

DUNLOP SPORT MAXX

CHURCHILL ON SUNDAY

Words: Dougie | Photos: Dan Pullen

Adrian Churchill and his Astra VXR have had a fantastic season in the Dunlop Sport Maxx, we went to the penultimate round at Brands Hatch.

The Dunlop Sport Maxx Championship is fast-paced and never short on action. Cars are essentially 'Group N' or 'showroom class' specification. This means standard bodywork, glass and fuel tank, and minimal engine modifications. In theory, if you had the cash, you could take your road going Astra-VXR and turn it into a Sport Maxx racer without too much

difficulty. With performance kept close thanks to power-to-weight ratio rules, a lot of the performance comes down to the driver.

This year, Adrian Churchill has been one of the stars of the show, behind the wheel of his Courtenay-tuned Astra VXR. On the penultimate weekend of the season, we caught up with the team at Brands Hatch as Adrian aimed to clinch his first title. A veteran race driver, Adrian began racing back in 1994 in a Honda CRX, claimed

championship victory in a Vectra V6 challenge car and then spent three years in Seat Cupra (which was the support race to the BTCC at the time). During the week, he runs a car dealership but when the weekend comes around, it's all about his passion - racing.

Adrian bought the Astra VXR - prepared by Mardi Gras Motorsport, an experienced race car builder - two years ago. The car is an o6-plate and had done around 20,000 miles. Fitted with

KW race-spec coil-overs, a custom cage and huge AP brakes, it was pretty much ready to hit the track, but it was still in need of mapping. Adrian drove the car for roughly two-thirds of the season before deciding to see what could be done. 'I'd never spoken to anyone at Courtenay before, but I picked up the phone and asked to speak to Jon,' recalls Adrian. 'He wasn't available, but he called me back within 10 minutes, said "get the car to us" and we took it from there.'



DUNLOP SPORT MAXX

A mapping session on the Courtenay Sport rolling road followed, and a customised map was produced for the car. As the car is set-up in the pit garage, Jon explains, 'Races are 20 minutes long, so we had to look at how the engine would behave across that period, paying close attention to temperatures. The Z20LEH can get very hot and you can't fit a bigger intercooler. We ran the car extremely hard, taking it to flat-out 173 mph on the rollers, with an 86 degree inlet temperature and a coolant temp in excess of 100 degrees.' With all the cars required to run 100 octane Sunoco fuel, the optimised map seems to have made all the difference. As it stands at the start of the weekend, Adrian has won 10 of the 15 races covered so far.

There are three races over the course of each weekend, with one on Saturday (plus 20 minutes of qualifying) and two on Sunday. When we arrive on Sunday, there's already been controversy. Adrian and fellow Astra VXR driver Ryan Bensley had a coming-together round Clarke Curve. Although Adrian won the race, a complaint made as a result of the incident saw him marked down to fourth place. Adrian shrugs it off as being just one of those things and is already preparing for race two. It's expected that the Nissan 370zs will dominate proceedings, with their large



Class rules dictate that the engine remains standard bar an exhaust and map.

reserves of torque particularly suited to Brands. The good news for Adrian is that the faster of the two Nissans is being driven by a 'guest driver', who is simply stepping in to run the car on a one-off basis. This means that their finishing position and their points don't count.

It's warm and the track is dry. The Courtenay pit garage is a hive of activity, where family, mechanics and supporters are all congregated. Adrian is suited up and although he doesn't show it, he admits race day is tense. 'I don't eat anything until I've finished the last race,' he says with a smile.

Starting from fourth on the grid, Adrian immediately grabs the third spot, and then next time around takes second from the Seat Cupra of Gary Duckman before the safety car is sent out due to a Class B Mini spinning off into a gravel trap. When the race resumes, it's clear just how quick



Adrian contemplates the weekend.



The Nissans were quick around Brands.

'WHEN THE WEEKEND COMES AROUND IT'S ALL ABOUT ADRIAN'S PASSION FOR RACING'



Winning is a team effort and you need a good crew in the pits.



Adrian's roll cage is custom-made and features door bars.



Second in race two helps Adrian move closer to the title.



> CHAMPIONSHIP INFO

There's not been much in the way of web-based information (which is pretty silly if you ask us, Dunlop), but check out www.mapw.co.uk, a site set up by enthusiasts.

