

THAT'S ONE OF THE most dangerous things I've ever done in my life,' said Martin Brundle, an hour or so after he'd just proved the XJ220 to be the world's fastest production car. I'm glad he came clean *after* the run. Had he told me before we - yes, I mean we - had climbed inside the Jaguar cockpit at the Nardo proving ground in Italy, I might have been reluctant to help. If, that is, riding shotgun with Martin Brundle, doing absolutely nothing except, if it came to it, holding his hand as we launched ourselves off the banking, *Thelma and Louise* fashion, can be deemed help.

'If a tyre had blown, part of the car broken, or there had been any failure, there's no way that Armco barrier would have held the car. We'd have gone straight through it. In F1, you're inside a composite shell that's massively strong, and there are medical facilities - including a mobile operating theatre - on hand. Here,' he said, gesturing towards the parched outfields of Nardo, 'there's nothing.'

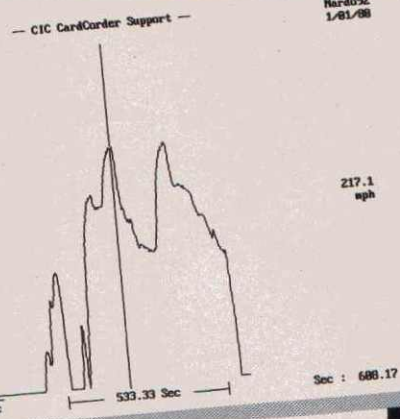
The whole thing was pretty crazy, really. In a nutshell, Jaguar was keen to see how fast its new XJ220 could go, just before deliveries started. There are only two circuits in the world

on which a fast car can be driven at over 200: Fort Stockton in Texas, and Nardo in southern Italy. The XJ220 had already recorded 212.3mph at Fort Stockton, which is faster than any production road car has gone.

The hope was that Nardo might yield a still higher velocity. The goal - and the expectation, too - was 220mph, which obviously would tie in well with the model name, and the pre-launch publicity which, a few years back, spoke about a top speed of 'over 200mph'.

Martin Brundle, Benetton Formula One driver and former Jaguar sports car racing driver, was to do the driving. The theory was that he might be able to eke out a few more mph than Jaguar's test drivers, if for no other reason than that he's probably braver.

If you've never been to that part of southern Italy don't bother. Geographically, it may be in the heel of Italy, but in most other ways it reminds me more of another part of the anatomy, at the opposite end of



the leg. It's flat and sun-parched and architecturally barren, and nothing like the chic, sophisticated and beautiful country further north. The drivers are even crazier than in the rest of the country, and that's saying something. Fiat, which owns Nardo (now there's a surprise), chose the site because, apparently, it's the driest area of Europe. Rain, and high-speed testing, obviously don't go together.

On the Sunday when Brundle was going for glory, it was hot and dry, with just a hint of a breeze. It had to be done on the Sabbath: there's a 150mph speed limit at Nardo from Monday to Saturday. The track itself is completely featureless - which is what you want when you're doing over 200. It's a 7.86-mile circle of constant radius, mildly banked, and four lanes wide. Two titchy pieces of Armco, one on top of the other, stand between the tarmac and eternity. 'That Armco wouldn't hold a Golf doing 120mph, let alone a big Jaguar doing 220,' said Brundle afterwards. I have no idea what lies on the other side of the barrier and, as far as I know, no-one has discovered.

The Jaguar technicians and test drivers had been in Nardo since the Wednesday, finishing off their durability tests. They had two cars, both pre-production machines, chassis numbers 007 and 009. Brundle, who arrived just after we did on the Saturday evening, would use 009 for the glory run.

XJ220 at Nardo (below), and (right) Martin Brundle gets up to 200mph with photographer Dawson on board. Telemetric 217.1mph readout (above)



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Keen to prove the XJ220 is the fastest road car yet, Jaguar went to the high-speed Nardo track in Italy, an



mph!

an Martin Brundle

to do the driving. Gavin Green was a passenger PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN DAWSON

The plan, on the Sunday, was for Brundle to do a few laps in the car in standard trim, to check the car's road-going maximum speed. Then I'd get to ride shotgun, after which photographer Ian Dawson would take my place in the passenger seat (to give you a view of what I saw). Then the Jaguar's mechanics would remove the car's catalytic converters, thus adding about 50bhp to the XJ220's already substantial corral of 542 horses. Free of any obstructive green things in the exhaust, or of any hefty passenger, our man Brundle would go for the 220.

