The closest the McLaren 650S and the Bentley Continental GT3-R have come is on-track as part of the Blancpain Endurance Series. Until today...
The traditional Continental cabin is recognisable beneath the new carbon fibre and VERY green detailing.

IT’S TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE CONTINENTAL GT3-R. THIS IS WHERE it all began. Cast your minds back to December 2013. With speculation concerning its forthcoming GT motorsport campaign having done the rounds (several times) since that year’s Geneva Motor Show, Bentley was about to embark on its first official race start since the 2003 Le Mans 24 Hours. A race, incidentally, the company had walked. Unsurprisingly, ahead of the Continental GT3-R’s debut at the Gulf 12 Hours, the pressure was enormous…

Indeed, despite an enviable motorsport record that included four outright wins at Le Mans on the bounce from ’27 to ’30, to many the concept of a Bentley going endurance racing raised as many eyebrows as a Rolls-Royce Phantom would doing rallycross. “Stuff and nonsense” spake company CEOs in late 2012 when the GT3-R concept was unveiled and a full GT program on the Blancpain stage was confirmed for the following season, the announcement both the ‘realisation of a dream’ for Crewe and yet further assurance that, like many of its more mainstream rivals, Bentley ‘belonged’ on the track. That the news also breathed new life – and re-sparked customer interest in – the by-now rather tired Continental did no harm either…

One year on, the Yas Marina Circuit and the Gulf 12 Hours were once again gearing up for a British debutant, one with another – albeit very different – prestigious motor racing record behind it. If anything though, the pressure was even higher, for while Bentley’s steps into the arena were its first in just over a decade, for McLaren this was a path they had worn almost smooth on both the GT and Formula 1 scenes for nearly 50 years. Winning was what they did, as the retiring 12C GT3 had also proven at GT level courtesy of three championship titles, 51 race victories and 71 further podiums. That the new 650S GT3 HAD to win – and ideally on its debut – was beyond doubt. Today, the atmosphere at Yas Marina is somewhat different. The sweltering mid-morning August temperatures intermittently knock the air from our lungs, neither V8 nor V6 rumbles can be heard roaring down the main straight, and the adjacent grandstands are empty. Yet still there is an excitement in the air. This, right here, is where Bentley and McLaren began their campaigns with the GT3-R and 650S GT3 respectively, and where our journey with their road-going counterparts begins today. Granted, at face value this may seem an odd stand-off. But remember that both are British to the core, both are powered by performance-hewn twin-turbo V8 engines, and both cost in excess of $280,000. And today, we’re going to take them for a spin on one of the region’s most notorious stretches of winding mountain road – Jebel Hafeet – to see just how that track potential translates to the road.

Regrettably, owing to a few ‘don’t even think about it’s from McLaren and Bentley, and since none of us has a cool half mill to spare should something go horribly wrong, our journey will not begin on the circuit itself. You consequently join us in the Yas Marina support paddock. It’s a shame, but it does at least give us time to take a closer look at each model.

Given the decidedly un-Bentley racing decals and carbon fibre detailing, the GT3-R doesn’t so much grab attention as thrust a knife beneath its chin: it’s a far more rugged, gritty look than the sleeker, more aerodynamically-centred 650S. The Continental’s new aero though is much more than just a poke in the eye. The enormous bonnet grooves for instance have been designed to feed more cooling air to the remapped 4-litre V8, which has also received high-boost turbochargers for added

‘THIS, RIGHT HERE, IS WHERE BENTLEY AND McLAREN BEGAN THEIR GT CAMPAIGNS’
grunt, in much the same way the 650S’s M838T V8 received new pistons, cylinder heads and exhaust valves to up power over the similarly-engined 12C. The carbon front splitter is a nod to Bentley’s drive for greater manoeuvrability, as is the tighter chassis, the fixed carbon rear spoiler and a rejigged sport suspension setup borrowed from the Continental S. Even those enormous 21in wheels are lightweight and shod with performance Pirelli for added grip, just as McLaren worked extensively with Pirelli to produce exclusive high-grip ‘MC1’ P-Zeros for the 650S. Performance then, and lashings of it, is the word of the day.

