

The Nurburgring 24-Hour 2002

The Final Chapter by James Madelin

2002 was the last time Caterhams will race at the 24hr. The official line is that cars with an 'open wheel' design are not safe and have now been banned. We are more inclined to think they were smarting from the thrashing doled out by the winning caterham factory team... Here then, is the last report of the great race you are ever likely to see in the pages of Low Flying. Enjoy.

The long weekend didn't start well. I'm sure they told me that I had rented a 'car', but with that much cotton wool in the gearbox and steering column 'boat' would have been more apt; the sweat clings to the palm of my hands inside my Sparcos. The road stretches ahead. I'm terrified. I wish I'd brought my Seven...

It all started when I saw an advert on Blatchat, a Caterham Owner's Club internet chat site. It was looking for hands to help at the 2002 24hr Nurburgring race. For anyone into motor racing, the word 'Nurburgring' conjures up such history, respect and magic, that I knew I had to go. Having cleared up the fact that I was keen, but by no means a mechanic, I was on the team. As the website thread expanded, postings from people who had helped Adrian the previous year appeared, making veiled references to how unforgettable it would be. How we would each be etched in the memories of the others for years to come. A little melodramatic I remember thinking to myself.

Some of you may not have heard of the infamous Nurburgring, or Nordschleife. It was built in 1925 in the forests and



Nurburgring 24-Hour



mountains of Northern Germany as both a car testing facility and an illustration of German engineering might. Seventy-five years after the first race it survives as one of the longest and most challenging motor racing circuits in the world. The circuit is so long that there are two or three villages inside its 13.8 mile narrow ribbon of tarmac. With its 73 corners winding through the Eifel forest, numerous blind crests, small run-offs and variable surface it is a challenge to drive

Images from the race: Non-stop action for a full 24 hours. The team (top left) looking fresh before the race.





on your own, let alone in a race when there is a ton of steel roaring up behind you in the dark at a closing speed of 70mph.

Time flew by and before I knew it we were pulling up in Adenau, a small town that the Nurburgring passes, to discover that our hotel didn't have room numbers. The rooms were named after corners on the 'Ring. The town was closed off, and hundreds of people had crammed into the tiny square to see a selection of the

Racing for a day and a night requires stamina not only from the car and drivers but the support crew too.





weekend's competitors tearing down the High Street past the flimsy metal barriers. The crowd was loving it. Imagine that happening in the Cotswolds, I wondered aloud over the din. I wouldn't have been surprised if petrol had flowed from the bathroom taps.

We hastily dropped our bags and headed straight over to the circuit. On arrival at the main entrance, we stopped the car to get someone to come and meet us with our passes. An officious but beautiful young blonde appeared at the window ordering us in German to move the car.

"Es tut mir leid, aber ich spreche kein Deutsch. Sprechen Sie Englisch?" I asked hopefully with a friendly smile.

"Nein !" she said. "Zer iss no parking hee-a"

"Yes, OK, I just need to pick up my tickets. I am not parking here."

"Nein ! Yoo vill not park hee-a." She seemed sternly unaffected by my friendly approach.

We were saved as Geoff appeared bearing our tickets and a fluent knowledge of German. Apparently she was just as short with him. I guess they all have a job to do, but after our first encounter with a German, we felt rather unwelcome.

We found a spot well away from our German freundin and walked into the pits through the paddock where the team trucks had parked. Some, like ours, were ancient battered diesels, driven from the other side of Europe. Others were a world away, gleaming, with models supping from tall glasses on roof terraces erected atop the trailers.

Our garage no. 16 was an affront to the senses. We threaded past a BMW M3 from the UK. Just past them, a German favourite, a 600bhp aluminium orange Audi 200. Just in front, a tiny Citroen AX. Between the two, squeezed in along the left wall, a tiny Caterham on axle stands. All this in the space not much larger than a double garage, further filled by about thirty people busying themselves around and under the other cars.

Naomi, Allen and I were introduced to the others by Geoff.

Rebecca; Geoff's daughter. Slim, bright and friendly.

Mario; Rebecca's Swiss mechanic boyfriend. Solid, quiet and hard working. A jovial twinkle in his eyes.

Mark; One of the drivers from last year and friend of Adrians. Getting stuck in as usual.

