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Double champion signs up for a BTCC

By Matt James

Italian Fabrizio Giovanardi has joined the swelling ranks of champions who will race in the British Touring Car Championship this season.

Six champions have been confirmed for the 2014 series while a seventh is in the final stage of negotiations to line-up. It will be the first time since 1997 that so many former title-holders have shared the grid.

Giovanardi confirmed his deal with the Airwaves Racing team last night (Tuesday) and will handle one of the Kent team's Ford Focus machines.

Reigning champion Andrew Jordan will return to the grid in 2014, alongside Honda Racing duo Matt Neal and Gordon Shedden. Former double champion Jason Plato will race an MG, while 1997 and 2000 winner Alain Menu has sealed a deal to race a Team BMR VW Passat (MN, January 29).

The 2009 title winner Colin Turkington is in advanced talks with the eBay Motors team to return in a BMW, although the deal had yet to be concluded as *Motorsport News* went to press.

The last time there were seven overall champions on the grid was at Silverstone in September 1997. They were Menu, Frank Biela, Gabriele Tarquini, Tim Harvey, John Cleland, Will Hoy and privateer Robb Gravett.

Gio physics

Giovanardi, who won the title for Vauxhall in 2007 and 2008, said that he had been keen on a return to the UK and had opened talks with Motorbase Performance, which runs the Airwaves-backed cars, late last season.

The 47-year-old said: "When [team boss] David [Bartrum] called me I asked him if it was a joke! He told me to come and see him and we started to put things together for a new challenge."

Giovanardi has raced in the Superstars series and a handful of Australian V8 Supercar rounds since quitting the BTCC. He has also taken part in several long distance races. The BTCC has changed its regulations from the S2000 machines that Giovanardi handled during his three previous BTCC campaigns to new Next Generation Touring Car rules, which mandate a raft of controlled parts to keep the costs down. The engines are also two-litre

NUMBER OF CHAMPIONS ON THE GRID

turbocharged units. "Rejoining the BTCC is like being born again because in four years, everything has changed," said Giovanardi. "It is a challenge for me. Obviously I know the British championship but I don't know who is driving now. I do know that there are a lot of good names to beat."

"The spirit of the championship is the same as when I was here before but because the car is new, that is why there is a challenge. I am not worried about the new car because when you are racing, there is no time to be worried."

Giovanardi will shake the car down on Thursday next week before the team heads to Portimão in Portugal for some more intensive running.

Team principal Bartrum said that upgrades to the car over the winter should turn it into a title threat: "The car is ready to move to the next level and Fabrizio is the final piece of the jigsaw. Signing Fabrizio is brilliant for us. He is a great character."

"We have new staff in ex-Team Dynamics man Stuart Beaton and you will see a different look of the car. It will be a faster car for 2014 and we are ready to kick on."

Bartrum said that the drivers for his other two entries would be revealed soon.

eBay at bay

Turkington's deal had yet to be finalised – although team boss Dick Bennetts was hopeful of

getting the Northern Irishman back in to a car.

Turkington, who was in the title fight until the final meeting last season, beat Giovanardi to the crown in 2009.

Bennetts said: "We are talking, and there is a desire on our part to have Colin in the car. It is all about the fine details, and we are having discussions all the time."

The eBay Motors team should also confirm that Nick Foster and Rob Collard will remain with the team.

Gow: it's about now

BTCC series director Alan Gow said the influx of interest in the championship with the household names returning would have a positive impact on the future of the contest.

Alongside the winners, there is new licensing system for teams which has been introduced for 2014. It means that there should be 30 cars on the grid for each round and teams have some value for their slot on the grid.

Gow said: "When I created the NGTC rules, I was more focused with creating the stars for the future of the BTCC. But it's really nice to have some of the old guys back... in the smaller paddocks at some venues, it may be very difficult to accommodate all their egos! But seriously, they perfectly underline the stature of the BTCC and will create more media and spectator attention."

FABRIZIO GIOVANARDI

Double champion on his return to the UK's tin-top scene

Q&A

Are you pleased to be back in the British Touring Car Championship?

