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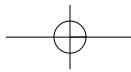


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SPARRING PARTNERS

Trackday specialists RSR shift the focus of their business from the Nürburgring to Spa: they show us the way round the Belgian GP circuit – in a 997 GT3 RS

Words: Johnny Tipler
Photography: Antony Fraser



GT3 RS CIRCUIT TRAINING AT SPA



Eau Rouge! The most daunting corner on any racetrack. I've watched in awe, year on year at the Spa Six Hours, cars hurtling downhill past the 'old' pits, twitching left into the dip then nipping right, arcing up the hill to dart left at the summit into Raidillon. Wow! What must that be like behind the wheel?

I'm about to find out, living the dream courtesy of Ron Simons' RSRSpa trackday experience – in a 997 GT3 RS, no less! Thanks to its Ardennes setting, this magnificent circuit encompasses major changes of gradient and camber, low- and high-speed curves and corners, and the challenges are huge, no matter how good you think you are. RSR's programme is concise and well ordered: Snapper Fraser and I overnight in Francorchamps so we're on the spot for the briefing that kicks off at 8.30am. Having established that everyone understands English, Ron delivers a welcome speech from the pit wall to the assembled throng on the pit lane: fifty or so enthusiasts from all over

Europe, north and south America and a few Aussies; 'who's never been here before?' Ron asks, and a third of the hands go up. Hmm... could be interesting out on track, and Ron cautions strictly against 'racing' and competitive actions especially concerning RSR's own cars. Any such problems and the perpetrators are on their way home, says Ron. RSR provides a selection of helmets, though I bring my own which is a double edged sword: it fits perfectly but it's got the intercom system from La Carrera Panamericana (so I could listen to Sarah Bennett-Baggs' instructions) but my RSR instructors have no such facility, and hearing their didactic commentary above the noise of the engines is well nigh impossible. No one apart from a few racers wears race suits, though clearly driving shoes are vital. Today's 20-car fleet consists of two 997 GT3s, four Lotus Exiges, a couple of Elise 2/Elevens, a BMW M3 and half-a-dozen each of Clio Cup and Mégane RS26R saloons. 'If a customer has booked a Clio to start with, they can upgrade during the day provided they've



already let RSR know that's what they want to do,' says Ron. The other cars present are mainly privately owned GT3s, plus a Ferrari 458 Italia Spider, a Nissan GT-1, a Corvette and a couple of very hot 964 RSs.

We start with a track walk at 9.00 o'clock, stopping our cars on the old grid and hiking up the implausibly steep hill from Eau Rouge to Raidillon where Ron explains the lines and techniques his ten instructors will be instilling in us punters. These guys are mostly

training, and we work with a selection of 50 guys.'

Next stop on our walkabout is Pouhon, the long, double apex lefthander that curves apparently gently into the second half of the circuit, its camber dropping the car out to the right so you're on the outer rumble strips by the exit. And Blanchimont, apparently an innocuous left, penultimate bend before the Chicane (that replaced the Bus Stop) bringing traffic back onto the pit straight, but for the experts a very fast double

“We start with a grid walk at 9.00am, stopping our cars on the old grid and hiking to Eau Rouge”

racers from touring cars and the Le Mans Series, who've done the Spa 24-Hours enough times to know it backwards, metaphorically speaking. Sometimes he engages F1 stars like Timo Glock, Eric van der Poele and Perry McCarthy. As Ron puts it, 'the racing guys only have one thing on their minds: with normal people it's sex, with racing drivers it's racing and they want to be on the race track, so they're perfect for driver

left where lines and balance are crucial. Every marshalling point is manned and the blue flag is the one most commonly waved: 'you stick to your line and the guy behind you will find a way around you,' says Ron. During my lappery I still back off if I see one of the 'racing' GT3s in my mirror, partly so I can select my best line through the approaching corner. The hotheads generally come to grief on the first lap so, says Ron,

Above: Our man Tipler at the wheel of RSRSpa's GT3 RS. You don't get to jump into one of these straight away. Practice starts in an Exige (right), but that's no hardship and if Porsches are your usual diet, then it will make an interesting change



GT3 RS CIRCUIT TRAINING AT SPA

'take it easy and approach limits from the safe end.'

