

# What a drag!

From zero to 100mph in less than a second? **Martin Love** wonders if he's got what it takes to get behind the wheel of Europe's fastest methanol drag racer



**'Whatever you do, don't release the handbrake,'** says Dave Wilson. He disappears from my view, leaving

me to contemplate the 'bonnet' of the car stretching out in front of me: 25ft long and 1ft wide. I feel like I've been strapped into a supercharged coffin. Looking over my shoulder, behind the eight gleaming exhaust pipes, I can see the two vast rear wheels quivering slightly. Dave pops up surrounded by mechanics wearing fireproof suits and rubber gas masks. He gives me the thumbs-up sign – my cue to depress the clutch. The mechanics fire up the vast V8 3,000hp engine. Eye-stinging smoke fills the air, the car shakes and bucks on its blocks, and the roar of the mighty V8 makes my chest cavity vibrate like a broken speaker...

The engine cuts and the smoke clears. Dave 'Grumpy' Wilson is the driver of the fastest methanol drag racer in Europe. Contrary to what you might think, drag racing has nothing to do with men in high heels and

mascara. It's about launching a gas-guzzling, wheel-smoking 'car' down a quarter-mile track in less time than it takes you to spot a cross-dresser in an M&S lingerie department.

'Are you ever frightened?' I ask Dave. He looks puzzled – the idea of accelerating to 270mph in just over five seconds is his idea of a Sunday drive. Dave, who is 60 this year, is sponsored by PlayStation and drives for the American Car Import team, which is owned by the colourful Anthony Cohen. I ask him what it takes to be a top driver. He pauses, then grins: 'Balls, huge balls!'

Drag racing, which has its roots in the illegal street racing of Detroit in the Sixties, has now become a sport with a cultish following in Europe. Fans turn up in their thousands to watch the masters like Grumpy Wilson, and also to thrash their own tuned-up cars in 'run what ya brung' events. But whatever they drive, from top fuel burners to 200mph 'funny cars', the gas geeks

**Up to speed:** Dave 'Grumpy' Wilson (above) driving for the American Car Import Team

are all here for one thing – speed.

The figures are so immense they leave you slack-jawed with disbelief. The acceleration is 0-100mph in less than a second; 270mph in just over five. The car costs £100,000. The wheels, at £1,000 a pair, have to be replaced every three miles. All eight spark plugs have to be changed every half-mile. And what about consumption? 'Oh, about one mile to every 24 gallons,' smiles Anthony. 'But it's environmentally friendly. We're burning methanol.'

The teams have spent all day 'dialling' their cars into the track – fine-tuning them to get a split-second's more adhesion on the glue-sprayed surface. Now the 'Christmas tree' starting lights blink, the screaming rear wheels send up clouds of smoke, Dave drops his brake, the car bunches itself like a Wacky Racer and then, in the blink of an eye, is gone, hurtling towards the horizon. Five seconds, two gear changes and 24 gallons later, Dave clocks 270mph. And not a streak of mascara in sight. **OM**  
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