It was all done in an unstructured, unofficial way, more for the hell of it than for any meaningful reason. There were no independent witnesses - no Guinness Book of Records judge, for instance - apart from two journos (self and John Lamm from America's *Road & Track*), Dawson and a BBC cameraman who was recording

the event for *Top Gear* and posterity. And none of us understood how the testing equipment worked. There was no minimum distance over which the speed had to be held, no attempt to repeat the feat in both directions to compensate for any wind, no hard-and-fast rules, no official laws or regulations. And, of course, taking off the cats instantly made the car non-standard, and thus non-production. Irrelevant it may have been (does a road car that can do 220mph matter these days?), yet we all knew that we were witnessing something about which we'd talk for many, many years.

Two pieces of timing equipment, both on board the car, would measure the runs. One activated an on-board print-out; the other was telemetrically linked to a computer back in the base, in the centre of the Nardo bowl.

Brundle's first run, then - with the engine and exhaust in

standard trim and no passenger on board - would be the most representative, inasmuch as your average XJ220 owner could *in theory* do the same thing with his car. Decked out in his United Colors of Benetton yellow overalls, and looking very much at ease (this sort of thing must be a doddle for a bloke used to driving wheel to wheel against Senna and Mansell on Sundays), Brundle got down to business.

I watched from the trackside, with the JaguarSport engineers and mechanics. A far-off but very muted roar, sounding a little like a jet aeroplane, presaged the car. Then we caught sight of it, high on the banking, metallic green and looking lovely in the bright midday sun. It fairly *belted* by, trailing a great whoosh, and a muted but trulent engine note. Apart from the noise, which gave you some idea of the sheer hell that the engine and the tyres and the other mechanical bits must be going through, and the sheer visual speed - you turned your head quickly, as your eyes followed the car - the whole thing looked rather uneventful. The car was tracking as straight as a bullet, and going not much slower.

Next time around - two and a half minutes or so later, on this track of almost eight miles - he pulled in, and the mechanics opened the boot, where the on-board speed print-out was sited: 211.2mph maximum, said the little piece of tape. 'I could have gone faster, but the engine was bouncing on the rev limiter in top,' said Brundle, rather matter-of-factly. The limiter comes in at 7400rpm. Later, for the non-cat run, it was increased to 7900.

Back in the garage in the middle of Nardo, near the big control tower, the print-out from the telemetric timing kit on the car recorded the maximum at 212.3mph, exactly the same as the top recorded at Stockton, which can't just be a coincidence. 'Which speed reading is the definitive one - the read-out in the car, or the telemetric one?' I asked of an engineer. 'Whichever is the higher,' he said with a grin.

My turn. Garbed out in my old Renault 5 Turbo racing overalls - the fastest they'd been was probably about 130mph - and a rather scratched old Bell helmet (put it this way, when I stood next to Brundle, you could tell who was the pro and who was the hack), I slithered into the passenger seat. Headroom is at a premium in an XJ220, and my

bash-hat was just kissing the glass sunroof.

Strapped in with a four-point harness, one hand clutching the centre console grab handle, I was soon propelled out of the central workshop area down a service road, heading for the speed bowl.

Behind me, the engine sounded a bit feeble. There was none of the bellowing growl that so distinguishes an F40 or a Diablo motor. The XJ220's note was too high, too anaemic. Its bark is a lot worse than its bite. 'The production cars will sound different, apparently,' said Brundle, yelling through the slot in his full-face helmet. When the turbos started to influence events, the engine note deepened, as progress jumped.

Out on the bowl - just like a four-lane motorway except that it's banked and deserted - Brundle gave the Jag some welly and the car sprang around to 180mph on the speedo very easily. The acceleration was ferocious, my backbone wedged into the thick leather seats, hanging on hard to the grab handle, Brundle still talking but fast becoming inaudible. I told him I couldn't hear him - the engine and wind noise was too overwhelming - but he couldn't hear me, so kept talking. I wish I could have heard him: I'm sure what he said, as we edged up to 207.4mph, was interesting.

