

The Spa Six Hours is the ultimate test for a GT40. It combines all the requirements of a shorter sprint race with factors involved in endurance racing. This year pole position was taken by Kenny Brack with a lap of 2:43.185. In the race this will only drop to 2:46 to 2:49, which means that the car needs to last pretty much the full distance of the race flat out. This puts enormous demands on all the systems, but if the driver looks after the car too much then it's easy to lose considerable amounts of time. The engine, transmission and brakes come in for a serious pounding - it's not unusual for a GT40 to finish the race with boiled brake fluid and no brake pads left. Then throw into the mix that the starting grid is regularly in excess of 100 cars ranging from pole-setting GT40s to Mini Coopers. The potential for incidents is high, and then as if any more ingredients for a thrilling 6-hour race weren't already present, you have to add in the unique climate conditions that Spa has to offer. So winning the Spa 6 Hours is not something you just turn up and do; it requires considerable experience, good planning and a heavy dose of lady luck!

This year I was fortunate enough, not only to be working for the winning team, but was also responsible for running and preparing the winning GT40. This is a brief account of the race weekend from inside the pit garage.

This year the Spa 6 Hours started for me on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> September at 6am at the workshops of Historic Automobiles in Petersfield. I was part of the 11-strong team that Simon Blake had put together to prepare and run 7 cars at Europe's most challenging historic racing event. This year we would be responsible for 3 GT40s, competing in the main 6 hour race, and a Ford Mustang, Lola T70, Cooper Monaco and Lotus Cortina in supporting races.

The logistics of getting 7 cars, all their spares and all the tools and other bits and bobs down to and back from Spa could fill another article. So I'll just say that it's a mammoth undertaking!

The basic time table runs as follows:

- ♦ Wednesday track day - GT40 1022 testing
- ♦ Thursday untimed open practice day with noise limit!
- ♦ Friday support race qualifying & Six Hour qualifying
- ♦ Saturday support races & Six Hour Race
- ♦ Sunday final support races

The GT40 I was responsible for was P/1022 owned by Manuelle Ferrao and driven by his son Diogo and Martin Stretton. The car was already at the circuit, testing on the Wednesday, just to make sure there were no dramas with the freshly-built Mathwall engine that had only been installed on the Monday of the same week.

Upon our arrival at the circuit, we were greeted by glorious sunshine and temperatures that really only inspired us to soak up the atmosphere of this magnificent track. With all this lethargy we were very pleased to find that Simon and Neal had got the car dialled into

the track, the engine was performing well and the drivers were very happy with the setup of the car.

All we had to do now was wait for the lorry to turn up with the rest of the cars, tools and spares so that we could setup our pit garage for the weekend. This gave us the chance to go and see some of the circuit before things got busy. When you've got 7 cars to look after, you don't really get out of your pit garage, so the opportunity to take a pit bike out to the top of the circuit was one that I couldn't miss! It demonstrated the huge gradient changes and size of the 4.35 mile-long forest circuit that simply can't be appreciated by viewing a Formula 1 race on the TV.



The main pits are just visible in the far distance

The Thursday test day was open to all cars running in any of the races during the weekend, but it had a noise limit! So all our cars had to have their silencers fitted, just in case the drivers want to test.

As I mentioned in my preamble, the 6 Hours is a tough test for the GT40 and perhaps the biggest factor, after mechanically durability, is the fuel factor! As I'm sure you all know a GT40 is a thirsty beast at the best of times, even if being driven carefully on the road, so imagine how much fuel is used at full chat for 6 hours. Basically an original GT40 is capable of completing the 6 hours with just 2 fuel stops, within which driver changes will also occur. Any other servicing, such as brake pad or tyre replacement, will ultimately cost too much time and put you so far back down the field that you would need a major dose of luck to regain the time lost. Another feature of a GT40, that a lot of you will be familiar with, is how completely and utterly useless the fuel gauges are. This particular foible is not reserved just for replicas - the originals suffer the same problems. Therefore to gauge how much fuel the car is using at full chat, you need to measure the exact quantity used on several hot laps for each driver.

This testing is done during the practice and qualifying sessions of the meeting, and is repeated more than

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once per driver, to make sure the numbers are right. This involves completely draining the tanks and then filling them with a measured quantity of fuel. Laps are completed, times are recorded, then the tanks are drained again to see how much fuel has been used. From these measurements we then calculate how much fuel the car is using per lap for each driver.

Another quirk of the 6 Hours is the refuelling method specified by the race organisers. Drivers have to refuel the car themselves from a regular fuel pump - as found in a petrol station! No assistance can be given by the team. There are only 4 pumps available, so it is very easy to find yourself in a queue; this can destroy your race and tales of leading cars jumping the queue are a regular occurrence - you know who you are!

