

Classic Endurance Racing at Nürburgring and Silverstone

by Claude Nahum



NÜRBURGRING

The next race in our schedule was the Classic Endurance, which was to be held on the 21st to 23rd August at the Nürburgring.

At the end of July, Chris Ball had contacted me, because apparently he was going to attend the race. That was going to be fun and I would be able to measure myself and 1078 against another very well-driven GT40 in a CER race.

The timetable was very peculiar this time. The free session plus the 2 qualifying runs were all bunched together on the Saturday. The schedule was packed. It started at 07:30, went on with free practice at 08:30, followed by drivers briefing and first qualifying at 11:30 and the second qualifying session at 16:10.

The time since Spa had been used to disassemble the Lola and x-ray each part to make sure nothing else would break during the race. So we were taking part with both cars.

We drove to Nürburgring on Thursday evening and went straight to the track to check the cars. We were amazed at the work that has been done on the track. There was a whole complex of huge buildings, fun-fair like aerial trains and new hotels since we were last there in 2007.

There were an amazing number of entries, 55 cars in all, of whom 7 were in my GT1 class.

Everything seemed to be OK, so we went to the hotel, which as usual was the Dorint. The rooms had balconies overlooking the grandstand straight.

We had dinner all together and agreed we would be at the paddock at around 07:30. Here at Nürburgring this is relatively easy if you are staying at the Dorint. You go out of the door, walk 200 metres, turn left, walk under the track in a tunnel and you are in the paddock.

The weather was cool for the middle of Summer. I had anxiously checked the met reports all week to see whether it would be raining, and it seemed that one way or the other we would get some rain during the Saturday sessions. Now, on the morning in question, there were some clouds but nothing menacing yet. We were practically in the same region as Spa, where the weather can change from one half hour to the next.

A tremendous amount of work had been done on the T70, running in Proto 1, which now had the new central nut hubs, which looked fantastic.

A lady marshal came by to tell us that we would be leaving the paddock at around 10 past seven. She noticed the Turkish flag next to my name on the door and wanted to know who the Turk was. We



Nürburgring Track Layout

chatted in Turkish for a while as, although German, she had Turkish neighbours and had learnt the language. She was extremely friendly for the rest of the weekend.

As we got in the cars, ready to move out, Bernard had a problem with the gears, was apparently unable to drive the car and came in after the first lap.

I went out without problems. We were first kept waiting a few minutes and then let into the pit lane by a back entrance, right after the normal pit entrance at the chicane.

We drove to the end of the pit lane and waited only a few minutes for the red light to turn green and out we went onto the track. I like Nürburgring; like Spa it's one of those tracks that I feel comfortable on.

As soon as I started, I remembered the track and found my marks. I wasn't pushing but did 2 laps at 2:28 and then started working curve by curve in terms of line, braking point and corner speed, testing the limits. Xavier Micheron, whom I'd met at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, had brought his Howmet TX. It was his first participation in CER races and we had had a few words in the morning, during which I had tried to give him as many tips as I could. His car, that very Howmet TX, and my GT40 P1078 had been together at Brands Hatch for the BOAC 500 exactly 41 years before.

Times started to come down. 2:26, 2:22, 2:19, 2:18, 2:20. Something seemed to be definitely wrong with

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Bernard and the T70 as I overtook him. Then, on the 11th lap with everything properly warmed up, I did one full lap where every single corner seemed to be at the limit, every braking point was at the last possible moment, every corner the car seemed to be balanced between proceeding with the turn in the direction I wanted and letting go and spinning off. That lap felt faster than any lap I'd ever done; it just felt right. The result, I found out at the end of the session was a time of 2:16.601.

The session ended and we brought the cars back to the Paddock.



Didier changes a wheel

As I found out when the timing sheets were distributed this time of 2:16.601 put me first in GT1, fifth overall amongst all GTs, including much more recent cars on slicks, with only one Porsche 935 and three BMW M1s ahead of me. It also put me in 23rd position of the 48 cars that had started the session, ahead of no fewer than 8 prototypes. Two years ago at Nürburgring, with the same car when sharing it with Bernard, his best time for the whole weekend during qualifying had been 2:17.625 - more than a second slower, and my best time had been 2:24. It was the first time I was faster than him. In all honesty I was more than pleased.

