

The Bench MARC

Since their 24H SERIES debut in 2014, MARC Cars and their customers have taken nine class victories, claimed five class championships, and fell just 10 points short of winning the 24H SERIES outright in 2015. As we find out with company founder Ryan McLeod, that's just the start....



It's Bathurst in 2010 where the MARC Cars story begins, as Ryan McLeod, looking for a fresh challenge, learns of a 24-hour race halfway across the world in the Middle East: the Hankook 24H DUBAI.

"As a family, we'd competed in the Bathurst 12 Hours since 1991, and we'd won in our class so many times. But after a while we were looking for a longer race, and for an opportunity to race, competitively, outside Australia. There was a Bathurst 24 Hours in 2003 and 2004, but that didn't last very long. And then around 2010, some customers of mine were competing in a new 24-hour race in Dubai, and the idea of that really intrigued us."

Even up against the likes of future 24H SERIES champions Duel Racing and former World Touring Car Championship Teams' Trophy winner SUNRED, Racer Industries' maiden outing in Dubai was a solid one, with the Astra VX-R finishing 4th in the A3T class. Though Racer Industries were unable to replicate the result one year later – a turbo hose worked itself loose, dropping the Astra to 6th in SP3-GT4 – key lessons had been learnt, and plans for an ambitious project, one that spelt the VX-R's imminent retirement, were already in the works when the team returned home to Norwell.

"We learnt so much about 24-hour racing from Dubai, and we did Barcelona that year too. So when we came back for 2012, we made the car a bit lighter and a bit faster. But it was still a modified road car. With the new category CREVENTIC was introducing – SP2 – we could see there was great potential in these regulations to make a car that was completely tailored for endurance racing. That's when we went back with a pen and paper, and started to make a car for the SP class. One that could race fast without technical issues, and, most importantly, could be funded by our drivers and not require massive budgets."

Fast forward to early 2014. Racer Industries is now 'MARC Cars' – "MARC is an acronym for 'McLeod Auto Racing Competition', but because we make our own cars, it's also 'McLeod Auto Racing Concepts' " – and, minus a couple of test days at Queensland Raceway, the team's brand new, purpose-built endurance racer is ready for its first official race, fittingly, at that year's Bathurst 12 Hours. Home turf.

It's a formidable machine. Yes, the modified bodywork is from a Ford Focus, but underneath is a bespoke CroMo4 chassis, 'penned' via Computer Aided Design software (CAD) and produced using Computer Numerical Control (CNC) for maximum accuracy ("there are no hand-made parts"). Designed and built by PACE Innovations, it's a platform that accommodates panels from almost any production hatchback, and is a robust, cost-effective and, crucially, efficient way to go endurance racing.

Aero components like the front splitter, wheel arches and rear wing are standard across all MARC Cars for multilateral handling. The Brembo brake discs are purposefully larger to improve performance, and thus durable enough to last two if not three 24-hour races. The suspension arms are identical front and back, as is the Bosch ABS system (save bespoke mounting points) meaning componentry is interchangeable, reducing the need for spares.

On top of all that, every spare part is 'off the shelf' standard, and can be sourced and fitted from any supplier without modification. The MARC I's Recaro bucket seat for example is lifted from a Porsche 991, and you'll find myriad examples of the steering column and six-speed Albins sequential transmission on the Supercar Championship grid. Then there's the rear-wheel driven 5-litre 'Coyote' V8 powering the 1,230kg hatchback. It's capable of punching 500bhp, and has been lifted, complete with throttle and manifold, from Australia's Ute V8 Racing Series because, as Ryan explains, *"that engine was popular, it had been fully developed, and it was readily available."*

The approach is considered, the attention to detail absolute, and the success, as a result, immediate. Not only did all three Focus-bodied MARCs finish the 2014 Bathurst 12 Hours on their maiden run, they locked out the 'Invitational' class podium.

Three months after the team's Bathurst triumph, and with its first 24H SERIES class podium claimed at the Hankook 12H ZANDVOORT in May 2014, the 'Gen I' MARC went on to secure category wins at the 24 Hours of Zolder and the Hankook 24H BARCELONA on consecutive weekends in late August. And all for half the price of a brand new Mercedes-AMG, Porsche or Ferrari GT3 car.