Rob Guthrie (formally of Lanzante's) and I were running GT40 P/1022, and from the outset we knew we had a shot at winning the event, as both drivers were known to be quick and consistent. All we had to do was give them a car that was capable of lasting 6 hours. With this in mind, it was decided to do as little running as possible with the car during the build-up to the race on Saturday afternoon. We completed a fuel test run per driver during the practice session and also during qualifying. The only major issue we had to fix was a faulty wiper motor, that I had to repair to ensure it would work if the weather broke.

One of the other GT40s the team were running was not so fortunate. The car owned and raced by Gavin Henderson, his son Rory and at Spa, Gregor Fisker, had developed an engine problem during the Thursday practice session. With qualifying the following day, we didn't have much time to diagnose the problem and resolve it. Ultimately the decision was made to change the engine, despite the fact that this meant no dinner and a very late finish that night/morning! All the team pulled together to whip the engine out, swap over ancillaries and reinstall it before returning to the hotel for a well deserved forty winks. Our efforts on the previous night just left the exhausts and some other connections to be made before the car was ready for qualifying, which was due to start at 6.30pm.

Martin Stretton qualified P/1022 in 6<sup>th</sup> place with a time of 2:46.56. We were at the pointy end and that was sufficient; there was no point in going for the glory of pole position - 6 hours is long enough to gain 6 places. The Henderson car had a trouble-free qualifying and achieved 9<sup>th</sup> position with a time of 2:48.39. The other GT40 in the Historic Automobiles stable, driven and owned by Roger Wills and James Littlejohn for Spa, qualified in 7<sup>th</sup> position with a time of 2:46.63.

Qualifying finished at 8pm; this is when the mechanics start to prepare the car for the race at 4pm the next day. Good lights are essential at Spa, as racing continues into the night, with the finish at 10pm. For reasons I won't go into here, we always set up the lights after qualifying in the dark, so we know they are pointing exactly where the drivers want them. A quick check over the cars is made to ascertain if any of them has a

major issue - if so we need to get on it now! All the cars checked out OK, so we could return back to Spa for a meal and a relatively early night!

On Saturday the main focus is on preparing the cars for the 6 hour race, but there are still other support races that some of our cars were in, so it really is a very busy day. We arrived at the circuit at around 8am and from then until just before 4pm, the start of the race, we will be preparing and fuelling the cars with measured amounts of Sunoco's incredibly expensive race fuel.



P/1022 in good company

One of the highlights of the weekend for the mechanics working at the 6 Hours is the visit to the pit garage by the well-endowed and suitably-dressed pit girls. This tends to happen on the morning of the main race and signals a tea break for the garage!

Despite the threat of classic Spa weather (rain), the race started dry with really quite warm sunshine. This must have turned the GT40 cabin into an oven as Martin waited on the grid for the formation lap, especially considering that he had just hopped out of the winning Formula 1 car and jogged to the grid ready to do another 2 hours of pounding round the Spa circuit.

At Spa, because of the sheer numbers of cars involved, the organisers operate a rolling start. After the first lap, Martin had barged and bullied his way to 3<sup>rd</sup> position, where he settled down to a sensible pace. Then, as



The Henderson GT40, P/1055, on the grid

predicted, the heavens opened; rivers of rain were running down the pits and the start/finish straight started to resemble a canal, rather than a race circuit.

Inevitably this downpour led to an incident which necessitated a safety ca. Again because the field is so big it's split in half with 2 safety cars. This allowed us to stretch the fuel considerably during the first stint. With the 2½ hour driver limit fast approaching, we had to bring Martin in. Diogo jumped in and set off for the pumps, which mercifully were empty.

This pit stop saw us come out in 2<sup>nd</sup> place. The rain had now eased and a dry line began to emerge. Diogo was putting in very consistent times, quick times considering the conditions. The GT40 was now showing signs of contact, and we had one headlight that had refused to answer to the switch. This made our car a little easier to identify as it passed us on the pit wall (surprisingly difficult!). By now, as we approached the decision time for calling Diogo in, the light was beginning to fade and the rain started again - this time accompanied by thunder and lightning. Time for Martin to get in again after he had re-energised himself with various energy foodstuffs - no waffles!

Another perfect pit stop and refuel saw us gain a massive advantage to the now 2<sup>nd</sup> place GT40 of Hadfield and Voyazides. Neither myself nor Rob have any idea how events transpired, but we were now in first place. Seems like a strange thing for me to say that we had little idea of how we were in first, but you have to remember that this isn't like the F1 race you watch on the telly. The only part of the track we could see was the start/finish straight and La Source, the first corner. We have a timing screen and a scrolling screen of corners around the circuit that race control use - which was now mostly black because night time had well and truly fallen, much like the entire contents of some seriously heavy clouds. I was now, for the second time in the race, completely soaked through to the skin.

