

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Seeing Silver at SeeRed](#)



While racing on the damp Donington circuit was fast and furious, one of the highlights of the fabulous VSCC SeeRed meeting last weekend wasn't a race at all. The sight, sound and smell of Mercedes-Benz W154, the beautiful 1939 Silver Arrow Grand Prix car, as it thundered round the circuit on a series of demo laps, was enough to bring spectators into the stands all by itself.

This car is very rarely fired up, let alone let loose on a circuit at speed, and the noise of that three-litre V12 – which for 1939 had two-stage supercharging – was equivalent to an entire grid of more humble race machines. This car, used for hillclimbing in 1939 and raced in Argentina by Fangio in 1951, is said to produce 585bhp. But what was less expected was the smell, which seemed to strike all the spectators, even those tucked away deep in the infield. What was that persistent scent of almonds, drifting across the Derbyshire countryside? “That’s the fuel – largely methanol,” explained Josef Ernst of the historic arm of Daimler AG, who had generously brought this legendary car from Germany for the demo runs at Donington.

The fortunate driver was Tony Dron, clearly aware of the heavy burden of responsibility as he took to the track for his first run in this utterly priceless piece of history – never having so much as sat in the car before. And while W154 stretched its legs, the reverse was true for Dron. It was an extremely tight squeeze and it seemed at first that the racer/journalist would not be able to get his long frame into the car at all. This, despite the fact that Dick Seaman, who was 6-foot 3-inches tall, raced the W154 in its day (and died in one at Spa in 1939). “But then I’m two inches taller – and that makes quite a difference,” said Dron. But once he’d slid right into the cockpit and got his knees well under the supplementary ‘saddle’ fuel tank, it was “really quite comfortable”. In 1939, the W154’s dual fuel tanks held up to 111 gallons of fuel to keep the thirsty engine supplied: consumption was just over two miles per gallon.

“Despite the obvious similarity in layout with the 1937 W125, the W154 is actually a much more sophisticated car,” said Dron after his demonstration runs. “The driver feels slightly less upright and far more enclosed within the cockpit. The clutch foot is enclosed to the left of the offset transmission tunnel and the brake pedal is on the extreme right, with the lower accelerator pedal in the centre. It’s ideal for heel-and-toe changes and feels very natural. What does exercise the brain however, is the unusual gate pattern of the five-speed gearbox. It feels very odd, shoving the lever forward to change up into top.

“The V12 is far more progressive than the explosive power of the 5.7-litre straight eight in the W125, which goes immediately onto power oversteer when you accelerate in a corner. With its more advanced chassis and lower centre of gravity, the W154 is a quicker race car with a more modern character. It feels more like something from the late 1950s than pre-War days. Still, with that much grunt, you do still need to keep your wits about you. In the wet run on Sunday morning, I found it could spin its wheels easily on the straights, even in the higher gears. My only regret is that there were no Auto Unions on the circuit on Sunday afternoon...”

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