Adrian Watt; Owner of the car. Hairy chest, filthy overalls and a welcoming handshake.

Geoff; Unofficial pit boss. The Boss. He who knows all and is all-seeing.

Dermot; Engine mechanic, a worker of magic with the K series and a warm character.

Pete; All rounder, knows the insides of a Caterham better than most and a good bloke.

Naomi; My girlfriend. Not sure yet what she'd let herself in for.

Allen; Caterham owner who answered an ad as I did and had travelled over with us.

James; Me. Seven owner, mechanic in training, and relishing the next few days. Not forgetting of course...

The Car; a Caterham 1400 with freshly installed Emerald ECU, Piper Cams, Apollo tank and full roll cage. Held together with duck tape after many seasons of racing. 140bhp... remember that number.

I had been told that the team had qualified on the basis of their previous year's performance, but that was only valid for the car. Each driver also had to complete two full laps to qualify, so if you couldn't get each driver around the minimum pair of laps of the long circuit, all the work you had put in would be dead in the water.

Race weekend at the Nurburgring is a big event, and although the 24hr race is the highlight of the weekend there are many other races of spectacular custom V8s, touring cars, and classics. I mistook one of the entries for a pace car but on closer inspection I saw it was a German 'Polizei' car from the 1970's throwing itself around the GP circuit, leaning onto its door handles on every corner, with its little blue light still on the roof.

Back in the garage preparations continued. While we nervously checked the car over, a glance into the Caterham works garage revealed a picture of serenity. The car was being polished! 10am and the practice/qualifying session began. Out went our little car number 125, dwarfed

by the GT3's. I wondered how it would feel to be out on the track. The Nordschleife is incredibly narrow in places; not much wider than a British B road, it must feel even smaller when you're sharing the road with a huge Dodge Viper.

I'm on the pitwall with the stopwatch. Adrian goes out and has an uneventful two laps. Our first driver qualifies. Mark goes out and does a quick lap of the GP circuit before heading off around the 14 mile Nordschleife. On the way down to Fuchsröhre, at one of the fastest points of the circuit, Mark has a Moment.



Fuchsröhre is a series of downhill bends taken in sixth gear. In our car, that is about 130mph. It's a fear thing... it would be easy to go slower, but with other cars lapping on the pace, and some considerably faster, you have to pin your foot to the floor and go for it. As Mark was halfway down, an Alfa driven by a beautiful Australian shuts the door on him. At 130mph the cars meet, and the cycle wing is stripped from the front wheel of our car. The offside mirror is torn off the rollcage. Mark puts two wheels on the grass, the armco only feet from his left as he barrels on down the hill at top speed. Lifting or braking ? Out of the question... any sudden move would send you spinning into the steel armco. But somehow he ends up back on the tarmac. A corner later he passes the Alfa, sure that there is more damage to our car that he can't see. When he gets back to the pits, we realise he was very lucky... a cycle wing and the mirror was the only damage. From the colour of his face when he got out, I'm sure his race suit was the

worse for wear too.

Ross puts in a quick lap, and with his two laps done we have three drivers qualified. James squeezes himself in to set out and.... the car doesn't start. Geoff shouts for a push start, so we set off down the pitlane. No luck. We try again. Nothing. The engine sounds all wrong, a whining chugging sound that does not bode well even to my untrained ear. Checking to see whether there is a V8 monster trying to overtake our little bit of chaos in the small pitlane, we hurry to push the car back into the garage. We quickly find that the fuel pump isn't working and set about changing it. An hour or so spent passing tools and scrabbling around on the concrete floor and the car is ready. It fires first time. James heads out into the glaring sun, the last of our drivers to qualify.

I cross to the pitwall with the stopwatch running and wait. About 12 minutes later as he comes past he is furiously waving at the back wheel. I warn the others, and after a quick lap of the GP circuit rather than the 14 mile Nordschliefe, he pulls the car into the pits. It turns out that he was coming out of a left hander when the back snapped on him. No gradual breakaway as you would expect, but a sudden gut-wrenching snap oversteer slide. His instinct alone kept the car on the road, but for the rest of the lap it was obvious that something was very very wrong. We push the car into the garage, and a quick inspection reveals that the rear wheels are off centre. The de Dion axle tube has snapped.

