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# How Smiley and Taylor pressed Restart

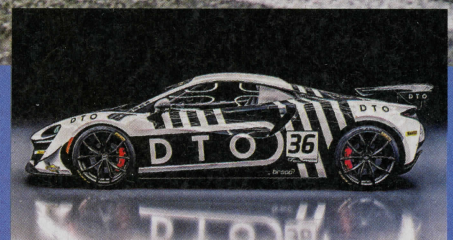
The story of a remarkable TCR UK title triumph



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# FROM FROZEN OUT TO CHAMPIONS

*Chris Smiley and Restart Racing chief Bert Taylor found too many obstacles to remain in the BTCC.*

*Now they're reigning champions of TCR UK, a series that's massively on the up*

MARCUS SIMMONS

**B**ert Taylor is laughing and, all things considered, it's lovely that he's able to do that. At the end of 2020, he exited the British Touring Car Championship when he quit the BTC Racing squad he had founded, but sold to fellow ex-short-oval man Steve Dudman. It's fair to say that the two did not split on good terms. In early 2021, Taylor became ill with COVID-19 and then suffered a debilitating stroke. For 2022, he was knocked back in his attempts to rejoin the BTCC with his long-time protege and friend Chris Smiley driving. Then, within a couple of weeks, came a last-minute decision, a dash to Italy and a race win. A few months on from that, Taylor's new entity – appropriately named Restart Racing – was celebrating TCR UK title success with Smiley.

As happens so often in motorsport, this was a domino effect of chance happenings, culminating in a call from an ex-journalist who now runs a PR company, for whom one client is JAS Motorsport, which looks after Honda's European customer racing... Taylor takes up the story: "Jamie O'Leary [the ex-Autosport staffer who used to cover the BTCC in these pages] rang me up and said, 'What are you doing?' And I said, 'Well, Chris has lost his drive'. He said, 'Oh right, have you ever thought about TCR?' And I said, 'Yeah, I've looked at it loads of times'.

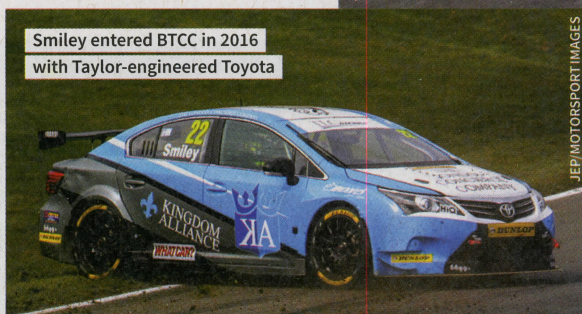
"It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and literally about 15 minutes later the phone went and it was Mads [Fischer, the Dane who is JAS's TCR project leader], and he said, 'Do you want to do TCR UK for us in our Honda? You've been in the family [running Hondas in the BTCC], would you do it?' So I said, 'Well not really, because I'm at home relaxing, getting over a stroke'. And he said, 'Listen, I'll make it easy for you. You get a car and I'll sort it all out.' I said, 'OK, there's only one person I'll do it with and that'll be Chris. I'll ring him up and ask him.' I didn't want to tell him it was TCR because I didn't want him to say he didn't want to do it.

"I rung him up and said, 'Do you want to drive for us again?', and he said yeah. I said, 'But you don't know what it is'. He said, 'I don't care. I'll do it.' So I rung Mads and I said, 'OK, we're on'. He said, 'Have you told him?'; and I said, 'No not yet, but I will when you agree the deal and we sort out the paperwork'. I couldn't drive [because of the stroke], so I rung Chris back and said, 'We're doing TCR with Honda, the downside is your dad's got to go to Italy to get the car!' And that's what he did. It



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Smiley entered BTCC in 2016 with Taylor-engineered Toyota



JEP/MOTORSPORT IMAGES

was on the Thursday, and by the Monday morning he was outside my house with the car and the trailer, and then the first race was the following weekend. Absolutely mad!"

The Taylor-and-Smiley partnership goes back to 2016. The Northern Irishman had a Mini Challenge title under his belt and had shone in the DTM-supporting VW Scirocco R-Cup when he entered the BTCC with Team Hard in a Toyota Avensis; Taylor, who had previously run cars in the series, was his engineer. "It was an absolute disaster," shudders Smiley, "and Bert did everything he could to try and improve it for me. Halfway through that season we decided that wasn't for us, and we were going to work hard to get the funding together to have a proper go at it in a car that we were in control of."

This happened via a late-2016 stopgap in the Renault Clio Cup, with the involvement of Taylor, who adds: "The rest is history. We had a chat and he said would I do the BTCC again, and I didn't really know if I wanted to do it under the stress from trying to raise the money." Luckily, Smiley had the budget from property developer



Victory came first time out at Oulton Park in TCR UK opener with Honda Civic...

