



Fun by name...

The Fun Cup is reckoned to offer very close racing – John Hayman uncovers the truth of the matter in a thrilling six-hour race at Mondello Park

Five and half hours into what can best be described as an intense collection of half-hour sprint races squeezed into one afternoon, I scramble out of the sweaty driver's seat for the last time. My co-driver, Nigel Greensall, is lined up to do the final half-hour stint that will take our Fun Cup racer to the chequered flag at the end of six hard, frantic, frustrating and elation-packed hours of endurance racing here on the International circuit at Mondello Park in Ireland. I'm knackered but buzzing; Nigel is focused (always the pro). Nikki his partner, who's been helping us all weekend, is running back and forth between the TV monitor in our garage

and the pit board on the pit wall to let Nigel know exactly where he is, and what he has to achieve in the remaining stint. The tension is soaring, especially as we're in with a shout of winning...

The build-up to this nail-biting finish at Mondello began many weeks before, during a chat with Paul Rose, proprietor of JPS Motorsport and the man behind promoting the Fun Cup in Britain. The real purpose of our conversation had been for Rose to explain the rise of diesel power within the championship – just as at Le Mans or ALMS, diesel engines are becoming more and more competitive. In the Fun Cup, of course, they're not the multi-cylinder monsters used by Audi and

Peugeot, instead they're comparatively humble VW/Audi 1.9-litre four-pot TDI units with 160bhp, compared with the 130bhp pumped out by the petrol 1.8s. The diesel engine is heavier and makes the Beetle lookalike Fun Cup less agile than its petrol-slurping sibling, yet does have an appreciable torque advantage and is kinder long-term to its components. In the UK championship both cars run side-by-side, but in two separate classes. Out of this conversation on the merits and drawbacks of diesel somehow grew a plan to create Team JPR-TrackDriver, with the goal of competing in the six-hour endurance event at Mondello Park (last August). I was really up for it having sampled the Fun Cup back in 2005 during the highlight of the championship's year – the Spa 25-hour, with anything from 140 to 160 cars on the grid. However, my enthusiasm wasn't matched by that of others in the TrackDriver office. Hales initially said 'yes', but a couple of days later ducked out; Vickers used the "I don't race anything with less than a trillion horsepower" excuse. Things weren't going according to plan! And then I mentioned it to Nigel Greensall, our racing contributor – he was so fired up you'd have thought I'd offered him a season in the BTCC.

Fast forward to August 20: Nigel, Nikki Welsby and yours truly are wending our way through the Dublin rush hour in a renta-Panda, destination Mondello Park. Nigel innocently drops







into the conversation the fact that many headlining pro-drivers have turned their hand to the Fun Cup over the years, and failed miserably – now I'm beginning to understand why the rest of the guys in the office suddenly had other, more pressing appointments... I do recall from my Spa experience that these space-framed, mid-engined race cars don't take fools gladly; they aren't something you take *your* driving style to. Nigel sums it up perfectly; the mistake many drivers of all levels of experience make in the Fun Cup, is failing to realise that you've got to drive the car to its strengths, not just expect it to respond to your driving style.

This is something I soon find out – give it beans, stamp on the brakes, or be at all ragged, and the lap times are very off the page. It takes a great deal of concentration to extract a competitive pace out of a Fun Cup, particularly so with the braking. You have to make every effort to balance it to perfection on the brakes, and if you don't then your exit will be a slow, scabbly mess. Blimey it's hard work! Getting to grips with the car is a steep enough cliff to climb, but having to learn the circuit as well makes for a daunting yet exciting challenge. Nigel, on the other hand, is in his comfort zone: not only has he been a Fun Cup

regular for many years, he's also rather up to speed at Mondello, being the reigning outright lap holder... I could fill the whole of this magazine with the race story; instead I'll keep it very brief. Qualifying on Saturday morning is trouble-free for Nigel. He's quickest by some margin in the petrol class, whereas I'm trying to get to grips with both the car and circuit, but I'm near enough to the pace of our main adversary, JPR/Credit Crunch Racing, to keep things interesting in the race. Pole in qualifying, however, means diddly-squat in the Fun Cup. The starting grid order is made by random selection, in this instance by plucking numbered balls from a hat. Ball number 110 – us – manages to avoid being selected until there are only four remaining... This is not where I want to be given I'm starting the race; I would much rather be behind the bulk of the diesels rather than being mugged by them. Gantry lights out and I get a wicked start. But all too soon the diesels' extra accelerative pace means I'm surrounded at turn one, and choose to let them have it – there are six hours to go and I don't want to throw it all away this early on. Half an hour later Nikki's

hanging the 'in' board off the pit wall – there are obligatory half-hour driver change pit stops. We're in second place, so far in one piece even after a naughty side slap from Credit Crunch who were leading. The driver changeover is trouble-free, albeit a bit slow (note to self, exercise before trying anything like this again). Nigel instantly sets a blistering pace and is going some way to making up what we lost in the pit stop. All is good until the next driver change – Nigel dives out, I unceremoniously fall in, which is when we discover the lap belts aren't suited to my ample waist region: a good minute is lost trying to get them fastened. *Arse!* And that's the story for



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the bulk of the afternoon. Nigel tries his hardest to make up what we lose in the driver change each and every time. To help him along we give him the car in its optimum state – I drive it after we fill it with fuel, then when it's emptier and therefore lighter, he hops in and gives it the beans. Turns out those team tactics work: at the fifth hour we are in second place and on the same lap as the leader. All that's needed now is a bit of luck. I spot yellow flags being waved, soon after SC boards; wicked, a safety car exactly when we need one. A few laps later the race resumes and I try to keep on the tail of Credit Crunch, albeit with three other cars filling the gap between us. Trouble is, those three are diesels! I'm all over them in the corners but they leap away exiting them. I get past one but the Credit Crunch car has gained a good eight-second margin by the time Nikki hangs the pit board off the wall. Nigel is strapped in and has less than half an hour to make up the deficit. To say he puts his head down is an understatement. He gives it everything, an appraisal substantiated by him breaking the Fun Cup petrol Mondello lap record in the last fifteen minutes of the race. What a superstar!

The last ten minutes and things are really nerve wracking. Nigel's chipping away at Credit Crunch's lead and soon he's mere car-lengths behind. With just minutes remaining he pulls off the manoeuvre of the race – he gets a tow down the start/finish straight, Credit Crunch defends; our Nigel takes the long way around the outside at turn



one, stands his ground so he has the line for the two corners that follow, and... *bloody hell* he's done it! We're in the lead and shortly after the flag drops. The win is ours! After six hours of flat-out racing there's only 2.5sec between us in the petrol class; it's even tighter in the diesel class, the winner's margin a barely visible 0.7sec. Impressive stuff, I think you'll agree, and brilliantly illustrates how evenly matched the Fun Cup cars are. Just as importantly, it demonstrates that one-make racing isn't all about manipulating the rules to gain an advantage: real racing is when the cars are genuinely equal and produce results like these. Says something

about reliability, too. Apart from feeding our Bug with fuel, nothing else needed attention, likewise for the vast majority of our rivals. Hats off to Paul Rose and his team for maintaining this level playing field – and if you fancy having ago yourself, then give JPR a call, I can highly recommend it... And if any more motivation is needed, have a look at our pictures and see the size of pot you could win! ■

Thanks to:

All at JPR Motorsport
Nikki, Chris and all at Mondello Park
View the video online at
www.trackdriver.com

