

THE UPHILL STRUGGLE



“Stefan Bellof was killed here in 1985 and just last week someone died at this very spot on a trackday.”

As welcomes go, it certainly isn't the most reassuring, but these are the first words I hear from the founder of trackday specialists RSRSpa, Ron Simons, who is leading a track walk at Spa-Francorchamps. I'm with dozens of other trackday drivers who have congregated at the barrier on the outside of Eau Rouge, one of the most famous corners in motorsport.

“Anyone who's told you that you can take Eau Rouge flat isn't a friend,” continues Simons, as he explains the challenges of the corner and its unforgiving past.



While modern Formula 1 cars are now able to take it flat without the slightest hint of a lift – much to the irritation of critics who claim it's no longer a proper corner – for me and my fellow trackday comrades this is just one of many turns around the 4.352-mile track that will need to be respected.

“If you're not scared, you will die. Fear is what keeps us alive,” Simons adds.

Now sufficiently full of dread, I turn to Terry Bower, a professional driving instructor with 19 years' experience, nine of those with RSR, who will be my coach for the day.

Thinking Simons' words amount to little more than scare tactics to keep everyone in check, I ask him whether the story about the recent incident is made up.

“Ron wouldn't say something like that

GGLE TO TAME SPA

FRESH FROM HIS FIRST EXPERIENCE OF RACING, **STEFAN MACKLEY** HEADED TO THE HOME OF THE BELGIAN GRAND PRIX FOR AN RSRSPA PREMIUM TRACKDAY. HERE'S WHAT HE LEARNED



GETTING STARTED IN MOTORSPORT

if it wasn't true," comes the response.

Standing on the steep incline looking down to the entrance of Eau Rouge and envisaging the speed at which I'd be approaching the corner, I begin to wonder what I'm actually doing here.

The purpose of my visit is to spend a day alongside an RSRSpa trackday instructor who, in theory, will teach me how to become a better driver. I'd competed in my first race, the

Rockingham Citroen C1 24 Hours, just two weeks before and shown general competence – even if I was several seconds off the pace. But now I'm to take on one of the world's most famous circuits and make the next step in my racing 'career'.

While most people have brought their own cars, my vehicle is a Renault Megane RS 265 rented from RSR, but there are much quicker machines in attendance, including a Porsche

911 GT3 RS (991) and Radical SR3 RSX.

Although these would obviously have allowed for a quicker lap time, a trackday isn't all about the numbers on the board. To get the most from the day, drivers are encouraged to choose a car that matches their ability. There's little point jumping in a car with more than 500bhp when you're struggling to get the most out of one with half as much power.

As we continue the track guide in convoy, we take in all the corners at a leisurely pace. The next stop is Pouhon, the downhill double-apex left-hander, where I count no fewer than four separate sets of tyre marks leaving the circuit at the start of the second apex and ending at the barriers. It's a reminder that even with the swathes of runoff, this is a ►



EXPERIENCE SPA FOR YOURSELF

Ron Simons Racing prides itself on being the premium trackday specialist, offering customers the complete package of supercar rental and driver tuition at some of Europe's most famous circuits.

The company was founded by Simons – a Dutchman with a background in development and testing for marques including Lancia, Alfa Romeo, Porsche and Ferrari – 15 years ago, and he has expanded his model across Europe, attracting clients from around the world.

There are various branches to the company, which developed from Simons' Nurburgring-based 75Experience using a fleet of Alfa Romeo 75s. After RSRNurburg, based near the famed Nordschleife, started in 2002, RSRSpa was established in '09 and was followed in '14 by RSRiberia, which specialises in trackdays in Spain and Portugal, including Circuit Portimao and the Ascari Race Resort.

The RSRSpa Premium Trackday calendar gets underway on May 6-7, with a driver briefing and options for instruction included.

For more information visit www.rsrspa.com



track that needs to be respected.

With the track guide concluded, it's time for the serious business of the day. Trying to put the 'what if?' scenarios to the back of my mind, and with Bower scrutinising my every move, I blast out of the old pits and up Eau Rouge before emerging at the top of Raidillon for my first real driving experience of Spa.

What becomes apparent very quickly is the speed difference between the cars. My only racing experience to date has been in a single-make event. But this is a completely different story, as I'm now among machines that have more than double the power and stopping capacity of the Megane.

I'd commented as much before we went out, but Bower tries to reassure me: "Stefan,

I guarantee you that although these are fast cars, half of them can't be driven properly."

