

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE GT4 KIND

Pirelli World Challenge's GTS class has a divergent look for 2016, and the influx of new arrivals from GT4 has caused both excitement and trepidation.

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It's as if the aliens landed and walk among us. But we're not talking about the humanoid, look-kind-a-like-us aliens, nor even the lanky gray things from "Close Encounters." Nope, something more like the Cantina band from "Star Wars," or maybe even *the Alien*. They can look odd, out of place, and even a little frightening.

Well, maybe not next to a McLaren 650S GT3 or a Ferrari 458 - but next to a Chevrolet Camaro or Ford Mustang, a SIN R1 or KTM X Bow looks rather out of this world. In case you didn't know, those are two of the more exotic examples of GT4 cars that are taking hold in the Pirelli World Challenge GTS class. But GT4 cars - homologated competition cars that slot in under GT3 in terms of speed and cost -

also come in more familiar flavors, such as the Lotus Evora, Maserati GranTurismo and Aston Martin Vantage. Still not as common as a Boss 302 or a Z28, but more familiar nevertheless.

The Aston, Maserati and Lotus have had a presence in World Challenge previously; the former, along with Ginetta, are new cars this season that are coming in now that the series has opened GTS to any GT4-homologated car, much as it did with GT3 in the GT category a couple of years ago.

It's the latest evolution of a class that, following a long absence, re-emerged as GTS in 2010, but has often existed in some form or another in PWC - a class that slots in somewhere between touring cars and top-flight GT cars. After kicking off with RealTime's Acuras ruling the roost, it evolved into the pony car class, dominated by Mustang and Camaro, with some Kia Optima successes thrown in for good measure.

Given the traditional nature of those cars, it's not surprising that some have derisively referred to the new arrivals as "kit cars," since several are not sold in the U.S. and, if they are, drivetrains must be purchased separately. Nevertheless, they are tested and the performance is balanced and, so far, they appear a good fit for the class, just as they seem to be able to compete on equal footing in the SRO Motorsports-run GT4 European Series.

In the first four GTS races of 2016, Camaro Z28-equipped Lawson Aschenbach won Round 1 at Circuit of The Americas, Brett Sandberg took the second COTA race in a KTM, and Jack >



(MAIN) Chasing after the future... Brett Sandberg's GT4 KTM X-Bow heads a pair of pony cars - Lawson Aschenbach's Camaro Z28 and Nate Stacy's Boss 302 Mustang - in Race 2 at the COTA season-opener. (LEFT) In the end, Aschenbach and Sandberg split the COTA victories.



GT4 VARIETY SHOW

(LEFT) Racers Edge Motorsports will run a pair of SIN R1 GT4 cars in 2016 PWC GTS. The R1 has already proved an effective package in European GT4 racing. (BELOW) SDR Motorsports' Lotus Evora was a podium contender at the COTA opener.



Roush, Jr. swept St. Pete in a Mustang. "The vision for GTS is to continue the class," says Greg Gill, CEO and president of WC Vision. "But in a Balance of Performance world that's more and more driving sports car racing today, the exciting part of GTS is the question: how do you balance cars that are interested in being in the series and is there any kind of common standard?"



JACK ROUSH, JR.
The son of Ford NASCAR mainstay Jack Roush, Jack Jr. was a multiple race winner in Continental Tire SportsCar Series before switching to PWC in 2014. His breakthrough GTS weekend came with a pair of wins for his Boss 302 at St. Pete in March.



some tracks, but the same can be said for GT3, where front-engine, turbo V8 Bentleys, mid-engine V10 Audis and rear-engine, flat-6 Porsches are competing against one another. "There were a lot of unknowns," says Lawson Aschenbach, a two time GTS champion in Black Dog Speed Shop's Camaro who returned to the team in 2016. "We knew that was going to be the case, and there were some of us who were going to be happy and some of us who were going to be unhappy with how the balance of performance played out. "I think, in the end, bringing in GT4 cars is a very smart move by the series. You saw the explosion when GT3 cars were brought into GT, what it did for the series, but also what it did worldwide. Although GT4 is a little bit on the bottom

floor at this point, it's slowly getting more exposure and you're going to have more manufacturers coming in. I think there's a really solid foundation for the future of this class, running GT4. People like the worldwide spec; people like to have consistency across many different series over the world."