"I was away for four years. I was getting old and I wondered if maybe my chances to come back to the BTCC are finished. So instead, I started to do some boring races like 24-hour races and I was almost falling asleep in the car because it was dull. I knew that I wanted to get back to shorter races and have a real fight!"

Have you kept in touch with the BTCC since you have been away?

"Not really because when I moved

from the BTCC in 2010, I was pissed off because I wanted to race again in the UK. It is difficult to follow the other guys driving in a championship that you want to be in yourself. I isolated myself from it."

Do you think you will be able to adapt quickly enough to the new breed of Next Generation Touring Car?

"I have not got the answer to this. The time to be adapting to the car will be short, but we start in a good position. The team have built the car so they have one year's experience, so the

car is not zero. The car is top I believe. The rules are quite similar between the cars, so we have to fine-tune the set up and then I think we will find that I will be in the top."

With all the former champions on the grid, is there anyone you're looking out for especially?

"The first name I can think about is Jason Plato. Then there is Matt Neal and all my friends are there too. They are competitors in the car but they are real good friends too – maybe because we are all getting quite old together now!"

comeback in Airwaves Racing Focus

GIOVANARDI ADDS TOURING CAR TALENT

Giovanardi gets comfy in his new Airwaves Ford Focus

Neal thrilled after first Tourer outing

Triple champion Matt Neal says he was thrilled with his first outing in the new Honda Civic Tourer, which was shaken down at Rockingham last week.

Neal was giving passenger rides over a four-day session to a number of corporate guests but was also able to conduct a few hours of test work, which was conducted back-to-back with last year's machine.

"It was very cold and slippery so it wasn't so much about setting the car up, but we were able to do a lot of things like testing components to make sure they were reliable."

Neal's team-mate Gordon Shedden was also present at the test, but he remained at the wheel of the 2013 machine.

Neal added: "It was hard to get a proper gauge on the car because of the conditions, but the reaction of the people I gave passenger rides to was a joy. They were really buzzing, and that is just the kind of reaction we wanted to get with the new car."

Neal said serious testing of the Tourer would start next week.

Neal tested Civic Tourer

BTCC CHAMPIONS

POS	DRIVER	POINTS
2013	Andrew Jordan (GBR)	Honda Civic
2012	Gordon Shedden (GBR)	Honda Civic
2011	Matt Neal (GBR)	Honda Civic
2010	Jason Plato (GBR)	Chevrolet Cruze
2009	Colin Turkington (GBR)	BMW 320si
2008	Fabrizio Giovanardi (ITA)	Vauxhall Vectra
2007	Fabrizio Giovanardi (ITA)	Vauxhall Vectra
2006	Matt Neal (GBR)	Honda Integra
2005	Matt Neal (GBR)	Honda Integra
2004	James Thompson (GBR)	Vauxhall Astra Coupé
2003	Yvan Muller (FRA)	Vauxhall Astra Coupé
2002	James Thompson (GBR)	Vauxhall Astra Coupé
2001	Jason Plato (GBR)	Vauxhall Astra Coupé
2000	Alain Menu (SUI)	Ford Mondeo
1999	Laurent Aiello (FRA)	Nissan Primera

BTCC CHAMPIONS ROLL CALL

ALAIN MENU (SUI)
Age: 50
Championships: 1997, 2000
Race wins: 36

MATT NEAL (GBR)
Age: 47
Championships: 2005, 2006, 2011
Race wins: 52

FABRIZIO GIOVANARDI (ITA)
Age: 47
Championships: 2007, 2008
Race wins: 24

COLIN TURKINGTON (GBR)
Age: 31
Championships: 2009
Wins: 24
Yet to be confirmed

JASON PLATO (GBR)
Age: 46
Championships: 2001, 2010
Wins: 82

GORDON SHEDDEN (GBR)
Age: 34
Championships: 2012
Wins: 34

ANDREW JORDAN (GBR)
Age: 24
Championships: 2013
Wins: 10

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