

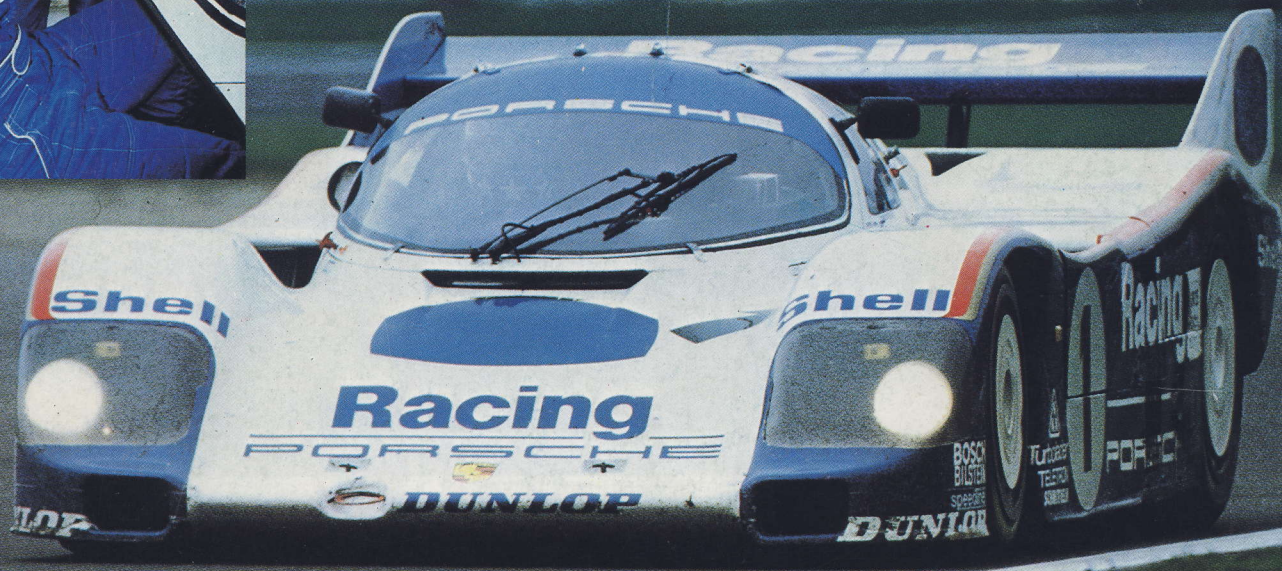
NOVEMBER 1986

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Track Test — Formula Three Ralt

Jaguar's Superb XJ6

Toyota Supra Test

Track Test

Tim Davies' Terropol Ralt



IT IS OBVIOUS that Tim Davies is an optimist. Not just because of the determination which has kept him fighting for wins, and sponsors, through FF1600, FF2000, and F3; more gratifying than that, he proved himself willing to hand over his Formula 3 Ralt to the mercies of two Standard House journalists to experience first hand the pleasures and pains of driving a top single-seater.

For a man who has shown that he has the speed and the racecraft to win, and the car to do it with, but whose moment has failed to materialise all season, Davies was remarkably sanguine about allowing two non-racers to try his seat for size with a third of the F3 season still to go. But with the help of John Thompson, Tim's manager, and the enthusiasm of both Guido Basile, team owner and second driver, and Brian Holmes, whose Auto Windscreens company is the other major sponsor, a rendezvous was arranged — Bruntingthorpe Proving Ground in Northamptonshire.

This ex-airfield track is of course where MOTORSPORT testing is carried out, but as this does not normally include timed laps, it was likely to be no less daunting for me than for my colleague David Tremayne, editor of our weekly sister paper, *Motoring News*. Using this

TIM DAVIES at the wheel of his Ralt RT30. Note the asymmetrical side-pods, with the radiator on the driver's left, and the air-cleaner which fills most of the view from the right-hand mirror.

venue was ideal as we could expect to have the place to ourselves, while in case of over-exuberance, there is practically nothing to hit — no armco, no marshalls posts, nothing fixed at all. Plenty of wildlife, though...

Like most drivers, Tim Davies has had a continuing struggle to finance his racing. It was while scraping together the cash race-by-race for his first F3 season in 1985 that Davies met Guido Basile, Italian boss of a games machine company called Terropol, who was running in FF2000. Basile agreed to help Davies out, and the one-race deal blossomed into a much more ambitious project — Team Terropol, a two-car F3 team for the 1986 season running Ralts, with Davies in one and Basile, running in Class B, in the second.

There is nothing technically startling about the Ralt RT30; its inboard spring/damper units follow normal F3 practice, cleaning up the drag of the suspension, and while ground effect proper was banned in 1985, the flat bottomed side-pods are continued up under the rear suspension to try

and generate a little extra grip. Aluminium used for the monocoque, with cast aluminium fabricated front bulkheads, and a single wing is bolted to the five-speed gearbox behind the rear axle. Mated to the John Judd's Engine Developments VW single-cam unit derived from the eight-valve GTi, producing some 163 bhp when boosted through the compulsory 24 mm air restrictor.

