

scary fast **scary**

scary fast



From the Silverstone pits, **Nick Coleman**
between instruments of torture and

ry fast

fast scary fa



ponders a hitherto unexplored connection
Alfa Romeo's latest International Touring Car racer

In the otherwise charming Tuscan hilltown of San Gimignano there is a historical museum of torture. There you will find many instruments of highly specific application; rack upon rack of abstruse devices fashioned from wood and metal to do unsavoury things to people.

One of the most troubling aspects of the museum is that it's not always clear how the objects displayed in it were once supposed to work, and what form of nastiness it was they were precisely designed to inflict. There is the obvious stuff, of course: the spikes, claws, pinions, rakes, balls, ratchets and so on. But there are also obscure machines of rare shape and complex mechanism, the purpose of which is not readily expressed by the overall geometry of the objects themselves – mechanised spheres, cogged triangles, baffling arrangements of chain and brace which look no more threatening in a display case than the rusting contraptions you'll find in the potting sheds of retired seamen.

The modern design purist might argue, then, that these strange tools do not abide by that cardinal rule of design which holds that form should always express function. But then the same purist would only have to read the explanatory rubric by the side of the display case in the museum to gather with a sudden chill that the flaw is not in the design of the instrument but in his own capacity to imagine a purpose for it; that what he is puzzling over is a machine conceived to accomplish a task outside the limits of his comprehension. For instance, there is in one elegant niche a small, segmented wooden bulb on a cogged stalk that, though it bears a passing resemblance to a working model of a medieval chocolate orange, is in fact a machine specifically designed to... but no. It's not my purpose to mess with your breakfast.

The Alfa Romeo paddock on ITC qualifying day at Silverstone is almost as trying to the imagination as the San Gimignano museum of torture. The atmosphere here is methodical. Technicians go about their own business with an air of rational detachment, their pace measured, their movements shaped to the contours of the tasks they have to perform. And all about them lie the machines of their trade, rigorously distributed for maximum utility; devices that have names known only to a handful of specially trained people.

You don't ask what those names are, though, because the guys in overalls – besides being Italian – are simply not available. They are in another world, a parallel universe of concentration in which the job in hand is everything. Here, an aerodynamic undertray is being coated in posh tinfoil to insulate and contain heat; there, a telemetry monitor zigzags with coloured curves, speaking volumes, no doubt, to the chaps hunched at its winking screen; meanwhile, down the paddock trail in the Michelin tyre tent, an armourer's array of metal doodads squats out of the sunlight radiating menace. One cruel-looking gadget in particular gives pause for thought – an alloy turntable fitted with anvil-shaped hooks, over which a barb-nosed articulated arm is poised like a scorpion's tail: something to do with changing the lick-thin rubbers ITC cars run on, no doubt, but you wouldn't want to be strapped to it by a man with three teeth and bristles in his eye-sockets.

Thankfully, there is little evidence of the medieval torturer stereotype anywhere in the Alfa pitlane, although

the funnel-topped pavilions and pennants of the paddock do hint at an age of hospitality less populous with Nanini espresso machines and baseball caps. Here at least you can relax a little, sip your coffee and marvel at the impossibly small dolly trundling to the garage with its gleaming cargo suspended heavily from its chains – it's a race-tuned Alfa V6 engine, its ventricles and arteries gaping – and then muse on the thought that, in auto-anatomical terms, this beautiful, disconnected hive of cylinders, pipes and chambers is a disembodied Alfa heart, the motoring equivalent of high class offal.

International Touring Car racing is, I am assured, the second wealthiest circuit racing championship in Europe after Formula 1. In other words, there is little here of the make-do-and-mend spirit you may find to some degree in

A race-tuned Alfa Romeo V6, its ventricles and arteries gaping

most forms of motorsport, and there is a superabundance of the hi-tech gadgetry you won't find in F1 these days as a result of ever-increasing technical regulations. This is where computerised traction-control comes home to and where ABS technology gets its toughest testing. It's also where the saloon cars you see on ordinary roads – in Alfa's case, its handsome 155 – get stretched to the limit in just about every department of motoring design and engineering.