The Sport Maxx is really great entertainment, with close battles going on between cars that are well matched and, of course, very similar to your own pride and joy. There are seven rounds, which take place between April and August. The venues for 2010 were: Rockingham, Snetterton, Oulton Park, Pembrey, Castle Combe, Brands Hatch and Thruxton. It's been a popular pursuit for Vauxhall tuners – we covered Thorney Motorsport's team last year – while 888 have also been involved.

There are three classes:

Class A – 161-210 bhp/tonne

Class B – 131-160 bhp/tonne

Class C – Up to 130 bhp/tonne (there were no Class C cars this year)

Each round consists of a qualifying session of 20 minutes to determine the grid for race one. Over each race weekend, there are three races of 20 minutes' duration. Starting positions for race two are determined by the finish positions of race one. Race three features a reverse grid, where the starting grid is reversed by a number from four to eight, chosen at random by the winner of race two.

As with the BTCC (British Touring Car Championship), success ballast is awarded at the end of each race to the lead cars to even out performance. Success Ballast is awarded in 9 kg increments to the top five finishers in each class as follows:

First - 45 kgs

Second - 36 kgs

Third - 27 kgs

Fourth - 18 kgs

Fifth - 9 kgs

Thanks to Adrian's good starts, the Astra carves its way to the front.



DUNLOP SPORT MAXX

the Nissan is, and it gains a quarter of a second per lap on Adrian. But the thing is, with a comfortable gap between him and Ryan Bensley in third, Adrian doesn't need to push on too hard, as second place gains him maximum points. It's also worth noting that with the mandatory Dunlop tyres costing £180.00 a pop, it makes financial sense to try to preserve them where possible! The only further incident in the race is when Gary Duckman's Seat locks up

going into Druids and smashes into the tyre wall. He's OK, but the same can't be said for the car.

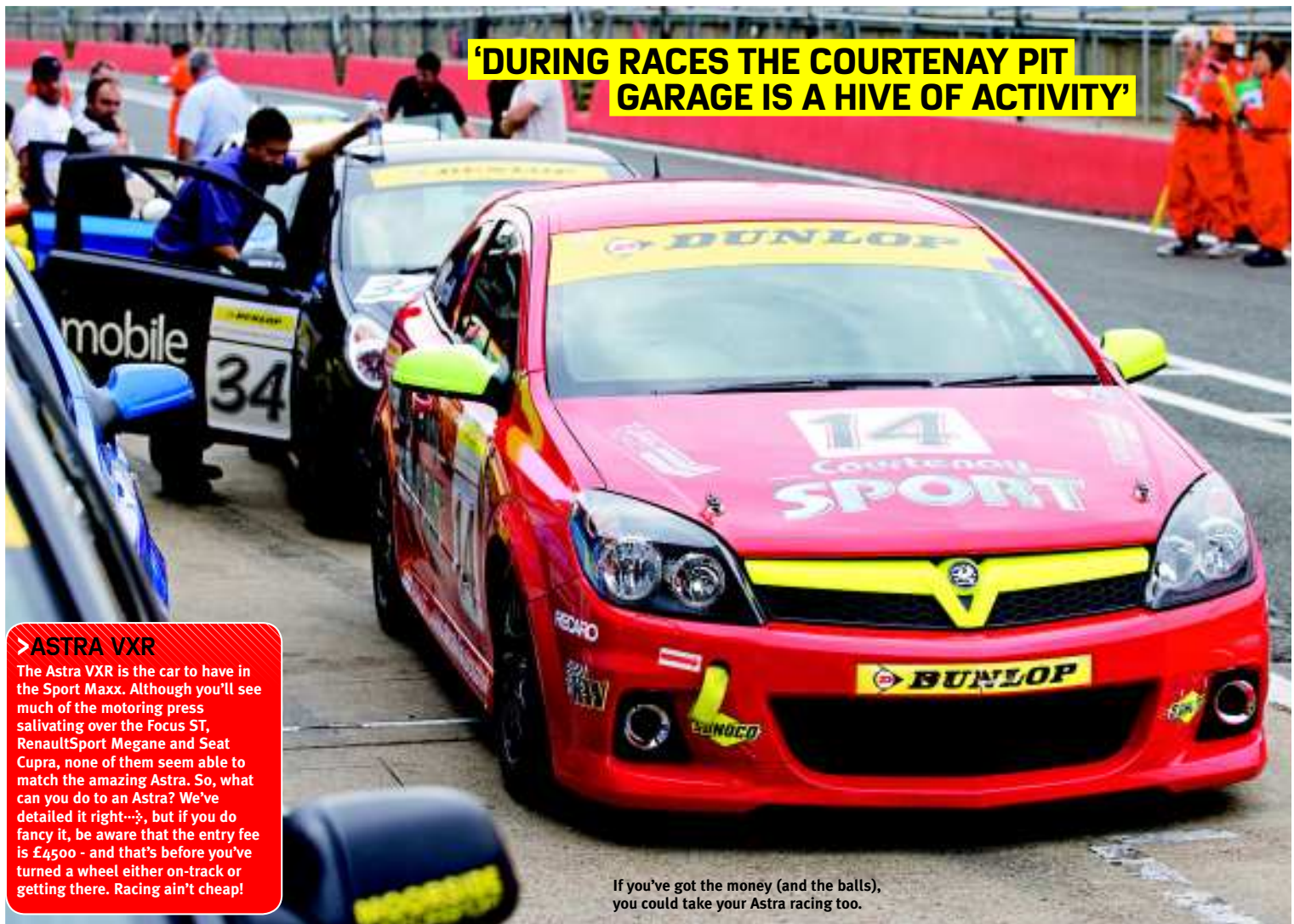
After the race, there's an agonising four-hour wait for the third of the weekend. The team calculate the various possibilities and it transpires that Adrian could win the championship that day if he scores maximum points, fastest lap and if his closest rival, Class B Renault Megane driver Jordan Witt, fails to score any points. Ah yes, the overall championship can be won by a

