

Laps entertainment

AS A keen motorsport fan and an avid follower of the British Touring Car Championship, being invited to join Kent's Motorbase Performance for the final round of this year's series at Brands Hatch, was one too good to turn down.

I was asked to join the team for last weekend's crucial round at the Kent track, which represented an opportunity to see exactly what's involved in getting the cars ready for race day.

The majority of the teams arrive at a circuit on a Thursday when all the frantic work begins before the scheduled three races on the Sunday.

The scale of the project for a race weekend is staggering. The Motorbase team, who made the short journey to Brands from their factory in Wrotham, is made up of 22 staff, which includes mechanics, engineers, drivers and support staff.

Three articulated lorries transport the cars – worth £150,000 each – and equipment, with one completely filled with enough spare parts to build another car.

Briefing

I joined the team on the Friday and after a team briefing with owner David Bartrum, it soon became clear that the day's efforts, which included setting the cars up and testing them on the 2.3-mile Grand Prix circuit, could make or break the team's weekend.

Bartrum explained: "It's very full on and Friday can be the most important day of a race weekend. Basically we use this day to get set up and it can become stretched with the amount of cars we run."

"The engineers are particularly busy as they have to analyse data and decide where to make changes. They dabble with changes on the cars to make the recipe for our weekend race plan. For me, I am everywhere working with the Porsches and the Touring cars."

Motorbase are entered in both the British Touring Car Championship, where they have two cars, and the Porsche Carrera Cup, in which three cars are submitted to race.

The mechanics set to work on preparing the cars for Saturday's qualifying, which is crucial in motorsport as that denotes starting or grid positions for Sunday's races.

The cars require a number of changes, which would seem superficial to an onlooker, but they can equate to fractions of seconds on the track, which in this series could be the margin between victory and second place. First, the BMW saloons – or the touring cars – are driven for 15km, known as a 'shakedown run', in order to establish the car's performance.

Once completed, wholesale changes are often made involving ride height, gear ratios, suspension settings and even an engine

IN THE POINTS: Rob Collard claimed points finishes but Team Motorbase's weekend finished on a sour note



Pictures: NICK DUNGAN

Kent on Sunday sports reporter TOM HOWARD goes behind the scenes with Kent British Touring Car team, Motorbase Performance, to see how they prepared for the final round of the championship at Brands Hatch



change if needed, which can unbelievably take the team only an hour to complete.

When I returned on Saturday, the work stepped up a notch to prepare for the day's all-important qualifying session.

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After each session, data from both cars were recorded on a tiny memory card which was analysed by engineers in an office in one of the trucks. The office is where drivers and engineers discuss how they can improve the

performance with the help of the car's onboard cameras.

Sunday came around quickly and Motorbase's two drivers, Jonny Adam and Rob Collard, qualified in seventh and eighth place on the grid respectively.

The garage on race day was a hive of activity and three hours before the first race I was greeted by the sight of mechanics frantically making changes to the gearbox of Collard's car.

The team have just 15 minutes between the cars leaving the garage to the start of the race as a chance to make any last-minute changes on the grid.

Team members, media and sponsors all congregate around the cars on the grid in a mad rush just minutes before the race. Amid all the frenetic activity, mechanics do the final checks on the car and driver before the red lights go out.

As the cars set off on their formation lap, the grid is cleared and everyone rushed across the pit lane into the garages to switch their attention to the timing screens.

The first two races passed without any mechanical problems for the team as their



CROWDED: The pit lane is packed with teams going about their business and fans clamouring for a look at the cars

drivers secured solid points finishes. Collard came home with a sixth and fourth place, while Adam finished seventh and fifth.

The final race of the weekend added somewhat of a surreal atmosphere to the paddock as the overall title became a three-way fight between Colin Turkington, Fabrizio Giovanardi and Jason Plato.

Yet it was Kent's Motorbase Performance that started the race on fire, galloping into second and third position to the delight of the pit lane crew.

But elation in the Motorbase garage soon turned to despair. Halfway round the opening lap both cars were punted out of the race when Adam briefly held the lead.

There was no need to ask the team what had happened as it was clear by their faces and the garage fell silent and cheers erupted further down the pit lane. With a chance to pick up a valuable race win against teams with bigger budgets, it was a missed opportunity through no fault of their own.

A disappointed Bartrum said: "Obviously it was not how we wanted to finish the season. There was something to be taken from the final race, but it just wasn't to be."

The season is over for 2009 but this circus begins all over again in April at Thruxton.



DRIVING SEAT: (l-r) Tom Howard with team Motorbase principal Oliver Collins, and checking out the cockpit of a BMW touring car