It's a scorcher today, and open windows are a no-no, till the cooling off lap at least. I drink plenty of water when pitted, and I don't overdo it – because concentration wanes after four full-on laps anyway. Ron's team lay on the creamiest buns, croissants and coffee for breakfast and later there's a splendid lunchtime buffet in the roof-terrace restaurant above the pits garages.

The moment's arrived: I select an Exige for my prelim laps; I know the car well from scribbling numerous drive stories for Lotus's in-house magazine. It's what the Hethel firm does best – forget their most recent high-end aspirations that will never see the light of day, the supercharged Exige 260S is the kiddie out here: taut, agile, responsive, and very quick. On the straight it's overhauled by the GT3 RS, but in the turns it's phenomenal. You can't teach an old dog new tricks, so they say, but already Antony Ashley, my RSR instructor, is getting me to leave my hands in one place on the wheel, grip it less tightly and resist the temptation to move them around: I must push the appropriate hand upwards in the direction I want to steer. And brake in a straight line, so as not to upset the car's balance, using a constant throttle as I turn in so the back doesn't come out; only when I take the lock off do I start accelerating. On some curves it's fine to use the kerbs, while on others with a double apex I sacrifice one in order to take the second one faster. Being in the right gear for each corner is essential, and I learn that by counting his extended fingers. Here's Antony with the homily: 'the main thing is to get the basics right; it's much more important to have the car stable rather

than having a perfect line. The stability of the car allows you to carry the speed, because you lose a lot of speed by doing things mid-corner – braking too late, accelerating too early – and you really have to feel that, so that when you brake you change down too, do it all in one movement. You brake, you change down, and as you come off the brake that's when you turn in, because that's when you are getting the maximum bite on the front wheels, and then you can start increasing speed.'

Now comes what we're here for: the Porsche experience. I'm clenched into a racing style seat in the cockpit of the GT3 RS, easily finding the most comfortable angles for squab and backrest, enveloped by an intricate roll cage and bound by a Schroth Racing harness, a reassuringly secure environment for tackling the course. We trundle slowly up the F1 pit lane, show our 'driver' wristbands to the marshals and accelerate out onto the track below La Source. That hairpin is a snapper's favourite because you're almost close enough to touch the cars and, hence, I know the best line round it by heart: but no one on the trackday comes close. Naturally I try my best to emulate it, and my instructor says, '...could we be a little further out next time, please?'

And here we are approaching Eau Rouge. You have to lift, surely? Well not necessarily: depends on your entry speed of course, but I can state that I took a GT3 through there without so much as a jab on the brake. Comparisons come to mind: the Corkscrew at Laguna Seca, Paddock Bend at Brands Hatch, Bergwerk on the Nordschleife. Ron is dismissive: 'whatever people have told you, Eau Rouge is not flat, it is very far from flat

A GT3 RS around the Spa circuit. Does it get any better than that? Johnny probably wishes it was his GT3, but actually there's a lot to be said for using someone else's car



and unless you are able to copy your line at least ten times in a row you are not ready for speeding up yet.' The entry to the corner is from the pit wall, veering left and, adhering to Antony's guidance, I don't accelerate too soon because there's still a lot of movement in the car; if I accelerate and I don't have any bite on the front, it gets dangerous. Nevertheless, it's equally thrilling and rewarding as we top out, barrelling across Raidillon's kerbs and onto the long Kemmel straight to the Esses. The GT3 RS is deceptively quick and I concentrate on gaining speed, braking early for the tight right-left followed by a deceptively tight right. Another downward rush before the long, adverse cambered right, no throttle here, clip the left-hand kerb and straightline it to the tight, off-camber left, then there's another longer run down to Pouhon. It's fast and furious, with several other cars vying for the corners too. Feather the throttle, clip the apex much further round than you'd think, allow the car to drift out, and slightly downhill again to the next right-left. The following sequence seems straightforward: tight right, onto the rumble strips, aim for the blockhouse and veer right, powering hard for Stavelot and the final push for the wrestling match in the wiggle ahead of the pit straight – hard braking and opposite lock. All the while I'm either figuring out where to pass the odd slower car or, mostly, I'm watching the mirrors to check where the quicker ones are. The instructors are amazingly competent at this game, and sometimes it's akin to real racing.