Chris Ball hadn't been at the free session. His car had stayed covered.

Towards ten o'clock in the morning the sky got darker and darker and it started to rain. In a very short while it turned into a very serious downpour.

The drivers briefing was held in the CER tent while rain was pouring down all around. While we were there, the mechanics were changing to wets. It looked like the first qualifying session would be held in the rain.

A big discussion ensued with Didier and Jean-Max as to what we would do with the anti-roll bar. I wanted it completely disconnected. They didn't object, but needed to tie it somewhere, which they tried to do with tie wraps; this didn't suit me. I didn't

want it to free itself and foul something. As a result, we decided to put it back on - which turned out to be a huge mistake.

I treated my spectacles against misting as much as I could and drove out. This time Chris was there too.

By the time I was out on the track both my lenses and the windscreen had misted up completely.

The first and the second laps were done under safety car. The rain was pouring down and I hoped that sufficient air would at least clean enough of the windscreen to allow me to see where I was going. It was difficult to keep the car on the track, even in a straight line. The minute you touched the accelerator the back end jumped sideways, swerving the car all over the place. The third, fourth and fifth laps were done ever so slowly, and then the sixth lap in 3:12. I then decided to try to do a lap to qualify and end the session, so as not to risk an off-track excursion. I did a 3.02 and came in. Chris Ball in his GT40 apparently also had a terrible time trying to stay on the track, had numerous spins including on the straight, and qualified third in class with a time of 3:15.

Historic Motor Racing News said about the session "The first session was a complete washout with huge puddles and rivers across the track, into which the wise did not venture out." From what we found out afterwards, only two thirds of the cars risked it. The result was that I was absolutely soaked. A GT40 is not exactly watertight! After taking off my soaking racing suit, we went to eat something at the CER tent and then I decided to rest at the hotel, in the meantime trying to dry as much of the gear as I could. The weather got better and better during the afternoon and by 3, the sun was shining between fluffy clouds. The racing suits were quickly put out to dry further.



Leading Roitmeyer's GT2 Porsche 935 during the deluge

At around 15:45 we left the paddock again for the third time of the day and lined up in the pre-grid area to go out on track. These were uncomfortable moments for Jean Marc Luco, as we both like to be out of the paddock early and it invariably puts us near each other. He has to manage his angry expression and look away so as not to have to speak to me.

It all makes me laugh.

Finally we were released onto the track right on time. I must say they are precise, these Germans.



Claude and Chris, chased by Veillard's GT2 BMW 320

In the free session in the morning I had really pushed. The time difference between me and the next car in my class was big enough for me to take the session a bit slower. I knew Chris was fast in his GT40, but even if he went faster than I did in this session I had a reference from the morning session.

In the process I obviously let the cars that were going faster pass me, as long as they weren't all making a habit of it. That did cause some hairy moments.

The first 5 laps were really slow, around 2.28. It felt slow and on the next 2 laps I pushed and brought them down to 2.24. What I find fascinating is that by now I could really tell clearly where I was with respect to my limit. In the morning, I had come quite close to losing the car in more than one corner. Now I was driving with no pressure.

I then thought I would do the remaining laps slightly faster and brought them down another 2 seconds to around 2.22, which was 6 seconds slower than in the morning.

The session finished and we returned to the paddock. It had been a long day. Bernard wasn't totally happy with how the Lola was going, yet he had obtained second position in class behind John Sheldon. He in fact had ended the session saying he had smelled fuel and his right arm felt wet with liquid. When the mechanics lifted the back, they saw the left part of the chassis was covered in oil. Apparently the expansion tank had cracked and oil was pouring out of it. We decided it could be fixed the next day. This was the third problem the Lola suffered. After not being able to engage first gear, the coil had come loose and shorted, cutting the engine out. In fact the oil leak was so evident that it overshadowed

what Bernard had said and the fuel smell he mentioned was completely forgotten - with disastrous results in the race the next day.

I also had got second in class, as Chris Ball had class pole with a time of 2:20 against my 2.22. We changed and all decided to dine together at the Dorint, where Clive Robinson and Julien joined us.

The next morning we breakfasted late and strolled to the paddock. The weather was superb and it looked like we would spend the morning watching the other races while the mechanics were working on shoring up the Lola's oil tank.

