

LOTUS takes on the **BIG GUNS**

F1, Indy? All very well. But taking on Porsche and Ferrari in the GTE class? That's a toughie...
By **Gary Watkins**



If something had to give in Lotus's all-encompassing assault on the international motorsport scene, then why not its bid to take on Porsche and Ferrari at the Le Mans 24 Hours? After all, it would be trying to beat cars that roll out of the showroom with in excess of 600bhp with one that starts life with a mere 280bhp. Yet postponing the British marque's Le Mans comeback in the GTE class and waiting for the arrival of the LMP2 prototype was never an option.

Producing an Evora for the class formerly known as GT2 is a matter of common sense, according to the man charged with masterminding programmes ranging from a Formula 1 sponsorship deal down to an entry-level GT4 racer. Claudio Berro, who was appointed Lotus Motorsport director in October 2009, explains that its presence in the class with the Evora can be explained by its aspirations in the marketplace.

"We need to be racing the big sportscar manufacturers, including Ferrari and Porsche, at the highest level possible, and that means racing in the GTE class at Le Mans," says Berro, who has overseen a number of Fiat Group sportscar programmes, including the long-lost F50 GT1 and the never-to-be-forgotten Maserati MC12. "The Evora will be our GTE car for the next three years until the arrival of the Esprit [which is due to hit the road in 2013]."

The Esprit, with a longitudinal five-litre V8, will be an altogether more-suitable basis for a GTE contender than a relatively low-powered lightweight car with a transverse 3.5-litre V6. So much so that the sceptics argue that Lotus is entering the most competitive arena in sportscar racing with one hand tied behind its back. You won't get anyone at Lotus to go quite that far, but the designer of the Evora GTE admits that the starting point of the car explains an "aggressive design philosophy".

Nicola Scimecca, whose Ycom engineering company in Italy has been charged with designing the Evora GTE and building the first cars, explains that "everything that could be changed



Scimecca led design team

under the regulations has been changed" from the street version.

"You could say that the Ferrari 458 Italia and the Porsche 911 GT3-RSR are much more conservative because they retain a lot of road-car components," says the Italian, who was well known to Berro from his days leading the design team on the MC12 at Dallara. "On this car, we have kept only the aluminium chassis and the door sills.

"You could say the Ferrari and Porsche are more conservative - they retain road-car components"

its LMP-style uprights to a new Xtrac transmission that has its roots in the gearbox designed to handle the big torque numbers from the SEAT Leon turbodiesel World Touring Car Championship challenger. Scimecca estimates that "between 70 and 80 per cent of the components" on the new car have been made by Ycom and its suppliers in Italy.

That design-and-build process has been compressed into little more than five months. The green light for the project wasn't given until the start of November, after the Austrian Jetalliance squad stepped up to the plate and ordered the first two cars.

Berro reckons "the lead time on a project like this should be 10 to 12 months". That goes some way to explaining why Lotus has modest aspirations for its first Le Mans start since the Elise-based GT1 took part in the 24 Hours in 1997. "Reliability," he says, "is our first target."

The other reason is that the Evora's Toyota-based engine, now developed into a four-litre by Cosworth, gives away power and torque to its rivals. Berro put the deficit at "20-25bhp" ahead of an air-restrictor break in the wake of the Evora GTE's race debut in



Two cars competed in Spa 1000km race

"When we started the programme, we looked at the Evora GT4 Cup developed by Lotus, but we quickly realised that we couldn't carry anything over because the GT4 is essentially a road car. A relatively short-wheelbase car with a transverse engine is a bit of a compromise, so we knew we had to push hard in every other area."

That explains some of the stunning detail on the Evora GTE, from its carbon-composite bodywork through

the Intercontinental Le Mans Cup round at Spa. A reduced base weight should also help ease the Evora up the timesheets.

A Le Mans finish would be a good result for Lotus in year one of the programme. British fans should have a more competitive Evora to cheer in 12 month's time, and probably more cars to boot. That would be a nice appetite whetter for the arrival of the Lotus LMP2 coupe in 2013. ❏