030-036 GT 0708 29/5/08 15:55 Page 30

TESTING TIMES

We join Cargraphic as it prepared for this year's Tuner Grand Prix with its new 997 Turbo RSC 3.6

Words: Stuart Gallagher Photography: Dominic Fraser

Testing is a lonely business. Days spent alone in a vast paddock, your every movement and murmer echoing around the vacant grandstands as you rattle around the stark, monochrome pit lane with just a handful of personnel in attendance armed with a stop watch and a garage full of spares. Finding those last couple of tenths is not for those who get their kicks from bathing in the limelight.

Renowned German Porsche tuner Cargraphic is going through this very process at the end of April in preparation for the 2008 Tuner Grand Prix at the Hockenheim Ring. Having won the event for the last three years, brother Thomas and Michael Schnarr rank the event highly as a shop front for their range of tuning products for Porsches new and old. It's why they have booked the Hockenhiem circuit for one final test with both their 2008 contenders for top honours in this year's Tuner GP, and it's why the only thing you can hear in the vast confines of this Grand Prix venue on this bright spring morning is the sound of two flat-six motors fighting with the tortured screams from their Dunlop SportMaxx GT tyres.

The cars in question are last year's winner, the 997 GT3 RSC 4.0, and this year's new comer, a 997 Turbo GT RSC 3.6. The former is a 1365 kilo (with 90-litres of fuel on-board), 465bhp

GT3 RS which will get you to 62mph in 3.9 seconds, 120mph in 12 dead and complete a 0-155-0mph run in 25.9 seconds. It will also max out at 198mph and lap Hockenhiem's short circuit in 1.08:882. It is the lean, mean, fighting machine that has fought the fat and won, and won us over back in September 2007 (issue 70) when we drove the 2007 Tuner GP champ fresh from its victory.

Today the GT3 RSC 4.0 is here at Hockenheim not only for a final shakedown before the main event, but to also act as a benchmark for the Porsche that Cargraphic is hoping will deliver them their fourth consecutive Tuner GP victory. The Turbo GT RSC 3.6 is a lot more than a breathed-on 997 Turbo. For a start there is the small matter of the 615hp (624PS) and 609lb ft (826Nm) of torque Cargraphic has extracted from the 997's VTG equipped flat-six. The engine has been carried out in conjunction with renowned Porsche fettlers, RS Tuning, and consists of modifying the pair of turbochargers and intercoolers, replacing the entire exhaust system, including the manifold, with a highflow stainless steel system with 200 cell trimetal cats, which is complemented by the freer breathing air filter. Following the final remap, those mighty power and torque figures were achieved and in previous test sessions with Germany's *Sport Auto*

magazine the RSC 3.6 produces an impressive set of numbers: 3.3 seconds to 62mph, 9.9 to 125mph and 28.2 to 180mph and just 35.1 seconds to complete the 0-180-0mph test. Flat-out you'll be charging at the vanishing point at 202mph.

The Tuner GP is nothing to do with straight line speed, far from it in fact, as the pit straight is the longest of the lap, so outright power is nothing without control. With this in mind, and having gained valuable experience over the years competing at the event, Cargraphic set about honing the Turbo for the event. With a wet weight (ie with 67-litres of Super unleaded in its snout), the GT RSC weighs in at 1495 kilos which, although 90 kilos lighter than a regular Turbo, is still a considerable mass to control on track. Turning to Bilstein for dampers and H&R for springs, Cargraphic's approach has been methodical and exact while developing the setup. The dampers, Bilstein's PS10 units, are adjustable for both compression and rebound and have allowed for a number of settings to be derived that suit the venue's grippy GP circuit tarmac depending on the conditions. Naturally both Thomas and Michael Schnarr are keeping tight-lipped about the details of the final setup, but considering their last three victories have come in both rain and shine, it's safe to assume this 997's chassis has been finitely honed for the job in hand.

