



FRIGHT CLUB

The Carrera Cup has provided some of the closest racing in the country during 2006, and at Donington Park we joined in.

This is it. I gently roll the 997 GT3 Cup into my grid slot. Have I got enough heat in the tyres, the brakes? I hope so. I try to calm my nerves and regulate my breathing.

The 30-second board is raised. I stare at the Motec dash as I dial up 6,500rpm. Five red lights appear on the start gantry, I depress the clutch and firmly pull the sequential gear lever back. A large number one in the centre of the dash and a reassuring clunk confirms I am in gear. I gently lift the clutch and feel the rear of the 997 squat slightly.

Then in an instant the lights go out, I drop the clutch and the world around me becomes a blur of noise, colour and movement as 20 GT3

Cup cars launch towards Donington Park's first corner. There's little in the way of lost traction and the acceleration is such that I'm barely conscious of each up shift.

Throttle flat to the floor the shift lights blink orange at over 8,000rpm and I tug the tall lever to get an instant up shift. I've made a good start, I slot between the cars from the row in front of me, but ahead bits of bumper fly into the air. There's no time to worry though as the first corner is arriving, I force my brain to remember just how late and hard you can brake in this car.

Always a trip into the unknown, the first corner is now complicated by the telltale sign of coolant trailing from the broken radiator of a car ahead. Notoriously slippery, the fluid does its work and a

car rotates in the middle of Redgate - Donington's tightening first bend. Braking over, I'm down to third gear and just manage to squeeze between the spinning car and the edge of the gravel trap. Hard on the power, I accelerate towards the fearsome Craner Curves for the first time.

A plunging downhill left-hander, it's taken in fifth gear at around 206km/h (128mph in old money) in the Cup car, but on this first lap the wounded GT3 is trailing its fluid down the middle of the track and now I am sandwiched between two cars in the middle of the pack that's slithering in his wake. With a screen covered in fluid, visibility is an issue and approaching the braking area for the Old Hairpin I fight my first taste of oversteer.



A sweeping right-hander, I gently touch the rear of the car ahead as I struggle to get slowed down. However, no damage done, I accelerate out, tugging at the perfectly placed lever as each up shift arrives on the climbing run to Mcleans. The tarmac is narrow and curving so the pack has no room to separate yet and I am still staring at the twin exhausts of the pair of cars ahead of me. The wall of noise is fantastic and as I brake for the right-hander we finally make our way past the damaged front-runner.

Up to fourth gear, then down to third as I brake for the long right-hander of Coppice, I remember to get a decent blip into the throttle as I work the clutch and push the lever forward on the down shift. Feeding the power

in smoothly it's on to the back straight and for the first time since the red lights went out about 50 seconds ago, I have time to relax for a split second.

However, with a tight chicane approaching fast, it's a short-lived moment. Arriving in fifth gear at 235km/h (146mph), braking for the right-left chicane that ends the Donington lap is one of the hardest things to master in the Porsche Cup car. In less than 200 metres you need to shed a huge amount of speed and make two downshifts, all without locking a wheel in the ABS-less 997. And on this first lap it's complicated further by the need to defend from the bunch of cars behind. Through the chicane safely, one of the leaders gyrates on the grass

after the exit. I power across the line, flat shifting up to 5th gear and get ready for Redgate to begin another lap of Donington.

With the remnants of the first-lap carnage still littering the track, waved yellow flags are flying at the first corner, so I rest easy in the knowledge that overtaking is out of the question. But with a stream of Porsche coolant drawing a dark line down the centre of the road, the track is still treacherous.

The pack finally starts to spread out and for the first time I can arrive at the corners on the correct line and use the right gears, but before long numerous retired cars in dangerous spots causes the arrival of the safety car.

So now it's time to take stock, while I gently



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weave around to keep some heat in my tyres, I work out that I have made up a couple of places in the first lap melee. Having qualified 17th for yesterday's race – a 14th place finish meant that's where I started today and now I seem to be up to the fringes of the top ten. But to my annoyance I've been passed behind the safety car, but then to my amusement the offender spins on the coolant and parks himself in the Mcleans gravel trap.

And that's exactly what I don't want to do – having been given the opportunity to drive the Vertu-sponsored guest car, the challenge of a one-off drive is finding the balance between pushing as hard as possible so as not to look slow, but without making a mistake so as not to look foolish. With the safety car lights about to go out, it's time for me to get back into that rhythm. As I come on to the back straight I tighten my belts, and work hard at getting some heat into the tyres.

As we approach the chicane, leader Danny Watts backs the pack up, and the chain reaction causes a motorway-style concertina of hard braking and I narrowly avoid hitting the car in front, however, it compromises my exit and Michael Caine gets a run past me down to the first corner. One of the leading pack, he spun on the first lap so I wasn't going to hold him off anyway, so I settle into concentrating on completing each lap with as few mistakes as





possible. With a 40 minute race, my journalist rather than racing driver fitness levels mean physical tiredness is an issue too. The heat in the cockpit is draining and the laps take their toll, but as I concentrate on each brake point, perfect each down shift and work on the unique style needed to drive the GT3 Cup, I keep reminding myself to enjoy this wonderful car.

With 17 laps gone I've created a decent gap between me and the car behind, the one in front is not edging away either. With six laps to go I set my fastest time of the weekend, matching my lap from qualifying. I reel off the last few laps and cross the line. Back in parc ferme, the feeling of satisfaction is amazing. I am exhausted and welcome the cold drinks

handed out to the drivers. I thank the Porsche Cars mechanics and with a 12th place finish I feel privileged to have driven in such a seriously competitive series. It's all over but I will spend a long time remembering the weekend I finally got to race a Porsche. What's more, thanks to the 997 GT3 Cup, I couldn't have done it in a better one ●

THE CAR

Hitting the UK before the end of this year, the 997 GT3 has appeared in the pages of this magazine already. And this is the car the Cup is based on but, while there are plenty of similarities, the Carrera Cup car is very different.

With a seam-welded cage and a stripped-out interior, it's 255kg lighter than the road car, although with 400bhp it's actually 15bhp down on its street brother. The six-speed sequential gearbox is fantastic – full-throttle up shifts mean the clutch is only used on the down shifts. While UK Carrera Cup cars use metal brakes, the Grand Prix-supporting Supercup versions use ceramic discs. The UK series avoids these on cost grounds but braking performance is still incredible.

While the 996 Cup cars had ABS, the 997 does without this driver aid but does have cockpit adjustable bias. Typically for Porsche and unusually for a race car, the driving environment is ergonomically excellent. The left-hand side located racing seat has a standard forward and aft adjuster, while the wheel adjusts for reach and rake, the Motec racing dash replaces the dials but standard stalks remain. The banks of central switches are also perfectly placed and the upper dash is recognisable from the standard car.

Teams in the series can make minor suspension setup changes but to keep an even playing field everything else is controlled by Porsche. Dampers, gear ratios, engines and

pretty much everything else on the car is fixed. Sussex-based Parr Motorsport carries out the technical and parts back-up service for Porsche and Paul Robe's super professional outfit also runs the Vertu guest car.

Each car gets two sets of Michelin tyres per race weekend and conserving the rubber is part of the skill. Requiring a very unique skill to extract the most from it, the Cup car is easily over driven and over exuberance with the throttle means the tyres will go off. Over 50 per cent stiffer than its 996 predecessor, the 997 Cup is a true racecar and the fact that it relates so closely to the GT3 shows just how good the road car really is.



GT3 Cup has less power than road car but less weight, slick tyres and a sequential shift to make up for it