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**AIGP CELEBRATIONS**  
Robbie Kerr wins for Britain at Brands Hatch, as Neel Jani gives the Swiss a world cup title

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**HE'S TICKLED PINK**  
Sam Hancock drives Porsche, Spice, Nissan and Jaguar in our Group C mega track test

# TIME TO **C** STARTS

The Group C revival series showcases some of the most spectacular cars ever made. We 'persuaded' SAM HANCOCK to try some, and only a blow to the head will stop him talking about it...

**GROUP C TRACK TEST**

June 14 1987. I remember the day perfectly. I was seven years old, and turned on the TV to see that a British racing driver called Derek Bell had just taken his fifth Le Mans win aboard the most jaw-droppingly gorgeous racing car I had ever seen, the Rothmans Porsche 962C. This was an epiphany. Dozens of my drawing books, which had until then been filled with countless scrawls of Formula 1 cars such as Benetton's (because they were bright), McLarens (because they were easy to draw) and Zakspeeds (because, er... well, I have no answer for that), were soon overwhelmed by an invasion of a mighty new species: Group C.

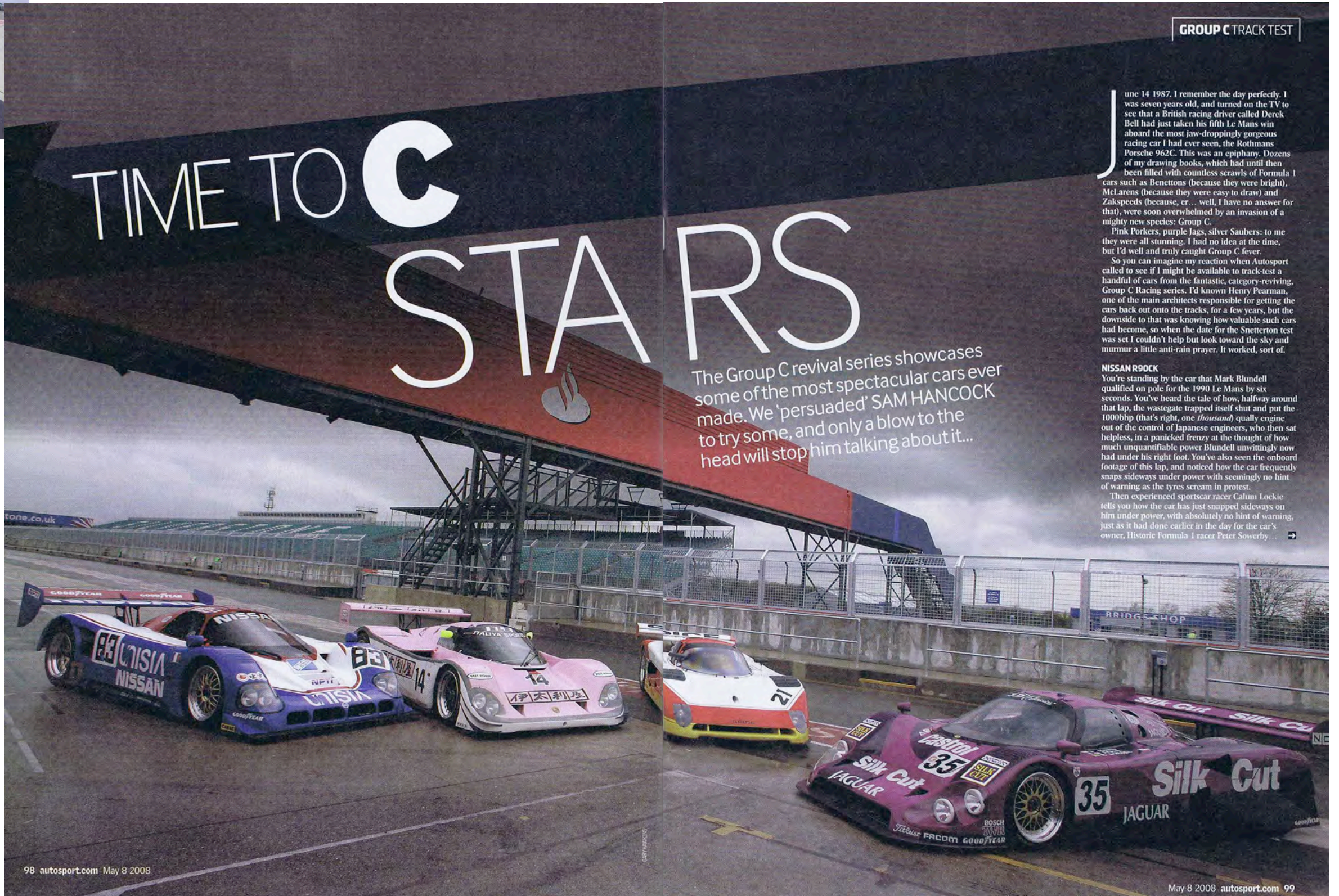
Pink Porkers, purple Jags, silver Saubers: to me they were all stunning. I had no idea at the time, but I'd well and truly caught Group C fever.