I also spent the time reviewing race strategy. This year something had changed. After Portimão, where I had decided to go after the Spa victory, I'd decided I would quietly go for the championship without putting pressure onto the team. Part of this had already been done. We were at Nürburgring in second position, with a difference of 7 points. In terms of strategy, the fact that Chris was there with his very fast GT40 was good. If he finished second, this would put me at the head of the championship. The current leader had to finish no better than third.

Another requirement was that I had to make the car last the full season, or at least each race.

My immediate need was that I had to overtake Chris. The problem was that the 3 cars I had allowed between him and me on the grid, a BMW 320 group 5, a Chevron B16 and a Porsche 935, although all slower than me, were fast enough to make it difficult to pass them. I could easily lap 4 to 5 seconds faster than any of them, including Chris, and could pass them, but I'd have to do it right at the beginning of the race so as not to allow Chris to get too far ahead.



Forming up

In fact I asked Jean Max, who was going to man the radio, to let me know each lap the time gap between Chris's GT40 and mine.

We had lunch with Chris and his charming wife Liz, before changing for the start of the race.

As we got ready I was again visited by the lady marshal who told me we would leave the paddock in our grid order about 15 minutes before race time.

With the precision we had come to expect from

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them, the marshals moved us out of the paddock, not to the pit lane but directly onto the track, where we were immediately lined up in grid positions.



Exactly on time, we moved off after the pace car for the warm-up lap, which is always a matter of concentrating to keep position, not let others jump theirs and paying attention to cars swerving and braking erratically. By the time we rounded the tight turn to the pit straight, the first cars had probably passed the start line and the whole lot accelerated.

I positioned myself to start accelerating in such a way as to pass cars on the straight as soon as we crossed the start line.

Apparently Chris had done the same. By the time we reached the tight, stepped right hander at the end of the long straight, I had passed the 3 cars between Chris's GT40 and mine. Only Chris had passed the 3L 911 RS and the Porsche 935 in front of him and was still 2 cars in front.

The problem for Chris, and for me too, was that we were able to pass some cars on the straight, but because they were on slicks, they were able to corner and brake much better on sinuous parts of the circuit. That's why, soon after the Mercedes Arena, the two Porsches had overtaken him again.

Thus half way through the first lap I was right behind Chris. I held back slightly after the NGK Chicane and was able to position myself better in the right hander onto the pit straight and was 0.2 seconds ahead of him (practically side by side) the first time we passed the timing line; we did the whole straight like that.

We then had to brake. I could have stayed inside and cut inside the corner, but I preferred to overtake less hairily and tucked in behind him.

The next two laps were done with me putting pressure on Chris, stuck 0.3 seconds behind him and watching the cars in front.

The Howmet didn't seem to stand the pressure and was getting overtaken as the laps progressed. On the fourth lap, it had an excursion off the track and both Chris and I overtook him.

But before that I overtook Chris immediately after the Mercedes Arena on the straight before the Ford Curve.

As this was going on, just ahead of me at the front of the race, Bernard, who had started 15th and had risen to 11th, was having dramas of his own. In the Mercedes Arena he noticed a loss of power and saw fire in his rear view mirror. He stopped by the marshals post, activated the fire extinguisher and left the car in a hurry before the marshals emptied another powder bottle into the car.

That lap I was ahead by 2 seconds when we crossed the start line and was 32nd overall, having started 41st. The next lap a BMW passed Chris and, when he crossed the line, he was 8 seconds behind me as I had pushed and done a lap at 2:20 when we had been lapping at 2:23. I had caught up with two Porsches.

On lap 6 I was informed that Chris had dropped further back, that there were 4 cars and 11 seconds between us and that I was solidly in the lead of the class, so I decided to reduce the pace to around 2:24 per lap.

On lap 7, as I had slowed somewhat, the ex-Eddie Cheever BMW Junior Team 3201 overtook me. In the meantime, the Howmet was slowly climbing up the lap chart, having passed Chris Ball on the 6th lap.



On lap 8 the Howmet was more than 8 seconds, and Chris around 12 seconds, behind me.

On lap 9, I had the Howmet 5 seconds back, and on lap 10 Chris got closer and passed the Howmet which might have had a problem.

It is interesting to read about that part of the race from the Historic Motor Racing News article: