

Maserati Gransport

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ROBERTO LANDS A 'WORKS'
DRIVE AT SILVERSTONE

t is Friday midday in Bavaria. My phone rings. It is Maserati Corse. "Can you get to Silverstone immediately to race a Maserati Trofeo GranSport in the British Grand Prix support race?" I say yes, but somehow I have to pick up my race kit and race licence from home (Surrey) and e-mail photo ID of myself and my partner for my Grand Prix weekend passes. Oh yes..., I also have to get myself from the Alps to Silverstone in less than five hours on a Friday afternoon. And no, I can't have a Harrier jump jet or a helicopter. You don't need to know how, but at 5.00pm I am on the race track.

The Series

The Maserati brand is right up here with the world's best. It says class, heritage, quality and sophistication. No surprises then that the Trofeo Vodafone Maserati is the world's best one-make race series. Trofeo drivers pay 128,000 Euro (£84,000) for a car in the prestigious seven-race international series. You can have one or two drivers per car. Maserati takes care of everything, including hospitality and accommodation, all you have to do is arrive and drive. But before I put you in the driver's seat, let's look at the numbers. If you decide to go it alone and have a race team supply you with a car and everything, you could so easily add another zero to the fee that Maserati charges. This Maserati deal is really exceptional value, especially to someone without a lot

of time on their hands. Maserati also offer top-class race tuition at Varano, so what are you waiting for? Book your 2006 season now. You know you want to.

Practice and Qualifying

I miss the morning's 30-minute practice session and arrive just in time for the late afternoon qualifying session. As my car (number 72) has not run that weekend, my orders are: take it easy for a few laps, come in for a mid-session pit stop for checks and then use what time is left to qualify. I qualify 15th out of 20 for the 40 minute race which is to take place the following day. Not having raced one of these cars before, and not having raced on the GP Circuit before, and not having practiced, and not having a full qualifying session, 15th had to do, which is far from ideal in a onemake race series. Having already had 30 minutes of prequalifying practice, the other drivers are instantly on the pace. Incredibly, the first six cars qualify within 1 second of each other, and that is on this long (3.2-mile) GP circuit. Ex-Formula One driver Johnny Herbert qualifies sixth, so the standard is very high. Yes, there are a couple of amateurs in the two-driver teams with slow lap times but that's it. Pole is claimed by the car of Ionnidis/Alessi. Celebrity drivers include supermodel Jodie Kidd and TV presenter/racer Vicky Butler-Henderson - co-driver of the winning car last year.

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A LAP OF THE 3.2-MILE SILVERSTONE GRAND PRIX CIRCUIT Use plenty of kerb and bury the brake pedal. Downshift to fourth and a quick squirt to Becketts. Taken flat in fifth The most important corner at as it leads onto the at 140+mph Hangar Straight. I think I got it right once. Had I been Brake and paddleshift down straight-lining instructing myself, I would have hit myself with a stick. from fifth at 145mph, to fourth the entry to Becketts gear at 100mph for a corner that is blind due to the pit-wall Taken flat with extending all the way to it. Just gets into sixth and 150mph an up-change. when it is time to brake and downshift to fourth for Stowe Cross the and the run to Vale. start/finish and check your pit-board Tighter than Priory and a quick third gear squirt to Luffield. Brake, third gear and use some kerb as it s flat and does not upset the balance. Taken flat in fifth. Easy in the dry. Haunting in the we Slowest part of the track and taken in second (at max rpm) or better in third with more control. Brake as hard as always – right up Goes on forever. to the ABS cutting in. Flat in fourth for some, Understeer city but Downshift to third and a confidence lift for other important to get a good climb some kerbs. exit as a combined Woodcote and Pit Straight are quite long. Power-slide territory and up through the gears to fifth.

The Race

Maserati allots each driver two mechanics, one of which is totally dedicated to your car. Claudio Visconti briefs me on the time slot for a driver-change. In my case, I am to race for the full 40 minutes duration with a compulsory mid-race 90 second pit-stop. There are many secrets and tricks to learn with any race series. I am in at the deep end but Claudio is an enormous help.

Sitting on the grid in row 8 of 10, I need a cunning plan but with the back-side of one of the Fosters Grid Girls resting on the bonnet, concentration is difficult. One-make race series are notorious for contact. Last year's race here was carnage. This is my first invitation by Maserati and my main priority is to hand the car back undamaged as a previous journalist had destroyed two cars. The Championship uses rolling starts and I am gambling on profiting from a first lap pile-up – which does not happen. I won't do that again. This is an error than costs me three more places, I am now back in 18th place with a mountain to climb. The racing is very hard; no one is giving an inch. There are several occasions when I have to take avoiding action from desperate drivers on banzai missions. There is supposed to be a 40 minutes count-down board at the startline. If it is there, I can't see it. Thankfully Claudio hangs out a pit-board, but at 140mph it is not always easy to see as he is located at my turn-in point for Copse. Fortunately, I do what I always do in long races and tape a wristwatch to the dash. At 20 minutes – and at Claudio's pit-sign – I roll into the pits for my compulsory stop, taking great care not to exceed the 40mph speed limit.

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SPEED IN GEARS (AT 7900 RPM)

st - 46 5mph

2nd – 71.1mph

3rd - 95.0mph

1th 120 9mnh

4111 - 120.6111p11

6th 1912mnh

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defended and nobody brakes early. Eventually I exit a corner quicker and add a dash of slip-streaming to overtake cleanly. Looking at the lap-by-lap race analysis sheet, after a couple of slow initial laps, my main weapon is consistency with lap times. I keep up out of trouble and never make a mistake. This takes me from 18th to 10th by the finish with the 9th place car within easy reach had there been one more lap. In the end, there is no carnage and just two DNFs: the Zerere/Harada car and the Johnny Herbert/Jodie Kidd car which retires at Vale when Joe Macari comes into contact. Last year's winner Vicky Butler-Henderson who is partnered with Jean-Marc Giraldi finishes 17th. At the front, the crowd is entertained by 40minutes of exceedingly close racing. Championship leader, Alberto Cerrai takes the chequered flag just half-a-second clear of the car of the Swiss pairing of Notter/Catori. My post-race feelings - can I have another go?

The Car

Idiot-proof, bullet-proof, bomb-proof and easy to drive - to a point. Achieving front-running lap-times from a Trofeo GranSport takes enormous race-craft. It also calls for some controlled brutality. You can be as rough as you like with these cars, the rev-limiter cuts in at 7900rpm and the Cambiocorsa paddleshift software won't accept inappropriate down-shifts. Despite its 1345kg (dry weight), the Brembo brakes will take anything you throw at them. The set-up is dry/wet compromise so that should it rain, your Maserati crew only has to change the wheels and tyres. LEFT:hgh ghghhghg hghghg ghghhghg ghgh ghgh hghghhghg hghghg

Cost: 128,000 Euro for one season's use. The 2005 aerodynamic improvements mean that there is some downforce, so you must remember that you can pull

more lateral-g in fast turns than slow ones. Used to driving my own race car or the personal property of a co-driver, I am programmed to be kind to cars. I learn that you can't be like that in a one-make series. These cars can and must be driven really hard every second of the race. ai

