



Third time lucky

Tiff Needell has been to Monaco for three different events, but his outing in the JaguarSport XJR15 was the first time he has raced around the classic track

After two abortive attempts to race around the street of Monte Carlo I was fortunate to be offered another go. I was invited by the owners of the BIM Motorsport JaguarSport XJR15 to race their £500,000 machine in the Intercontinental Challenge.

My first attempt at Monaco was back in 1977 when 63 cars fought for 20 places on the Formula 3 grid. While the opposition used Toyota Novamotor engines, I battled my Triumph Dolomite-powered Unipart March 773 to 32nd fastest; 0.81s off the back of a grid that was covered by 1.48s.

Those who qualified included the likes of eventual winner Didier Pironi, Elio de Angelis, Anders Olofsson, Eje Elgh, Stefan Johansson, Jean-Louis Schlesser, Derek Daly, John Nielsen, Geoff Lees and Geoff Brabham, while among those joining me in the non-qualifiers party were Derek

Warwick, Jan Lammers, David Kennedy, Ian Flux, team mate Ian Taylor and — down in 42nd spot — one Nelson Piquet, already showing a dislike for street racing.

Attempt number two was for the Grand Prix itself in 1980 driving the Unipart Ensign N180. In the wet Thursday session I qualified 19th, just on the 20-car grid. Only 0.03s ahead of me was Alain Prost.

Friday, as usual, was free and I spent all day doing little rain dances, but it was no use. To make matters worse I had to switch to the unused spare minutes before the final timed session and ended the day backwards in the Swimming Pool barriers to sit out the race with the likes John Watson, Eddie Cheever, Geoff Lees and Keke Rosberg.

This time the only qualifying necessary was to keep the car out of the barriers, as all 16 immaculate XJR15s would get to race.

JaguarSport was determined to do things in style for this Monaco weekend and on the Wednesday

before the race I was picked up from Nice airport and chauffeur-driven to Le Dior Chateau which is lost in the hills of north-west Cannes, a really beautiful palatial building with huge rooms, where I joined fellow residents Davy Jones, David Brabham, Juan Fangio II and David Leslie.

First practice was not until 3.30pm on Thursday, but Tom Walkinshaw had called a drivers' briefing for 11am and, with traffic chaos around Monaco, we needed to allow two hours travelling so it was up at eight for breakfast.

The instructions from Tom were mainly common sense, suggesting we all built up steadily and avoided damaging our expensive machines. There then followed a briefing about the start procedure from the French officials.

We were then left with four hours to contemplate our chassis set-ups; whether to run a stiff front anti-roll bar or a soft one. Everyone was keyed-up for the first practice and some were opening a book on

who would crash first. To make matters more interesting high seas were sending waves crashing over the sea wall at Portier, the right-hander before the tunnel.

Once we were released onto the circuit it was a marvelous feeling. My single most exhilarating sensation in all my years of motorsport was driving a Grand Prix car up that winding hill from Ste Devote to the Casino Square and now I was reliving it. However, my first impression in the Jaguar was that the circuit had shrunk, as we all got backed up in a queue for the first couple of laps.

Unfortunately, not everyone took notice of Tom's briefing and Davy Jones, going for pole on lap three, thumped into my backside under braking for Ste Devote.

'I think you owe me a rear bumper, Davy,' I said later.

'Don't you look in your mirrors,' he replied.

'Yes, but... oh, forget it.'

Amazingly our incident caused the only damage during that first session and their were equally few mechanical problems, which was of great credit to the hard-worked JaguarSport team. It was just my luck that one of the few gremlins attacked trusty number five.

In mid session I was up to third on the grid and things were going well, with 'team manager' touring car racer Win Percy kindly hanging out the pit signals. Suddenly it all went wrong. On full throttle the

Left: The JaguarSport XJR15s offered Tiff Needell (right) his first opportunity to race around the streets of Monte Carlo. Times were difficult, however, before our man came home a creditable seventh

this session was catching Davy and sitting behind him for a couple of laps with headlamps ablaze. I couldn't understand why he didn't wave me by, surely he was looking in his mirrors...

This time we went back to Le Dior for lunch, before I packed my bags, said *au revoir*, and headed back to Monaco to spend two days aboard the motor yacht Colinga chartered by a couple of friends and moored right alongside the dock in the middle of the F1 paddock. Sometimes I feel I could easily get used to this lifestyle.

On Friday evening we walked the circuit, pausing to cruise the magnificent Hotel de Paris and visit the Exposition sur l'Art Automobile of Alan Fearnley's paintings. Dinner was onboard – and excellent – then I went to bed early, rocked gently to sleep by the waves. In the morning I was only partly disturbed by the sweet sound of V12 Hondas being warmed-up for the Grand Prix stars' morning session.