So you can imagine my reaction when Autosport called to see if I might be available to track-test a handful of cars from the fantastic, category-reviving, Group C Racing series. I'd known Henry Pearman, one of the main architects responsible for getting the cars back out onto the tracks, for a few years, but the downside to that was knowing how valuable such cars had become, so when the date for the Snetterton test was set I couldn't help but look toward the sky and murmur a little anti-rain prayer. It worked, sort of.

**NISSAN ROCK**

You're standing by the car that Mark Blundell qualified on pole for the 1990 Le Mans by six seconds. You've heard the tale of how, halfway around that lap, the wastegate trapped itself shut and put the 1000bhp (that's right, one *thousand*) qually engine out of the control of Japanese engineers, who then sat helpless, in a panicked frenzy at the thought of how much unquantifiable power Blundell unwittingly now had under his right foot. You've also seen the onboard footage of this lap, and noticed how the car frequently snaps sideways under power with seemingly no hint of warning as the tyres scream in protest.

Then experienced sportscar racer Calum Lockie tells you how the car has just snapped sideways on him under power, with absolutely no hint of warning, just as it had done earlier in the day for the car's owner, Historic Formula 1 racer Peter Sowerby...



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**2008 GROUP C CALENDAR**

Date	Venue
May 16-18	Spa RML Classic (B)
June 11-15	Le Mans 24 Hours (F)
July 25-27	Silverstone Classic (GB)
October 3-5	Donington Park (GB)



**NISSAN R90CK**

Engine	3.5-litre turbo V8
Power	800bhp
Year	1990
Owner/driver	Peter Sowerby

The Nissan performed better the faster it went

As I climb in through the misleadingly angelic gullwing doors, I'm soon enveloped in a swathe of sinister black. Everything from the hard edges of carbonfibre chassis, the soft coverings on the seat and dash surrounds, to the thick clumps of wiring snaking its way through the cockpit like a scene from the Matrix, is devilishly dark. But I actually find it a strangely comforting environment, as though I'm being welcomed deeper into the devil's bosom with every reassuring click of the six-point safety harness.

Crack the engine into life, however, and it's not the induction or exhaust note that turns you on, but the purposeful whirr of the turbos that rises and falls in steady-but-delayed harmony with your right foot. Clutch down, and it's a dog-leg to the left and back to select first gear, before releasing the surprisingly light and manageable clutch to pull away.

Even the first gear change is enough to inform me that the straight-cut, five-speed, 'dog' box is sweet and precise and already I feel a little more at one with the Nissan. Into Riches for the first time though, I feel an odd and disconcerting sensation from the steering wheel as I apply proper lock for the first time. It's as though it's not really me dictating how much the car turns and that, having hinted at the direction in which I want to go, the car then takes over and effortlessly adds the rest of the lock for me while the loading through the steering wheel gets lighter and lighter. Into Coram at the end of the first lap, already carrying a fair amount of entry speed, and the penny finally drops: this steering 'issue' is no mistake: this is a cleverly designed aspect of the steering geometry that gives the car phenomenally good turn-in, yet light and manageable steering. Perfect for keeping the drivers' arms attached to their bodies over 24 hours.

Soon I decide it's time for the 'full beans'. Exiting Sear in second gear onto the Revett Straight, and I can already feel the turbos, fully spooled up, begging me to let them off their leash. With a little bit of steering lock still applied as I finish the corner, I offer a meaningful prod of my right boot and am instantly met by a fantastic and enjoyable thwack on the backside. A quick lift to correct a spinetling slide and, with the needle racing towards a glaring red line, I grab third and the rear tyres break traction yet again. That there is even then a hint of wheelspin in fourth gear too is just sheer madness.

Whoever said "anyone can drive fast in a straight line" has never driven this car. The R90 skips instantly and randomly from one side of the track to the other.

I have to hold on tight to the steering wheel, just to keep it pointing in the right direction.