Since racing engines are supposed to pump fuel, the recent reductions in lead have brought a major headache to without this anti-knock additive, there is a risk, in highly tuned engines, of detonation, severe and damaging pinking. Both Davies and Basile were more worried about coming off the track by detonating the unit than about over-revving, but to reduce the risk, the team added a fuel booster for our private session.

Before climbing into the car, Tim Davies and I around the circuit the team had selected the XR2. With a 2-mile straight and three loops, Bruntingthorpe allows several variations; the team chose to string together shorter loops to give us a 2.5 mile lap with nine corners. I say some, as two of the far side are so wide and shallow as to be one sweep where our highest speeds would

reached.

I was happy to let David go first, while trying to rehearse mentally the lines and gears I should use, but only made myself more apprehensive as the car stalled a couple of times. Getting a racing car rolling is never easy. Then Tim stepped forward with the advice to just tip the clutch a couple of times to make the car roll, before finally releasing it, and then David was away.

It seemed a long time before he finally relinquished the limelight to me, but his wide grin told its own story. "It's terrific" he said, "and it's easier than you expect". It was, too.

Getting into the car is a knack — step over the side-pod, thread a foot through the front bulkhead, grab the roll-bar behind you and slide down, feet under the steering rack and up to the tiny pedals. This is all aided by a removeable steering wheel. To the right is the short gear-level, ahead the simple instrument panel: central rev-counter, red-lined at 6000, combined fuel pressure and water temperature to the left, and oil pressure and temperature to the right. Flick switches for ignition, bad weather rear light, and fuel pump are below, with a push-button for the starter and a shrouded one for the fire-extinguisher system; brake balance adjustment and separate controls for front and rear anti-roll bars complete the equipment. Sitting there with the Willans six-point harness done up tight, the car seems beautifully compact — no spare space beyond the minimum needed to operate the controls, nothing visible of the body except the front tyres, a perfect driving position (conveniently, Tim, David and I are around the same height), and a well-shaped, though hard, seat. Ignition on, fuel pump on, nothing left but to press the starter — an external battery is used to preserve the tiny on-board one — and blip the throttle. Select first, back and left, lift the clutch once, twice, plenty of revs, and the car is moving.

For that first exploratory lap I stuck to second and third to keep the engine spinning in the crucial 4800-6000 range, learning about the very short pedal movements and the high-g geared steering, plus what the circuit looked like from this low viewpoint; bordered as it was by a crop of wheat, judging brake and turn points was not easy. From our base, corner one is an open 60 degree left into a short straight and a 90 right with a slight rise to the third bend, a rather blind 80 right leading across the main straight and into a faster 70 right. This is the fastest section from here with a mild left kink, a long straight, and three fast open right-handers which combine to make the last 90 right particularly critical, needing heavy braking, a double-downshift, and a precise turn-in point. This is also where the team were watching, so a bungle here could not be concealed.

Even in a road car, this ex-airfield is far from smooth, so the Ralt was set up with more ground clearance than normal, while Tim cautioned us about particular bumps to avoid, and advised on gears and the best line for each bend.

Timed laps were to be the order of the day, and our mentor took only four to set our bogey of 1 min 19.03. Even on the open bends we could see from our temporary pit-lane this looked fast,



SLIDING IN without standing on the side-pod, resting on the bodywork, or trapping a foot takes a little practice.

sudden screeches denoting a bumpy braking point as the undertray grounded, the engine sounding hard and strong despite running a small silencer for the first time.

First impressions were of the rough surface: the ride and the seat are hard, and the steering wheel leaps and bucks in the hands. The noise, too, was terrific, making the ears ring, but discomfort was forgotten in the delight of just how precise the car felt turning into a bend and how crisp was the gearchange; the chassis seemed absolutely stable, and the braking available was astonishing. As the revs through each bend increased lap by lap, and I began to use fifth with maximum revs, things began to flow together — instead of changing down I started to believe Tim's advice to keep the throttle open and let the steering scrub off speed for you in the faster corners. First I achieved fourth right through turns two and three, summoning all my courage to keep that pedal down even though the exit across the main runway was invisible.

TURN NINE — at the end of the fastest section, this was the most critical, and the most satisfying when it turned out right.



Braking and grabbing third for turn four proved a waste of time, and very uncomfortable due to the bumpy surface here; sliding over to the left-hand verge and then smoothly clipping the right-hand apex in fourth was not only faster, it avoided the intensified pummelling that braking brings. After holding the revs at 6000 through the left kink a couple of times, I decided there was no point in postponing fifth until after it, and when I was brave enough to take top before this the Ralt felt absolutely confident. In other words, despite my increasing speeds and commitment, I was still not stretching the car.

