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It's been said so many times but the Maserati 250F is what a real racing car looks like. I knew that even before I really became interested in cars, because all my schoolboy friends had a little metal model whose lines, even to an eye yet to develop any sense of taste, were perfect. Later in life I heard Chris Rea the musician saying how the body had made a perfect slide for his guitar while he was learning his craft. As I said, perfect... I could never have imagined that 40-odd years later I would be sat in one, lining up on the grid at Donington. Not even in the most distant moments of childhood reverie.

I have driven Nick Mason's car a few times, most recently for a comparison with the Dino 246 Ferrari that ushered out the front-engined era at the end of the 1960s. The first time had been a few years earlier, at Donington for the book Nick and I wrote about the man's collection. I had stepped into the ample seat, full of expectation, felt instinctively for the belts that weren't there, reached for the stubby gearlever down by my right shin, clicked on the dual magnetos and signalled the Ten Tenths' guys to push. The double-cam six between my feet lit as soon as the clutch came up and I winced at the bellow that crackled forth from the huge pipe behind my shoulder. I was about to experience the intimacy of the 250F, the perfect race car. I would feel what Fangio felt.

Winning Ways

This year's VSCC SeeRed festival at Donington saw an unprecedented 10 Maserati 250Fs on the grid for the pre-61 Maserati race. *Octane's* Mark Hales describes what it's like to win in one...

Words: Mark Hales Photography: Jeff Bloxham

Ten minutes or so later, I rolled to a halt in the pits and Ray and Charlie asked the inevitable question. What was it like? I paused, thinking of the right words before begging the question. 'Are they all like this,' I said, 'or is it just me...?' There was a simultaneous folding of the arms and I could see the thought they didn't give voice to. Ten minutes and he's a bloody expert. Of course it's wonderful. It's a Maserati 250F. What the hell does he know. But the fact is, it wasn't, and when I later had the conversation with Nick, he told me he was so glad I'd said that because he'd thought the same but didn't like to say so. Maserati 250F, y'see. They do say it's not always a good idea to meet your heroes.

I've said this much a few times too but these cars have to be right, just like a modern one. You wouldn't just assume your Formula Renault, or Ford or whatever had the correct set-up, the right springs, the right this or that: you'd find out and then try it. It had been 40 years since the Maserati first saw the light of day. Who knows what had happened to it since, and you couldn't exactly ring someone up and ask. Those who knew for sure were probably not with us and those had since spent time and money finding out secrets lost over the intervening 40 years could be forgiven for guarding the knowledge.

Nick's car is one of the few built by the Maserati factory with a V12 engine and which was later converted back by a private team. Ray subsequently did a bit of investigation and found the steering box was in the wrong place. The V12 cars had it moved to accommodate the engine, but the front suspension



was different. Nick's had a mix-and-match of six and 12 and the front wheels were toeing out like crazy whenever you turned the wheel. That was at least part of the reason why the moment you steered, the car dived for the turn and wouldn't come back without a massive struggle. The intuitive drift that Fangio, Moss, Musso and the rest could display at will was simply not possible. Ray also discovered that the chassis was an inch longer one side than the other. Beautifully done, but unequal. We had no idea whether it had always been like that, or whether someone had repaired it without a jig. There was more, and I suspect that a lot of the survivors are the same. Beautifully presented but not as Maserati would have wanted.

These things were fixed, and over the years we did a bit of fiddling with springs; those at the front are coils as we know them but at the rear is a huge transverse leaf, which curls into a semi-circle the moment it is detached from the suspension. The eventual ride height, the rate and the progression all depend on the temper of the metal, the length of the individual leaves and so on. It's not just a few bits of steel clamped together and, even now, I'm not sure we understand it properly. But at Donington, I knew the Maserati was at least some of the way there. On the Friday, I could drift the car right, then left, down the Craner Curves with barely a lift.

The brakes were still not as I would have liked and the pressure required to make the car dive one way then the other as the drums evened out their frictional effort was sufficient to make me hobble about the paddock afterwards, but they were getting better as the huge shoes wore themselves to suit the shape of the drum. Try not to use them for the fast corners anyway and instead lean the car into the corner, use the energy of speed to yaw the tail. Now sit it down with the power and



'I jabbed the brakes and jinked but the Maserati's elegant snout delivered Barrie Williams' car a subtle peck'

make the back grip. Hold it there with as little opposite lock as you can get away with. A bit of extra power now and then will keep the turn going, a bit of reverse lock will stop it straying too far but it's a balance. Too much of anything and the drift will become a slide and you lose speed while you sort it out.

Having done our best to make the mechanical part of the equation easier, that left the human side, and the diverse fortunes of racing. One of which can be managed, while the other is entirely in the hands of fate... Come qualifying on Sunday, we first managed to pick the wrong set of tyres, then a union came loose on one of the Maserati's three Webers and sprayed fuel along the bonnet and into the cockpit. It's amazing how 15 minutes translates into so few laps and by the time I had got out again and tripped over myself and some of my fellow competitors, the flag was out for the end of qualifying. Second on the grid seemed like a bonus.

At the start of the race I made a reasonable getaway alongside veteran Barrie Williams in another 250F and we rounded Redgate nose to tail. It looked like a fair contest from then on and I was reasonably confident, given the muddles of qualifying, but fate wasn't finished with us yet. I saw Barrie's head tilt forward at exactly the same time as I heard his engine racing. He had suddenly lost all drive and was looking down at the lever while he fished for gears. Trapped with my nose almost alongside his tail I jabbed the brakes and jinked but the Maserati's elegant snout delivered a subtle peck. This is not the first time that's happened between Barrie and me. People will begin to talk.

But fate was smiling on me this time and it worked out OK in the end, because I managed to pick my way through and see the best sight of all – the chequer unfurling for you before it is waved for anyone else. If I ever lose the desire to see that, it'll be time to stop. And, eight years on, Ray and Charlie can be reassured that the 250F is wonderful after all. It just needed a bit of fiddling.

Clockwise from top left

Amazing gridful of 250Fs; Hales in motion; duelling with Max Werner in 282; podium line-up of, from left, José Albuquerque (3rd), Barrie Baxter (2nd), VSCC's Julian Ghosh and Hales (1st!).