At the Esses, the response from the brakes is sharp and, pushing on through the Bomb Hole and into Coram, the Nissan's downforce shows. Sure enough, the faster I go, the better it feels. Through the slightly off-camber apex the front end feels nailed, giving me the signal to bury the remaining throttle through the exit. The rear end responds beautifully, squatting deeper into the road, surging forward. Before I have to hit the brakes for the final corner I realise: how can anything ever come close to this driving nirvana?

**PORSCHE 962**

Is that a key? Sure enough it is. One of the most successful racing cars in history comes standard with a black plastic key that looks more suited to a Ford Transit. Inside, the rest of the cockpit is clean and relatively uncluttered - very German, albeit with a distinct retro vibe.

This famous pink Porsche, which was fielded by Richard Lloyd Racing, is no ordinary 962. It's arguably one of the most-developed 962s in existence: the boys at RLR did an enormous amount of in-house development, resulting in revised suspension, front aero, and those 'Jaguar-style' rear-wheel covers.

Turn that key and the 700bhp engine (it would have had more in its heyday) fires instantly into life, offering a crisp but calm burble. First thing I notice on track is how easy this car is to drive. Okay, the synchromesh, five-speed, H-pattern gearbox requires a little more patience than that of the Nissan, but otherwise there



The Big Cat's 7.4-litre V12 provides plenty of torque

are no discernible quirks to the handling or other gimmicks to decipher. Porsche clearly designed this car to be fast, simple and above all reliable.

Within half a lap I feel like I know this car intimately, and have discovered no warts, history of disease or episodes of irrational behaviour. It's love at first sight, and I'm keen to fast-track the small talk and head straight back to her place for "coffee".

But the 962 is not a triple-espresso rush like the Nissan. It's more of a long, leisurely latte - still potent, but in a way that creeps up on you with a knowing grin, rather than blowing your head off at the first sip. Treat it with kindness and respect and you'll experience a whole new level of driving pleasure. It's so effortless that I'm amazed to see my times nudging close to those of the Nissan. If I were a gentleman driver, looking to indulge in a little Group C magic, without the need to take out extended life insurance, this is definitely the car I'd buy.

**SPICE SE90C**

'Rudimentary' is the word that springs to mind as I clamber into the aluminium honeycomb chassis of the Spice. I feel like I'm descending into an old fighter jet, state-of-the-art in its time, but instantly outdated in an industry where technology develops at an aggressive pace. The Spice isn't going to win any beauty contests, but has exceptional balance and surprising power.

It feels like a big kart to drive. The 3.5-litre DFR Cosworth engine is light and buzzy, and the relatively short wheelbase gives the car a nimble and responsive feel. Just as with the Porsche, it only takes a few corners to really feel at home and, as I work my way up through the six-speed 'box, pulling nearly 9000rpm before each shift, I grin from ear to ear at the glorious noise.

The car performs beautifully and, although lacking slightly in wow factor compared to the Nissan, the Spice is big on 'fun': chuck it into a corner, a little on the brakes, then nail the throttle and you'll exit in a glorious powerslide. The only real negative is that the 'extra' cog in the six-speed 'box adds a surprising amount of work to a lap around Snett.

So capable is the Spice that many of the braking and turn-in zones merge together, making the deceleration zone so short that there simply isn't time to get down through the gears.

Put a pro driver in for a one-lap, quality special, and they'd exploit the superb inherent balance to produce a more-than-respectable laptime among the grandiose company that the Group C era offered. Plug in an amateur or 'gentleman' driver and it'd be a user-friendly, comfortable racer that's quick, but not intimidating.

**JAGUAR XJR-12**

To Silverstone for this test, and I'm thrilled to discover it's on the Grand Prix circuit. If ever a car deserved to stretch its legs on the long Hangar Straight, the XJR-12 is it.

This Big Cat, owned by Gary Pearson, finished second at Le Mans in 1991, driven by Raul Boesel, Michel Ferté and Davy Jones. In its previous life, as an XJR-9, it won the World Sports-Prototype title with Martin Brundle, so to say it's a bit special is an understatement.

Pearson takes it out for a couple of laps to make sure all is well. Then it's my turn. This really is the stuff of dreams: one of the greatest privileges of my career.

The cockpit feels as refined as any carbonfibre prototype of the modern era and, were it not for a handful of analogue gauges giving the game away, you'd be hard pushed to guess this old girl's real age.

