



# 2013: A SEASON REVIEW

Away from the race track, Oman Air Motorbase drivers Ahmad Al Harthy and Michael Caine look back on a season of varied success as pilots of the fastest Porsche 911 GT3R in Britain

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Being overweight is no good thing; being overweight by 130 kilograms in racing is especially so. Due to the driver grading system, this was the problem faced by Oman Air Motorbase in the 2013 British GT Championship.

Last season, their Porsche 997 GT3R (affectionately called 'Max') took the title with Michael Caine and Daniele Perfetti at the wheel. This year, Carrera Cup GB Pro-Am1 champion Ahmad Al Harthy replaced Perfetti in the line-up.

With Al Harthy's previous success at the wheel of a Porsche, the championship organisers rated the Omani as a 'Silver' graded driver. Coupled with the

experienced Caine's high rating, this left the team with a hefty chunk of weight needed in the car to counter the pairing's supposed speed, despite Al Harthy's inexperience in the highly competitive environment of the British GT Championship.

With the addition of the FIA's 'Balance of Performance' correction, 130 kilograms of ballast would sit in place of the passenger seat in the GT3. Despite this, the season would bring two victories for Motorbase (two more than their championship-winning campaign the previous year) and leave them fighting for the title at the Donington finale.

Reviewing the season at Motorbase's lock-up near the Brands Hatch circuit in Kent, drivers Caine

and Al Harthy, plus team boss David Bartrum, are philosophical to **Total 911** about the attempted defence of their 2012 championship crown.

Caine begins by explaining the effect of the weight on their 2013 season. "As a pairing we were going to be strong, but we weren't going to be any stronger than anybody else," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "The worst thing was qualifying. We just didn't have the pace compared to everybody else. Everybody would find a second and a half to two seconds (the Astons would find three seconds), and we would find half a second on new tyres."

Caine's anecdote is borne out in cold, hard statistics. Across all ten qualifying sessions this





Motorbase's team spirit remains on point. 2013 may have been a tough year, but these are people who really enjoy their motor racing



season, the average position of the Motorbase 911 was 12th. Even the high point of pole position at Zandvoort has to be taken with a pinch of salt, as Al Harthy was the last car across the finish line before a torrential downpour.

On top of the draconian performance 'balancing', there was another hurdle to overcome, namely Al Harthy's lack of experience at this level. The Omani driver is frank about the challenge that faced him. "As a first year in British GT and in endurance racing, it was so much to learn," he explains.

The quality of the 2013 British GT field was arguably the strongest since the inception of the championship, making Al Harthy's learning curve steeper than it would have been in previous seasons. "You tell someone that you have won two races in British GT," Al Harthy begins, "they then come and see how difficult it is to finish, and then finish in the top ten, and then to win". Caine agrees: "When you look at the driver combinations, it's a who's who of British motorsport. The quality of the drivers among the pros is the highest in Britain."

To therefore win not one, but two races in 2013, is testament to the talents of not just Caine

and Al Harthy, but the entire Motorbase team. "Ricky [Martino] worked wonders with the drivers," explained team boss David Bartrum, duly providing a glowing reference for the team engineer. "He was constantly getting around the weight to give them some speed."

## "We were here to fight, and we showed that we could fight"

The speed that Bartrum talks about manifested itself in the races – a mixture of one, two and three-hour encounters. Caine and Al Harthy, on average, moved through the field by five places in each race. These strong performances ensured that entering the final round of the championship, the Oman Air 911 hadn't finished outside of the points – the only car to do so throughout the entire campaign.

With the weight penalty, such consistency was the only way Motorbase would defend their title. Despite this, Al Harthy, Caine and Bartrum are in agreement as to which result meant the most to them: Zandvoort. "We'd never been there, we'd never tested there," clarifies Caine, his smile creeping ever wider. "We walked the circuit at the start of the weekend, and that's how we learnt it."

After taking pole for the first race, Al Harthy's stint was spent stuck behind the safety car after a plethora of incidents in the early part of the race. A well-timed pitstop then left the Porsche in the lead with Caine at the wheel. However, it wasn't plain sailing. Bartrum takes up the story: "I was on the radio saying, 'Look Michael, you need to get your foot down as best as you can, because Dan Brown in the Audi R8 is gaining a second per lap, Rob Barff in the Ferrari 458 is gaining a second a lap, and there's another couple of cars behind them that will catch up'. Michael asked me, 'When are they going to be here?' I said, 'Ten minutes before the end. You're going to have to make it as wide as you can.'"

And that's exactly what Caine did. For the remainder of the race the Porsche survived the



Al Harthy has enjoyed a successful first season behind the wheel of the 911 GT3R, taking two British GT wins in the process



attacks of the Audi, Ferrari and BMW. Eventually, the chasing pack started squabbling among themselves, giving Caine a gap. "We don't normally go out and celebrate in the evenings, but we did on that one! It was a real sense of achievement," says Bartrum, clearly buoyed by the memory.

Throughout the interview, Zandvoort kept coming up in conversation. However, at one point, it showed the culture shock experienced by Al Harthy. "I think Zandvoort was the most nerve-racking race for me because, personally, I don't like to jump out the car and watch it." Opening up, he elucidates further: "It's a weird feeling. It's a lot more stressful out the car." It should be noted this isn't a marker of the Omani's inexperience; racing drivers just like being behind the wheel.

Staying with Al Harthy, 2013 provided the Omani with plenty to learn in his new racing environment. "It was a lot for me to appreciate how important teamwork is," he says matter-of-factly. It is perhaps for this reason that the SRO's decision to impose the 75 kilograms of weight was such a sticking point during the season. "I'm flattered to be called a 'Silver' driver," Al Harthy admits, "but

I'm not. But then again I'm not a Bronze, so I think there should have been a compromise."

