

INSIGHT: DRIVING ON ICE

Photos: Malcolm Griffiths



Sainz Senior had the measure of everyone on the zero-grip surface

IN THE SHADOW OF THE KING

David Evans went to Sweden to take on a

world rally champion. And lost.

Silence. Complete silence. And incomprehension. How did I get here? How did that happen? The frustration was enormous. My efforts to beat Carlos Sainz through the stage had gone wrong. I'm off. Bet you're thinking this is some sort of video game story. Wrong. I am genuinely gunning for the 3m 36.4s fastest time set by the two-time world champion an hour or so earlier. Same car, same road, same tyres. But, where Carlos had the throttle buried at the exit of the corner. I've buried the car at the side of the corner. Rally over. My mind flashes back to 2001 and the in-car of Richard Burns going off on the Lomhjoleden stage near Torshov. And I'm delighted to say, I share the same competitive spirit as Burnsie. My Go-Pro footage (which will forever remain in my private collection...) shows me bang the steering wheel and let out one long profanity. Like RB, the first reaction is reverse. Give it a go. Nothing. Spinning wheels. Another profanity. Richard had to wait for spectators and dropped around 15 minutes. I had to wait for a man with a van. There's the clunk as he hooks me up and the jolt as I'm hauled back onto the road. Now, here's the difference. Burns, fired up by his mistake went fastest in the next stage in a beautiful display of on-the-limit driving. Similarly fired up by my mistake and still desperate to make the end of this stage. I get back on it. And go off at the next junction. Straight off. It's a square left. Forget it. Over the top of the poles marking the stage and thump, straight into the bank. This time I laugh. It's all I can do. And wait for the man with the van. It's all Richard Tuthill's fault. A few years ago, Tuthill had the idea of putting one of the world's feistiest cars on a surface which 99 per cent of the population would rather put in their gin and tonic. But, the 911 on ice project worked. In fact, it went mad. So mad, in fact, that Tuthill had to extend the season and doing that meant finding more ice. Geilo, a couple of hours drive north of Oslo was binned in favour of Kall, a couple of hours north of Trondheim – which is an hour's flying north of Oslo. The key word in there is 'north'. We have closed considerably on the Arctic Circle and the local vista reflects that. It's desolate, colourless, cold, but oddly very, very beautiful. And the benefit of this move is that the Below Zero Ice Driving Porsches are less likely to get wet and meet their maker at the bottom of a chilly Scandinavian lake. Everything is bigger and better at the new facility. The lake is vast and, I'm reliably and reassuringly informed, half a metre beneath the rock-solid ice which we're playing on. Tuthill's format for these days is tailored to each client. Seeing the red mist descending all around him, he bolts on some button-studs and cheerfully sends me out, urging me to give the 911 everything. You might think this slightly insane, but Tuthill's faith in physics is complete and he knows that once my speed moves into double figures, I'll be found out. Quite right. But, crucially, at walking speed, I've already begun to grasp the importance of transferring the weight in the car to get it turned in. The speed increases with the length of stud and the level of grip. Sainz, in town for some fun and fever with family and friends, smiles at my frustration with the button studs. "You never really drive the rally under these circumstances," he says, "the grip is really poor, but you learn..." For much of Sainz's time, the Swedish Rally was always about bicycle tyres, bad studs and lots of grip. But not always. "I remember one recce," he smiles. "I was at Subaru and we were using some different tyres. It was a disaster

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On the recce, Colin [McRae] and I were going off all of the time. He went off maybe 14 times and me, maybe 11 or 12. To start with it was a joke, it was like a competition. He would be on the radio: "Carlos, Carlos, please come back..." Then, five minutes later I was on the radio: "Colin, please, wait, wait, wait, please come back..." In the end, Colin and I – in the middle of the recce – went to find some Nokian Hakkapeliitta (Finnish-made winter tyres). And then we finished the recce." The gorgeous, growling 911s are all a bit alien to Sainz on snow. He's never driven them in competition. Until now. And suddenly, he's in the biggest, fiercest competition around. Against his son. Carlos Jr is 18. And an F1-bound GP3 driver. He has no experience of driving a rally car on ice. In fact, he has no experience of driving a rally car. But, after a day on the ice, he is just a tenth of a second behind Sainz Sr. But about to be found out. "I had done about 70 laps of the

circuit," says Junior. "It was a racing track, so I am in my territory and I had my reference points. But then, we turned the lap around and went in the opposite direction and my father was setting *exactly* the same time. But I was three seconds slower. I wanted to check the difference between a racing driver and the rally driver. I can be happy with my car control, but for the eye, knowing what to expect... his experience is just amazing." As you would expect from Britain's foremost Porsche competition car preparer, Tuthill only brings Stuttgart's finest to the frozen water. But among the three-litre 911s, there's a 2.2-litre 912. Shorter, lighter and less powerful (around 140bhp compared to 250 for the 911s), the 912 is nimble and compliant. And, courtesy of inspiring more confidence, probably quicker over the length of a lap. In the 912, left-foot braking is all about helping to shift the weight to get the car turned in. Not so much about slowing down.