The 7.4-litre V12 on tickover is reminiscent of a big-engined, off-shore powerboat racer, chugging and popping away uncomfortably like a caged animal desperate to roar with freedom. Pulling away is effortless, the enormous torque doing all the work and the clutch as light as a feather. In stark contrast though is the throttle, which is sprung so heavily that I wonder if this was a token effort on behalf of the designers to protect the drivers from the ferocious power!

After a gentle lap to bed myself in I exit Becketts and nail the throttle. In comes the Nissan-like acceleration, this time from a normally-aspirated engine just brimming with torque. It's astounding.

Cranking up through the gears I find myself overcompensating for the gearbox, which is so much more precise than in the other cars. Just a quick flick, slightly across the gate and the next cog is instantly engaged. It's the downshift that really sets my heart racing, each 'blip' on the throttle making the V12 sing.

In the tight corners, the steering is light and agile, allowing me to tease the car on the throttle without fear of any sudden surprises. In the fast corners the Jag is just a raging bull on entry, charging towards the apex with unstoppable determination as if to say, 'Leave this to me chap, I've got it all under control!'

That my run is cut short slightly with a lack in oil and water temperature is of no consequence. I feel like the Jag has embraced me with open arms and willed me to blow out her cobwebs - and for that I shall be eternally grateful.

I may be few years older now but, with cars like this back out in anger, that feeling I had when I was seven has been well and truly reawakened. Now, where are those drawings I did two decades ago?

Our thanks to Group C/GTP, Charlie Agg, Henry Pearman, Gary Pearson, Peter Sowerby and Ralph Haddon



**PORSCHE 962**

Engine	3-litre turbo V6
Power	700bhp
Years	1989-90
Owner/Driver	Henry Pearman

User-friendly 962 was, and is, great car for 'amateurs'



The Jaguar makes its way round Silverstone, where it won the 1988 1000km in XJR-9 form

**JAGUAR XJR-12**

Engine	7.4-litre V12
Power	780bhp
Year	1991
Owner/driver	Gary Pearson



Hancock makes himself at home before Jaguar run at Silverstone



**SPICE SE90C**

Engine	3.5-litre V8
Power	575bhp
Year	1990
Owner/driver	Ralph Haddon

Spice is less sophisticated than the rest, but is great fun to drive

**LONGER, BIGGER AND BETTER**

The Group C/GTP revival series has come a long way since the Aston Martin Owners' Club ran the first event at Donington Park in 1999. In that race, won by the Jaguar XJR-11 of Paul Spire, only a handful of Group C cars appeared. The rest of the field was made up of a variety of GT machinery - a Ferrari F40 finished fifth!

Now the invitation classes have gone, and the grid is formed entirely of Group C1, C2 and GTP machinery of the 1982-90 era. Top cars and leading historic drivers have been attracted to the series, and the latest addition of a Sauber-Mercedes (see National News) has increased the feeling that Group C has come of age. Again.

Former race winner Charlie Agg, who used to run the successful Orwell Supersports series, took over Group C/GTP at the end of last year. He has already initiated developments that he hopes will build on the recent success, not least of which is the introduction of longer races with fuel stops and driver changes. There will now be a sprint race followed by a 90-minute endurance at each event.

Agg believes this will force teams to stop their aggressive engine developments, turn down the turbo boost, and improve reliability. "I want to drive back all the modifications to reduce costs and avoid getting the situation where it's a case of the haves and have-nots," he says.

"At the time it was a fuel-based series. A lot of the C1 cars will be marginal on fuel if they run too fast. That should help the C2s, which can run flat-out. I want to encourage them; it's a great class.

"Bringing a second driver gives something back to the owners and adds an extra element. It's a nice breeding ground for future entries."

It also opens the opportunity for legends of the

sport to appear. Five-time Le Mans winner Derek Bell, 1988 Le Mans victor Andy Wallace, and ex-Formula 1 driver Mike Wilds all raced in the two-driver event at Silverstone last year, though Agg maintains that "the cars are the stars".

Agg also wants to get tough on scrutineering and driving standards. Each car will have to run to a chosen specification from a particular season in its history. Drivers will have to behave, as Agg aims to avoid the sort of crash that claimed the life of Bob Akin in an American historic GTP race in 2002.

"That crash wrecked Group C racing in the States," says Agg. "These are extremely fast cars in amateur hands and I intend to be quite draconian. They can race as hard as they like as long as they don't touch. If two cars touch each other they will both be black-flagged. I'm itching to do it - you only need to do it once to get the message across."

Agg has the respect of the competitors, and if the changes succeed Group C/GTP will continue to delight sportscar fans in its second heyday. Kevin Turner



The Group C/GTP grid is now full of top racers