Jon Mirachi's Racers' Edge Motorsports is one example of a new

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LAWSON ASCHENBACH

team coming into GTS because of the acceptance of GT4 cars. Racers' Edge is the importer of the SIN R1 GT4, a relationship which developed because Mirachi started looking at GT4 cars when the series announced their eligibility and brought two of the cars to COTA. "I was looking at what was going on in Europe and the diversity of equipment that was out there," says Mirachi, who describes GT4 as having 90 percent of the performance of GT3, but half the

cost. "When I looked at the cars and what was available, the SIN just caught my eye. I thought it was the coolest looking car, and the overall layout just made sense to me. I thought, 'That's a car that people want to look at, drivers will want to drive, and we as a team would be proud to run.'"

Mechanical glitches and on-track incidents kept the cars from racing at COTA and absent entirely from St. Pete, so it's tough to say how they'll fit in. Mirachi acknowledges that things may not mesh immediately. "I think there's a little bit of pain that everybody has to go through trying to merge two different things together, so I expect some difficulties either to our advantage or our disadvantage," he says.

Of course, that is the big bone of contention, whether the SIN, X Bow and Ginetta are going to have an edge. So far it appears they don't, but there are circumstances where the very different character of the cars could come into play.

"Those cars have very low centers of gravity and very light weight," notes Mustang driver Roush. "Personally, I think they need to have a smaller tire to represent that. Because, even though in some cases we may have a similar lap time, at the end of a run they're actually



LAWSON ASCHENBACH
The two-time PWC GTS champion with Black Dog Speed Shop (2013 and '14) returns to the team for a 2016 GTS campaign, as well as racing a GTD class Audi R8 for Stevenson Motorsports in the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship.

going to be much faster than us." Indeed, Sandberg praised the consistency of his KTM throughout Round 2 at COTA, which he won, and followed that up with a pair of podiums at St. Pete. But the GT4 machine couldn't shake Aschenbach's Camaro that was hounding him all race long at COTA, either. Sandberg says the X Bow is great through the high-speed sweepers, but believes the Camaro is better under braking and out of corners. For his part, Aschenbach says the new arrivals have the Camaro beat on top speed. Swings and roundabouts? That's where the rulesmakers at SRO come in, and where Pirelli World Challenge Technical Director Marcus Hasselgrove may face his biggest challenge, especially while there are cars prepared to legacy rules running against the wave of GT4-homologated racers. Several GTS class competitors, though, expressed confidence in Hasselgrove's ability to keep the GTS field fair and balanced in the transition period. When that period of mixed legacy cars and GT4 machinery ends, as it likely will, perhaps some of the new arrivals won't seem quite so otherworldly, and an X Bow side by side with a Mustang in a corner won't look quite so odd? ■

GT BOOT CAMP

GTS GAVE MICHAEL COOPER THE SMARTS TO MOVE UP TO GT WITH CADILLAC RACING.



For Michael Cooper, Pirelli World Challenge GTS wasn't so much a stepping stone as it was a training ground to harden

him up for battle in the GT ranks. The 2015 GTS champion in a Black Dog Speed Shop Camaro Z28, Cooper has stepped into a coveted factory Cadillac ATS-V.R ride in the GT category. He's proven himself quickly, with a fast lap at COTA and finishing ahead of teammate and four-time GT champ Johnny O'Connell on a couple of occasions. Cooper won the 2012 Touring Car title, but had only a part-season in 2013. A one-off race in GT at Mid-Ohio caught Cadillac's eye, and they decided to give him a test.

"I actually tested the Cadillac before I ever drove the Black Dog car," Cooper says. "I think it was, 'Let's put Michael in the Black Dog car and try to develop him ourselves.' They were giving me a shot to help bring my craft along, because they believed in me and they thought I could do the job at Cadillac."

Cooper says he wishes that the series had more of a reward system for champions to help them move up to the next class if they desire. He notes that he gained confidence and skills each step along the way. Clearly, because he was ready to strap into one of the series' biggest rides.

"I don't think that I could have come out here and put on the performance I have had I gone straight from Touring car to GT," he says. "GTS was a huge learning platform for me to hone my craft and get some experience with some higher horsepower, rear-wheel-drive cars and more competitive drivers, and it's paid off."

(BELOW) Michael Cooper has been drafted into Cadillac Racing's No. 8 ATS-V.R in PWC's GT class for 2016.

