



# RAVE NEW WORLD

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN COLLEY

Oulton Park. It's wet. You've never raced here before - you need a car that makes you look good... **DAVE WALKER** does a Rave in the 750 Motor Club Kit Car Championship

**T**his feature really came about when Mike Topp's engine dropped a valve on my rolling road. We had been playing with his new kit car for this year - the LA Gold - along with the near identical car of his team mate,

Martin Smith, and we set both of them up on the Emerald rolling road. Mike's engine went bang with a dropped valve and we spent a desperate few hours rebuilding it. I found a valve and we pinched the Kent CVH 27 Cam that I had put to one side for the Shed. New Kent springs and followers were also robbed from the Shed project and we had her finished off in the early hours. It was as a reward

for my late night efforts that Mike arranged for me to race the car at Oulton Park.

That rebuilt engine didn't last too long as it happens and by the time of the Oulton race Ivan had put together another engine, basically robbing bits from around the workshop. So my first task on getting to Cheshire was to run in the engine - I had booked half a day's testing which gave me three sessions.

The seat in the LA Gold is a home made dustbin-liner job: fill a dustbin liner full of expanding foam and sit in it. Peel yourself out and cover the resulting foam slab in tank tape - voila! - one lightweight seat. It didn't fit me across

the shoulders but I could live with it.

Using just 3,500rpm to run the new engine in I spent my first session wobbling around Oulton following the kerb. This was no bad thing because I had never driven at Oulton before and it gave me a chance to take a slow-speed look at the circuit. Hmm... Interesting.

For the second session I was up to 5,500rpm and braking later for the corners, exploring the handling a little - it felt good. Then, for the final session, I revved to 7,000rpm and started to push harder, but it's difficult when you are driving someone else's car, you want to do it justice but you definitely don't want to crash it. However, the handling felt tremendous, perfectly balanced and so predictable. In fact, the faster I went the better it felt and I was wondering if I could even convey just how good this car handles... Yet if it handles so well, how come I don't



Low profile: Dave lost a bit of weight in training for his one-off LA Gold kit car race at Oulton Park...

lap faster? Well, that's the driver, not the car. So you just have to trust me on this one, this is the best-handling front engine RWD car I have driven to date. I could easily stay with the Caterhams in the turns even if they disappeared up the hill or along the main straight.

After the second session I asked Andrew Vacey - testing a Stock Hatch for Mr Potter - what a quick lap might be for this circuit. "High 10s to low 11s," was the answer. I had a lap timer and was putting in comfortable 1 min 13s and after a little pushing I would have made the 12s but I kept getting stuck in traffic. I was probably only a second and a bit off the pace - better than my usual two seconds off. So I wasn't unhappy.

My team mate Martin Smith arrived that evening and we had a tactical meeting - okay, a scoff and a chin-wag. Martin only needed fourth place to clinch the



championship and with just six class B cars that meant he only had to beat one class B car, just as long as I followed him home.

Race morning dawned and it was bucketing down. The cars were switched to wets and then Mike Topp explained that my tyres were eight years old and a bit "off" - these were the wets Mike had bought when he first started racing kit cars. Mike then backed off the dampers, removed and taped up the front roll bar and set the tyre pressures. Talk about pampered, I was beginning to feel like a real racing driver.

I had actually come prepared for once - I had some waterproof clothing. Not that it really mattered because I wasn't allowed to wear it. Apparently, plastic waterproofs

**Top: Wet weather gear. Dave wasn't allowed to wear his mac but at least the moulded seat was comfy. The engine in the LA Gold needed running in at first.**

are considered a fire hazard. I can see their point but equally I don't like getting wet. The short front mud guards on my car produced a spray which came straight into the cockpit with any amount of lock applied - urch! I had been thinking the night before that Martin's full mud guards were not as aerodynamic as mine, now I wanted to swap. Our qualifying was at 11.30am and the track was still very wet but with no standing water, so we both stayed on our wets.

Once I got over the initial shock of the cold water filling my right sleeve and running down my hip into my underpants it wasn't too bad - I just concentrated on the line and the braking points and tried to feel for the limit. The car was still handling really nicely, much as in the dry

but obviously at much slower speeds. It really is a great little car. I managed to stay with Martin for a few laps and I got the impression that my car was a tad better set up than his. He seemed to be struggling desperately for grip yet he had the newer tyres. But when the times came out Martin was three seconds faster than me so maybe I was mistaken. Martin had class pole while I was fifth in class and 10th on the grid. Ex Hot-Hatch superstar Steve Taylor had pole in his Class C Zetec powered Sylva Stryka.