KW coil-overs help keep things in shape during heavy braking.



Rear brakes are standard, but the front benefits from AP discs and callipers.

'DURING RACES THE COURTENAY PIT GARAGE IS A HIVE OF ACTIVITY'



> ASTRA VXR

The Astra VXR is the car to have in the Sport Maxx. Although you'll see much of the motoring press salivating over the Focus ST, RenaultSport Megane and Seat Cupra, none of them seem able to match the amazing Astra. So, what can you do to an Astra? We've detailed it right---, but if you do fancy it, be aware that the entry fee is £4500 - and that's before you've turned a wheel either on-track or getting there. Racing ain't cheap!

If you've got the money (and the balls), you could take your Astra racing too.



The Cupra R can't match the Astra's pace.

TECH SPEC

ENGINE

The engine must remain standard, including intercooler, but you can change the exhaust. This is why an optimised map is so important in order to squeeze every last bit from the engine. Courtenay rate the ZzoLEH highly, with Adrian's car having covered two full seasons along with 20,000 miles on the road.

BRAKES

If you're really keen, you can use standard brakes, but Adrian uses AP Racing discs and callipers on the front, complete with cooling ducts. Rear discs must remain standard.

SUSPENSION

One of the most critical areas is the suspension. You're free to use a manufacturer of your choice - Adrian uses KW coil-overs - but it's vital to get it set up correctly.

WHEELS AND TYRES

All cars must use the same Dunlop Direzza control tyre, but you can use either standard wheels or Team Dynamics Pro Race 1.2s.

INTERIOR

The interior is fully stripped-out and fitted with appropriate fuel and electric cut-offs, plus a mount for the success ballast weights. The roll cage is custom made - Adrian's features door bars, some other Sport Maxx cars don't have these. The airbag is removed and there's a Recaro Kevlar seat which weighs next to nothing.

EXTERIOR

The outside of the car must be showroom spec, so no fibreglass panelling or Perspex windows!

driver from Class A or B - a bit like the BTCC in 1989, when John Cleland won in the Astra GTE without actually coming first in any race.

Race Three features a reverse grid where the starting grid is reversed by a number from four to eight, chosen at random by the winner of Race Two. This meant Adrian was to start in sixth place on the grid. Adrian is renowned for starting well and he had to call on all

his skill on this occasion, as five cars charged headlong into the first corner. It looked like there was contact between him and Ryan once more, and for a split second it seemed as if the door were closed, but somehow Adrian muscled through and amazingly managed to secure first place on the first lap.

He held on to the lead for a few more laps, but it soon became clear

that Chris Ward in the Nissan was looking unstoppable. With no threat, Adrian let him pass and concentrated in putting in another solid drive, which saw him secure his second podium finish of the weekend and maximum points. With a 38 point cushion at the end of play, and just 39 points to play for at the final round at Thruxton, the champagne is on ice, but the cork hasn't been popped just yet!