Brows furrow as everyone takes stock. Mario is already under the car undoing anything he can see, being careful not to hit a brake line. The orange German Audi is just next to us, and I suddenly realise how lucky we are that in the space a normal car would fit in, you can sit a Caterham with four mechanics under it. Adrian appears with a spare axle just as the old one is dropped out, and with tools all over the place, the new shiny de Dion tube is installed. As I get up from the floor having spent an age passing tools back and forth I notice some new additions to the team. Adrian's wife Sally has arrived with their children, and eager to lend a hand they are polishing the car. I'm still not sure how to polish stickers

and gaffer tape, but they give it a good go, and suddenly the team feels a lot more professional. Anything the Caterham works team can do... I think to myself.

I don't know where the day has gone, but we have spent the whole afternoon in the garage and the 7pm practice/qualifying session is upon us. Mark goes out to get a few night laps under his belt, and I immediately realise that the pitwall lap time counters are going to have a problem tomorrow night.

The cars are all fitted with intensely bright xenon gas discharge lamps. If you haven't seen a setup like that, the intensity is hard to describe, but it is like the brightness of four or five full beam headlights from the same spot. You are looking out for your car and can't help but stare into the lights as they all tear towards you at speeds up to 180mph. Recognising which car is yours as it screams past down the main straight is not easy when you have been dazzled. When Mark comes in Adrian finds some little flashing bicycle lights for the roll bar. It makes a small but crucial difference. We notice a small fuel leak. As Mark gets out he looks puzzled.

"It's as terrifying this year as last. Why am I here?" I think he's joking, but it's not clear.

The British BMW in our garage has a more serious problem though. A cam has split, and flailed around inside the engine block. Like a medieval weapon, it has torn valves and the head to pieces. The mechanic team are looking at the scene of devastation with no idea what to do. Later on the car will be taken to a nearby engine shop where locals will stay up all night rebuilding the engine. The owner of the car is overheard on the mobile.

"How much will you charge me?"
"£14,000" "OK, do it."

In a blink of an eye, he has just arranged for his engine to be rebuilt for more than it would cost to buy our car new. And he is considered a small fish in the big sea of the corporate teams here. Our David and Goliath position starts to sink in.

The night before the race begins I realise I need all the sleep I can get but I'm nervous, and glad to get to the garage first thing. The fuel pump has to be moved from its previous vulnerable position, and the front suspension has to be fettled. Race

day is mad, with every corporate sponsor and paddock ticket holder wandering around, getting in the way and getting on everyone's nerves. We copy the attitude of the other teams in our garage, and the public seem to respect someone with a job to do and clear out of your way. The web cam is in our garage, and I wish I could tell someone back in the UK, but I can't get to a 'phone. It turns out that the orange Audi 80 is one of Germany's favourite cars, a real celebrity.

We spend the morning working away at the fuel pump, suspension and various other things as more races go on outside. The V8's have such a characteristic burble that it is almost like being at a 'pod racer' meeting from the Star Wars film.... blub blUB bLUB BLUB BLB BLb Blb blb blb as they roar past on the main straight just outside our pit garage. I manage to sneak outside to watch a full racing pitstop for new tyres. Very impressive.

And then we're there. Midday Saturday. Race time. We work right up to the last moment, before moving the car out into the hot sun and lining it up in the pit lane. Naomi shouts at me to turn around. A topless model with sponsor's logos painted on her page 3 chest strides past next to a BMW coupe. I turn back to our pits to see two stunning young girls in hotpants and lace posing next to their team car with a pseudo Elvis. This is more like it... Mental note to self... organise glamour for next year. I just don't cut it in my budget Halfords overalls. Naomi and Rebecca would look fantastic in Union Jack dresses, but it's not worth the black eyes I'd get to suggest it.... Mark drives the car slowly out and around the GP circuit to line up on the grid where we go out to meet him.

The grid is split into three groups of cars rated by their speed. We are in the last group, about a third from the front behind the groups of the giant slaying Porsche GT3s and Touring Cars. Two Alfas with similar paint jobs are either side of us, and both of them have scars where they could have taken off our cycle wing the previous day. We're a bit puzzled, but make a big show of inspecting their damage. I snap a few photos, and we are ushered back to the pits for the start.

