

The Ron Simons Interview

September 16, 2014 by [The Pits](#) [15 Comments](#)

Nowadays everyone has heard of the Nurburgring. It's pretty much compulsory for owners of fast cars to do a lap of the Nordschleife and get a bumper sticker. But going back to the late 80's, things were very different. The 'Ring was better known as somewhere to avoid if you wanted to keep your car in one piece. Famously denounced by Jackie Stewart and the place Niki Lauda very nearly burnt to death (over 200 other drivers weren't so lucky), the 'Ring had a fearsome reputation. Once the F1 circus moved-on, it fell off the radar. One of the people who changed all that was Ron Simons. Having endured his own personal 'Green Hell' battling clueless, corrupt, corporate morons (who brought the whole place to the brink after plans to create a 'Nürodisney' went predictably wrong) he's a understandably bit wistful about how things were 'back in the day'. The cars, the track, the politics – everything was so much simpler then. It was just the likes of Ron and group of knowledgeable petrol heads with some Alfa 75s and an empty Nordschleife. What was terrifying in an F1 car turned out to be utter driving nirvana in a 'Milano' 75 Twin Spark. People had to know about this place, it was the greatest race track there ever was (and will ever be) and so the 75 Experience, which became RSR, was born.



Ron with one of the Alfa 75s that started it all. This one has over 300,000kms on the clock – that's over 14,000 laps of the Nordschleife!

Ron started out developing and testing performance parts for Lancia and Alfa before becoming a test driver for Porsche and Ferrari and has over 20 years experience as a pro race driver. He has since become something of a 'Ring legend himself. I doubt there's anyone alive with a more detailed first-hand knowledge of the track and its history.

RSR today has an incredible line-up of cars available to hire for days at the 'Ring and Spa as well as for road trips, driver training – you name it, RSR does it. A wander around their HQ just up from the track entrance is pure 'if Carlsberg did rental cars' stuff. Starting with the feisty Renault Sport Twingo RS going all the way up to high-end supercars like the McLaren MP412C, plus track specials such as the Radcal SR3 and BAC Mono. There are M3s, GT3s, GTRs – the list goes on and on. Naturally, a few Lotus cars have found their way onto the fleet and currently these include the Exige 240S, Exige 260 Cup, Exige V6S and 211. So if you want to know how these cars perform in the most testing of circumstances and also how they compare to the other cars on the fleet, Ron is the man to ask. He's also a straight-talking, no-bull kind of guy so don't go looking for any corporate flannel here, you won't find any. Despite close working relationships with BMW, Porsche, Nissan, McLaren, Lotus and Renault he was refreshingly honest and didn't pull any punches, as you're about to read...





RSR's fleet of track and road cars for hire must be the best in the world.

So how do you go about choosing a new car to join your fleet?

RS: I would say we don't get cars for free but we do get amazing deals and have amazing partnerships and for me one of the most important is our partnership with Lotus because that is a true driving car that is made for the track. We started with no-nonsense, light cars with no ABS, nothing but great handling with the Alfa 75. I wanted to have something that came from the same background as an Alfa. It's rear wheel drive, it's got some power and it's balanced as a whole package. Of course it's easy to crash in a Lotus. With the 240S there's no stability system. It's a very light car, it's RWD, it's mid-engined, so all the ingredients are there for disaster! And now we have to cater for younger clients who run into ESP and ABS and don't even notice! So that is why we introduced the front wheel drive cars. But for the group of people that know what they're doing, who have a certain skill set, it's very progressive, it handles for me like a dream and it's very easy to control. But we don't send novices out in Lotuses in the wet here anymore. At Spa we have a solution because we use full racing wets for these cars, which works really well. But we can't run them here because the tyres have to be road legal.

Which was your first RSR Lotus?

RS: The Exige 240S. As a package to use on track or on road tours, for us it's the best car because everything is in balance. Also it doesn't use any tyres, it doesn't use any brake pads or brake discs, it doesn't use any clutch, the gearbox is so strong given the engine speeds and abuse they receive here, they don't need to change synchros every season. For comparison the Nissan GTR does 14 taxi laps and it's a set of brake pads. And then there there's that great feeling to drive. It rolls quite a bit and with this comes the warning of when it lets go, it's very progressive and you can lean on the outside front until it lets go and then you just lift off the throttle, then the rear-end steps in and I mean I can't see a car which gives so much pleasure in the same price range. As a balance altogether you can't beat the 240S.