Sort of. Despite their links to the race-going monsters that put the Gulf 12 Hours on the map, these are not stripped out track-day specials, retaining as they do creature comforts for everyday use. A point emphasised as I alight the GT3-R and rumble not so quietly through the support paddock towards Yas Island. Granted, the Bentley’s flabby stomach has received a staple or two: look high and low but you won’t find any seat massagers, high-varnished oak upholstery nor plush carpeting, the epitome of luxury now resplendent with carbon fibre door casings and only two seats to drop the kerb weight to ‘just’ 2195kg. Bentley hasn’t gone completely off its high-pedestalled rocker though, as everything – including the leather door pulls – has still been hand built on home turf in Crewe. Even the dashboard clock has survived the purge.

It’s a statement of intent certainly, but compared with the minimalist, driver-focused design of the 650S – barely altered since the 12C – it’s a little brash. You could even say, when we consider the bright green detailing, a little vulgar. The GT3-R may be 'the most dynamic Continental yet' but did so much of Bentley’s critically acclaimed elegance need to be sacrificed to slam this point home?

2013, 1hr in – Bentley GT3-R moves into third place after a stellar start from the second row of the grid

2014, 1hr in - McLaren 650S is leapfrogged by fast starting Abu Dhabi Racing and hard-charging AF Corse Ferrari, but comfortably retains third

There is a saving grace for Bentley however, and it’s a biggie. To truly emphasise the GT3-R’s motorsport pedigree, an all-new titanium exhaust (which accounts for 7kg of that weight loss) has also been installed to raise those distinctive V8 notes up a notch. As we enter one of Yas Island’s tunnels to the main land, a flick of the left wrist knocks the eight-speed ZF automatic down a cog or two, the resultant high-revving roar enough to quiver the enamel paint from the walls. It’s truly spectacular, the race-model at full chat the only equivalent worthy of comparison, AMG’s best included: gun the throttle, lift off, and the resultant rat-tat-tat-tat warble as the exhaust ‘pops’ on the overrun blows the admittedly pleasant but aurally outclassed McLaren out of the water.

Though it’s tempting to spend the remainder of this afternoon tearing through this tunnel with barely contained giddiness, the next – rather monotonous – leg of our drive takes us 170km into Al Ain, in a straight line. I will admit, even with that rejigged suspension, ride comfort in the GT3-R is surprisingly good. It lacks the über damped comfort of the standard Continental but impresses nonetheless, those double wishbones supple enough across even the most rutted of surfaces and more than enough give from those carbon-backed sports seats. Granted, further reach from the steering column would not go amiss: though head and legroom is plentiful, I’m stretching more than I’d like to grip the column-mounted paddle shifters. It’s a trifling detail though. Indeed, Bentley’s inherent luxury means the GT3-R’s ride is arguably more comfortable than that in the 650S, the McLaren’s taut ProActive Chassis Control geared more firmly towards road holding. It’s not uncomfortable, but the McLaren’s lowered stance means riding over road humps and broken asphalt is a more jarring experience than in the Bentley.

Still, check McLaren’s company letterhead and you’ll find form does indeed follow function in the 650S: there’s plenty of legroom, enough headroom (just), superbly cossetting carbon bucket seats, and a timeless elegance to the minimalist cabin design, even if the unpredictable touchscreen infotainment system will occasionally drive you to despair: you’ll need the steady hand usually reserved for cartridge surgery to tune the radio.

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Nevertheless it’s at moments like this that your right leg might start to shrink, not least because – in our case – our Carbon Black test model needs to be in a container to Bahrain in the morning. Leaving any carbon panels against the mountain walls isn’t an option.

Fortunately the balance through the turns, and the sheer amount of grip at the front end makes this scenario unlikely. The pose under even the sharpest of turn ins in the 650S is perfect – there really is no other word for it – the mid-engined layout and lightweight, very stiff carbon fibre MonoCell offering no flex and ideal weight distribution. Grip through those MCLs, front and rear, is seemingly endless, and only when you switch to ‘Track’ handling and really live vicariously with the pedal will the rear begin to twitch. Odd that for such remarkably light steering there is this much feel for the front end too, inputs through the flat-bottomed wheel registered with glorious precision, the feel for the road and camber tangible through the steering and the seat.

In the cabin, book-ended as I am by the high-backed, carbon-backed sport seat, there’s a tangible through the steering and the seat. precision, the feel for the road and camber.

