

CHALLENGE VECTRAS



Track days not fast enough for you? Low budget motorsport in Vectra SRi V6 Challenge racers is the way to get more Vauxhall kicks. Words and Photos: Dan Williamson

VECTRA V6 RACERS AT CADWELL

At 8.30 am on Sunday mornings most people are enjoying breakfast in bed, preparing for a day of light gardening or a gentle stroll around a shopping centre. Those with super unleaded in their veins however, will probably be on their way to a car show, club meet or track day. But what if you've been there and done all that?

The answer can only be a spot of fully fledged motor racing, where hardcore speed merchants seek the

ultimate in four-wheeled thrills. We decided to join some of them at Cadwell Park Circuit in Lincolnshire.

Overnight, a curtain of fog had draped itself over the circuit's rural hillside setting, dampening tarmac and reducing visibility to 10 paces. In the paddock, dozens of amateur and semi-pro racing drivers were making final preparations, their finely tuned engines bursting into life as an alarm call to the surrounding countryside.

Fighting through the grey, a couple of familiar shapes were being ferried into the paddock on trailers — a pair

of 10-year-old Vectras, stickered-up, slick-shod and low-slung on 17 inch five-spokes. Anyone who'd spent a lot of time around modified Vauxhalls or tin-top motorsport would know that these were survivors of the Vectra SRi V6 Challenge — the factory-backed one-make race series.

Run for three seasons from 1997, the V6 Challenge provided competitors with identical track-ready machines. Each had a basically standard 2.5 V6 bottom end from Swindon Race Engineering, solid mounted and fitted with Omega inlet cam, oil cooler, cold air feed, 110 dB straight-through

exhaust and sealed Weber Alpha Plus engine management. They came with a multi-point roll cage, 1.8 gearbox casing with Quaife six-speed straight-cut gears (or Hewland five or six-coggers, depending on year), sintered paddle clutch, rose-jointed steering and fully adjustable (for height, bump, rebound, camber and caster) suspension with remote reservoir dampers.

Considering it was only a stock PAS rack, turn-in precision was incredible. Coupled to non-ABS 330 mm discs and huge AP four-pots, handling was only a couple of steps down from a full-blown BTCC racer. The stripped-out cockpit



The hills of Cadwell Park are a real test for any car.



Vauxhalls of all shapes and sizes were racing.



The Vectras are both trailered to events.



Minor body damage is a common occurrence.

had carbon-fibre Recaros, Pi System 2 instruments and very little else.

It's estimated that fewer than 20 survive of the 38 built including five or six that are still racing, two of which are the machines you see here. Number 88 is owned by David Hinde and Nige Woodbridge and 78 by Simon Parker. These Vectras are very similar. They both run 8x17 inch Speedline alloys (identical to those on ST200 road

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cars), but with different tyre sizes. Simon uses 210/620x17 slicks while David runs wider ex-touring car and part-worn 235/610x17s, because they're only £30 each. David's car also benefits from lightweight 1999-spec modifications, with polycarbonate windows, fibreglass bonnet, carbon-fibre cover instead of spare wheel well, removed door internals,

parcel shelf and bootlid bracing, giving a 40 to 50 kg saving. It also boasts a huge Super Touring rear wing.

In its last incarnation, this machine saw action in the Land Rover Super Coupe Cup, winning the 2002 and 2003 championships. Needless to say, it retains the same suspension settings, but has had its yellow paintjob replaced with a replica Holden livery.

Ex-BTCC Cavalier gets us all misty-eyed with nostalgia.

It is co-owned by David and Nige, who swap the roles of driver and team manager for each event, sharing costs if anything breaks or gets smashed.

"Years ago we rallied a MkII Escort," David explains. "I used to have an ex-police Vectra with 180,000 miles on the clock, 188 bhp, cut-down springs and roll cage. I also had a V6 estate, but with the standard flywheel it was dead lazy. We used to run a track day company and bought the Vectra for corporate hot rides. It's safe and not too quick, but has great cornering

speed, plus Vectras are inherently reliable so it would do 150 laps a day. We'd amassed five ex-Challenge Vectras between friends, so this year we decided to start racing. This is only my second time out — at Rockingham I got third in class. It's a learning curve."