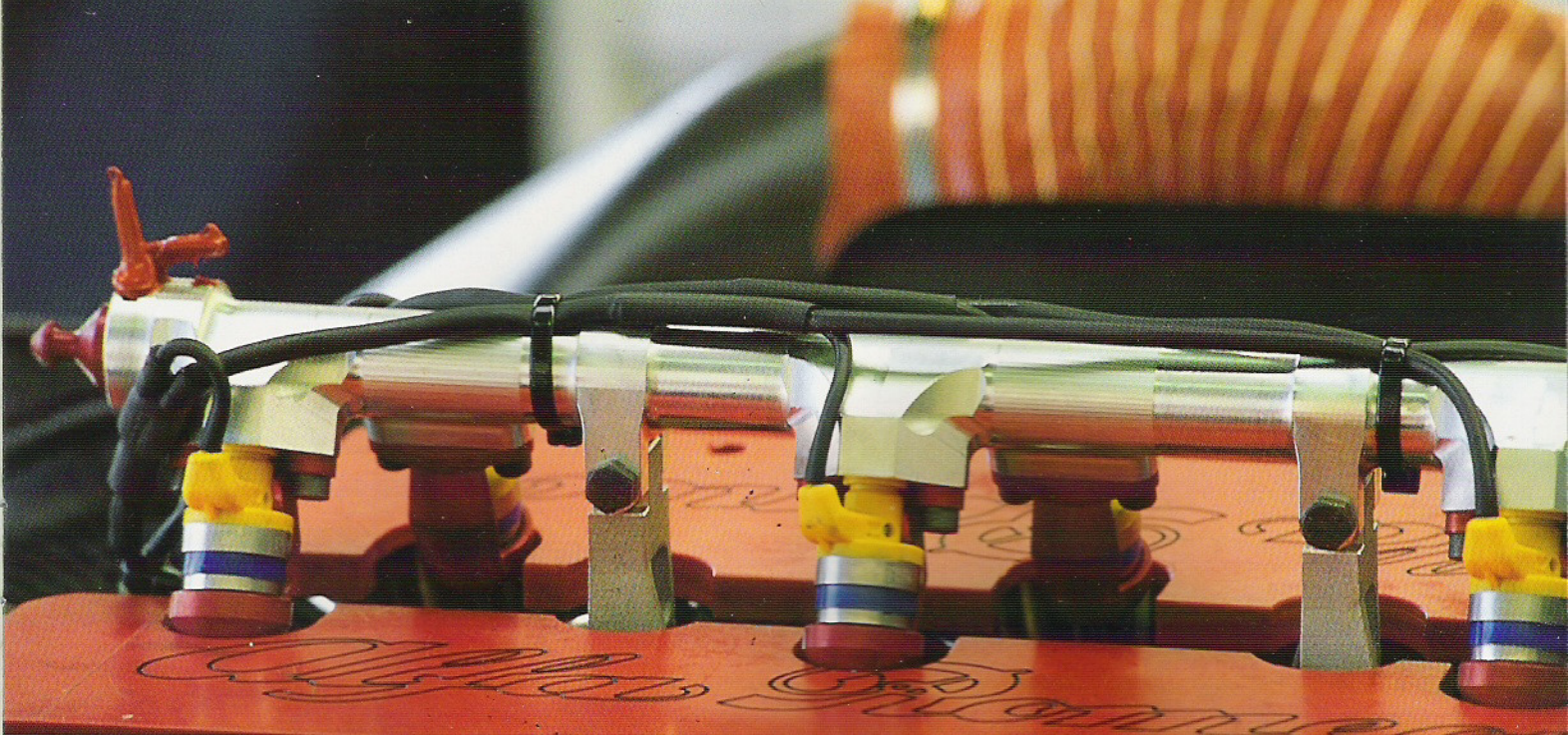
Although the cars are limited in engine capacity to 2.5 litres and six cylinders, and the broadest contours of their bodywork have to remain essentially the same as those of the road car, the racing versions still look like they've been dropping steroids on prescription. Massive wheel arches, radically lowered suspension, front and rear wings, deep, ducted skirts, even specially developed aerodynamic wing-mirrors, all add up to a racing mien that is about as lean and mean, and Gothically combative, as you'll find on any race track anywhere in the world.

There are three competing manufacturers in ITC – Alfa, Mercedes and Opel – out of which the Italian company runs eight cars in three differently sponsored teams. All but one of the seven drivers claim F1 experience and, in Gabriele Tarquini, Alfa Corse can boast the 1994 British Touring Car Champion.