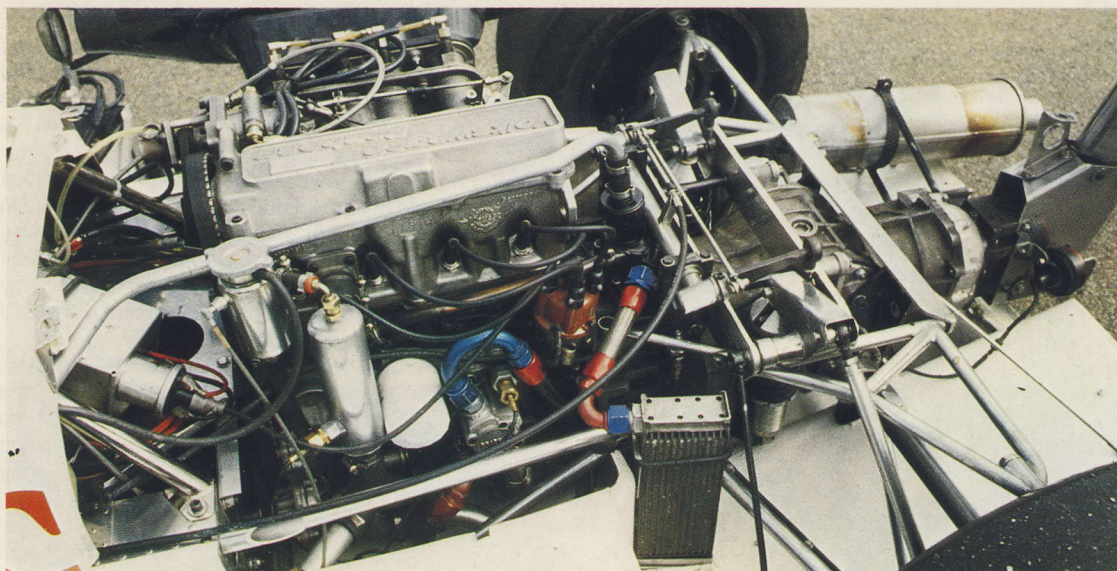
Hardest of all was the last bend, Turn Nine. Getting a bit cocky, I tried to approach it holding fifth from the previous sweeping rights and go straight to third under braking, but after finding neutral and then ignominiously chugging through in fourth in front of the whole team on two successive laps, I abandoned this plan in favour of taking fourth as I hit the brakes, and third just before coming off them and aiming down the straight.

Proceedings were interrupted for lunch, a barbeque ably prepared by Guido Basile himself with the benefit of one of his previous careers in catering, and David and I swapped notes. He had found he could hold top through the first bend, which depressed me a little, whereas I felt that I was gaining time over the rapid back stretches where I was in fifth for what felt like ages — whole seconds I should think. Already we were a little deafened from that engine wailing behind the head, and sore around the knees — in a fast corner, the legs thrash uncontrollably against the lightly-padded bulkhead, and it hurts. My respect for professional drivers was increasing steadily.

Gear ratios for Bruntingthorpe had been a bit of a guess, but Tim selected Silverstone gears which turned out about right, giving us around 140 mph in fifth. Not outstanding in itself, but the impressive part is how close the car's cornering speeds are to that. With a restricted engine and slick tyres, braking is almost the cardinal sin — be smooth, use all the road, make the tyres do the work, those are the rules. Precision and the ideal lines are crucial when all one's rivals have within 2 bhp of the same power.

How precise the two rookies were is debatable, but both of us made steady progress throughout our two sessions, and would gladly have stayed for another day if we had not known that even one day out of the team's schedule was very generous indeed. The urge to perfect each corner and then string the proverbial "flyer" together took over both of us, but I at least knew that I had chickened out at some point on each lap. The figures say that MOTOR SPORT had the edge on *Motoring News* by some seconds, my best being 1:27.15, more than seven seconds adrift of Tim, but John Thompson took another three seconds off my time when he had his first shot in the car.

As a day out it could not have been better: perfect weather, an ideal location, and the cheerful atmosphere of the whole team from Guido and Tim to mechanics Damon Brentnall, Adrian Burgess and Robert Costa, and timer Phil Cleveland. As an education for a journalist it



RALT EXPOSED: note inboard spring/dampers and small silencer added for testing (above). Minus detachable wheel, the instrument panel is compact and rather hard to read at speed on rough concrete. Bottom, Davies expounds on technique.

was profound, most of all because of the aches and pains of the next day. The knees I have mentioned, but my arms too complained about the effort of holding a steady course through a bumpy bend; you really do have to be fit to contest a 1½-hour race.

Looking back it is easier to say "I should have used fourth instead of third at that bend" or whatever, but to be truthful I still do not know where I was losing those seconds on the expert. I was pleased to have made no major mistakes, but given the abilities of the car that was no real feat. The real test would be to return and see if what I learned on the day has stuck. — G.C.



Time for action.

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