**“I SAID, ‘IT’S TCR WITH HONDA, THE DOWNSIDE IS YOUR DAD’S GOT TO GO TO ITALY TO GET THE CAR!’”**

Norlin, a company owned by a relative. “I think it was the last Clio round at Brands Hatch that he said, ‘We’re doing it with Norlin’, and Monday morning there was £550,000 put in my bank account to start a team up,” recounts Taylor. “Me and Chris built it up from nothing.”

The team ran Smiley and Dave Newsham in Chevrolet Cruze machinery in 2017, before switching to the Honda Civic Type R in 2018. That year, Smiley took his only BTCC win to date in a reversed-grid race at Rockingham, but across that season and the following term, when the FK8 Civic replaced the old FK2 model, he proved capable of showing genuine speed at several events. The problem was, Norlin had been sold and, says Taylor, that was “just such a shame that it happened for Chris because I do believe that if we’d carried on then we would have won again”. >>



...and six months later came title at Snetterton

During this time, Smiley was being engineered by Taylor's son Ben: "Chris lived at our house for the three years – I'd pick him up from or take him to the airport or the station, wherever he was going, so he was more of a son really. They're both about the same age, they're both doing the same thing, so of course he fitted in our family. It was going really well. Ultimately he won my first race [in BTCC] – that's something you never forget."

Before the 2019 season, BTC announced that Dudman had bought a 50% stake in the team, and he had outright ownership by the time Taylor walked at the end of 2020. That year, and 2021, Smiley had surfaced at Excelr8 Motorsport, which at his time of joining was trying to establish a foothold in the BTCC with its new Hyundai i30 N Fastback machinery. But he was still closely associated with the Taylor family, with Ben moving to the Suffolk squad to engineer him in 2021.

Smiley looked good to stay with Excelr8 for 2022, but it fell through ("I have to be careful what I say on that one..."). After that, "I had the deal done to be in the third Speedworks Toyota last year, but Toyota canned the third car [Speedworks had been loaned an extra TBL entrants' licence for 2022]. It was almost at the start of the season. That left us with no choice but to look for other things." Taylor's BTCC plans had also hit the buffers. "At that point of the year there's no licences, all the deals are done – you can't make a deal out of thin air," continues Smiley. "This [TCR] was looking on the up, and the cars looked good, and Honda offered us a deal to have the car."

Now he was armed with the ex-Nestor Girolami weapon that had been a race winner in the World Touring Car Cup. Any test mileage before the season? "None!" Yet Smiley claimed pole position and

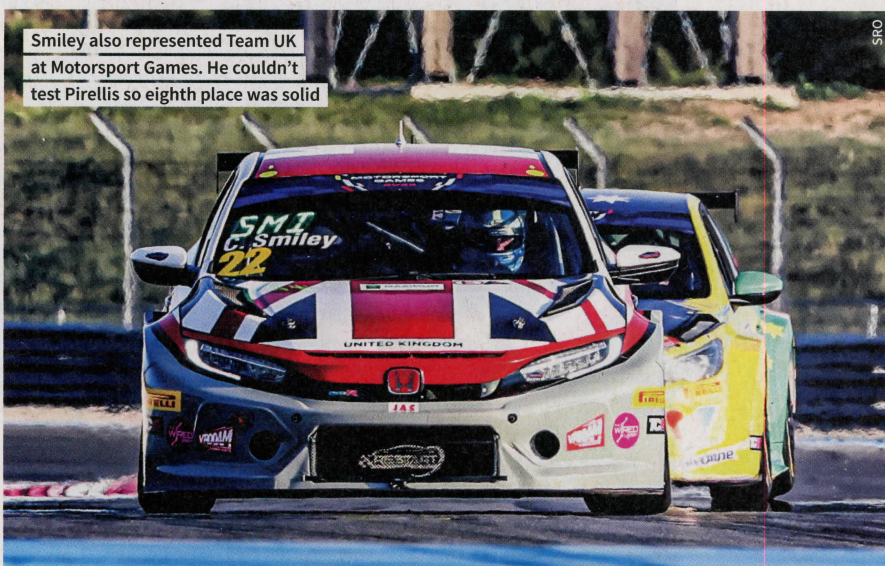
## "I THOUGHT LE MANS WITH TVR WAS THE HIGHLIGHT OF EVERYTHING, BUT THAT TCR RACE WAS FANTASTIC"

a race victory first time out at Oulton Park. "It was good to get the first weekend out of the way considering how tight we were on time and everything, and thankfully the guys from JAS Honda in Italy sent us over a guy [ace tin-top techy David Scott] to give us a hand with the car for the first weekend, which was good. They were a big part of it as well, making sure that we were organised. If we needed any help with anything, we got it."