The flag falls and with a huge wall of noise the 2002 Nurburgring 24hr Race



begins..... The stopwatch starts, and we have a chance to relax after all the work that has been done to the car over the last few days. There are a few hurried pitstops from other teams as various parts fail early in the race, but in the first few hours we all fall into a rhythm. I'm spending most of my time on the pitwall timing and counting our laps, and priming the team when the car is expected in. There is one fuel pump per garage, so you have to time your stops when possible to find the pump free. But stay out too long and you'll run out of fuel, and your race will be over.

The car seems to be running well, and I start to really enjoy myself. The previous two days have been fun, but this is the first time that I've been able to wander outside, snapping away. It's a buzz to stick your head through the gap in the pitwall fence as your car flies by lap after lap. The other teams on our section of pitwall are largely friendly and introductions are made, notwithstanding language barriers. We are posting consistent and good times of between 11:30 and 12:30 minutes. We have split the mechanics into two teams and I go off shift after two hours to spend a couple of hours wandering around taking photos, and sneaking back to the hotel to relax.

The short drive from the circuit entrance to Adenau is a joy for a petrolhead on so many levels. Not just because the roads are absolutely rammed with a fantastic array of high performance 'bikes and cars, but because you realise how much the circuit is a part of the local geography. You pull over to admire a beautiful view across a meadow and you can hear the race engines in the background, constantly reminding you that despite being hidden behind the hills and trees, there is a race going on out there. Every so often a crowd spills out onto the road and you realise that there must be a place to spectate nearby, down the forest paths. As I lie down for a half hour snooze, the sound of cars screaming through Adenaur Forst floats through the open hotel window.

While I am away the car is brought in for a remedial engine raise. There is an infamous corner on the circuit called Karussel, which is a steeply banked tight hairpin. The cars settle down into the

corner and push heavily as they bounce over the rough road surface of the banking. Our car is grounding out and we are worried that too much of that will wear the sump down. The car is wheeled into the garage for 15 minutes while spacers are fitted to the engine mounts. Night falls as I return to the circuit, there has hardly been a cloud in the sky and it's going to be a beautiful starry night. I pick up the stopwatch from Rebecca and head out onto the pitwall as Adrian goes out in the car.

I count off the lap times... 11:47, 11:58, 12:15, 11:52, and on until he has done six laps. I hold the pit-board out. You may recognise the pit boards from the F1 on TV. Held out by pit crews as the cars hammer past the pits, they are the only means of communication with the car for most teams. Ours is an amateur but effective effort of a black bin bag stretched over a piece of cardboard, with fluoro orange tape to denote various symbols that mean "three laps done", "in next lap" or "in immediately".

As Adrian rips past me at 130mph in the dark, both of us blinded by the other car's headlights, it is no wonder that he doesn't see me. With so much on his mind, he hasn't been keeping count of his laps. Twelve minutes later I'm waiting for him to come into the pits. He doesn't come in. He is now on his eighth lap, and having expected him to pit the car I have not seen him drive past. My stopwatch reads 19 minutes. I don't know whether he is halfway around a lap or has run out of fuel, or worse has crashed. I warn the team that he is pushing the fuel limits and we wait anxiously. A call comes into the garage, and as I run in I hear that Adrian has run out of fuel. My heart sinks.

It's the worst way to lose the race, for a stupid reason, and no one person can shoulder the blame. Confusion and panic reigns. We crowd around Dermot on the mobile, who looks at us quizzically when we ask him where Adrian has stopped. We need to find out where he is on the circuit, perhaps we can take him enough fuel to get back to the pits.

"I'm not talking to Adrian" Dermot replies...

The sense of relief is enormous, twinged with a smile at our little melodrama. A couple of minutes later Adrian comes in, having lost count of the number of laps he has done and worryingly low on fuel. We fill the tank and send Mark out. After spending another couple of hours timing laps, and helping with driver changes and fuel stops every seven laps, I go off shift to grab some food and photos. Just before midnight I'm back for another shift that passes uneventfully. On the horizon, you can tell that dawn will be here in a couple of hours.

