

FEATURE



Gornall will handle the BTCC Audi S3

JAMES GORNALL

THE BTCC NEWCOMER WHO'S READY TO TURN HEADS

Matt James caught up with this season's only touring car rookie, James Gornall

It was hard not to feel a little bit sorry for the competitors in this year's British Touring Car Championship. Preparations for the 2020 season were virtually complete. The announcement that the 30-race contest had been delayed came halfway through the category's pre-season test day at Silverstone.

No sooner had the final set-ups been assessed and the final preparations been completed than the rug was pulled from under the teams' and drivers' feet.

It was particularly frustrating for the only genuine rookie in this year's line-up, James Gornall. The Trade Price Cars Racing signing, who will this year handle an Audi S3 alongside Bobby Thompson, had set the 11th best combined time at Silverstone, just over 0.8 seconds off the fastest time. It was another building block towards cementing his position in the BTCC pecking order.

The draconian restrictions in testing in the BTCC – regardless of the other limitations presented by the coronavirus situation – mean that jumping into Britain's highest profile tin-top series is tough enough.

Gornall, 35, has done about as much learning as he will be able to do. The rest of it has to be done from a computer screen.

The 2019 Mini Challenge UK champion explains: "There are some things on the touring car which are new to me: things like bump steer, which I am having to get

used to. It seems like a luxury and I am having to adapt my driving style to get used to it all.

"I was getting there, and I was pleased with the official BTCC test day. I expect to get faster every time, but the progression has stopped. I have a sim [at home], but it is not the same as actually being out there. I need laps, I need to get used to the car, to the feeling of being sideways and there is nothing that can compare to seat time. I want to push beyond its limits. I like to understand any racing car so much that if I throw it in to a corner too fast, I will survive."

Gornall's on-track career – which stretches back to single-seaters almost 20 years ago – has been all about survival. He hasn't been blessed with the deep pockets of some of his rivals and so he has done a lot of learning on the hoof.

The entire BTCC entry will get another chance to familiarise themselves with their mounts again with the traditional two-day tyre test at Snetterton in the middle of July, which will be another vital tool for Gornall. In 2020, should the season kick off on its planned return at Donington Park on August 1-2, that test will provide him with a refresher, and he will also have team-mate, something he has not been used to in recent times. He has tapped Thompson for some tips, but Gornall is also a man who likes to plough his own furrow. He says: "I normally have to learn myself. In the Mini Challenge, I set the car up myself and did the data-logging myself. I will look at every lap I have done and compare them with all the



After a number of speedbumps along the way, Gornall has ambitions

others and eventually build up this little picture.

"I have got tools available to me now: for example, I have got other people's data and I have got an engineer. Wow! It is luxury. I got my head into it a lot over the start of the season, especially after the media day. But, of course, it stopped and it became obvious it was going to be a while so I stepped back from it, otherwise I would have just driven myself crazy. I will be hitting it hard

long before we go racing again though."

Learning the hard way is something that Gornall has done throughout his career. After a highly successful karting career in the late 1990s, the Nottinghamshire racer followed his early dream of Formula 1. But, like so many who have trodden that route ahead of him, the financial pressures soon shrouded the ambition despite the fact that the pathway seemed to have been paved with gold for him.

"If there is a sniff at that F1 dream when

you are younger, you go for it," says Gornall. "I had a backer, a guy who was helping me and selling the dream, telling me they were going to pay for everything and then they ended up going to prison."

"That meant my dad, Ian, ended up financing my first season in Formula Renault BARC in 2003 with JA Motorsport. Dad remortgaged the house for that: once we had committed to the deal, we had to do it."

"The following year, we moved up to do Formula Renault on the BTCC support package. We had a 7.5-ton truck and that was it. We had to give it up halfway through because I had run out of money. We had no testing, there was no data, it was the same old story," recalls Gornall. "I can't grumble too much, at least I got to have a go. I had another sponsor in that season who we took to court because he didn't pay, and we won that case – turns out he ended up going to prison too."

So Gornall had trodden a treacherous path and already faced some serious pitfalls. A lesser driver might well have turned his back on racing at that stage, but he was determined and felt that he had yet to have a proper shot at achieving his dream.

It was time for a reset, and he put away the single-seater ambitions and turned his attention to the British GT Championship. Again, it didn't come easy and the finances were hand-to-mouth but it would lead to the highlight of his career so far – the 2008 British GT Championship in a Brookspeed-run Dodge Viper in 2008. After a one-off in 2007, Gornall was



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Five wins in the Mini Challenge UK helped Gornall to the crown



A wet test in a Motorbase Performance Ford helped Gornall dream

partnered with Jon Barnes for the following year and four wins delivered a major British title success.

“We started 2008 with about £5000 in our pocket,” remembers Gornall. “It was round-to-round and it was tough. When I look back, I realise how hard the financial situation makes it. I wasn’t able to focus on the driving: I was focusing on getting money, and then five minutes before you are meant to get in the car, you are having tough conversations.”

He managed to put all that behind him and it looked like it would lead on to much bigger and better things. There was a plan for the crew to graduate to Formula Le Mans prototypes but the backers went under and the rug was pulled from his feet, once again.