Would it dry out for the race later that afternoon? The answer was yes, kind-of, nearly, almost... and when we lined up the grid area was very slippery but with a dry line starting to appear on the rest of the circuit. I hadn't practiced any starts so I followed instructions: 4000rpm

## GOING FOR GOLD

There's a new kid on the block in kit car racing and it goes by the name of LA Gold - 'LA' for 'Live Axle'. It is the creation of Ivan Gilmour at Procomp Motorsport who has been building engines and setting up suspensions on kit cars for a number of years and so has a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't. In fact - in partnership with 750 Club member Mike Topp - his team has won the kit car championship on a number of occasions with a Westfield.

Ivan decided to design his own car based around the 750 Club championship regulations. One of the key factors is that spherical bearings are not allowed. So, Ivan built a rig and spent a lot of time experimenting with various bushing materials. He also spent a lot of time getting the angles right in the suspension wishbones and trailing arms. He felt it was important to have suspension that worked, rather than heavy springs that stopped things moving - to the wrong place.

In the true spirit of the 750 Motor Club - affordable racing - Ivan built in the option of a Ford Escort axle or one that was easier to find and cheaper into the bargain - the Lada axle. The Lada axle is dimensionally the same as the Escort and you've a choice of 3.9, 4.1 or 4.3 differentials. You can't buy a slipper-diff for the Lada axle but you aren't allowed one in the regulations anyway so it's no hardship.

Ivan used a lot of Sierra parts because they aren't hard to find in the breaker's yard and the bodywork is basic Seven style but with side exit panels to get the air out from under the bonnet. Fibre-glass and sheet aluminium are the order of the day and while it might not look exactly stunning - or original - the car I drove weighed in at 519 kilos. Since you are not allowed aluminium gearbox cases or diff housings this is a very respectable weight. Ivan's philosophy right from the start was not to compromise the handling to save weight. The chassis is strong and this gives you a stable platform - the basis for any good handling car.

Cost of a base kit is which gets you the chassis, the panels with pedals and a single hoop roll cage. An aluminium bodywork set with templates - cut out and bend up yourself - comes in at £150. To this you have to add the cost of your engine/gearbox/axle and steering parts. Depending on how much work you do yourself and how much you spend on the engine, gearbox and dampers/springs/wheels, the cost of a finished car can vary from to If you're interested, the best bet is to discuss all the options with Ivan, on 0121 350 3258.



and dump the clutch - Martin is now well known for his ballistic starts and the LA Gold seems to put the grunt down really well off the line. Five minute board, 30 seconds, five seconds... 4000rpm... red lights, green! Plenty of wheel spin but I got a fair start and gained a fraction on the car ahead, meanwhile Martin had a bit of a flyer and was looking good.

Everyone was pulling towards the inside kerb so I ducked to the outside with a plan to pass them all and come out in the lead. But then the car directly in front punched into the back of Martin's right rear wing and there were cars and bits of fibreglass exploding everywhere. In a situation like this a good driver instantly weighs up the options and makes a snap decision as to



Ego builder: the LA Gold is one of the best handling front-engined RWD cars Dave's driven... sure footed enough to make even him look quick! Inset: trusting car owner Mike Topp

what action to take... But I simply swerved onto the grass. I was busy correcting the mess I was in and could see Martin sideways but still on the black bit, then, somehow, he gathered it all up and disappeared down the hill.

I managed to make my way back onto the track, not quite last but almost. From where I was sitting it looked like the guy who caused the accident just drove straight into the back of Martin's car - and it wasn't a tap either. Over-excitement perhaps?

I gained on the car ahead quite quickly and I could hear Murray Walker in my lid saying: "catching is one thing, passing is another". I made up my mind to go straight by wherever I caught him and it was a case of going up the inside under braking. No problem at all, no contact and it was all very gentlemanly. My car was obviously quicker and the other driver was courteous enough not to make life hard for me.

I seemed to gain quite a few places and then I was on my own. I concentrated hard and began to explore the handling on the fast drying line. On the one left-hander it wasn't great but you could live with it here, and on the rest of the circuit it was nothing less than wonderful. You had to brake in a straight line, or it moved about a lot, but

the balance under power was superb. I had a little performance meter in the SPA Microdash and the little arrow was just glued in the upward direction. Each lap was faster than the one before and then there was the finish line.

Martin finished second in class and won the overall Championship for the kit cars. Congratulations young man, a great finish for the team and the LA Gold's first year on the circuits. Mike downloaded my lap times and I was disappointed not to break into the 12s. I had a final lap of 1min 13.19 seconds but I know that if I had a few more laps I would have made the 12s - honest.

Then came the result sheet. Mike looked very surprised, as did everyone else because I had made fastest lap in the class. Then competitions secretary Robin Knight pointed out that I was now the new lap record holder! I was over the moon, not to be a lap record holder, but because it proves how good this car is. The previous day I had gone well under the lap record after sitting in the car for the first time - on a track I had never driven before - in just ten laps. It really is a bit embarrassing because the car is flattering the driver but what the hell - I'm a star, Rave always knew it! ■

**Gold star:** Dave was disappointed not to break into the 1m 12s, but a new lap record was some consolation. Not that Rave will have any of it...