One of the many RSR Exige 240Ss. They are some of the hardest working cars on the fleet.

So the sweetest handling of all your Lotus cars is the 240S? Even more than the 211?

RS: Well now you're coming into a different category. If you talk 211 lap times at Spa then you cannot beat that with a 997 GT3 RS. A 211 straight out of the box does a 2.48. A 996 GT3 RS was 2.54 or something. The gen II RS was I think a 2.48 but then you use a lot of fuel, a lot of tyres, a lot of brakes, a lot of everything. We do taxi laps with the car and I think I even did a 2.47 taxi lap with a passenger. So it's absolutely easy 2.50's all the time. And the 240S is a 3 minute car. 211 is so much more effective, a more track orientated car but because of that it's also more difficult, it steps out at a higher speed and in a more radical way with less roll and warning. The 211 is a hairy little rebel! But it's one of my favourite cars and it's what we use for our taxi laps. It's a trouble-free package compared to the LMP2 car we used to run but for a customer experience it's very close. It moves so much more than the 260 Cup at Spa. It has a nice kind of instability that makes the ride way more spectacular!

that makes the ride way more spectacular!



Ron calls it "a hairy little rebel". The 211 remains one of his favourite cars.

How does the Exige Cup 260 compare?

RS: 260 Cup is much closer to the 211 than it is to the 240S. It feels way lighter than the 240S. As soon as you put it on slicks it becomes such a capable, very easy to drive car. There's so much grip from the rear end and it's a very quick car. I remember we did these taxi laps here at the VLN and with a set of full wets around here you're as quick as the GT3 Cup cars. It's so special because you see all that power and all that German efficiency and we are able to run similar lap times with no consumables and against cars costing 4 times the money. OK I know this place pretty well but they can't get away from this crazy little 1.8 car. In general the 260 Cup is easier to handle at that level than the 211.



Exige Cup 260. Still out there punching above its weight.

And how about the new Exige V6?

RS: It is an impressive car the V6. That put that car right away at a level which is close to a Porsche 997 GT3 mk II because the speed in that platform is amazing of course. We run the standard street car and we run it on the standard street tyre – so everything in perspective – the car is very rapid because of that engine of course but also because of that amazing rear end. But

RS: It is an impressive car the V6. That put that car right away at a level which is close to a Porsche 997 GT3 mk II because the speed in that platform is amazing of course. We run the standard street car and we run it on the standard street tyre – so everything in perspective – the car is very rapid because of that engine of course but also because of that amazing rear end. But we have had a problem with the front-end washing away more than I would like because I like a very pointy car. I have a feeling that there's not enough castor or that maybe the shocks are too short and springs too soft so that you reach full bump and full droop too early. A big chunk of that might be the tyres but even with the set of Ohlins one-way adjustable shocks we put on the car, something feels way off. For me the standard Exige V6 is not as much fun out of the box as, say, the 240S.

So how much have you had to modify your cars?

RS: To run here in tourist traffic we are not allowed to modify the cars at all. They have to be completely road legal. The 260 Cup is still straight out of the box.

Take me from a Cup 260 into a V6S.

RS: Well the 260 Cup is a proper, well sorted, balanced trackday tool. With the Exige V6S we have has the potential to get there, it isn't there yet but I'm talking about pushing to 9 tenths and over. We compared the two at Zolder. The lap times are similar. The V6 makes all the time coming out of the slow corners on power and torque and the 260 Cup makes all the time on corner speed. But the 260 Cup was on slicks.

And Exige V6S vs Cayman S?

RS: On the road the Cayman S is softer. It has a softer ride and is more comfortable. I don't think anyone would say it's too harsh for me. But they could still say that about the Exige V6. For me the Cayman is too comfortable on the track, it has too much squat and dive, it also rolls but especially the nose dive under braking. But it's still a top car for us. It does everything. We tested the car on dealing with stupidity, so we just did stupid stuff and see how good the system is and I must say that you can get away with murder!



