

GT's NEW WAVE OF WINNERS

Two young teams are making an impact on British GT this season. KEVIN TURNER takes a closer look

New teams don't often succeed straight away – just ask Team Lotus, Virgin and HRT in Formula 1. But in British GT this season there are two fresh squads who already look like serious title contenders.

United Autosports only made its race debut at Oulton Park's British GT round last year, yet the team's lead duo Matt Bell and Michael Guasch currently head the title race after their first win at Snetterton. Not bad for the Audi team's inaugural full assault on the series. Scuderia Vittoria's arrival has been

even more sudden. It didn't exist in December, but took a victory at the Oulton opener in April with single-seater convert Michael Lyons and ex-Porsche Carrera Cup racer Charles Bateman in a new Ferrari 458.

Both teams are giving established title-winning outfits CRS Racing, Team Pyro and Trackspeed real trouble.

UA's rapid rise is perhaps less surprising, given it is a joint venture between marketing guru Zak Brown and experienced team manager and former GT2 Le Mans winner Richard Dean.

"Zak and I have known each other a long time," says Dean. "While I was at Ginetta he opened his [marketing firm] JMI London office and he said he wanted to do some races. He asked me what would be good and we looked at GT3."

With a little help from one of Dean's old mates, Le Mans legend Tom Kristensen, UA became one of the three official Audi representatives in the 2010 FIA GT3 Championship. There were flashes of pace, but the Audi R8's success in 2009 meant it was heavily penalised in the 'equalisation' category.

"The FIA tried to respond to the Audi winning in its first year and they probably overcompensated in 2010," recalls Dean.

This year, however, the R8s look competitive. That's just as well given that UA is also running in both the FIA GT3 and the new Blancpain Endurance series. "The pace of development has helped the car to be more competitive," confirms Dean. "We try to play to its strengths – for me it's the best car on the grid on its tyres. It's well-balanced and doesn't force mistakes from drivers."

Central to the car's competitiveness has been the people Dean and Brown were able to bring on board straight away, including Paul Haigh (who engineered Dean in British F3 back in 1989) and former Zytek managing director Trevor Foster (who has F1 experience with Jordan).

"The core of the team has come from my previous [British Formula Ford] team JLR, and there are some guys who won Le Mans with the LNT Panoz in 2006," says Dean. "We're very busy with the different series, so the challenge is to manage everything so there's nothing detrimental to any one programme. We've got the people and systems in place to do that."

SV's Piers Masarati, who formed the team with former Renault Clio Cup

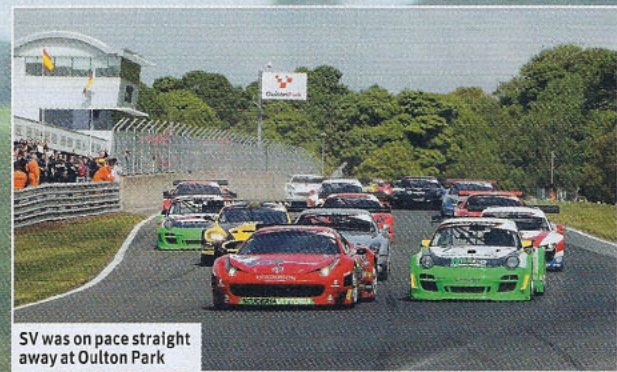
Guasch (left) and Bell celebrate Snett win



champion Danny Buxton and GT ace Tom Ferrier, agrees that getting the right people in place is crucial.

"Getting drivers is not a black art or secret, they go to teams because of the people you have," he says. "We worked with good people [running other teams] but you want control."

"I've taken guys that have always come with me to different squads – Tech 9, Trackspeed and Chad, people from when I did A1GP – but now we have our own team," adds Masarati, whose Clio squad has also recruited title-winning engineer Kevin Whittaker.



SV was on pace straight away at Oulton Park



UA's Audi and SV's Ferrari battle it out

How to build on a good start

AS WELL AS BEING IMMEDIATE frontrunners, United Autosports and Scuderia Vittoria have another thing in common. Both are being circumspect when it comes to future plans.

For the time being, Masarati has no intention of doing any more than building on the one Ferrari and one Ginetta G50 he currently has in Brit GT.

"Next year will probably be similar to this," he says. "We want to run customer cars and customer drivers."

"We'd love to move up the ladder, but we want to make sure we can walk before we try to run."

UA's plans are a little more extensive – it already has a historic racing arm in the American Legends of Motorsport series – but Dean is in no rush.

"We want to establish ourselves in GT3 and that means winning more races than we lose," he says. "We don't want to move on too quickly without being proven and quick."

"We're looking outside GT3 – LMP2 is a possibility for the future – but we'll be around in GT3 for a few years yet."

"We've brought in the best we can and it's paid dividends. We're a 'new' team, but we're not new to the game."

That said, even he has been surprised with the strength of Bateman and Lyons in the squad's Ferrari: without a race-ruining clash with Bell at Snetterton the duo would be a lot higher than 11th in the standings.

"It's gone a little better than expected," admits Masarati. "The 458 is a better car than the old 430 and we get good support from [Ferrari tuner] Michelotto."

"We knew Michael and Charles would be good, it's the first time I've not had an amateur and a pro. They're not as quick as Allan Simonsen or Matt Griffin, but they're a good pairing."

So, can either of the new teams go on and take the title?

"As long as we can avoid mistakes we have a good chance of the championship, but UA is very strong," reckons Masarati. "Matt Bell is very good and Michael Guasch is the revelation of the year."

Dean, who also runs an R8 for ex-BTCC racer John Bintcliffe and club driver Jay Palmer, agrees that Bell (brother of international GT ace Rob) and Guasch (53-year-old former Star Mazda racer) are in a good position.

"We've come in at the perfect time because British GT has got good cars with strong teams, and quick drivers," he says. "We want to be in a serious championship and this season British GT looks like a serious championship."

"I believe we've got a chance to win it. Leading is a nice place to be and our drivers are going to get stronger."