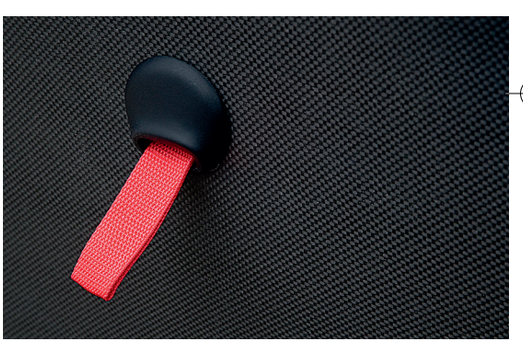
So too have the aerodynamics. The carbon-fibre front splitter generates ten kilos of additional downforce, which is crucial to keep the Turbo hooked on-line as it dives through the first two right-handers of the course, both of which require big commitment to carry maximum speed. A fixed 997 GT2 rear wing replaces the Turbo's moveable item and provides the force required to keep the rear Dunlops compressed onto the tarmac. The other carbon accoutrements: front bonnet, doors, mirror housings etc are there to aid in the weight saving process. Brakes are regular Porsche steel discs but with a more aggressive Pagid brake pad replacing the standard items.

The Tuner Grand Prix is less than ten days away when we join up with Cargraphic in the empty Hockenhiem paddock, yet incredibly they are happy for us to drive both their TGP contenders. Once Cargraphic's pilot of choice – Supercup, FIA GT and Nürburgring 24Hr ace Mark Basseng – had completed his testing schedule, obviously.

The 2007 Tuner GP winner is ready for us first, its 458hp flat-six having been warmed up nicely during the morning test sessions and its Dunlop Sport Maxx GT rubber proving stickier than a piece of chewing gum stuck to your shoe. The lightweight Recaro bucket grips tighter than a regular GT3's branded chair and the lighter, parred down doorcards are probably closer to what GT3 RS owners were expecting when they ordered their road cars. Strapped in, Arai on and the thumbs up from Michael signals the beginning of every petrolhead's dream: an empty race circuit and somebody else's 911 to play with.

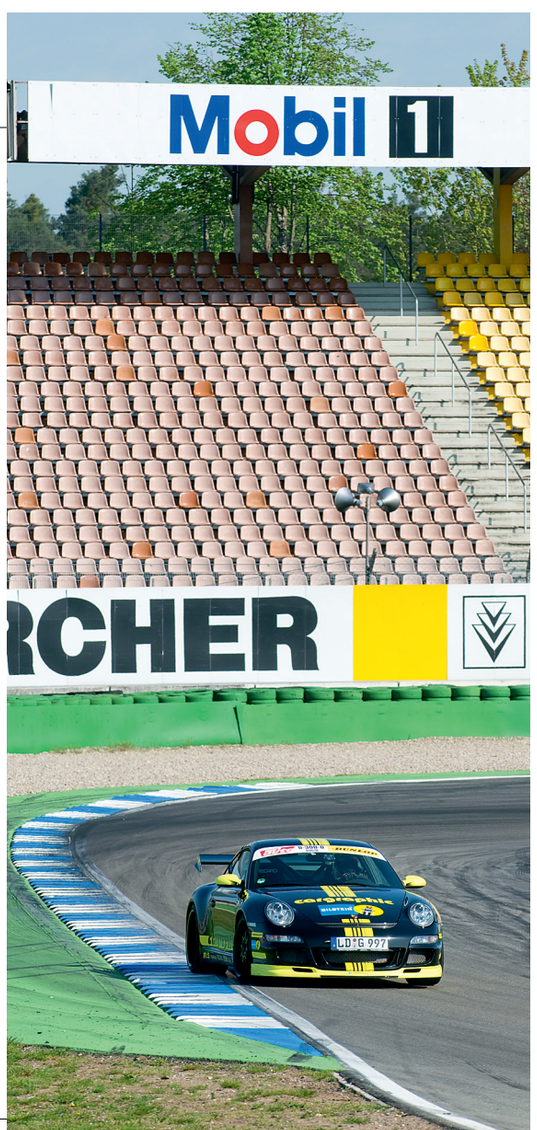
There are two elements that dominate the RSC 4.0: the immediateness of the chassis' responses to your inputs and the subsequent grip it manages to generate from its Dunlop boots, and the effect any movement of your right foot, no matter how slight, has on the fire ball of an engine that sits behind you like a caged tiger being prodded by a bored toddler. The first two gears work the crank to a similar pace of a turbocharged engine on full boost, and around the shortest of Hockenhiem's configurations third and fourth gear are all you need. You will also require a couple of circuits to reconfigure your idea of a GT3's performance. Both the engine's torque and power converge to generate such a linear wave of accelerative shove there's almost a feeling that you are gliding from exit to apex with little or no effort required. Trimming speed for turn-in points and mid-corner if so required can be measured out to millimetre perfection thanks to an engine which brings a whole new meaning to the word responsive. Its big 4.0-litre capacity (bore is increased to 105mm, up from 100mm) is an obvious benefactor to this performance, and confirming that there really is no substitute for cubic inches.