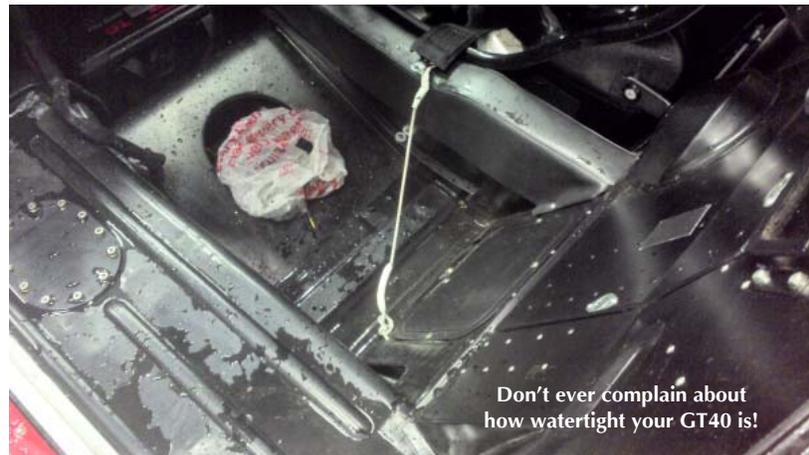
The race was now ours/Martin's to lose. All he had to do was keep the lap times consistent and keep it on the black, wet stuff. This wasn't made any easier for him, because now the other headlight had decided to go on strike as well. Martin was now driving on just 2 spotlights and the difference in forward illumination was all too clear for us to see from the pit wall. Now approaching the end of the 6 hour sprint, the heavens opened up even more, if that were possible, and the thunderstorm intensified with massive flashes of lightning illuminating the circuit. These may have been of great help to

Martin in the car. Conditions were now so bad that the safety cars were once again deployed. The organisers decided that the conditions were too bad to continue, so the race finished with all the cars formed up on the grid behind the safety car. At this stage we have no idea what was going on - have we won? Where's the car? Finally the safety car led the cars once more around the track and into the pits. The timing screens confirmed that we had indeed just won the 2014 Spa 6 Hours.

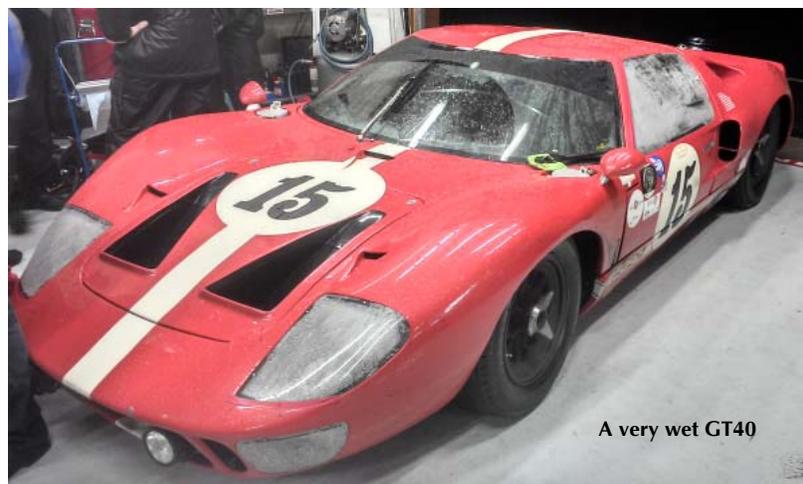
Our pit garage filled up with well-wishers and the beer began to flow. Martin confessed that, at one stage during the last stint, he left the track because he simply couldn't see where he was going. He only found the track again by following the safety barrier around the edge! The inside of the car was almost as wet as the outside. If you'd been on public roads driving in these kind of conditions, most if not all of us would have pulled in.

The celebrations ran on until 3am in Spa, but we still had a car in a support race on the Sunday, so we were at the circuit at 8am to prepare it and pack up all the other cars and equipment ready for the trek back to Blighty. We headed back to the UK at around 2pm. By the time we reached Historic Automobiles HQ it was dark, and so ended the 2014 Spa 6 Hours. Still shell-shocked, the result had still not sunk in, but the exhaustion certainly had.

Photos: Geoff Taylor



Don't ever complain about how watertight your GT40 is!



A very wet GT40



The winning team:  
Simon Blake, Rob Guthrie, Geoff Taylor,  
Martin Stretton, Diogo & Manuelle Ferraro,  
Neal, Roy, George, Dan, Martin, Conrad,  
Tony, Keith