Simon finished fifth in the same event, as he was still getting to grips with his SRI. "I only got my race licence in January, but I've owned it for 18 months, trailering it to track days," he says. "This car was a five-times Nürburgring 24-hour racer and finished



Challenge cars look very similar to the road-going ST200.



70 | TOTAL VAUXHALL

RACING TODAY

Since the Vectra SRI V6 Challenge became defunct, the cars have been involved in any competitions where they remain competitive. Currently it's the BRSCC LMA Euro Saloons Championship, set up for production car-based machines.

They run in Class C, which means head-to-head battle with BMW M3s and Rover Turbos. Normally all five classes (A to E) compete together, but Cadwell Park's smaller grid capacity means separate races.

It was a shame on this occasion because the Class A and B event contained John Hammersley's ex-John Cleland 1994 BTCC Cavalier and Tim Morgan-Barrett's VX220 Turbo. They were up against other old touring cars, plus an obscenely quick 20-odd year-old Lotus Sunbeam.

The remaining Vauxhall was Nova GSi in Class E owned by Simon Jackson. Covered in spots, named Pongo and boasting a comedy awooga horn, it looked like it was there purely for fun, but it took class victory. Nice one.



Simon's car is a 1997 spec racer, while David's is a 1999.

every time. It was owned by two brothers, who bought it for its reliability in endurance events. A normal race lasts 20 minutes, so this has done the equivalent of 360 events..."

As Simon checks his tyres before qualifying, he tells us about his recent addition of BTB exhaust manifolds, which should have released 20 bhp: "They left the fuelling really weak, which proves they work. I took it to be remapped but it couldn't be done, so on Friday evening we had to refit the old manifolds.

"My next job is to get the ECU unlocked," he continues. "This championship allows modifications and even forced induction, but as long as you're competitive you'll enjoy it."

David agrees, saying: "What do you modify? Where do you stop? To upgrade, you might as well buy an ex-Super Tourer for £15,000 — it'd be cheaper."

Through dismal mist and drizzle, both Vectras were immediately competitive in their 15-minute qualifying

session, but their phenomenal brakes were locking up round Cadwell Park's twisty sections, obstructed by cars that were quicker on the straights. However, the 2.25-mile track (fondly referred to as a mini-Nürburgring, thanks to its tree-lined mountain section and fearsome reputation) had enough swooping bends, tight twists





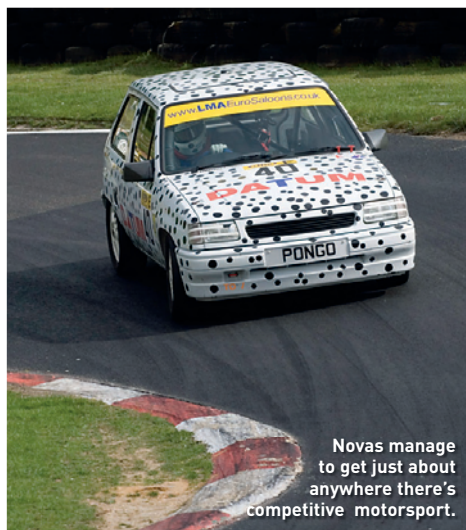
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Simon's car needed a fluid change on the day.



All mod cons in a Challenge car!



Novas manage to get just about anywhere there's competitive motorsport.



and blind crests to let the Vauxhalls outhandle rivals.

David drove a series of scorchingly quick laps, running a 1 min 42 sec best, just a few seconds slower than John Hammersley's higher-grouped BTCC Cavalier. It was enough to put him in highest class position, second on the grid for the Class C, D and E main event.

Simon wasn't so happy, having only reached fifth spot. "I'm a bit disappointed," he reckons. "It all went wrong. I just wasn't confident — the back kept coming round on me, and I had no brakes. We run Pagid Yellow pads, which are very abrasive and stop quicker, but the fluid hasn't been changed for five outings."

So while Simon got on with bleeding his brakes, we anxiously waited for David to return to the paddock. The reason for his sudden absence halfway through qualifying soon became clear — his Vectra returned on the back of a recovery truck, its nearside front wheel flopping around inside the arch.