Restart took its green flag with Taylor Jr on engineering duties, plus Darryl Taplin and Russ Higgs – from Excelr8 and BTC respectively – as mechanics, Colin Hewett (who previously worked with Taylor Sr on the TVR Le Mans project) as team manager and Mark Smart



Smiley's solitary BTCC win came at Rockingham with BTC Honda in 2018



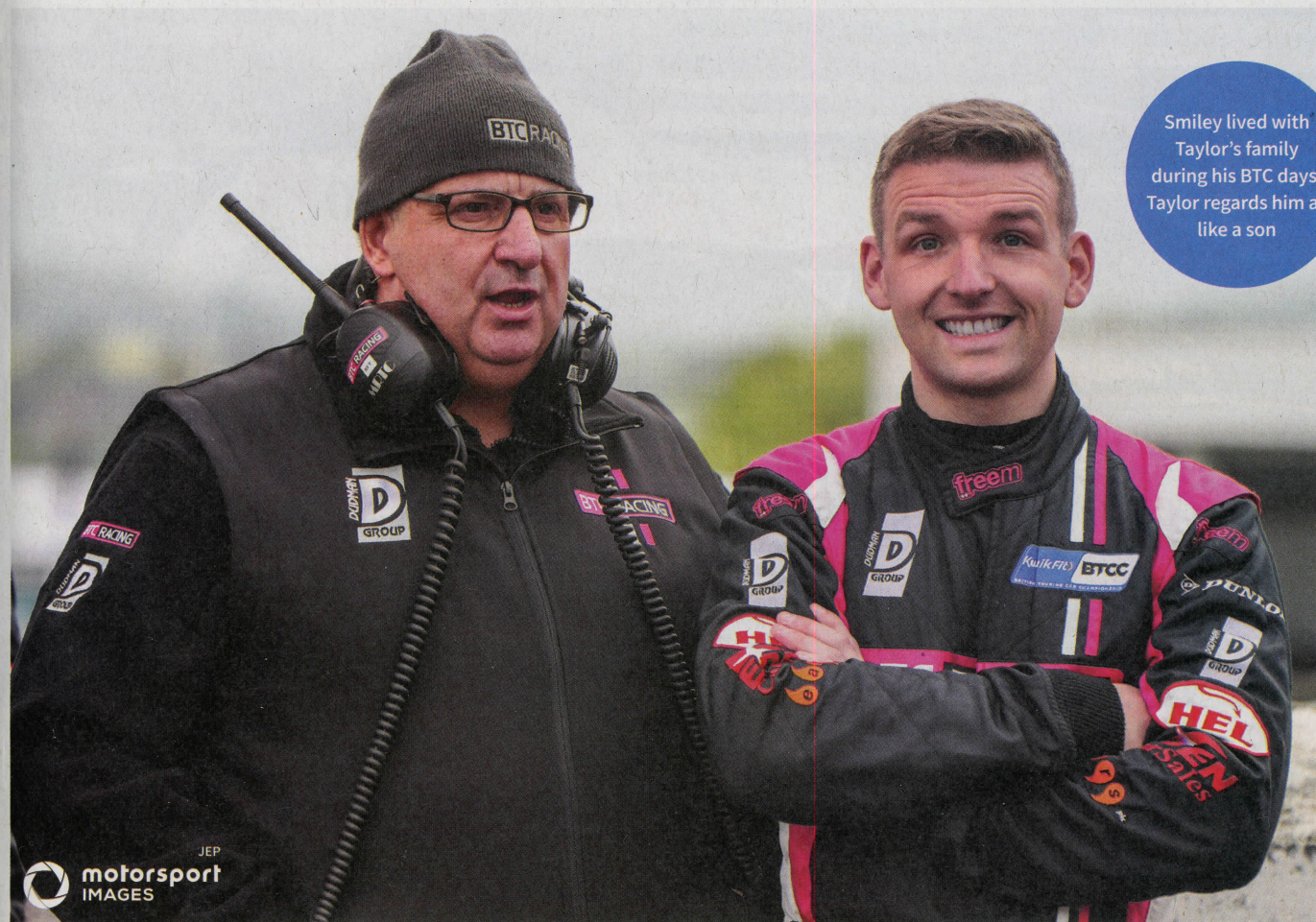
Smiley also represented Team UK at Motorsport Games. He couldn't test Pirellis so eighth place was solid

looking after everything else.

After that Oulton victory, there was a win drought until the finale at Snetterton, but in part that's due to TCR's joint balance of performance and compensation weight measures that are decreed direct from the category's worldwide organiser WSC. The latter measure is based on the qualifying results from the previous round. As Smiley points out: "You also score points in qualifying, so it's a double-edged sword – you score the points but it means you carry the weight for the following weekend. It's a fine line whether you want to qualify on pole, take the points, or you want to race your way through the day differently."