There is also no substitute for a near infinite adjustable chassis, which has allowed the Schnarr brothers to develop the GT3 RS into a car that makes the standard factory machine feel, well, a little recalcitrant. The RSC 4.0 turns with the instant response you expect from a slick-shod machine, with the nose following the chosen path with dogged diligence while you can feel the Dunlops beneath you offering every last bit of grip they have. At first the sharpness of the front end catches you out, so quick is it to respond to your steering inputs, but within a corner or two you can begin to push harder and lean on it with greater confidence. As you'd expect from a car developed to perform faultlessly on this track, the balance and traction



Cargraphic's small team has made big progress with the 997 Turbo for the 2008 Tuner Grand Prix. Its 615hp VTG equipped flat-six is just immense, but equally more impressive is how the chassis is able to cope with such a power figure.

Cargraphic entered both its GT3 RSC 4.0 and Turbo RSC 3.6 in this year's event. Both cars had been set up by test driver Marc Basseng before being handed over to us to try –yes, we brought them both back in one piece!



through and out of the corner is exemplary, and stringing consistent, quick and committed laps together is quickly achievable. It's little wonder that a driver of Basseng's ability and experience managed to finish ahead of the field last year.

For 2008 Marc will be at the wheel of Cargraphic's new car, however: the GT RSC 3.6. The surroundings will be familiar for Basseng with the 997's cockpit identical to the RSC 4.0 I've just stepped out off, but there the similarities end.

Earlier in the morning I'd positioned myself at the end of Hockenhiem's pit wall, which is in line with the apex of the circuit's first corner, and started to question if I really wanted to get behind the wheel of a car that a) was required for the Tuner GP is less than two weeks' time and b) that looked like it was as easy to handle as a miffed Cobra. The Dunlops sounded like they were crying enough at even the slightest sniff of steering lock, the nose appeared to be pushing on with the blind enthusiasm you'd associate with an athlete who's been caught doped off his head but still wants to compete at the Olympics, and at the very thought of opening the throttle, Basseng was throwing armfuls of opposite lock at the thing just to keep it out of the empty grandstands. This could end with the Cargraphic dust pan and brush being called into action and one less car on the Tuner Grand Prix entry list.

As it turns out, my concerns were uncalled for. The last time the GT RSC was tested at the venue it rained, and then rained some more just in case that wasn't enough, which was fine by Cargraphic because it allowed for them to finalise a wet setup, and as it turns out the morning running by Basseng was about fine tuning the dry setup, which met a little bit of experimental running first. Before it's my turn to wrap my sweaty palms around the Alcantara steering wheel, Basseng has signed off the setup and posted a time in the one minute, six seconds zone. His work is done.

No matter how many axles you have at your disposal to release 600+hp, the first time you do so it still feels like you've been asked to hold a lit firework: the excitement of watching has quickly turned to becoming an integral part of the display. Although, thankfully, whereas the rocket will bite the hand that holds it, the RSC 3.6 will invite you to play and be part of the experience. It's not as sharp as the GT3 RS-based machine – the extra weight can't be hidden and the front end feels no where near as responsive and requires constant, minute adjustments as you balance the throttle on turn-in and tickle it thereafter as you make as clean and quick an exit as possible. The Turbo is a more forgiving machine however, with more body roll giving you the confidence to lean on the chassis from the moment you tip it into a curve. Where the GT3 felt a little edgy and unforgiving, the Turbo inspires a level of confidence that allows you to delve deep into its huge reserves of power. The way it pitches into a corner is more natural for those with road car bias track experience, as is its behaviour under braking and the balance through the really quick turns at the beginning of the Hockenheim lap.

With a lap time in the bag that should see the Cargraphic cars at the top of the time sheets, and the team over the moon with both their cars' performance, silence once again descends over the Hockenhiem circuit as it awaits the arrival of the Tuner Grand Prix and for the battle to commence ○