And such, to begin with at least, seems the case. One thing that’s always interested me in particular about the 650S is the delicate manner in which the power from that refined twin-turbocharged V8 is put down. Unless you really stamp on the pedal, acceleration is surprisingly gentle, an underlying threat of aggression lingering just beneath the surface. Even when the Powertrain is set to Sport. Things change dramatically however as the speed begins to build and the revs start to rise. Peak power doesn’t appear until after 7000rpm, at which point there’s still a further 2000 to go before you hit the redline. Here the V8 soundtrack hits another octave, the high точ ‘prolific acceleration becomes much sharper and immediate, response from even the smallest of throttle impressions reminding you this is a 329kph supercar. It borders on aggressive yet feels far too composed.

**‘ON THE CLIMB, THE McLaren SHOULD EAT THE BENTLEY FOR BREAKFAST’**

2013, 3hrs in – Bentley’s 4.4-litre twin-turbo V8 kicks out a robust 572bhp... Right: ...though the McLaren’s 3.8-litre twin-turbo V8 pips this with 641bhp

Left: The Bentley’s 4.4-litre twin-turbo V8 kicks out a robust 572bhp... Right: ...though the McLaren’s 3.8-litre twin-turbo V8 pips this with 641bhp.
rattling soundtrack to match. The pull into the higher revs could be considered linear were the sensation of speed not so rampant, ratios of the eight-speed ZF now much shorter to truly emphasise this (almost) savagery. As expected, upshifts are now crispier than the GT3-R’s base model, the somewhat docile nature of the system under successive downshifts the only thing to truly knock the experience. Keep the speed up through flick-flack lefts and rights, and you’ll find the gearbox similarly unwilling to acquiesce. Further criticism could be levied towards the steering, which doesn’t exactly drip with feel and could be more precise under such circumstances. And yet – and yet – there is something about the GT3-R. The balance, its sprightly nature under acceleration, and a much greater feeling of composure through even the tightest and most snaking of mountain climbs is far greater than we’ve seen from any Continental before. Marketing fluff would have you believe the GT3-R is ‘the most dramatic yet’. And y’know, I think it might be...

2013, 10hrs in – Ferrari and Bentley dice for third place with just two hours of the Gulf 12 Hours remaining

2014, 10hrs in – Temporarily knocked into fourth, the McLaren is soon past the SLS and Ferrari into second as the chequered flag comes.

At the top, I’m admittedly lost for words. That the 650S – an improvement over the already superb 12C – was going to mauler the mountain was a foregone conclusion, and while the soundtrack offered might not evoke the same sonorous fury of its Italian rivals, the precision and raw with which the McLaren can monster the turns is almost beyond belief. It’s shame perhaps that, as an everyday machine, small elements like ride quality and questionable practicability (when compared with the Bentley at least) can spell the overall package. There’s no doubt though that, as a road going racer, the 650S is astonishing.

And then there’s the GT3-R. It’s comfortable and refined but still quite heavy, not quite as poised as the McLaren, and not as elegant in terms of design, both inside and out. There is though that phenomenal – PHENOMENAL – V8 soundtrack, an awe-inspiring sensation of speed, and a balance we’ve yet to see from the Continental. Which is better said since, given the $380,000 price tag and the 300-unit production run, we’re unlikely to get to sample this ever again. And to draw attention to that Glacial White elephant in the room, that is an enormous price tag when you consider what other British, performance-focused sports car you could potentially have, plus spare change. It is this reasoning, plus the almost hypnotic performance of the 650S that – if you twisted my arm – would probably see me vote Woking, but it’s hard to claim the 650S as today’s outright winner. Offering balance and handling we hadn’t thought possible from the weighty Continental, magnificent aural drama and the commendable effort from its illustrious manufacturer, the Continental GT3-R – much as it did two years ago – has earned some serious respect.

2013, finish – Front axle issues slow the charge, but the Bentley GT3-R still manages to secure fourth place outright on its race debut

2014, finish – The McLaren 650S GT3 secures a podium finish on its debut after snatching third place from late-race rivals

2014, 3 Hours of Silverstone – Bentley GT3-R takes its first official victory, five months after its debut in Abu Dhabi

2015, 3 Hours of Silverstone – McLaren 650S GT3 takes its first official victory, five months after its debut in Abu Dhabi

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