

CLASSIC DRIVER

Aston Martin Racing: 50 Years On, a Championship Awaits



Aston Martin Racing could win the 2009 Le Mans Series Championship at the Autosport 1000km of Silverstone on 11 - 13 September.

The British team, fresh from its **1-2-3 at the Nürburgring** last weekend (23 August), is in with a very real chance of winning this year's **LMS Championship** – the first for the company in the top class of endurance motor racing with a two-seater prototype since 1959.

To publicise what is looking like an exciting event, the organisers arranged for **Darren Turner** and **Tomas Enge** of **Aston Martin Racing** (AMR), and **Jonny Cocker** of **Drayson Racing**, to be on hand for Q & As, as well as chauffeuring journalists around **Silverstone**. For the latter, **Aston Martin** had provided a **DBS**, a **V8 Vantage** and a **DB9**. **Tim Samways** brought along **DBR1/2**: the actual **1959 Le Mans 24 Hours-winning car**, fresh from a pre-**Goodwood Revival** rebuild.



And Tony Dron (a regular driver of the classic racing Aston over the years, and a thoroughly good bloke) happened to be there, too; so it would have been a shame not to have given it a bit of a twirl... more of which anon.

Back to the main event. Over 80,000 Brits make the annual trip to the famous circuit of **La Sarthe**, but a similar-looking grid will be coming to the UK for the season's finale. As many will know, the diesel-powered **Audis** and **Peugeots** run at an advantage at Le Mans but these works teams rarely compete in the other races. This year, the pale blue, **Gulf-sponsored Aston Martin LMP1** machines have set the pace and won two out of the four rounds held so far, picking up important points-scoring places along the way.



A win at **Silverstone** should seal both the drivers' (**Enge/Charouz/Mucke**) and teams' championships for AMR, although – depending on the exact result – a fourth place may well be just enough. Complicated stuff that I will leave the teams, and specialist press, to worry about. Suffice to say that these races are always fascinating, have varied grids (that include road-based GTs from **Porsche, Corvette, Ferrari** and **Aston Martin**) and actually include some overtaking. My, my.

Oh, and **Nigel Mansell** will be driving with his sons in **Team LNT's Ginetta-Zytek LMP1** prototype. So you can expect a **partial eclipse of the sun**, a **tornado at Becketts** or a **swarm of French hornets** to have a significant effect on the family's fortunes.

Press presentation over, it was time to have a few laps with the boys that really know their stuff in the latest models from the **Gaydon factory**. First up was **Jonny Cocker** in the **V8 Vantage**. His regular mount is **Lord Drayson's biofuel-powered GT2 Aston V8**, and he'll be driving this at Silverstone. Sitting alongside the young Yorkshireman, it's circuit driving of the classic school: smooth, using all the circuit and keeping the power down while click-clacking through the V8's **Sportshift** change.



We managed to keep **Tomas Enge** in the silver **DBS** in sight despite its power advantage, but the amiable **Czech** was doing a little showboating, throwing the big car into slides and 'backing it in' to corners. He is a rally driver, too, you know.

When I was with **Enge**, I put up with a couple of laps of that and then asked if he could do it the 'racing' way. Immediately the car's progress felt less dramatic but I'm sure the times dropped. He was still **very** hard on the brakes, though. Different drivers, different styles, I suppose.

By now, **Samways** had **DBR1** ready and it was to be my great pleasure – and honour – to sit alongside **Tony** for three laps of the National circuit. No seatbelts for the passenger and I'd forgotten my full-face, so it was back to the 1950s with just sunglasses and a smile on my face.



Any feeling of vulnerability soon evaporated with the euphoria of sitting alongside one of the country's most accomplished drivers in **the** Aston Martin. Forget all the Bond silliness: the **Le Mans winner** is the one. Tony's very smooth style, coupled with the car's handling – sublime in the late-50s – and **Samways'** superb preparation means that the car feels perfectly planted on the track. Acceleration, from the 3-litre straight-six, is strong and the brakes powerful. Stories of the David Brown gearbox's foibles are legion, but in this car the driver smoothly went from one ratio to another with little trouble.

One felt that you could really race the **DBR1** over a long period without stepping outside its comfort zone. Which is exactly its purpose: to win endurance events, even when mostly at a disadvantage to **Ferrari** and **Maserati** on sheer power.

We cruised back to the pits and I hopped out, to grab a slightly distracted **Darren Turner** for the last ride of the day. **Turner**, it turned out, was in line to share the **DBR1** experience with **Dron** next. Ever the gentleman, he obligingly turned in a couple of blistering laps in a **Touchtronic DB9**, before returning to the pitlane for his share of the fun as a passenger in the 1950s racer.

It was interesting to get a de-brief after his ride. Remember, this man has driven countless racing cars, been an official **McLaren** test driver, won his class at le Mans, etc, etc. Full of: "I thought he's going to brake soon... no, NOW!" and "The engine pulls well... and the sound!", he liked it. A lot - and is looking forward to his drive in a **Mini** at this year's **Goodwood Revival**.

That will be the week after the **Autosport 1000km of Silverstone** so, Darren, concentrate on the job in hand and win that one first, please.

For further details on booking tickets, see www.silverstone.co.uk or call +44 (0)8704 588 260.

*With grateful thanks to **Tony Dron**, and **Tim Samways** of [Tim Samways Sporting Cars](#).*

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