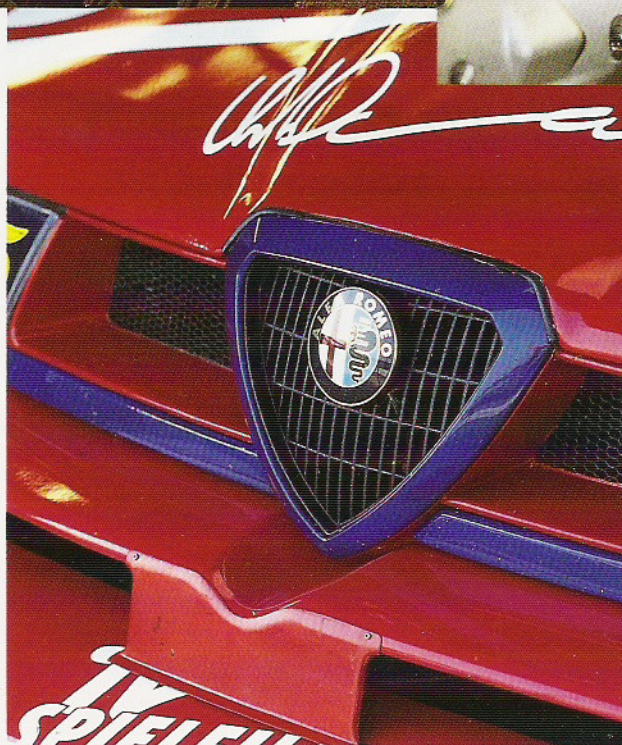
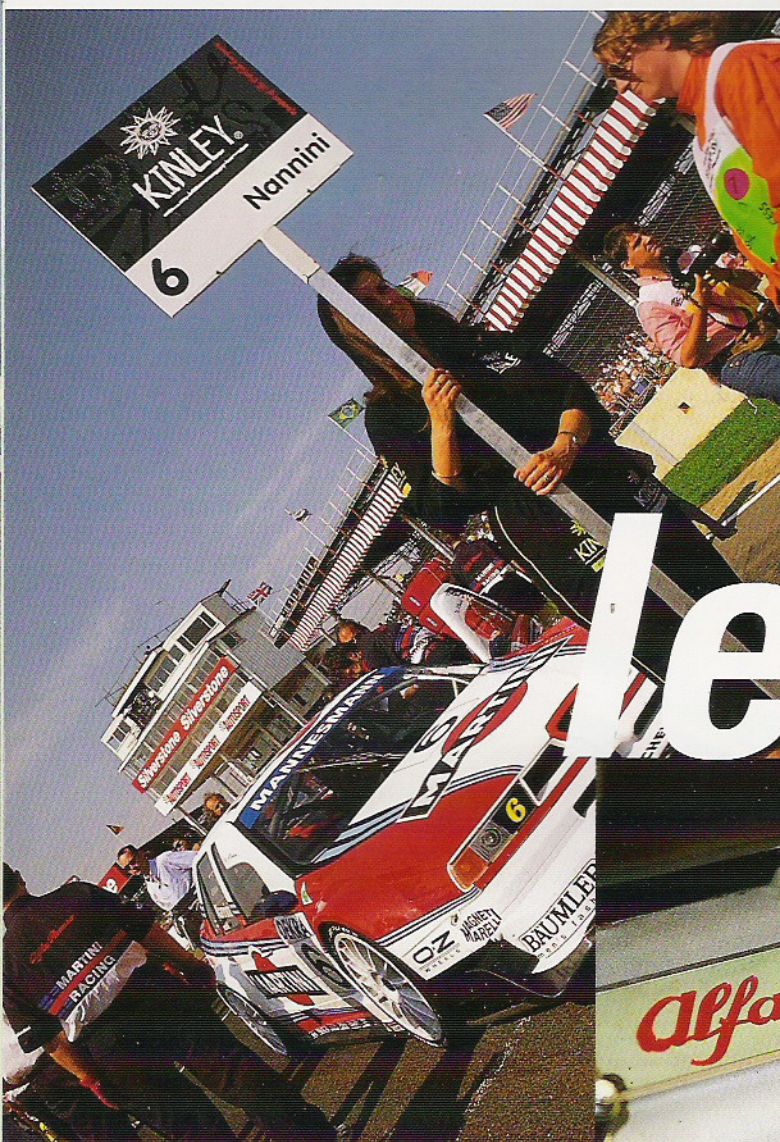
Tarquini heads up one of the JAS-operated teams, rivalled by Jason Watt, Stefano Modena and Michael Bartels. The TV Spielfilm outfit is piloted by Giancarlo Fisichella and Christian Danner, while F1 fugitives Nicola Larini and Alessandro Nannini don red Alfa overalls to cook metal for the Martini Racing team – you get that lot piling into your rear-view mirror, you know you're in a joust.

It's 9am on race day. Pennants are barely stirring on their pavilion stalks and the espresso machines are working at full bore, gurgling inaudibly against the howl of a full ITC warm-up routine. The cars are doing untimed circuits of Silverstone to check things over, make final adjustments and charge up all systems for the struggle ahead.