And RSR's verdict on my efforts? 'You did really well,' says Antony. 'But don't go into quite a difficult corner like Eau Rouge and be too aggressive on the throttle; it's better to find a slightly higher speed going in and then keep it stable, so what I notice is sometimes you

go in maybe a little bit slower than you could, and then you hit the throttle, so you destabilise the car, so next time a little bit more speed into it, constant throttle, let the car just find its way through, and as soon as you can you hit the accelerator again.'

As we pack our kit away the wrecking truck hoves into the top paddock, hauling the sad carcass of the red Corvette that's clearly gone off broadside. It's not the only casualty: one of the RSR Exiges is also similarly damaged, and that is trailered away for repairs at the Nürburgring HQ. No such denouement for me: I have the grin of someone on a permanent high. It's been one of the best driving days ever: I've learned a lot about on-track car control, handled a GT3 RS and, best of all, fulfilled a lifelong dream of lapping the hallowed Belgian GP circuit.

A CLASS ACT

I first met Ron Simons at the Nordschleife nine years ago. I'd just bought the Peppermint Pig and was attempting to give it a baptism of fire when the authorities denied me access – German export plates were verboten (something to do with damaging their Armco) and the personable Dutchman came to my rescue. He was taking a class of trackday wannabes at the time, and he gave me a few laps in one of his Alfa 75 saloons instead. He still owns about 50 of these cars, last of the rear-drive Alfas (and probably the only ones in the world not to have rotted away), and the 75Experience is the bedrock of his trackday enterprise. As he says, 'the 75 is still the best car around for trackdays, you can't beat that, budget-wise.'

The emphasis of RSR's operation shifted to Spa three years ago because of the apparent mishandling of the associated facilities at the Nordschleife by its owners

Cars parked up on the old grid and instructor and pupils take a stroll up to Eau Rouge for a spot of familiarisation. Photographs and TV never do this fearsome section justice. It is very steep, and while it may be flat in an F1 car, it certainly isn't in a road car



GT3 RS CIRCUIT TRAINING AT SPA

Nürburgring Automotive GmbH, who sought to oust trackday firms like RSR by offering exclusive tour and accommodation packages to its own customers; even Ring Taxi queen Sabine Schmitz fared no better. Last year RSR obtained a high court ruling that overturned the circuit stakeholders' ban on the basis that it contravened German Anti Trust laws while continuing to offer similar services – in effect, a monopoly. Still, the damage was done. 'We can only do private instruction on exclusive track days at the Nordschleife,' says Ron, 'and we can only do taxi hot laps on racing and track days, and that is simply not enough for the number of customers we have every week. We needed to look at other tracks and you don't need to look far to see that Spa is the best track in the world with the best corner in the world! It's worked well for Spa too: 'we've created a lot of demand for Spa and that's why we have been awarded the driving academy status here. We are the only racing school, driving academy

tyre package – we have full racing wets for the guys who know what they're doing – and the track day fee is on top, that's 500 euros, and then the private instructor can be added. So you can spend about 5,000 on the day and 900 euros including the instructor.' A lap package is available too: a punter or a syndicate can buy 320kms, the equivalent of 46 laps of Spa or 16 at the Nordschleife, and that is plenty for a day. 'Sixteen laps of The Ring is a good two hours of track time and normally you would be absolutely knackered after that, and if you are not that experienced you can't do 45 laps of Spa on the trot because you'll lose concentration. But the day is 8 hours long, so you come in and have a drink and talk and you go out again.'

Ron has his punters' motivation taped: 'most people can afford something really fast and they can point and squirt it on the road, but probably not in such a safe manner, and then when they come through our

“We needed to look at other tracks and you don't need to look far to see that Spa is the best”

and event organisers at the circuit.'

