



# THE ULTIMATE TEST DRIVER

*Derek Bell is president of the Sports 2000 Club. Time for him to test some of its members' cars – and report his findings*

Words Richard Heseltine Photography Paul Harmer

**TRY HARD TO** make sense of it, and there's little to be found. Derek Bell MBE is on track, doing what he does best: hustling a sports-racing car. Yet he's sharing space with a trio of works BTCC Hondas, a couple of wayward Caterhams, a tube-frame VW Beetle and a monstrous NASCAR-style stock car. It's like a scene out of *Wacky Racers*, this open test day at Brands Hatch, and our hero appears his customary smooth self aboard a multi-hued Tiga. On his first flying lap of several, the five-time Le Mans winner and *Octane* columnist corrects a rare anomaly in his resumé.



You see, The Legend is president of the Sports 2000 Club (which organises four championships for these characterful, entry-level sportsracers) despite never having previously driven one. Today, he is evaluating a quartet: two semi-historic Ford Pinto-engined cars and a brace of Duratec-engined machines, one of them brand spanking new. And the significance of the venue isn't lost on Derek: John Webb, the former Brands supremo and arch-promotor, devised the category, after all.

Sports 2000 kicked off in 1977 and spread, in time, beyond the UK into

Europe and the USA. It attracted then-future Le Mans winners, BTCC champions and more besides, only for interest to wane in the early '90s. Since its rebirth in 1999, it has provided club racers with the opportunity to compete at classic venues without breaking the bank. What's more, it has drawn seasoned veterans and newbies alike. The racing is close and quick but rarely takes a turn for the physical.

Will these cars impress a man who has guided a Porsche 917 along the Mulsanne Straight at 246mph? Over to you, Derek... →

## TIGA SC79

'I haven't been in anything like this for years,' Bell says, surveying Chris Snowdon's Tiga. 'It reminds me of the old Mirage I raced in the 1970s, only it's a bit smaller and I'm guessing the Pinto engine puts out less power than a DFV.' Tiga was once a renowned manufacturer of S2000 and Group C2 cars; this example is prepared and raced by Snowdon. The prolific racer shares the car with Sports 2000 frontrunner Mike Fry.

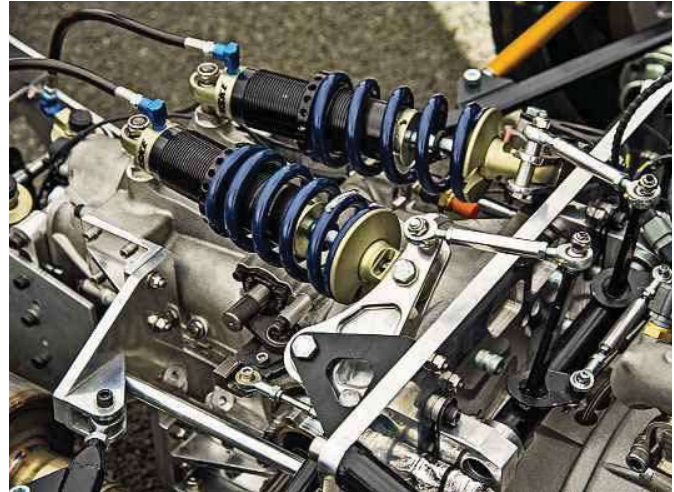
Perhaps better known for his championship-winning success with Alfa Romeos, Snowdon also competed in Sports 2000 in the late '80s and returned to the category in 2005. He claimed the Historic Sports 2000 title two years later and has racked up multiple race wins in the various classes since then. 'Considering how fast the cars are, they are good value for money, but it's all relative,' he adds. 'The Tiga has a glassfibre body, an aluminium tub and double-wishbone suspension. It's relatively underpowered so it's all about carrying speed through the corners.'

Bell returns from his test laps wearing a smile. Snowdon jokes: 'I'm guessing it isn't much like a 917' – which prompts a laugh from the man in the Gulf overalls. 'No, I can safely say that it isn't,' Bell fires back. 'It is bloody good, though. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't take it above 6000rpm, but it feels like a really well-sorted car. The kerbs here are awful, so I was doing my best to stay away from them, and it isn't my car so I wasn't pushing for the last tenth, but I was still pressing on. Coming out of Druids, there was just a tad of understeer but then I was back on it. There was no oversteer anywhere. At no point did it get nervous or jittery. It's incredibly neutral, which gives you confidence.'

