



Given that 'McLaren', that most British of automotive marques, has been synonymous with motorsport since the early 1960s, it's a little surprising that the McLaren 720S GT3 currently being prepped by 24H SERIES newcomer 7TSIX for its endurance racing debut is the only such example on the grid in Dubai. And given that Woking has been a key player in GT racing since the mid-1990s (give or take 15 years or so on the sidelines...), it's even more astonishing to think this is only the fourth time Woking has been represented at the Hankook 24H DUBAI in the last decade.

To further confound matters, the 2023 Hankook 24H DUBAI is also the first 'proper' endurance race for the still adolescent 7TSIX. Not that this seems to worry them...

"Timing-wise, this time of year, there's not a lot going on in the UK," 7TSIX founder Joe Edge explains. "So we just thought, why not get involved in something a bit more aggressive than what we've been doing? Things just kind of fell into place after that."

It's a commendable approach for the Yorkshire-based team, which, having been founded in late 2021, so far has just one British GT Championship campaign to its name. While that may sound small-scale on first reading, this "strong team of individuals" – led, incidentally, by team manager and experienced GT racer Jody Firth – "who have worked closely with the McLaren brand" nevertheless impressed with high points-paying finishes at five of the season's nine races, producing a top 10 finish overall in British GT's Pro-Am Cup.

To say a large chunk of that confidence comes down to the McLaren itself is no hyperbole either, given the capabilities of the 720S roadcar on which the GT3 is based. Indeed, when the silks dropped at the 2017 Geneva Motor Show, McLaren proclaimed its first-ever, second-generation Super Series model to be "lighter, faster, and even more dynamically capable" than any McLaren to have come before it. Every component of the 650S supercar it replaced was either honed or replaced altogether as Woking, never shy to add further weight of expectation onto its newboy's remodelled shoulders, sought to "rais[e] previously accepted limits of performance in the supercar sector."

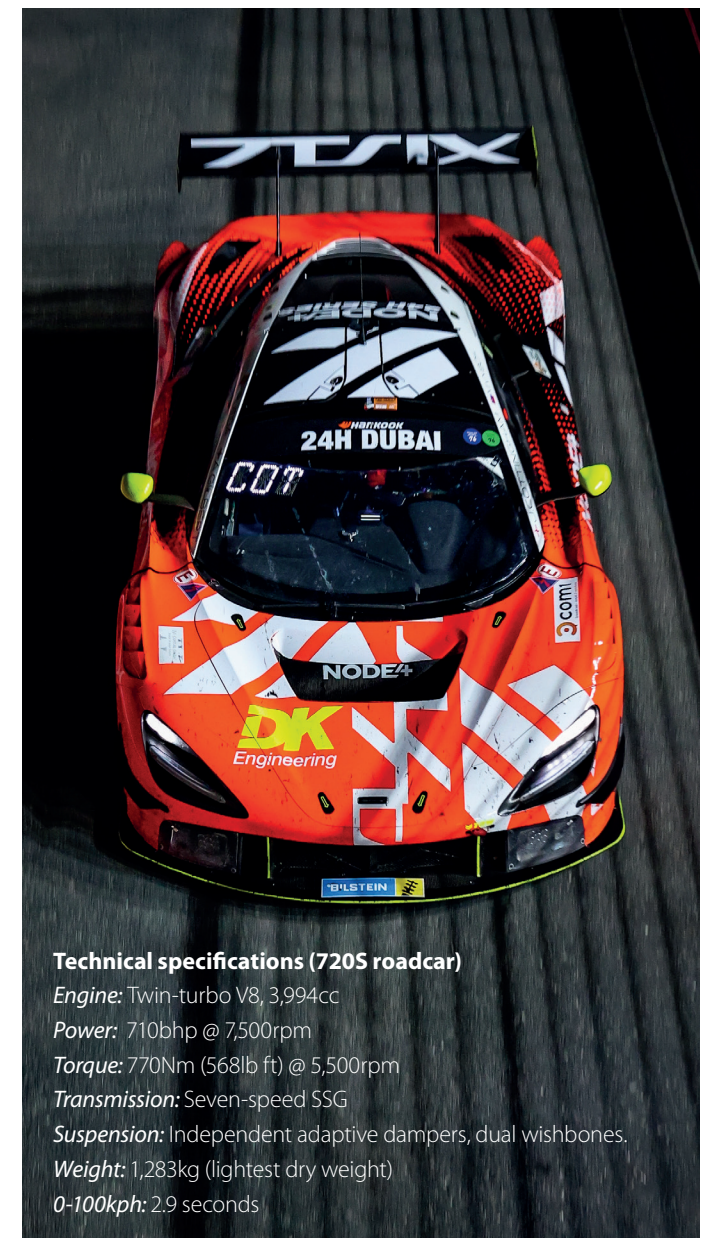
At its base, and like every McLaren since 1993, lay a carbon fibre chassis, albeit a heavily revised version of the 'Monocell' that debuted with the 12C in 2011. For the first time though, the 'Monocage II', now featuring aluminium alloy rather than steel to boost rigidity without adding weight, also extended into the roof, meaning the 1,283 kg 720S was both lighter and stronger than its 650S predecessor, and boasted a lower centre of gravity. Moreover, the encompassing tub allowed McLaren to 'shrink-wrap' the aluminium bodywork more tightly around its carbon fibre structure, effectively doubling aero efficiency over the already sprightly 650S. Examples of this included the new 'eye socket' headlights, which allowed air to flow around the LEDs for additional cooling, and the 'double skinned' doors, which ditched conventional side air intakes for re-sculpted ducts that channelled airflow from the now-slimmer A-pillars towards the engine bay.

