

Dunlop Sport Maxx Championship

Rounds 1 and 2, Snetterton

First rounds of the new season are always eye openers but this was an interesting one to say the least. We arrived at circuit on Wednesday for three days of testing, Leyton had got some time in the Corsa at Thruxton the previous month but Simon had never driven the Astra before so he needed seat time to get used to driving a forced induction car as his previous experience has all been in normally aspirated. Very quickly we knew we in for a good season; Leyton very quickly got used to the car and was putting in competitive lap times straight away – very impressive. Simon also settled in straight away and by the first morning was already lapping quicker than last years times for the race, the fact that both drivers adapted so quickly was very encouraging. We didn't spend a lot of time on the M3 as we were keen to have Leyton and Simon sorted in the other cars but it running new KW race suspension we spent the time trying different set ups and scrubbing in the new Dunlop Sport Maxx tyres.

A new season means new regulations and new tyres. The New Dunlop Sport Maxx control tyres seemed nice and grippy in the wet after limited bedding in time. In the dry once they'd been scrubbed, they offered a higher level of overall grip than last years versions, (this years SportMaxx tyre has a Kevlar construction which means you get more consistent heat build up) a point demonstrated by running the M3 on both last years and this years versions in testing. You can't help feeling that whilst racing on a road tyre is always going to be a question of compromise the Dunlop SportMaxx is actually a very good road tyre.

Qualifying

Watching the other VXR Astras and Simons Megane in the previous days testing showed us that our Astra VXR was quicker so we were hopeful Simon setting a good time and we weren't disappointed; he was a clear second and a half quicker than the 888 Astras but only a couple of tenths faster than Simons Megane so it was going to be a close race. Having a TMS Astra on pole though was a gratifying sight. Leyton also performed well, obtaining 4th in class. However, with big gap to the leading Clio we knew that we needed to make up time somewhere. The Clio is a lot lighter and with broadly similar power. Leyton did well to keep close to them, especially in a car with relatively limited testing. We knew the M3 was quick at Snetterton, indeed it should be, the superior aerodynamics compared to the hatchbacks and rear wheel drive in the dry meant we knew it would be fast at a power circuit like Snetterton so whilst initially having pole by almost 2 seconds we were quickly disqualified and placed at the back of the grid with a ten second penalty. Why? Well we built the M3 exactly to race regulations but discrepancies in the SportMaxx regulations meant we appeared to be underweight (not an accusation levelled at me too often I have to say). We knew it, they knew it and we simply sacrificed the car to ensure the issue

was recognised. As expected, the regulations are now being reviewed to sort the issue and we have appealed our exclusion formally to the MSA. This is not how we wanted to start the season but we have a genuine desire to see the SportMaxx Championship grow and for that it needs regulations that are both fair and controlled. Fortunately, BARC agree.

Race 1

With Simon on pole we had high hopes and with Leytons clear experience in actual race craft (you don't win the SaxMax Championship unless you know how to work in traffic) we hoped for a good race and we pretty much got it. Simon grabbed the lead and proceeded to lead the Leon, the Megane and one of the 888 Astras in a 4 way fight with all the cars dicing closely in the race. Leyton got off to a tremendous start and managed to fight his way past one of the Clios and even got past the other SEAT despite the fact the LEON was over a second faster in qualifying – impressive driving indeed. The M3's race was a different kettle of fish, being put at the back of the grid is bad enough but having to wait 10 seconds before starting as all the others race away is almost depressing and there are only two ways to react; accept it, drive your best or fight it and go out as hard as you can – I chose the latter.