'Of course, I would love for there to have been another 100bhp or so, but this isn't a slow car. What helps is that I felt comfortable. I'm the right shape for it so I didn't have to contort myself to fit. I like this car a lot. I'm impressed.'



**Left and below**  
The Tiga features glassfibre bodywork, double-wishbone suspension and a Ford Pinto engine. Derek thought it was 'bloody good'.





## LOLA T90/90

'I have always been a great admirer of Lolas,' Bell says, inspecting Colin Feyerabend's ultra-smooth, Pinto-engined T90/90. 'I did quite a lot of testing for [marque founder] Eric Broadley back in the 1970s, and held him in the highest regard. This car certainly looks different from the Tiga. It's hard to believe there is only five years' difference between them. It has a much longer wheelbase, for starters.'

Feyerabend, a key instigator of Sports 2000's renaissance, has been competing in the category for the past two decades. So what's the appeal? 'The Lola looks great, and Sports 2000 cars are relatively cheap for their performance,' he says. 'At Thruxton – which is a power circuit – they're quicker than the British GT series cars. The Lola was rebuilt over the winter and we haven't had time to shake it down, though.' Like the Tiga, the T90/90 comprises an aluminium central monocoque, a three-piece glassfibre 'shell' and double-wishbone suspension.

After several minutes spent adjusting the harnesses, Bell seems at home. 'You don't need a shoehorn to fit, which is a good sign,' he quips. And as there's been no post-rebuild testing carried out as yet, it's time for a masterclass from the man himself – and when he returns, he admits to having mixed feelings about the Lola.

'It isn't intimidating...' says Derek, weighing out every last syllable. 'The problem is, it lacks feel. By that, I mean it didn't tell me what it was doing while I was lapping. It didn't communicate anything through my contact points and seemed rather passive. It didn't really understeer or oversteer, but I wouldn't say that it was particularly neutral, either. If I was to race this car, I would want to play around with the settings and make it do something. I would provoke it into moving about so I had some idea of where the baseline was. I would then work on the set-up until I had it exactly how I wanted it. I just didn't feel as confident pushing it as much as the Tiga, although it was good over the kerbs. There was no jarring. It didn't seem to have the same amount of power, though. I think a little work on the set-up would work wonders.'



**Left and above**  
Lola is similar in concept to the Tiga but a few years younger. Fresh from a rebuild, it awaits shakedown testing and final set-up.





## RAY BRO9SC

While the Pinto-engined Sports 2000 cars pack around 135-140bhp, the more-modern Duratec-engined cars have around 200bhp. The Ray is untypical of the breed in that it is unique (although there is a spare chassis), but it has quite a pedigree. It represents a joint project between Gavin Ray, son of famed Formula Ford constructor Bert, and Steve Mole Motorsport. The car consists of a tubular steel chassis, a glassfibre body and rocker suspension; former Tiga racer Steve Mole developed it extensively and it made its competition debut at Donington in 2009, where Chris Snowdon finished sixth. Since then, it has been campaigned by many, 2015 Le Mans winner Nick Tandy among them. That makes Bell the second factory Porsche driver to take his seat in the car.

Which is easier said than done, as the Ray has been set up for a much shorter driver. 'It's a bit restrictive in here,' Bell says, somewhat superfluously. Nevertheless, he is animated on his return.

'I did feel rather squeezed in, which was a problem. It was a bit too tight around the hips and my knees were up against the base of the dashboard. However, once I had acclimatised, I was able to try that bit harder.'

'It is very fast; much quicker than the Pinto cars. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised because it is clearly a serious bit of kit, and I wasn't expecting there to be so much front-end grip. You can really feel the nose loading up, which took me by surprise first time out. It was excellent through Clearways – very planted, but overall I felt there was too much downforce at the front end and perhaps not enough at the back. Some of this could be due to the size of the splitter. It's enormous and I think it might work a little bit *too* well. I would be interested in trying the car with a smaller one and seeing if that helps.'