I'm standing at the back of Alfa Romeo's TV Spielfilm garage on its specially-laid red checkerboard floor,



scary fast

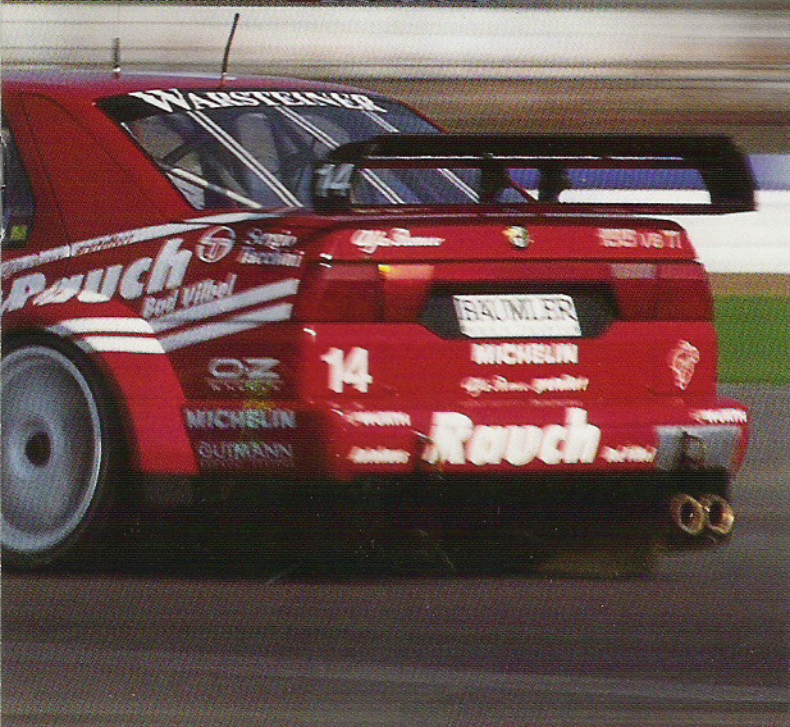




d mean



Cars lean and mean – and as Gothically combative – as you'll find on any race track in the world

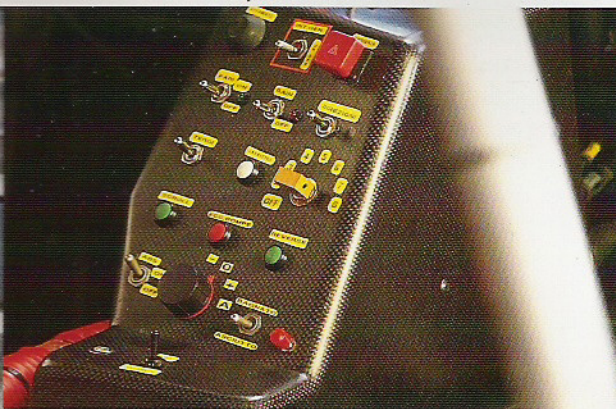


wondering what happened to all the hardware that stood in this very space yesterday after qualifying. Yesterday, this was a nightmare scene for the techno-worrier; a chamber of horrors full of arcane instruments and the gimlet-eyed technicians who operate them; a place in which alien creatures keep their hands to themselves and their faces still. I have had dreams about places like these.

Now the garage is stripped for action. Everything unnecessary has been stowed in the giant artics backed up in the paddock, leaving the floor clear for efficient work under pressurised conditions. The telemetry units can be seen on the far side of the pitlane, and a handful of mobile storage cabinets line the walls containing slivers of who-knows-what in absurdly shallow drawers.

There is a howl, a choking sound, a declining roar but no screech, and a stationary red 155 appears as if by magic in the frame of the garage doors. There is no puff of smoke. Time stops. Then things happen fast.

Eight or nine bodies swarm all over the car. The driver slithers rapidly from his near-prone position behind the 155's extended binnacle. The chassis hisses up on jacks. The rump wing and



its accompanying bootlid are replaced in two movements. Glass is wiped. Wheels come off. Discs are examined. The skin covering the entire front end is peeled as a unit and the guts of the car are exposed, steaming for a moment in the morning light. The howling persists in the distance.

Giancarlo Fisichella walks calmly into the garage. He perches on the edge of a cabinet, hands folded on one knee, his face flushed but his eyes clear as the sky outside. One hank of hair curves over his forehead like a sickle. He is extraordinarily still. He seems to be in another world altogether. And he has three hours this morning to get inside that world, conquer it and make it his. Outside the car hisses down off its jacks and rolls backwards into the garage. There is absolute silence. Whether this is because the howling has stopped, or because I no longer have the capacity to hear it, I could not say. ■