By the time the final event came around, Smiley had clocked up two non-finishes owing to contact from other cars, and was locked in a battle with youngster Isaac Smith – who hadn't won a race but had a 100% record of top-seven finishes – for the title. He could have been out of the picture completely, but key to his campaign was an extraordinary day at Castle Combe: the Honda took pole but, as Smiley says: "The clutch plate welded together on the line, and we started from the back. We finished fifth in the first race and we finished fourth in the second race, and we started from the pitlane in the second race because we hadn't time to change the clutch. The weekends where we worked hard and things didn't go our way, and we still scored good points, was what saved us." Smiley's race pace was half a second quicker than anyone else's, and crucially he outscored Smith on that day in Wiltshire.

"It [the second race] was probably one of the best races in all the time I've known him



Smiley lived with Taylor's family during his BTC days. Taylor regards him as like a son

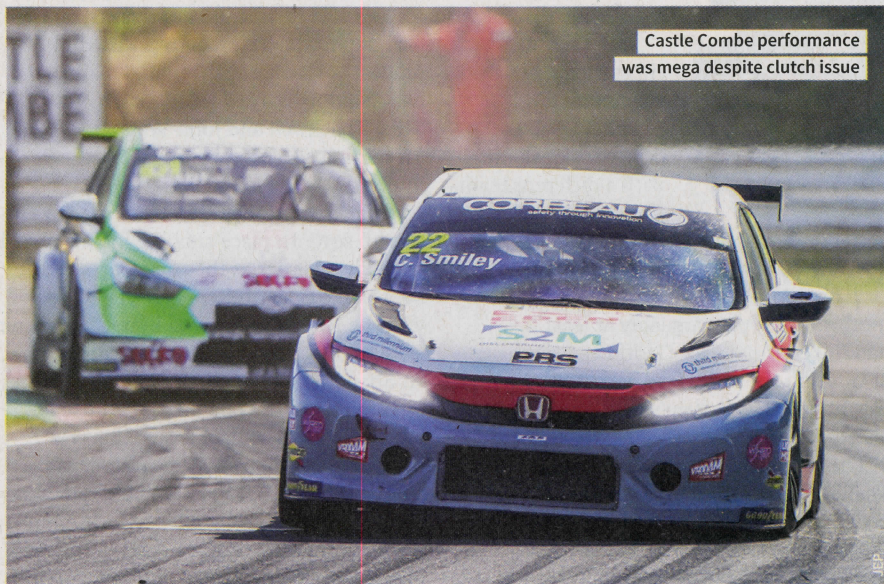
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that Chris ever did," enthuses Taylor. "It was a brilliant race – he drove magnificently. I thought when I went to Le Mans with TVR was the highlight of everything, but that TCR race was fantastic. The pressure he was under... he drove that car at 110% the whole day."

And what's it like for a driver coming from the indigenous-to-UK NGTC formula used in the BTCC to the more production-based TCR? "There's very, very little in it," asserts Smiley. "Some circuits less than a second on lap time. It's a slightly different driving style from the BTCC. The cars in the BTCC, you have a more aggressive driving style than what you have in a TCR car. BTCC, you roll up your sleeves and you hang onto it."

"These feel like they're proper racing cars," says Taylor, who reckons the budget for TCR UK is around a third of the BTCC. "They're a manufacturer-built car, and they're so rewarding for the teams and drivers because they're driving a proper TCR touring car. They are good. When we got the opportunity to go with Honda it was a no-brainer – they didn't have any other cars on the grid. Also, they took as big a chance as I did by doing TCR UK. They went away and had a look at all the history, what we'd done, what we were hoping we were going to do for them, so they have as much a part to play in winning that championship as we have. The racing is insane – it really is brilliant. We love it."

Is that it, then, for the two parties in the BTCC? Restart is upgrading to JAS's new FL5 model of the Civic, and is adding a second car to Smiley's in 2023 for Scott Sumpton. "I wouldn't say never," offers Taylor,



Castle Combe performance was mega despite clutch issue

"but the plan is now we've done a deal with Scott and Chris, and we want to do TCR UK, and go round the world, race in Europe, Asia, Australia..."

"We go racing because we enjoy doing it together," says Smiley. "Whatever the plan was on the table, that's what we were going to stick with. A British championship is never easy to win, there's a lot of new cars around, there's going to be a lot of new drivers, so you never know who the next guy is going to be or where it's going to come from. We've now got a year's experience in the championship, we've learned a lot together with Honda, and we're feeling good to get going again this year."

Sounds like they can't wait to, ahem, restart their racing. ❄️