"Take a Porsche or a Mercedes GT3. They're fantastic cars, and tons of development has gone in to them, but they're still road cars that have been modified by the manufacturer to race. The MARC car is different, because the Ford Focus panels on the outside are literally just that: some panels that are fixed to the frame of a completely bespoke racing car. When we need to get a component for the car, we can look globally at every supplier and we can fit it to the car. If it doesn't fit, we modify the car to make it fit. All that means preparation is better, the supply of components is completely unrestricted, and you can race a MARC more affordably than production-based cars."

With a proven class-winning pedigree and two years of furious development now safely tucked beneath the Focus / Mazda3 body panels, the MARC I was entered for its first full season in the 24H SERIES in 2015. The year started with four consecutive class wins in Dubai, Mugello, Zandvoort and Paul Ricard for 'MARC Cars Australia', and there was even time for class victory at the Britcar 24 Hour at Silverstone in April. Heading into the series' penultimate race, the SP2 title was already a foregone conclusion, and MARC Cars Australia was on the brink of an outright maiden championship glory at its first attempt. It was not to be though...

"On paper, our car was designed to win, and we should have won the 2015 title one round early in Barcelona. But as happens in endurance racing, there was an accident on-track, a rock got caught in the belt in the motor, and the engine stopped. So that meant we had to go to Brno for the final round. We were competitive again and the cars ran 1-2 during practice, but then Scuderia Praha turned up with a Ferrari [run under the RPD Racing banner] that was put into our class, which went on to win. We came 2nd and 3rd rather than 1st and 2nd, and we lost the championship by just a few points."

"That was difficult to take because we're not a big team – there's only four full-time members and a lot of volunteers – and we'd put so much work in. We're still very proud of what we achieved though, looking back at the positives."



Ryan McLeod and his team would not return to defend their newly won 24H SERIES title in 2016 however, their focus – pun very much intended – having already shifted to the design and construction of a brand new, more aggressive 'Gen II' model for 2018.



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Let's tackle the elephant in the room. Though it may boast a striking similarity, the MARC II is categorically NOT a Ford Mustang, though Ryan does admit that Ford's halo muscle car did play a small role in the genesis of the new "bigger, badder" bespoke bodywork...

"We wanted an iconic style. For the last 20 years in Australia, if you wanted a Ford Mustang, you couldn't buy one. But when the 2015 gen arrived, finally, they made the car right-hand drive, and when it was released, it was huge.

"I actually bought one as a road car, and the response you get from driving that car on the road in Australia is massive. I thought, 'this is the response I want people to have when they see my car.' Everywhere we take this car now, because it's so low, so wide, and so angry, people just love it. I haven't had anybody say anything negative about the appearance of the car on-track."

"I had the vision of what we wanted to create. We wanted a bigger, badder, faster car, something with a bit more focus on the track over the Focus or the Mazda. We wanted to keep the DNA of the MARC I car, so the core components have been put into the MARC II. But there was a remake of the chassis, and a complete upgrade of the electronics system, the engine and braking systems." The 'Coyote' V8 remains, albeit as a 5.2-litre variant lifted from a GT350 Mustang that delivers 615bhp. "It's got bigger wheels too, plus, we completely designed our own body, so for the first time, we were dealing with aerodynamics.

"I'd say it's comfortably five seconds a lap faster, and because the car is easier to drive, we've closed the gap between our gentlemen drivers and the PRO guys. Before, it was around four seconds, and now it's down to under three seconds, which is just fantastic. You can't do that with a standard GT3 car."

Admittedly, results so far in 2019 have been mixed: the MARC II finished 4th in-class on its maiden Dubai run in January – again with VDS Racing Adventures –while fellow customers T2 Racing took the Invitational Class win at Bathurst a month later. This year's 12-hour race at Mount Panorama, however, was the first time a factory MARC failed to make the finish since 2014. Still, team owner Ryan McLeod has little doubt the new MARC II will pick up where its illustrious predecessor left off.

"With a little bit development, we want to dominate SPX class, and we believe we can do that. We also want to consistently push into the outright top 10 in the 24H SERIES. With the MARC I, we figured we could compete in the top 12 or 13 per cent. Now, with the MARC II, we want to be in the top 10, or even the top eight. That's our goal, and we're quite good at meeting those!"

Ryan McLeod was speaking with Brianna Leipert and James Gent



the MARC II with VDS Racing Adventures finished 4th in-class on its maiden Dubai run in January