We knew that assuming the lap times stayed around the same that it was theoretically possible even with a 10 second penalty to catch the leaders so I set off to do that. By lap six we'd managed to get to the lead but then disaster; I'd been pushing the M3 hard round Russell lap after lap and simply pushed too hard at just the wrong time and spun causing Simon in our Astra VXR to go wide thus ceding the lead to the Seat of Shaun Hollamby – I was gutted and was cursing myself for such a stupid error, but racing is racing so I set off to chase the leading 5 cars down again. Up ahead Simon was fighting hard with Gusterson who tagged him and spun him round at Russell. Simon fought back, eventually he got past with a bit of door banging at Seer. In the meantime I got back behind them to latch onto the bumper of the leader Shaun in the Seat and after a bit of a fight down the back straight we go back into the lead and pulled away.

Leyton had a roaring fight with Millers Clio and the other Seat with (judging from the state of the car) numerous contact so clearly he was relishing the racing. However Quentin Laithwaites Clio was too fast and he pulled away leaving Leyton with a well deserved second place. Up front Simon managed to claw back to the bumper of the Megane but couldn't get past to claim third place.

After the race we surveyed the damage, Simons Astra had been hit so hard that the fuel tank had broken one of its mounts and was hanging down together with some wheel and bodywork damage for good effect. Leytons Corsa had front and rear bodywork damage together with steering arm damage which affected its steering – can't have been easy driving with that.

Race 2

We had a good gap between races so we set about completing re-doing the geometry on the Corsa and repairing the Astra, we suspected the rear axle might bent from the contact with the Megane but it looked pretty good so we were keen to get back out there. Simon was on P2 on the grid and Leyton P4 again in the Class B and I took up my position at the back and waited for 10 agonising seconds of loneliness. After my screw up in race 1 I was determined to not put a wheel wrong in race 2.

Simon got off to a stunning start from P2 and leapt into the lead ahead of the Megane but at Seer Simon went wide allowing Gusterson and Hollamby through. Worse was to come though as Simon pitted with a problem, came back out but subsequently pulled over at Coram – gutting. Leyton had slightly less eventful race, try as he might to get past the Clios he couldn't quite get past so finished in third place. In the M3 we managed to drive a slightly more conservative race getting back to the lead by lap 7 this time after a harder battle to get past eventual race winner Wallbank in is Astra, whatever they did between races it was a lot quicker down the straights that's for sure.

Epilogue

It's a funny thing racing. When you look at the results we should be delighted with the weekend. Two race wins for the M3 (despite the penalty – which is under appeal), a second and third in class for Leyton in Class B and a third in Class for Simon in class A. However we feel a little deflated. Simon was the fastest Astra VXR in qualifying and in race one and without my screw up probably would've taken a win – something for which I personally take the blame for. Simon has clearly adapted to the Astra stunningly well out performing the other similar cars and despite a fair bit of contact (and damage) in the race managed to keep third. The pipe failure in race two was doubly frustrating as it was the connection we have to install for the series data logger for regulations which failed not anything to do with the car preparation for racing so that is a bitter blow to swallow.

Leyton did a stunning job driving a Corsa race that is unique in the World, no-one anywhere has race prepared a Corsa 1.6 turbo and for Leyton to change his driving style from an 850kg normally aspirated Saxo to a 180bhp 1120kg turbo charged Corsa is nothing short of stunning. We're now doing some extensive work with KW to develop the handling of the car so it can better compete with the lighter Clios in time for Pembrey in two weeks time.

And what of the M3? Well, its never nice to be disqualified for a technical infringement and starting from the back when you qualified on pole a bitter pill to swallow but we did it to highlight a problem that needs addressing in the regulations. We're confident that our appeal will be successful but more confident that BARC understand the issues and are addressing them with high priority. Our motivation for the Dunlop SportMaxx series is that is really is an excellent race series and will be

worthy of its BTCC feeder aspirations, we're certainly treating it as such. BARC are committed to allowing the series to adapt and grow and so are we.

Next race is Pembrey on 10th and 11th May where we'll be running the M3 in the Kumho Championship on the same week-end (we're going to be busy!) The SportMaxx races are different this round with a 15 minute sprint and a 45 minute endure, it'll be interesting to see what happens.

John