The dihedral doors were retained of course – to jettison this McLaren staple is akin to blasphemy – but in-keeping with customer feedback, the door sills were lowered and the doors themselves incorporated part of the roof to open wider, thus making ingress and egress easier.

This fanatical attention to detail is a long-standing trait of McLaren, and is often the reason why the British brand, in contrast with the bombastic Lamborghini and beguiling Ferrari, is, unfairly, considered a little 'clinical.' Ironically, it's an approach that produces another, unexpected level of competition for McLaren's racing customers...

"I think McLaren go about their GT racing differently to Audi, Mercedes and BMW, for example," Jody continues. "With those brands, you've quite clearly got teams that are very well-supported by the factory. McLaren go about their motorsport in a very different way, because they very publicly advertise that they are a customer racing entity."

"Now, that's a plus point, and could also be considered a negative in some respects: if you are contemplating buying a McLaren, you are on par with every other team because, theoretically, no-one else is getting additional support. A lot of us have been involved in motorsport for a long time, and we find that to be an interesting new challenge."



Unsurprisingly, the aerodynamics had received further tweaks when the 720S GT3 was unveiled as McLaren's flagship racer – ahead of its sister 570S GT4 – in August 2018. The pop-up airbrake at the back for example, which already produced 30 per cent more downforce compared with that on 650S, was replaced altogether with a GT3-spec rear wing, while a bespoke splitter, new dive planes at the front and carbon-composite body panels were among "more than 90 per cent" of the components changed on "the strongest contender yet from McLaren for GT3 racing honours."

Arguably among the biggest changes was the 'race-prepared' M840T twin-turbo V8, which, on the roadcar, had already increased from 3.8-litres to 4-litre capacity from the 650S to the 720S, and which now featured a wider torque curve for 'traditional racing' (much of the heavy lifting was done by the lightweight, twin-scroll turbochargers, developed specifically to prioritize responsiveness over power). Gone also was the roadcar's seven-speed twin-clutch gearbox in favour of a six-speed paddle shifter, so-chosen for increased shift speeds and durability.

Power? As expected, McLaren were fairly tight-lipped on that ahead of the 720S GT3's maiden season in 2019. Given that the roadcar though was already delivering 710bhp and 568 lb ft of torque – a heady leap from the 650S' 641bhp and 500lb ft, respectively – upwards of 500bhp seemed a doddle, even with GT3's balance of performance regs to consider. ➔

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ON THE GRID WITH...

Throw in bespoke suspension geometry – a 16kg weight saving and a gateway to improved grip and steering feel – plus ferociously durable carbon ceramic brakes, and there was more than enough for Joe and Jody to consider the 720 GT3 above the more established likes of Mercedes' AMG GT3, Audi's R8 LMS, and even Porsche's 911 GT3 R when finalizing 7TSIX's first contender...

"We could just tell that the McLaren is a really competitive car" – Joe – "and I think there's still a lot to come from it. Plus, its popularity is growing, year-on-year. To have a McLaren was fairly rare at these kinds of events..."

"...well" – Jody – "there was a period of time when McLaren had its own feeder series." – When news broke in 2017 that the 720S GT3 would begin testing the following year, Woking also announced the formation of a revised young Driver Development Programme and a one-make racing series for owners called 'Pure McLaren-GT.' – "With that, we were naturally tapping into a good resource, and a fairly easy resource to try and move into a GT3 car.

"If you consider 'high net-worth' individuals who want to go motor racing: when they're sitting around the dinner table with friends, family and business associates, and they tell people they've been racing in Dubai, one of the first questions is, 'what did you race?'. If the answer is an Audi or a BMW, it's not quite as sexy as a McLaren or a Ferrari! McLaren definitely has a high appeal to those high net-worth individuals because it is a cool thing to go and drive. If someone wants to drive a McLaren, they're picking up the phone to 7TSIX."