Still, much of my time for the first five-lap stint is spent looking in the mirrors at the seemingly never-ending stream of faster cars. Even as the day wears on and I become more confident in both the Megane and my abilities, the spectre of a quicker car behind me isn't far away.

RSR's strongly enforced policy for all trackday users to only overtake on the left helps to make things more predictable, but that doesn't stop a Porsche GT3 divebombing me on the right into Stavelot, or me having to take avoiding action when a KTM X-Bow decides there's a gap through the left-hander of Les Combes. There wasn't.

But all that is yet to come, and after my first





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run Bower is reasonably happy with my driving. "You have a very good feel for the car. You're not too aggressive or overdriving," he says.

Bower had stated that although he prefers to focus on the positives and tries not to discourage his clients, he would always inform them if they were being dangerous or foolhardy. The fact that he hasn't done so with me – and wouldn't for the whole day – helps to put my mind at ease that, while I feel like a mobile chicane, at least I'm not totally out of my depth.

As I continue to log laps my times tumble, but one issue in particular starts to become evident – my braking. I was told when racing a car you should always be on either the throttle or brakes, but years of driving on the road have created a tendency to roll off the throttle, coast

and then progressively apply the brakes, a habit that's proving hard to shake off.

My braking needs to be much firmer, but it also needs to be controlled so as not to unsettle the car, and it takes most of the day to reach a stage where I'm able to do this with any confidence.

"You were being too gentle with them, but then you started to get used to the different brake material in the car and you started to be a lot more positive," is Bower's feedback.

I also come to realise that as my speed increases, he wants me to brake earlier. At first I don't understand why. Surely, the quickest way around the track is to brake later, not earlier? But what I haven't appreciated is the speed I'm now carrying from the previous corner. It means I'm arriving at the next turn slightly quicker, so by

In some ways, it's a bit of a catch-22. Trackdays aren't all about lap time, and whether or not you manage to shave another second off your best time ultimately makes no difference – after all, you're not qualifying for a race. But what better way is there to judge if you're improving than by using the stopwatch?

During my runs, Bower turns the onboard Race Navigator away from me to make sure I'm not distracted by the times on the screen. It's another tool in the driver coach's arsenal to help trackday enthusiasts improve, as it

"My braking needs to be much firmer, but it also needs to be controlled"



Mackley's Megane wasn't the quickest vehicle at Spa...

braking earlier, getting the car balanced and accelerating through the corner, I'm carrying more speed onto the next straight and turn. It's a continuous cycle that's shaving seconds off my lap time.

Momentum in racing is everything, so gaining five metres on the brakes into a corner but then losing speed on the exit by being late on the power will ultimately cost you overall.

"Could you feel that the car was starting to slide because the tyres were overheating?" Bower shouts to me at one moment on track.

Bower is acutely aware of what the car is doing and relaying it to me. What surprises me more is that I can feel that the car is sliding, which I presume is being caused by the tyres. Having Bower confirm that my internal monologue is correct only serves to increase my confidence.

Through the course of the day, my lap times continue to drop, from a 2m32s with my first clear lap in the morning to a 2m15s in the afternoon. Bower is adamant that I was set to go another four seconds quicker, but once again traffic in the Bus Stop Chicane costs me, much to my annoyance.

"The big 'don't' of trackdays is don't try too hard," says Bower. "Get to know the car, get to know the circuit and then lap times will come down. Do not worry about lap times."

records throttle, braking and g-force data and every lap time set, with the facility to overlay two laps and compare them.

It isn't until the end of the day that I sit down with Bower and look through the data, but I don't find it especially useful. Without another driver's data to compare against, it mostly came across as a series of squiggles.

But had sitting alongside a driving coach made me better? Honestly, I think so. I could have spent the entire day driving around on my own and not got close to the time I managed. Rather than just telling me what I should be doing, Bower also explained to me why I should be doing it and how it affected the car at any given moment, which served to help my understanding of how a car behaves and how to get the most out of it.

"Through the lap you're very consistent with your driving," he says. "Some of those edges you can't polish off because you had traffic."

Quicker cars prove to be a thorn in my side, but Bower's prediction that half of them would not be driven properly also comes true. Through the turns, I frequently gain on cars only to be left in their dust on the straight, although this is par for the course on trackdays. Come the end of the day, I'm just glad to have made it through unscathed... ■