A one-off with Beechdean Motorsport in the Britcar 24 Hours, also in 2008 still, put Gornall again on the cusp of big things. After racing the Aston Martin N24 to a class podium alongside Andrew Howard, Jamie Smyth and the late Neil Cunningham, things should have been looking good.

He takes up the story: “After the Britcar 24 Hours, I was going to have to miss the podium because I was due to get on a plane to New York to meet with some potential sponsors for the following year for the Porsche Supercup, because that was a fabulous package. But on the Friday at Silverstone, I got a call saying don’t bother to go to the US because the banks had all collapsed. They couldn’t sign anything, so I was knocked down again.”

It was the third major blow to Gornall just as his career was getting some traction. It seemed like he would never be able to catch a break.

While the on-track situation was dire, he landed a role as the MSV Formula 2 coordinator in 2010, working with Jonathan Palmer on the one-make pan-European category. He wasn’t sating his own competitive instincts, but he was involved in motorsport and it gave him some opportunities to indulge.

“I got to drive the cars a lot: I would roll them out of the garages and I would do

some of the development work. I did get to drive around Monza though and I did a few shakedown,” says Gornall.

He and his father still wanted competition though, and they went back to karting for a season. But it wasn’t enough.

“Halfway through 2014 that Dad suggested that we go and get a race car,” Gornall says. “We agreed. Dad had been made redundant and I refused initially, because I know what Dad is like: he will spend every penny he has got on it. Eventually I came around. I would race every day if I could, but I didn’t want to bankrupt him. I am lucky in having a racing dad but it is not like he pushes me. We both want to do it. I am usually the one who is tempering him.”

And that was the start of the path that would lead Gornall to the cusp of his British Touring Car Championship debut in 2020. This was after three years in the BMW Compact Cup, which earned the crown in 2016 before a scrutineering dispute stripped him of the silverware in the following campaign.

Slight aggrieved, dad and lad sat down and mapped out a path to the BTCC because it was the only championship that they realised they could make work on a commercial basis.

“We sold the car and took some time out,” says Gornall. “We had a heart to heart about what we wanted to do, and at that time, the BTCC was the destination. We don’t have money to pay for racing, we have to find partners, and there are few championships in the world. The BTCC gives bang for the buck. So that was the new target that was brought into focus in the crosshairs.”

“I had never raced front-wheel-drive cars and there was no way you could get into a rear-wheel-drive car as a rookie, I don’t think,” explains Gornall.

“We quite quickly settled on the Mini Challenge UK as being the best option.

“People charged a lot of money to run those cars, so again we did it ourselves. I didn’t find the switch to front-wheel drive exceptionally hard. What I learned was



The British GT title was won in 2008

that you can get the feeling of when it slides and you can keep it pinned and that’s fine, but the most important thing I took into account was that you can’t wait until you feel the grip to straighten a front-wheel-drive car when you are fully sideways. That was where the experience came in. Once I had learned that, I was sideways everywhere! Once I was happy with it sliding, it all clicked into place.”

The championship title followed and with that was the chance he had dreamed of, the opportunity to sample a Motorbase Performance BTCC Ford Focus as part of the Dunlop prize package for the series. Despite appalling conditions, it gave Gornall the insight and belief he wanted.

“In the afternoon is was monsoon conditions, and it felt remarkably similar to the Mini – and it was after that, I thought ‘I can do this, I have to find a way’,” he recalls.

Former BMW Compact Cup rival Dan Kirby helped. Kirby moved into the BTCC as boss of the new Trade Price Cars team in 2019 for Jake Hill and Mark Blundell in the Audi S3s, and Hill won at Knockhill. Gornall had kept in touch with his friend, and the doors opened up for 2019. Once again, the career trajectory had been restored. Given the amount of times Gornall has been knocked off course in his plan to establish himself as a top-line driver, this is a chance he is relishing – and he has set some lofty targets already.

He is forthright. “I want to win straight away,” he declares. “If luck falls your way, doesn’t matter who you are, you can win races in the BTCC.

“I have won a lot of championships, and it is not through luck. I will just make sure I work hard. If I am not winning, I will look at myself and work out what I need to do better to get there. You can’t just sit back and complain and say you have not been lucky. My favourite saying is that to be good, you have got to be lucky, but to be lucky you have got to be good.”

Gornall has certainly had his share of bad luck in his motorsport journey so far. This time he hopes that there will be nothing standing in his way. ■

CV

James Gornall

Age: 35
From: Nottinghamshire

2020: British Touring Car Championship with Trade Price Cars Racing in an Audi S3
2019: Mini Challenge UK champion, five wins, champion
2018: Guest appearances in Mini Challenge UK
2015-2017: BMW Compact Cup, champion in 2016
2008: Britcar 24 Hours, second in class in Beechdean Motorsport Aston Martin N24
2008: British GT champion with Jon Barnes in Brookspeed Motorsport Dodge Viper
2007: One-off in British GT in a Brookspeed Motorsport Dodge Viper



2004: Formula Renault UK Championship, part-season with JA Motorsport
2003: Formula Renault BARC season with JA Motorsport, winner
1995-2002: Karting



Gornall raced in the Formula Renault UK Championship back in 2004