With the Jaguar race not until 5.15pm, we had all day to finalise our semi-race set-up. Three choices had to be made: brake balance position, front anti-roll bar stiffness and old tyres or new. The amazing thing is that the fewer the choices the more fuss you get into deciding on your solution.

My pre-race nerves far exceeded any that I can remember for a long time and the afternoon dragged by. We were all aware that we were in identical cars and we all had our points to prove and our pride to maintain. The race was 'only' 16 laps but the 30 minutes the race lasted were hot, hard work, as we muscled the XJR15s round the tight streets of Monaco with full-width front radiators full of 100-degree water providing airtflow over the car.

At the start John Nielsen, who was alongside me, made the better getaway and then had to squeeze out of Ste Devote side by side with Bob Wollek who had outbraked himself, half shot straight on and then squeezed back in.

At the entry to Casino Square Jim Richards went wide, allowing Nielsen to slip through but he managed to get it together again in front of me. At the right-hander before Portier Jim got it wrong again, and I dived inside for Portier, which we managed side by side, but my better exit got me into the tunnel ahead, in sixth place, but with a fair gap to the five in front.

The gap proved useful a lap later, as a flash of yellow flags heralded Nielsen's demise at Tabac. I arrived first on the scene to see a seriously damaged XJR15. A lap later Juan Fangio outbraked me into the seafront chicane, just before we were greeted with more trouble at Tabac: Armin Hahne was broadside on the circuit.

By now the race order was all but finalised. The dust had settled and number five was fifth holding



pedal 'clicked' under my foot and went lame. Fortunately it wasn't stuck wide open. Instead, when I lifted off the engine shut down but the pedal remained dead on the floor. It must be a broken throttle cable, I thought.

I was pit-bound and cruising home on tickover when the pedal suddenly came alive again, clicked and went lame again. Naturally, in the pits it worked perfectly. But as the session finished and the waves subsided at Portier, I was dumped back to seventh on the grid while we tried to solve the problem.

Apparently, these new high-tech engines don't have a direct link from pedal to throttle-slides. Instead the pedal rotates a drum that works a potentiometer that works... I know not what, but somewhere in there it didn't work.

Whatever my problems, I nevertheless enjoyed those laps of Monaco, just taking it flat through the right-hand 'corner' in the middle of the tunnel when the line was perfect.

After qualifying we headed back to the chateau for dinner and bed by around 10pm to prepare for the 5am alarm call and our second practice session at 8.10am.

To everyone's frustration a steady drizzle meant it was wet tyres all round and the first day's times would stand for the grid. However, we all went out to get a feel for things should it rain on Saturday. What pleased me most in

back a recovering Hahne and Wollek. But all was not well. From the word go, the pedal had been clicking under full throttle, but after lift-off it always returned – until laps seven and eight. Hahne and Wollek were by in a flash and I was left kicking the pedal in anger, and that did the trick.

I spent the rest of the race alone, battling with the increasingly oily track and becoming hotter and hotter. By the end I was happy to survive and finish seventh.

The Formula 1 Longines results service, giving every lap for every driver, was interesting. I'd finished 31.284s behind the dominant Derek Warwick, who did a really professional job all weekend, I lost

16.312s on the first four laps of dodgems, 7.551s on the two laps with throttle problems, and 3.950s easing up over the last two laps. During the other eight laps of 'normal' racing I only dropped 3.471s in total.

For all concerned the race was a great success; JaguarSport and all the drivers put on an excellent show. Interestingly four of the drivers were from that F3 class of '77. It was a pleasure to get to know Juan Fangio who has a true love of the sport of motor racing and carries the name of his legendary uncle with pride.

Record producer Matt Aitken should also take pride in having a go himself and, in such illustrious company, he in no way disgraced himself. Touring car aces Hahne and Richards upset the form book by qualifying second and third, perhaps proving that 450bhp and limited grip suits their style more than the sportscar men.

Saturday night was for the Tip-Top and the Casino and late to bed. Somehow the V12s being warmed up on Sunday morning didn't seem quite so sweet. After breakfast I climbed aboard the dingy tender and waved a grateful *au revoir* to my hosts and the crew as I headed out to sea, away from the incoming hoards, and towards the heliport to begin my journey home. I had to return early to do some commentary for the Sky Sports channel... on the Monaco GP. ■

Davy Jones, going for pole on lap three, thumped into my backside under braking for Ste Devote