"I understand the championship's problem; it's a Pro-Am series," explains Bartrum. "But you shouldn't be too blinkered. Ahmad wasn't really a 'Bronze', but he wasn't a 'Silver'." Bartrum feels the compromise Ahmad alludes to should have fallen at around 40 kilograms. "We could have dealt with that. But 75 kilos, that's a lot," the manager laments.

Of course, it wasn't always the ballast that caused Motorbase problems. In August's round of the championship at Brands Hatch, an entirely different problem was causing Caine difficulty.

During Al Harthy's stint, the rear of the car took a knock from another competitor, breaking one of the exhaust back boxes and causing a small fire. While the pit crew extinguished the flames at the driver change, no one was initially aware that the damage was causing exhaust gas to fill the cockpit.

In true racing driver fashion, though, Caine continued to race to the flag, despite the damage his stint at the wheel was doing to his health. "The best way of describing it is it was like going out for a beer," says Caine. "You know when you've had

## 2013 Season results

Rounds One & Two: 1 April – Oulton Park



Motorbase begin the season by finishing 4th, then 9th

Round Three: 6 May – Rockingham



Caine and Al Harthy finish 6th after qualifying 15th

Round Four: 26 May – Silverstone



Motorbase finish 8th after qualifying down in 17th

Rounds Five & Six: 16 June – Snetterton



A first win of the season was followed by a finish in 8th

Round Seven: 11 August – Brands Hatch



The GT3R finished a credible 7th after qualifying 20th

Rounds Eight & Nine: 7-8 September – Zandvoort



Motorbase took another win and a 9th place in Holland

Round Ten: 6 October – Donington Park



12th place means Motorbase finish the season in fifth





Caine (left) recounts his story of the Brands Hatch 'gassing'. Despite this, the whole team is looking forward to next year



two beers and you think, 'I'll have a third, I don't feel that bad'? So you keep going and then you wake up in the morning and think, 'Woah, what the hell was going on there?'"

Bartrum kept talking to Caine throughout the race, keeping him alert as the build-up of gas continued. Admirably, the 2012 British GT champion brought the car home in seventh. However, the legacy of this race meeting continued well beyond the chequered flag.

"I felt horrendous. I told my wife I'd got flu because I couldn't tell her that I'd just gassed myself in a racing car," Caine laughs. "So I went to bed and woke up in the night, and my arm was dead. When I woke up in the morning it was still the same."

"I went to the doctors and they sent me to hospital. What had happened was I'd damaged the nerve endings in my hand because I was sat in a racing car like that [Caine extends his arms in front of him]. It was the furthest thing from my heart, and that is the first thing to go." So for Caine this was obviously the hardest race, right? "No," he says emphatically, "because I couldn't remember it!"

Caine's resilience has been a hallmark of the season: as well as the Zandvoort win in September, his inability to give up on a fight brought about a win in June's Snetterton event. In the first of the one-hour races on the Norfolk circuit, Caine had Warren Hughes in the Audi R8 all over him

**"Come and see how difficult it is to finish, and then finish in the top ten, and then to win"**

with five or six laps to go, so he deployed some well-versed defensive driving to take the flag in second. However, after the Trackspeed 911 GT3R was disqualified for overtaking under yellow flags, Motorbase gained their first win of the season.

Before this opening win, Motorbase found their Porsche languishing in ninth. This victory, coupled with their incredible consistency, turned Caine and Al Harthy into championship contenders. Asked what ensured the 997 GT3R was in with a chance of retaining the championship title going into the final race, Bartrum paused to consider his response, before replying emphatically: "I think the strength in the car was the preparation, the mechanical reliability and, of course, the driver pairing."

While the final round at Donington Park (documented in Issue 107 of **Total 911**) didn't go to plan, Motorbase's 2013 season shouldn't be defined by what stymied them. Instead, it is the Snetterton and Zandvoort triumphs that typify the team's British GT campaign.

"It was a hard season, but enjoyable," says Bartrum, turning serious as we conclude our season post-mortem. The sentiments of both drivers throughout the interview certainly appear to echo Bartrum's summary. Despite just missing out on the title, success hasn't completely evaded Motorbase. Besides, there's always next year. **911**

## 2014: A new beginning?

For two years, Motorbase has been one of the yardsticks in the British GT Championship. However, in 2014, the team may be trading the M25 for journeys of a more pan-European nature as it looks to move into the Blancpain Endurance Series, in which Al Harthy has already competed this year with the ARC Bratislava 911 GT3R.

"The long-term goal," explains Caine, "is to make him [Al Harthy] very, very successful. I would love to go to Le Mans to watch him do the 24 Hours. The progression is to

make him massively successful in GT racing. That's what Motorbase is here to do."

While the step up to European competition, taking on some of the world's best GT teams, is huge, Caine feels that Motorbase is ready. "There is no way we would see ourselves any differently to a factory team. There will be no difference in preparation, and no difference in effort."

In an ideal world, a Blancpain campaign would be dovetailed with another shot at the British GT crown.

"Ahmad deserves to be British GT champion, so that is something that needs to be sorted out. If we're running in Blancpain, he needs to be running up the front," says Caine.

In motorsport, money is always the determining factor in moving up but, if the finances can be sorted, team boss Bartrum is hopeful that Europe will be Motorbase's calling next season. "British and Blancpain is the aim, if everything goes to plan. It would be a new adventure for us: six-hour, 24-hour. No time for tea breaks!"