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Nurburgring 24-Hour

Just after 2am I knock off again and make a beeline for the hotel for a kip. I set two alarms by my head, and sleep through the noise of both of them. I awake after four hours of sleep and feel like I've been run over by a truck. Having been up for more 24 hours, after a derisory four hour sleep I feel worse than if I'd forced myself to stay awake all night. I shove some painkillers past my dry tongue and head back to the pits. On the way through the early morning light, there are broken race cars littering the verges of the forest roads. Some have been driven out at breaks in the armco and are being worked on by the side of the public highway, others are in various states of wreckage, waiting for tow trucks or cranes. In the paddock there is more of the same. I photograph a race spec Honda Civic that has had a serious engine fire. It's a mess. The orange Audi 200 has retired and is sitting in the paddock. Later it will be wheeled out to cruise the last lap, to guarantee a race position.

I get back to garage 16 to see our car on axle stands. By now I'm running on automatic, my emotions have been left behind in the night; I ask what's happened still feeling so shattered that it almost feels like I don't care. I hear that while following a BMW M3, James Auld had seen a flash of metal go under the car and felt the crunch as it tore a hole in the sump. He has limped it back, and as I arrive an aluminium welder is being sought among the other garages to plug the hole. Adrian gets an old sump from the truck, and when we realise that no one can help us fix the broken one, we decide to check it over. The sump we are now thinking of fitting to the car was taken off the car last year when it started leaking from the drain hole, but it looks fine now. We put it on, fill the car up with oil and send it out for a short lap of the GP circuit. It looks oil-tight so we are back in the race. I hear later that brake pads had been changed while I was asleep.

As the sun comes up I'm amazed that any cars are still running, having been pushed so hard for so long around such a violently demanding circuit. The scream of the engines redlining down the straight doesn't help my exhaustion headache, but a plate of lukewarm pasta sets me on the road to recovery. Lap by lap gets logged.

The belligerent attitudes of some of the professional teams soften as more and more of their mechanics walk up to me on the pitwall, their cars battered heaps in the paddock. They ask meekly...

"Your leetle car... eet eez still in ze race?"

They smile and pat me on the back when I answer. I'm definitely feeling better, twinged with nerves. As we enter the final hours of the race, we are running at the top of our class and we have gained more than seventy positions. If something goes wrong now.... The BMW that had the engine rebuild the night before the start seems to be spending almost as long in the pit garage as on the circuit, and I hear why from one of the mechanics.

"We've got four drivers, and one of 'em owns the car. Every time 'e goes out 'e breaks it."

The tale of another owner-driver who is too hard on his machinery to ever win anything. The mechanics roll their eyes and go back to work.

Sunday morning goes steadily by and it's another scorcher. As the finish time grows closer we get more and more nervous until there are ten minutes to go, and all the teams crowd over to the pitwall to bag a place from where they can watch the finish. Before we know it, we can't see the track. Someone suggests climbing up, so up we go, grappling up the pitwall fence and balancing on the top. Something in the back of my mind tells me this is a very silly thing to be doing since it might collapse onto the track below, but I'm past thinking straight. The winning car, a yellow Zakspeed Viper driven by Zakowski, Lamy and Lechner crosses the line to thunderous

applause and waving flags. A BMW breaks down in sight of the line, and the driver starts to push for the last few hundred metres to the finish. Camaraderie kicks in and an Opel Kadett drives up slowly behind it, engages its bumper and pushes it down the straight. It's an amazing sight.

As car 125 crosses the finish line, bedecked with the Union Jacks and bunting taped on at the last pitstop, I'm swallowing tears of elation and exhaustion. I realise that I never really believed that any car could do it let alone our Caterham 7, with a 1400 engine and less power than most modern Gti hatchbacks. Colin Chapman would be proud. We get an enormous roar from the crowd as James crosses the finish line and many on the pitwall look at us with a mixture of amicable contempt and congratulation. There are tears streaming down Mario's face. It's over.

After starting 183rd on the grid, we came 94th. We came third in the class that made up one third of the grid. It feels like we've won to me. After downing a few beers, we arrange to meet at the award ceremony in the fabulous Dorint and head off. I need a siesta. I slip my Sparcos on and ease myself into... the Renault Megane. Having been immersed in racing all weekend I miss my Caterham more than ever as we wallow our way back to our hotel in Adenau, for a long long sleep.

The lush hills and valleys were silent again. If you'd just arrived you would have had no idea what draws so many to that amazing place. Remembering that weekend makes the hair on my neck stand on end. It will be etched in my mind for a long time.