It's the same range of cars deployed at the Nürburgring: 'You can start off with a 200bhp Clio and work your way up to a Renault Mégane RS26R which has got nice stability. From there we can put you into the more track orientated Lotus Exige 260S and after that we can get you into a Lotus 211 which is the open top car, and then from there we can go to the Porsche GT3 and after the 997 GT3 we have the GT3 RS which has got the full cage and semi-slick tyres.' That's our baby! Conversely, they need slower cars too because Spa is already quick enough: 'in the wet a Clio is great fun; it is safe and it is affordable. If you share a car with two or three people and you have eight hours of track time, you can do it for 4- to 500 euros. If you go to the Porsche GT3 you're on a different scale and that's 3,500 euros for 320 kilometres on track, including the

school we can start to train them.' RSR use a video feedback system, including theory, circuit diagrams and track time, filming in-car to monitor and refine technique, 'so that you're safe around everyone else, to yourself and the car, and from there we can bring down your lap times. You maybe start at a 3m 30s round here and at the end of the day you can be down to 3 minutes in an average car just by getting the line right, braking points right.'

Next year Ron plans to offer Radicals, and he's set to build a new facility at Stavelot. 'We're going to have the same premises as we have at the Nürburgring, so that'll be a full garage, lounge, changing rooms, apartments on top of the building and a classroom. At Grand Prix time we will have a package for you: just arrive when there are 100,000 people here, and you'll pass all the queues, park your car in our private



Above: Look carefully and you'll see what is the ultimate track day weapon – a Passat 2.5 diesel. Actually it's the long suffering workhorse of g11&PW snapper A. Fraser. Below: It's a track day and so cue lots of Porsches. Could these guys be from Italy?



basement, put your stuff in your apartment and in 2 minutes you can be at the track watching Formula 1 cars.'

The Nordschleife currently still represents 75 percent of RSR's business, though inevitably that will swing in Spa's favour. Ron has not only seen the trackday market burgeon during his 20 years as an organiser, but the nature of his clientele has also moved on: 'In the beginning we were appealing to an audience which had the basic car control to start off with, but now the number of customers has increased and the type of customer and their intentions and aspirations, everything has changed. In the earlier years the people that came to the Nürburgring were racing guys, or guys doing track days, and they had special cars, without ABS, without stability control, so they were the right type of customer for that programme. Now we see people who maybe do a lot of days on track but they've never been in a rear-wheel drive car before, never been in a car without stability control, and then they want to drive on the most dangerous track in the world. In fact there is no dangerous track; there are only dangerous people, but there the Clio saves lives. A Lotus or a Porsche, even an Alfa, is way too radical for most of them, and the Nürburgring gets this audience where somebody wants to do special things in his life so he goes bungee jumping off a cliff and surfing in Hawaii and he does the Nürburgring in a Clio. We have customers with quite

a bit of cash to spend, and they can buy another car, another house, another yacht, but what really makes them happy is an experience like this, driving on the best track in the world with a group of like-minded guys, just having fun. So we have everyone from the guys who've never driven on a track before and those who want to come and be the big bad wolf, to the seasoned veteran professional who wants training from us.' It doesn't end there; some punters sign up for a complete package: 'they'll spend days with us, and we have a deal with a hotel and restaurants where we take them out and wine and dine them, so there's a whole social aspect around it.' Trackdays aren't everyone's cup of tea, and Ron has that covered too: 'people can love cars, but they want to enjoy the car without defending their corners, and without all the stress, so we organise a programme of tours with the Lotus Exiges, and that's probably happening every other day now.' RSR's customers can be on track without being on the circuit, for example driving the old Spa circuit which includes Burnenville, the 800m-long downhill right that's public road towards Malmedy, and the Masta straight (more of a kink really) where the 917s once ran flat out. A few classic cars are available for tours, including a Lancia Delta Integrale, Ferrari 308 GTB, Sunbeam Tiger and Alfa Romeo GTV. What more do you want? You even have the setting, the most picturesque location on probably the world's most dramatic circuit. **PW**

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*Restrictions at the 'Ring
have seen Ron Simons start
to move parts of his RSR
operation to Spa, where
RSR has now been awarded
official Spa driver
training status*



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