"It's broken a stub axle!" cries David. "I was on my fastest lap, braking to turn right at 100 mph and it said, 'Bang! See ya Dave!' The wheel went up in the arch and took me off the circuit and down the grass with no brakes." Luckily the Vectra had come to rest a long way from any solid objects. But David was understandably miffed. "I had it drifting in fifth," he enthuses, "I'd have maybe got pole if it hadn't broken."

Almost ready to chuck in the towel, David was kept level-headed by Nige,





Battle scars are a trademark of saloon car racing.



who started rummaging around for spare parts in their support wagon. As we began to lose hope, he discovered a grotty second-hand driveshaft that might with luck be persuaded to fit. All we needed was a bearing puller and press. In the middle of Lincolnshire. On a Sunday lunchtime.

But this is nothing like F1 — this is motorsport at its friendliest. A passing spectator bagged the requisite tools from a friendly competitor and with phone assistance from a mate, the team swapped driveshafts and got the car back together with hours to spare. Part of the problem was the fact that

these hardcore racers use standard Vectra shafts which become the weakest link among competition rose-joints, gearbox and solid mounts. Snapped driveshafts are not unusual.

Which is why Simon's SRi runs massive, modified parts from an Iveco truck costing £2000. As David points out, "That's why they're still in one piece." He spoke too soon though. After the brakes were bled, Simon took his Vectra for a drive round the paddock to ensure everything was in order. A few minutes later he came walking back, having abandoned his Vauxhall with transmission failure. ➡



Makes the current Vectra BTCC racer look rather ugly, doesn't it?



TOTAL VAUXHALL | 73

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⚡ Despite investigation, it was not obvious what was wrong and Simon was left to load up his car and take it home, only to discover later that a nearside driveshaft had broken where it exits the ATB diff.

This left David as the sole Vectra pilot in the afternoon race. By now the fog had completely lifted, allowing sun to beam down on a dried-out track. David's a cool customer, but as the 3.45 pm kick-off drew ever nearer, you could almost hear his adrenaline building. Normally chatty, David had now become silent, focused as he was on the job in hand.

"I'm second on the grid with everyone behind me trying to come past, wanting to win," he reports. "My main concern is the repair — it was done in a rush with second-hand parts. Plus the rolling start — as soon as the

M3 had more power, but couldn't touch the Vectra on corners.



A delighted David (right) took second place on the podium.



lights go out, you're racing." He had good reason to be worried, as right behind him was a BMW M3 with rear-wheel drive (better traction) and at least 320 bhp (well over 100 bhp more than the V6 Vectra). No wonder it left him standing. But the BMW's set-up was no match for the Vauxhall. On every bend it was holding David up and on the second lap he made his move. "He was all over the place," David says later. "He went wide and left the door open, but I was on the apex and level with him. We clouted each other side-by-side, but I gave it pain!"

With a long straight after the overtake, David knew he could



keep ahead under braking. After that he just strolled away from the M3, which was too far back from the leading Civic Type-R to have a pop. Instead David settled into a comfort zone, his broken front splitter threatening to give way but holding together long enough to take second place overall and a deserved class victory.

"Fantastic! I'm well happy!" he grins. As he was presented with champagne and took his place on the winners' rostrum, David was dripping with sweat. He was exhausted and overjoyed after 20 minutes and 12 laps of intense motoring action. He may not have taken the top spot but the victorious Honda is around £40,000 worth, while a good Vectra Challenge machine is only £8000 — preferably without the stoved-in front wing and bumper! "We'll have that fixed in five minutes," says David. "And we'll treat it to a new bumper after this year."



A few scuffs here and there were nothing compared to the thrill of competition and the satisfaction of taking part in a successful team. "We're here to enjoy ourselves. You learn the circuits, gain confidence and get more aggressive," explains David. "We're planning a 50-minute race at Oulton with compulsory driver change and even thinking of doing a tarmac rally in it. The buzz is nothing like a track day." Simon agrees, "It's a massive shock the first time you race. But after that, a normal fast lap isn't good enough."

So it's a bit more expensive than doing track days (race and test sessions cost £195 a piece), it's impractical to drive your car to events and you might well break the car or pick up some damage. But then, that's motor racing.