'Steve mentioned that it's about 40kg overweight, which is also going to have an impact on performance, but it is clearly a proper racing car. It's a good car that, with a few aero tweaks, could be an excellent one.'



**Left and above**  
Modern Ford Duratec engine in place of the Pinto in older Sports 2000 cars; still glassfibre bodywork but F1-style suspension.

## MCR

'This is clearly the all-singing, all-dancing Sports 2000 car,' Bell says, inspecting the MCR's pushrod-activated front suspension. 'It looks like clever stuff.' Designed by Brazilian Luiz Fernando Cruz and made by Welshman Clive Hayes, this shapely device has dominated the Duratec class in recent years, in addition to running at the front in non-Sports 2000 series elsewhere. 'We have made 18 since 2008,' Hayes adds. 'It has a chrome-moly spaceframe chassis, pushrod-activated suspension and glassfibre or carbon-carbon bodywork. This car is glassfibre-bodied.'

Unfortunately, the brand-new MCR managed only a lap and a half before returning to the pits. The problem was traced to an unresponsive ECU. That meant Derek was unable to test the car. 'It's a pity as I was looking forward to driving it,' he says. 'I gather that it is a front-running design. It certainly looks the part. I really feel for Clive, having driven all the way from Wales to Kent to be here.'

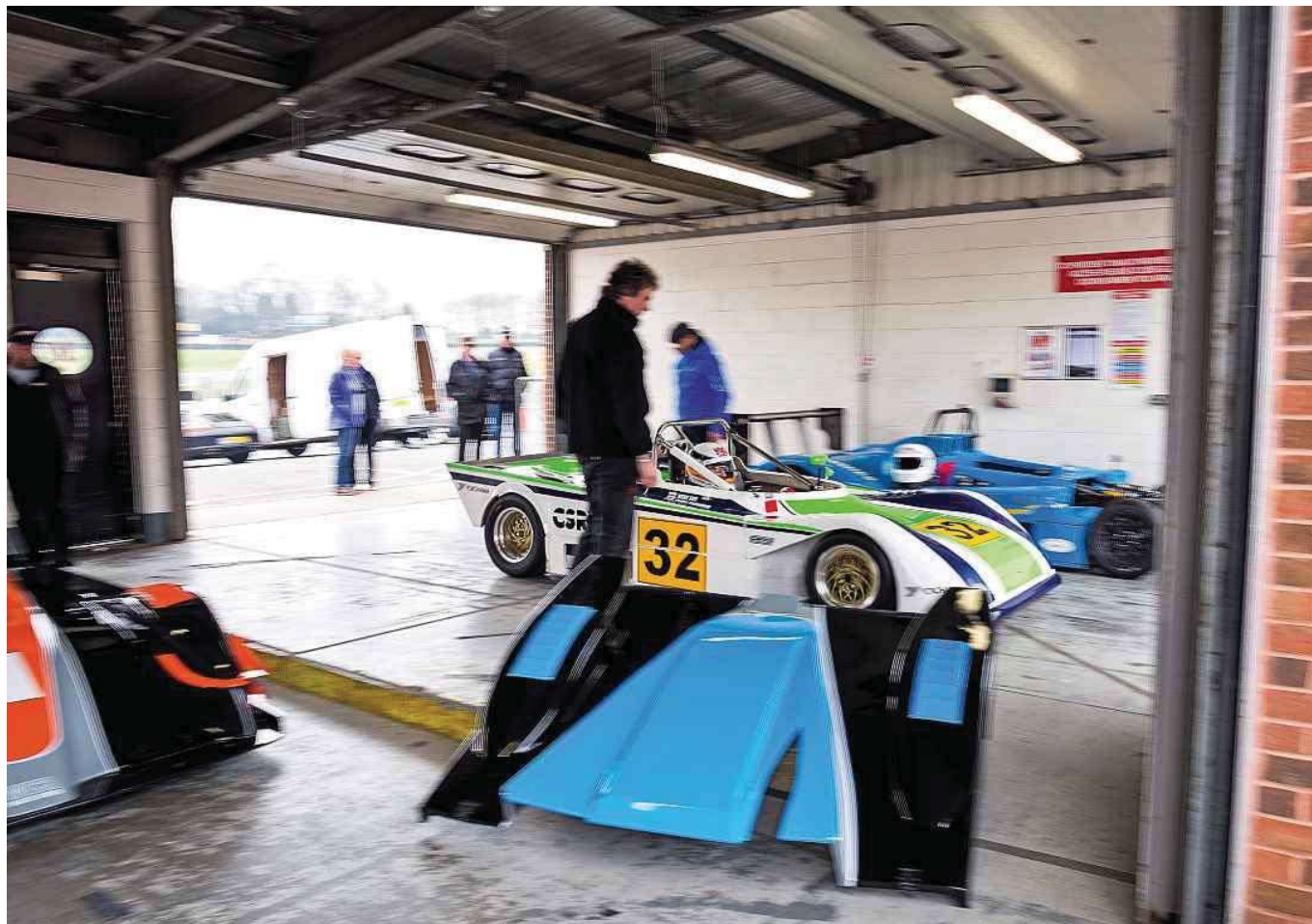
The car's owner, Mike Turner, began his motor sport career in 1968, competing in a Mini-Cooper S, before spending two years racing a Merlyn in the European Formula Ford Championship. Following several decades away from the cockpit, he returned trackside four years ago. 'I started out in Pintos before moving up to a Duratec,' he says. 'Sports 2000 racing represents good, honest club-level motor sport at sensible money. I realise that Ron Dennis isn't about to phone me and offer a drive any time soon, and the other drivers know the same. This isn't the sort of racing you get into if you want to be a world champion.'