An impressive early run meant the 720S quickly had the collective records of the now-retired 12C GT3 and the 650S GT3 firmly in the crosshairs. This was of particular interest to former British GT4 champion Jody, who, prior to his engagement at 7TSIX, had first-hand racing experience of the 12C GT3 in British GTs alongside ex-F1 race and '92 Le Mans winner, Mark Blundell. That the newcomer had also been specifically developed to be more efficient, financially, as well as to its fuel consumption and tyre unsafe was another crucial bonus.

"It's hard to compare the 720S and the 12C because they're so different in their make-up." – Jody – "In terms of a carbon tub and a mid-engined layout, they're obviously the same, but aerodynamically, the cars are massively different. And the technology advancements have come on leaps and bounds. McLaren now shares some components with other manufacturers, so that's helped its cars reach a certain degree of reliability, especially when it comes to endurance races. I think that was a smart move.

"This being a turbocharged car, efficiency can be difficult. But when we've stepped into other series where they have long distance races and stint lengths are key to your strategy, we've always found we can be versatile with our strategy because our stint lengths have always been so good. I know we can go 10 minutes longer on a tank than other brands. So, yeah, fuel efficiency, for a turbo-ed car, has been pretty excellent.

"In terms of tyre life, being a mid-engined car, the McLaren has incredible rear grip, so the car isn't sliding about a great deal. Balancing that back out with the front, both mechanically and with aero, is always the challenge, but so far we've found the car to be very good on its tyres. There's an Evo version of [the 720S] that's been launched that deals with some of its weaknesses, but this first iteration has been very quick, and also very kind."



"When a driver tells people they've been racing in Dubai, one of the first questions is, 'what did you race?'. If the answer is an Audi or a BMW, it's not quite as sexy as a McLaren or a Ferrari!"

There is, of course, one elephant in the room we've yet to address. The Hankook 24H DUBAI has not been overly kind to McLaren down the years. Inception Racing with Optimum Motorsport for example may have led 25 laps outright at the 2021 event – becoming the first McLaren customer to ever do so – but lost 20 minutes after on-track contact, and eventually finished 10th overall, 24 laps down, emulating the Lapidus Racings' result of 10 years prior (the latter on that occasion finished 35 laps down). In 2018, ALFAB Racing was looking good for a GT4-class podium until a terminal turbocharger issue struck the Swedish team down shortly before half-distance. The big question then is, can 7TSIX finally seal a podium for McLaren in Dubai?

Jody – "In short, yes!"

Joe – "Yeah, we would like a good result, and I think we're very capable of achieving that. I don't see any reason why we can't be up at the top."

Jody – "When you go and do an endurance event – and, if we're being brutally honest – I don't think McLaren would be everyone's first choice. But McLaren has at least finished this race, plus Daytona, Spa, the Nürburgring... all of them. The car has come a long way. And McLaren are no different to any other brand: when the BMW [M4 GT3] was released, it had a lot of issues. And that happens, particularly in GT3 racing, with manufacturers pushing the envelope because the competition is so strong. Naturally, you go through a phase of honing-in on performance and reliability, and I don't think McLaren are any different in that respect.

"But the product is very, very good. In terms of reliability, before the race has even started, we haven't put a spanner on the car. I'm probably tempting fate, but it's been absolutely perfect! McLaren deserves a lot of credit."

Happily, things are going pretty well for 7TSIX as the Hankook 24H DUBAI gets underway. The fourth fastest time of any GT3 runner in Fran Rueda's 15-minute qualifying session helps net the British team GT3-AM class pole position – over reigning Overall GT Teams' 'Continents' champion CP Racing, no less – and a spot on the seventh row. Momentum that teammate James Cottingham takes into the race after a clean start.

Sadly, damper failure brings the British driver back to pitroad after just 22 minutes, and while the 7TSIX crew manages to turn the #76 McLaren around in an incredible eight minutes, a faltering turbocharger eventually brings the British team's race to an early end at three-quarter distance. Fate dutifully tempted.

Still, with 455 laps completed at the Dubai Autodrome, 7TSIX can at least celebrate a classified GT3-AM podium in Dubai, a commendable performance that's already got both Joe Edge and Jody Firth wondering where their team, and the McLaren 720S GT3, can go from there.

Joe – "I think it's a case of building on what we started last year. We've got a really strong team, we all gel really well – which I think is key, especially at these types of events – and we want to do everything we can to get our customers on the podium."

Jody – "We wouldn't be where we are if we didn't have full confidence in the car and the drivers and our team." ■