

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE



Just like any infant, I had it drilled into me that you shouldn't get into a car with strangers.

Twenty-odd years on, I managed to break the golden rule – and only just about lived to tell the tale afterwards.

Well and truly in the driving seat of the race-prepared BMW 320 touring car was the Netherlands' Tom Coronel, of Carly Motors team.

Whimpering apprehensively in the seat next to him was one dazed journalist.

To mark the run-up to the FIA and GT European Touring Car Championships, which starts today and lasts until Sunday, I had been invited to Donington Park to test my breakneck speed bravado with a couple of laps around the circuit.

It was a tough decision – I didn't get my licence from the Mary Poppins School of Driving, but neither would I class myself as an adrenaline junkie – roundabouts in children's playgrounds make me dizzy.

BY GEORGE DRYDEN

But setting eyes on Tom, six foot tall, good-looking and with no outward signs of self-destruction, how could I refuse?

One by one, each of us was skilfully sped around the track at up to 140 mph (bends taken at a mere 90mph) – a task which no doubt served as a useful pre-cursor to his weekend challenge.

SQUEEZED

With the ink still drying on my life insurance policy, I squeezed myself in beside the man who was about to take my life in his glove-clad hands.

It was too late to change my mind and reverse my decision to go.

The stiff upper lip is usually the ultimate defence in tense situations, but with a screeching of brakes, a revving engine and a look of horror, he'd got me hook, line, and sinker.

He knew I was terrified.

As we approached the track from the pit lane, gathering speed every millisecond, he got hold of my hand and held it in a victory grasp as we headed into oblivion (far scarier than the Alton Towers ride of the same name, I can assure you).

I'd promised myself to keep a check of the speeds we reached as we hit bends sharper than Sketchley's Keep-a-Krease, but all professionalism went out the window and self-preservation kicked in as he gripped my hand once again and said 'Don't worry' with a warmth that in other situations would have made me melt.

I had been the seventh in line for the dubious Lap of Honour and pressures of time had meant – disappointingly I first thought – that we only had time for one ring of the circuit.

Only moments into my 45.8 second joyride was I thanking my lucky stars that one lap was all I'd get.

How on earth the tyres gripped the surface like they did and how he kept his nerve throughout will remain a mystery to me

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for eternity, but thank goodness they did.

Upon our welcome return to the pit lane, it took two people and Tom to tell me it was all over and time to get out.

I thought I'd kept my dignity quite well during the journey.

I'd prepared ahead with only a light breakfast and kept my squeals to a volume which could be muffled by my snug safety helmet and the guttural roar of the engines. Or so I'd thought.

With a cheeky, knowing smile, he patted my arm and told me he'd heard every scream, and every Anglo Saxon expletive uttered.

He said he'd never forget the look on my face throughout. And I'll never forget the ride of my life.



FOOT DOWN: Tom and George speed out of the pit lane on the flying lap in Tom's BMW 320