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DRIVER DIARY: #98 ANGELO LAZARIS

AUSTRALIAN GT CHAMPIONSHIP RD 4 QUEENSLAND RACEWAY

The weekend of 25th and 26th of May saw my first foray into top tier motorsport in the Australian GT Series at Queensland Raceway in my Lotus Exige GT3. I was fortunate enough to purchase this vehicle at the end of 2006 after it had been successfully campaigned in the British GT Series by Gavan Kershaw and Barrie Whight. I had spent the first part of this season carefully dissecting the car and its characteristics with my crew before taking this quantum leap into the "bigtime" against some formidable drivers and machinery; including Lamborghini Gallardo GT3s, Ferrari GT2 and GT3 cars, an Aston Martin DBRS9 and the inevitable horde of Porsche GT3 cup cars.

Up until this weekend, my race experience consisted of a few club level events, and I can honestly say that nothing could prepare me for this; the most daunting experience of my life!

This was always going to be a learning experience for me, and I had no delusions about how difficult the task ahead was. Just how daunting became evident in the first practice session where the flyweight Exige, still heavily sprung to cope with British Circuits, was being thrown around the bumps in the track and made me feel like I was riding a mechanical bull in some automotive rodeo. I was unable to get any power down after the high speed turns 1 and 2 and lost a lot of momentum traversing the long back straight, with the car literally skipping across the track, trying to throw me off at every opportunity. A lack of experience (read: talent) and unfamiliarity with both the car and track saw it succeed...more than once! Using the top GT3 Porsche as a benchmark for performance evaluation confirmed my worst fears: I was 5.2 seconds off the pace.

A quick check through the data indicated that I hadn't come even close to using all of the braking ability the massive AP Brakes had to offer, so the third practice session was used as a brake testing session, and I think everyone around the track (including me) was gobsmacked to see just how much I could reel in the other cars under braking. The gap to the fastest GT3 Porsche had however, closed to 2.8 seconds.

The Qualifying session was a bit of a mixed bag, I was only fuelled for a few laps and was unable to get a clear run before an accident on the far side of the track brought a close to the session. Gap to fastest GT3 Porsche down to 2.4 seconds.

On raceday, my heart was in my throat as I lined up for my first rolling start. I had made up 3 spots by zipping around the outside of the first turn and was reeling in the pack ahead when my initiation into the Australian GT took a frightening turn. A wayward Porsche spun violently out of control in front of me, and I only managed to miss him by a couple of feet. With the sweat still pouring down my face and my teeth still chattering, I decided to put my new-found confidence in the brakes to the test by diving into the last corner in an attempt to pass 3 Porsches at once. My well-laid plans literally came to a screeching halt when two of these Porsches collided in front of me, forcing me to take evasive action in an attempt to avoid the carnage. I thought that being stuck in the kitty litter was definitely the safer and cheaper option!

After being pulled out, I was left on my own a fair way down in the placings to the conclusion of the race. The next two races saw various suspension tuning attempts with mixed results; punctuated by the odd lock up, and inevitable self-induced rookie spin in Turn 3. The car, and I unfortunately, never felt completely comfortable throughout the weekend. Although there was obvious disappointment at finishing well below the car's potential I was elated to still have it in one piece and the weekend certainly exceeded it's "baptism of fire" credentials that I had been warned about. On the bright side, the fastest laptime gap to the fastest Porsche GT3 had closed to 1.5 seconds.

With a little more experience, some track-tuning to Antipodean conditions, and the ongoing support from the highly capable and passionate people at Lotus Sport, hopefully the rest of the season will see some respectable progress up the ladder. Watch this space!

Angelo Lazaris