It wasn't actually that dramatic. Sure, the kilometre posts were disappearing very quickly, it was hellishly hot inside (the air-conditioning was turned off, the air vents were shut, and the glass roof and the vast screens at the front and rear of the cabin were turning that cockpit into a hothouse), and it was mightily noisy. But the car felt so stable, so safe. The ground effects seemed to suck it down, clamping it firmly and safely to the tarmac, never mind that the road was flashing by underneath at a quite insane speed. My only concern - and it was a far-away worry - was that one of the Bridgestones would decide to go bang. At least it would have been a fast death.

Mind you, the bumpiness of the circuit surprised me. Look at the surface, from the trackside, and it seems as smooth as glass. Drive on it, at 200mph-plus, and the tiniest pimples kick the car's suspension, in turn kicking you. My helmet was rattling against the glass roof the whole time, as it bobbed up and down, at one with the car's tortured springs.

Mechanics take the catalysts off and adjust rev limiter for the record run (below). Notice the massive straight-through twin exhausts (bottom)



'The sight of that car streaking by us, screaming low-flying jet, waves of air and dust trailing



Brundle didn't do lap after lap at 200-plus, gently coercing the last mph out of the car; far from it. He would slow down and speed up regularly. On a normal lap, the speed from the surprisingly accurate speedo (200 is apparently a true 199), varied from about 150 to 200. Accelerate at 150, and the car would surge forward. Even at 180 - at which speed the car is particularly comfortable - the XJ220 jumped, when Brundle so demanded. From 180 to 200 in an XJ220 feels like 80 to 100 in a Golf GTI.

Over 200, more patience was needed, the engine's power trying to break free from the massive drag. The speed rose more gently after that, and the bumps became bigger and much more violent. There is one particularly bad one at Nardo, and every time we hit it, the car - just fleetingly - felt like it might be brushed off course. Other than that, the XJ220 just went around as though guided by rail.

Dawson went next, camera poised. He didn't have a helmet, which concerned him. 'Don't worry,' said Brundle. 'If we

crash at 200, a helmet's not going to do you much good. Besides, I'm here as well, and they don't come much more chicken than me.'

Chauffeur driving out of the way, it was time for the serious part of the day. While Brundle and I had lunch next to the Nardo pool, the mechanics deactivated the high-rev cut-out, and took off the catalysed exhausts, replacing them with a pair of straight-through shotgun-like pipes.

An hour later, now screaming like a racer, the XJ220 once again took to the Nardo bowl. Mechanics, engineers, journos and photographers gathered trackside to witness the fastest speed ever attained by a production road car (minus its cats - which are not yet mandatory in Europe anyway).

He did only one flying lap ('I didn't need any more'), and the sight of that car streaking by us, screaming like a tormented monster, whooooooshing by like a low-flying jet, waves of disturbed air and dust trailing in its wake, will live with me till the day I die. It looked *much* faster

Brundle (in flash yellow overalls) and our man Green (in scruffy grey ones) about to set off on their 207.4mph run. Car amazingly stable at that speed

than before, and we all cheered and wowed in awe at the sight of that green Jaguar which quickly disappeared from sight.

Brundle trundled in next lap. The front bonnet now stood about an inch proud of the body; the front hinges had bent at speed from the enormous pressure. He said the car felt faster but didn't feel 220mph fast. 'The speedo showed 220, so it's probably 215 or 216.' The boot read-out confirmed it: 216.0mph maximum. The telemetric read-out, we later discovered, showed 217.1. It looked faster, if anything on the road can possibly look faster than 217 miles an hour.

The JaguarSport guys must have been disappointed - they all really wanted to see 220, I know, as a final reward for four years of hard work. Yet they now knew, with even more clarity than before, that they were about to launch the fastest production car to hit the road.

The Japanese Bridgestone men, on hand but always discreetly in the background, said that Nardo had 1.1deg of scrub all the way around - so a car never steers dead straight, and that palpably hurts top speed. Apparently, some manufacturers reckon you should add three percent to the Nardo figure, to get the real top, as would be achieved on a long, long straight. Add three percent to 217.1mph, and you get 223.6.

So we proved that, on some theoretical straight road, driven by someone who can drive as well as Martin Brundle, in weather conditions similar to southern Italy's, with minimal wind and with the cats taken off, the XJ220 could probably do 220. Which, I suppose, means we didn't prove much. No matter, I know I witnessed history. There may never be a faster road car than this one. It's a day I know I'll never forget.

**like a tormented monster, whooooooshing by like a
in its wake, will live with me till the day I die'**