The Cayman S. No lizards were harmed in the wrapping of this GTR.

It's a good car for idiots then!

The names of the people were named in the mapping of the GT3.

It's a good car for idiots then!

RS: [laughs] Yes, so far it's very easy to drive and very difficult to get it wrong and the engine is amazing and the PDK gearbox is also. But from a drivers point of view I don't like PDK at all. And I also want my customers not to like it either. Because it takes away another part for the driver. What makes it nice to do this game we're doing of going around in circles without any apparent reason is to be on the limit and the limits are getting further away and the speeds are getting higher and the risks are getting higher. That's why historic racing or old cars are so much fun. For me changing gear with heel and toe is part of your connection to the car and when it's the stupid flappy paddles then it's not so good. But it's good for our customers because it's one less thing for them to worry about. Especially for our clients from the UK, Japan, South Africa and Australia this makes it so much easier for them to drive a LHD car, they don't need to change gear with the 'wrong' hand and mechanically it means less trouble for us too with no over-revving, no broken clutches and so on.

I'd be very interested to hear your views on the electric steering?

RS: I didn't even notice on the 991 GT3. I did one lap on the Nordschleife and at first I didn't think the front end was as good as the old 997RS. But then we looked at the data and I was arriving at the corner 10-15 kmh quicker in the new car. With 240S everything matches, the brakes are up to the level of the engine and so on. For me with this car they underestimated the power and the speed of the whole package. And now the brakes are a little bit behind the rest. It's not because the brakes are not good it's because of the engine, man that thing's screaming, at 7000rpm you still have 2,000 to go. I don't want to say the new steering system is perfect but it's at least very good. And my whole racing background doesn't mean anything either because we're just talking about road cars here. When you take a 964 Cup car on torsion bars that thing turns in like there's no end to it. For me any road car is always a compromise. I don't want to say I don't enjoy it but it's so far away from a proper set up race car on slicks with the right cambers which would not be driveable on the road any more.

Where do your Lotus cars stand among a fleet of the best drivers cars in the world?

RS: To finish this discussion about various cars, Lotus is unique because no other sports car manufacturer makes such a complete car with that real sports car feel at that price level. For us the best car is still the 240S because as a drivers car it is the best experience and from the mechanical and maintenance side of things it's also a dream. The only downside is that people can't drive anymore and that's when the Lotus can become expensive! But injury is very rare, thank goodness. Some customers still think of it as a toy car, a plastic, unsafe car but we never had any injury in a Lotus. And when you see the tub and how solid it is, it's so strong. We had a side impact when a guy in a Ford Focus hit a Lotus on the side and he broke his foot, it was such a heavy impact. The guy in the Lotus hurt his hip but if he had been in a hatchback he would be dead. That big bar on the side of you is way stronger than any door on any car out there.

At Spa the next day I asked how things were at the 'Ring right now. I had hoped the picture was improving. Ron's face immediately curls up and he shakes his head: 'Don't ask. We need all day.' He's going to keep us posted on that though because car enthusiasts might need to unite online again in the near future to help the 'Save the Ring' campaign. Fortunately he didn't spend all day talking about politics as we had some serious cars to drive around Spa. A 991 GT3, a Lotus 211 and my own Exige V6 Cup were about to get the Ron Simons treatment. More on that to come very soon. But for now, you can hear for yourself what he thought about the V6 Cup.

My sincere thanks to Ron and RSR for their time and for letting me experience their incredible cars around Spa. They are a great bunch and petrolheads to the core. For the very best cars at the very best circuits in the world for barely more than the cost of taking your own car – look no further. I really feel like I learned a lot while having the time of my life. If only school had been this much fun, I'd have been

around Spa. They are a great bunch and petrolheads to the core. For the very best cars at the very best circuits in the world for barely more than the cost of taking your own car – look no further. I really feel like I learned a lot while having the time of my life. If only school had been this much fun, I'd have been a genius! | www.rsmurburg.com



Ron after a few laps of Spa in the Exige V6 Cup. You can hear what he thought about it in the video.