'It's important to stress that there aren't a lot of accidents. We race hard but there isn't much in the way of contact. We also get to race at some fantastic tracks, and not just in the UK. Le Mans is about to be announced as a new addition to the calendar, and we will also be racing at the Nürburgring next year. We're out to have a good time as well as race, and what appeals to me is that there's a wonderful social side, too.'



Left and below  
The MCR is state of  
the art for Sports 2000,  
and is even available with  
a carbonfibre-reinforced-  
carbon body.





*'If you can be competitive in one of these, I don't see why you cannot be quick in just about anything'*

IF THERE'S A common thread throughout conversations with the driver/owners, it's that Sports 2000 provides close racing at an affordable price. In addition to the regular Pinto and Duratec classes, there is a standalone pre-'81 Historic series and another for longer-distance mini-enduros. 'If you were looking to buy a car like the Tiga, you would end up paying around £22,000 upwards,' Snowdon says. 'An '82 car sold recently for £23,500. An '84 March has just gone on the market for £30,000 but it comes with loads of spares. I wouldn't say that there's a particular price premium for the Historic cars, either. They haven't gone mad. I would expect to pay £23,000 to £25,000. As for a Duratec car, it depends on whether you're looking to buy one that's a few years old, or a brand new car.' A new MCR, for example, will cost you around £40,000 plus VAT, depending on spec.

And running costs? 'Again, it all depends on what you're after. If you use a new set of tyres at each meeting and also insure your car, you will probably be looking around £2000 to £2500 per meeting including entry fees and so on. That isn't exactly cheap but, again, it's all relative. You could save a lot by doing all the

preparation work yourself. As for the engines, the likes of Scholar and Philspeed have been around forever.'

The last word goes to Derek. 'I was pleasantly surprised,' he admits. 'I wasn't sure how the day was going to go, but I was taken by the enthusiasm of the owners. They're involved in motor racing for the love of it and it shows. As for the cars, they all have different characters. I don't want to single out one as being the best, but I think it's pretty obvious which one I felt most comfortable in. As for Sports 2000 itself, I think it's a fantastic starter series. If you've done a few seasons in, say, Clubmans racing or something similar, this would be a fantastic step up.'

Warming to the theme, he adds: 'If you can be competitive in one of these, I don't see why you cannot be quick in just about anything. I think you could do a year or two in Sports 2000 and move on to modern GTs, sports-racing cars or the really quick Historic stuff. Alternatively, there would be plenty of pleasure to be had in just staying put. That says it all, really.' **End**



THANKS TO Chris Snowdon, John Dean-Bowers, [www.sports2000.co.uk](http://www.sports2000.co.uk), and Sarah Mole.