

How a 35-year-old BTCC rookie came the long way round

It's been an unusual route to the BTCC for 2008 British GT champion James Gornall, but the series' only rookie for this season reckons he's a better driver for it

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If this were any ordinary racing season, James Gornall would currently be preparing for the fourth round of the British Touring Car Championship at Thruxton next weekend, knowing that the Hampshire track's high-speed corners were the main Achilles heel for his team's Trade Price Cars Racing Audi S3s last year.

Of course, this is no ordinary season, and the only rookie in this year's field is still waiting to make his debut, although his vast array of experience in different national motorsport categories should stand him in good stead.

Now 35, he is a much more experienced driver and more rounded individual than the man who took the British GT title in 2008 - for one thing, "my temper is not as bad as it used to be," he offers - and has since racked up further championships in national racing series as diverse as the BMW Compact Cup (2016), SsangYong Racing Challenge (2017) and Mini Challenge JCW (2019), the latter crucially giving him his first experience of front-wheel drive.

"As Mark Blundell found out, if you're trying to learn front-wheel drive in front of everybody on the TV, there's quite a lot of pressure and it's not easy, so that was why we went down the Mini Challenge route," says Gornall, who replaces the 1992 Le Mans winner at TPCR.

"The different types of vehicle I've driven has given me this massively eclectic repertoire of skills which means I'm quite happy to jump into any car of any type and I'm confident that, in a short period of time, I can make myself fast. Having varied experience is I think a massive help."

Gornall fondly recalls watching the BTCC's super touring golden age growing up, which he says "excited me more than anything else when we first started kart racing back in 1995, I preferred that to F1". Still, he continued to follow the single-seater dream, but after claiming the 2003 Formula Renault 2.0 BARC title, the money dried up 12 races into 2004 in the full UK championship with a best finish of 10th at Thruxton.



While contemporaries including champion Mike Conway, Paul di Resta and Oliver Jarvis all progressed, Gornall's career came to a stuttering halt, but things looked to be on the up again when he forged a winning combination with Jon Barnes in 2008, their Brookspeed Viper winning four times en-route to the British GT title.

Gornall attracted sponsorship from Lloyds TSB and was eyeing a move into the Porsche Supercup for 2009, but the onset of the global financial crisis "totally screwed" those plans and meant a dose of pragmatism was required.

"It was then that I decided to get a proper job and Jonathan Palmer offered me a role coordinating the FIA Formula 2 championship," he says. "I thought 'I'd better do it' because racing had just fallen apart. I was dealing with the FIA, the circuits, all the drivers, their sponsors, we had our hospitality unit to run, so I did learn an awful lot and it was a good time.

"We didn't have a team of people to check everything, so as soon as I was out of the car, I'd have to plug in to see if we need to change a turbo or whatever if there was an issue" *James Gornall*

"I suppose one of the things that I had going for me was drivers couldn't pull the wool over my eyes and I could be quite abrupt if I thought someone was trying to have me over!"

He stayed until the championship folded after the 2012 season and had a spell at Ellis Clowes selling motorsport insurance before joining ATL Fuel Cells as head of sales and marketing, but his hunger for competition never left.

Back to square one but with a plan

He returned to the British karting scene - "we always stuck around motorsport even when we couldn't compete at the level we wanted, because we love it" - and decided on a return to cars after guesting in the Classic Sportscar Championship with a friend's Porsche 944.



He rented a BMW Compact Cup car for a race at Silverstone in 2014 and was 3.5s off the pace in qualifying, but decided to buy the car and resume the dad-and-lad approach he had adopted in karting.

His father Ian is a financial advisor - "it's not like he has any training in this" - but prepared his championship-winning Compact Cup and JCW cars from his garage. For Gornall, racing has always been a family affair - he estimates that his mum, Sandra, has only missed two races in 26 years - and that only made the JCW achievement against well-established professional outfits Excelr8 and Jamsport all the more satisfying, even if it took a while to sink in.

"There was so much to keep on top of that you don't get a lot of time to step back and enjoy it because we were having to work so hard," says Gornall, who is proud of the fact that he could get his BMW Compact gearbox off in seven minutes - "which really shows I had too much practice at it!"

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"We didn't have a team of people to check everything, so as soon as I was out of the car, I'd have to plug in to see if we need to change a turbo or whatever if there was an issue, and once you've done that and then looked at your own driving and tried to sort the set-up, before you know it you're back on track again," he says. "It was very busy, but we didn't have the money to pay other people to do it, so it was the way we were going to have to do it."

From those inauspicious beginnings in 2014, Gornall looks back fondly on his time in the Compact Cup.

"Just because it's club racing, doesn't mean it's easy - certainly not," he says. "The great thing about that championship is you've got some specialists who take it very seriously and the cars are unique to drive. Lots of people jump in them and they don't necessarily do very well, so I had to work out how to go fast. It's very competitive and there are people who do a really good job."

He won a second BMW title in 2017, only to be thrown out in post-season technical scrutineering for a non-compliant crankshaft, which he appealed unsuccessfully.

"The crank had a mark on it, and there was zero performance advantage. We had it weighed and it weighed exactly what it should do," he says. "BMW provided me with confirmation that it could well have come from the factory with that mark on it but I still got thrown out. If I had been a lot faster than everybody down the straights then it would have been a lot easier to swallow, but I wasn't even the quickest car out there on the straights!"



From weekend racer to full-time coach

Deflated, Gornall elected not to return for 2018, but regrouped and set his sights on the JCWs. He left his day job early in 2019 and has focused on coaching full-time ever since.

"It's allowed me to work on my own driving," he says. "Coaching is a wonderful thing because you're always learning I think, even when you're teaching others, and you can see immediately what that has done. After finishing, I won the Mini Challenge that year and went straight on to touring cars, people often don't get to do things that quickly unless they've got pockets full of cash."

A prize test in a previous-generation Motorbase Ford for winning the JCW series confirmed to Gornall that he'd made the right choice of series, but he concedes there is still a lot to learn.

"I've never really seen a driver get up to speed in a front-wheel drive machinery like the BTCC as quickly as he has" *Chaz Cleland*

"They're far more complicated and on things like set-up, I'm only just getting my head into the different set-up permutations on this thing," he says. "Although the cars are all quite similar, the options that you still have available to you are massive. As I learn more, I expect I'll get faster."

And while he has access to data from TPCR team-mate Bobby Thompson and AmD Tuning stablemates Jake Hill and Sam Osborne in the Honda Civic FK2s, old habits die hard. Gornall admits that he'll still be keen to "stick my nose in", even if keeping the same level of involvement in every detail won't be possible in the BTCC.

Engineer Chaz Cleland is delighted with his "unique" work ethic and has every confidence in his charge getting on the pace quickly.

"James does have an engineering background, which will help him massively," he says. "I've never really seen a driver get up to speed in front-wheel drive machinery like the BTCC as quickly as he has in the two or three tests we've done so far, so I've got no worries in the fact that we'll be fighting in the top 15 in every qualifying session, and in five or six rounds it wouldn't surprise me if we qualify inside the top 10."

Yet for Gornall, the ambition stretches further still.

"I know it's very hard, but I still think I can win races and I'm going to work as hard as I can until I win races," he says. "If we don't aim for what we really want to do, we're not going to achieve it and I genuinely believe that this year, I can win races in the Audi. Jake Hill managed it last year, so I don't see why I can't and if I'm struggling to put myself in that sort of position, I'm just going to work harder until I can work out how to do it."