The 911 – specially the orange one – shouts, kicks and bites. In this car, the brakes are all about slowing down. The differential in the scary one is reckoned (by those who know far more about these things than I) to be a bit soft; there's very little progression in the way it locks. Now this, I can relate to. It's hard to drive, really making you work, sweat and swear. But I love it. It's the kind of knife-edge, adrenalin rush I've come in search of. Invariably, however, it ends up on or in a snowbank. The silver three-litre car, however, is the stuff of dreams. The diff's a peach (did I really just say that?) and this thing totally delivers albeit it on the best tyres. Caught out by a tightening corner in the orange car I went for the handbrake and usually shut my eyes. But in this, confidence is such that I'm happy to give it some more revs and another armful of lock. The silver one is also Carlos' favourite. He doesn't do quite as much driving as the others in his party, but

when he does, he comes out smiling. "It's good fun," he says with a grin. But now the competition is definitely hotting up. Mobile phones out, stopwatch engaged, this thing is getting really serious. It's down to father vs son. Just a tenth in it. Sainz the world champion pops in a 3m 36.4s. He's not super-happy, but he's pretty sure it's enough. Talking to Sainz while his son is in the stage and trying to beat him is a waste of time. I could offer him Saturday's six lottery numbers and he wouldn't be interested. He's focused. "He's missed it," he says to Tuthill, "the man on the clock. "He's missed it, too slow, now. Yes?" Tuthill reckons it will be close. Sainz's brow furrows further. But he's safe. He's safe by 2.3 seconds. And the younger is distraught. "I missed the gear

coming out of one corner," he says. "I took fourth instead of second." As the father and son shake hands, there's massive mutual respect. And a big hug from his uncle. "This is my family," Sainz Jr says, "and if there wasn't competition like this, this wouldn't be my family!" With that, it's time for them to go. Hire car door shut, a cheery wave offered, Tuthill turns around. "Right," he says, "who's first to have a shot at Carlos's time?" And with that, any semblance of tutoring went out of the window as six cylinders were thrashed to within an inch of their lives in search of a time a tenth or two quicker: Was the King beaten? I'm not telling, but Martin Rowe proved himself well worthy of sharing the world champion tag. The second half of

the day is very much the ethos of Below Zero Ice Driving. It's your show. Tuthill brings the cars, the lake and the petrol and you bring your enthusiasm and snow shovel. If you want to spend the day on button studs at 10mph drifting between the cones, you can. And believe me, getting a 911 on the absolute limit of its grip at such a low speed remains a hugely rewarding experience. By the end of my time, my shoulders ached, my arms had nothing left to give, my thumbs and fingers felt broken and I had blisters. But boy, was it worth it. Unfortunately, not much of the science has translated into my everyday life. Attempting to demonstrate the theory of weight transfer in the family Volvo on the school run wasn't the best. After my best efforts, I opened the door to let my daughter out. "Daddy," she says, "is the car meant to wobble?" Find me a lake, and freeze it... ■



Handling a rear-engined Porsche on ice is...interesting



Sainz in Sweden, '97



Carlos Sainz Jr joined in the fun

When tutors get together and become students

My student house was a place full of fever – including a bath full of read and discarded MNs – but it was never *this* full of fever. Welcome to Kall's only student house, so called by former World Rally Championship co-ordinator Calvin Coolidge. He knows this is a student house, because he lives there. And he's contributed to the beer can collection. Also in there is former Production Car World Rally champion Martin Rowe, factory Vauxhall driver Terry Kaby, British Rally Championship event winner Ryan Champion, top-drawer national drivers Simon Redhead (he's from York...) and David Maslen. The boys are all working through the winter, tutoring clients at Below Zero Ice Driving and keeping the fleet of 911s on the road. And there's no doubt, it's hard graft at times; when we leave for lunch, Redhead's lying on the ice fitting a new driveshaft to a car. But, once the wheel's back on, the car has to be tested... "It's a good atmosphere around the place," says Coolidge. "We all get on well. I get up in the morning and put the porridge on and we have a go at cooking. And there is quite a collection of beer cans on the mantelpiece right now. It really is a student house for middle-aged men!" The biggest difference in this house, however, is that instead of talking about what might be in their careers... they're all talking about what once was. Having shipped off to Canada, Rowe was the biggest surprise. "I'm here for five weeks," he says. "It's tough leaving the family, but this is a chance to earn money doing something I've always loved doing. It's an amazing place to work and we get some great clients in here as well. And there's always banter going on in the house..." Ace tutor Martin Rowe



A place the WRC calls home in the frozen landscape

Rally folk know Kall. And they know Kall Auto Lodge especially well. But not many people know it was Colin McRae who helped set the place up. Close to Åre, one of Scandinavia's biggest ski areas, Kall offers great winter testing conditions from December until April. And before the 42-day test limit was imposed, teams would spend weeks in this freezing part of the world chasing the big prize in Karlstad. Not only does Kall have the frozen lakes, it also has some exceptional roads. Talking to Mikko Hirvonen after my trip to Kall, he was telling me where he had run his DS3 WRC prior to Rally Sweden. Turns out the access road to the lake Tuthill uses was Citroën's test stage for a day. It was McRae and Kenneth Eriksson's co-driver Staffan Parmander who had the idea of turning the Lodge into something special. There's a relaxation area in the hotel which is still called, 'Colin's corner.' The hotel itself has been in this place since 1800 and something, but it now comes complete with hot tubs, saunas and some fairly tidy tucker. "This place has changed a lot since I was last here testing," says Sainz. "But I always liked it here, with the weather and the conditions being so much colder – you could always get a lot more done than you would if you were in the Karlstad area." Åre is a great place, full of the Alps-style ski resort atmosphere, but the restaurants and bars are eye-wateringly expensive. Kall on the other hand, has a petrol station. And nothing else. Entertainment in the village could sometimes be hard to find, once a day's testing had been done. Which is probably why one high-flying WRC driver found himself snowmobiling across the lake at -15 without *any* clothes on.



McRae is still remembered in a certain part of Sweden