

QVICK SMART

Is this the ultimate MINI? With a 365bhp M3 engine, rear-wheel drive and a bespoke carbon fibre and Kevlar bodyshell, it's certainly a contender

Words: Dominic Holtam Photography: Dominic Fraser





You do realise,' deadpans snapper Fraser, 'that this is the equivalent of living in Paris and popping up to Donington Park for a quick photoshoot.' As we're picking our way through heavy traffic and lashing rain in a Ford Focus with a whining clutch 100km from Liège, I am suddenly gripped by an urge to turn around and go home. Perhaps, if we were on our way to see a normal car, I would have done just that.

When Olivier Boedt sent us a letter about a month previously, we knew that this was no normal car. Olivier works for Qvick Motors, a company that makes bodywork for all manner of sports car manufacturers. After hours, however, the staff can be found indulging in their other passion: Qvick Motors Racing, a semi-professional Belgian race outfit which competes in the Belcar Championship. The team had run an E36 M3 saloon in the 'Touring' category since 1999, finishing first, second and fourth over the last three seasons in the sub-3000cc category. For 2002, however, the team decided to sell the M3 and take advantage of the liberal Belcar regulations to undertake an exciting new challenge.

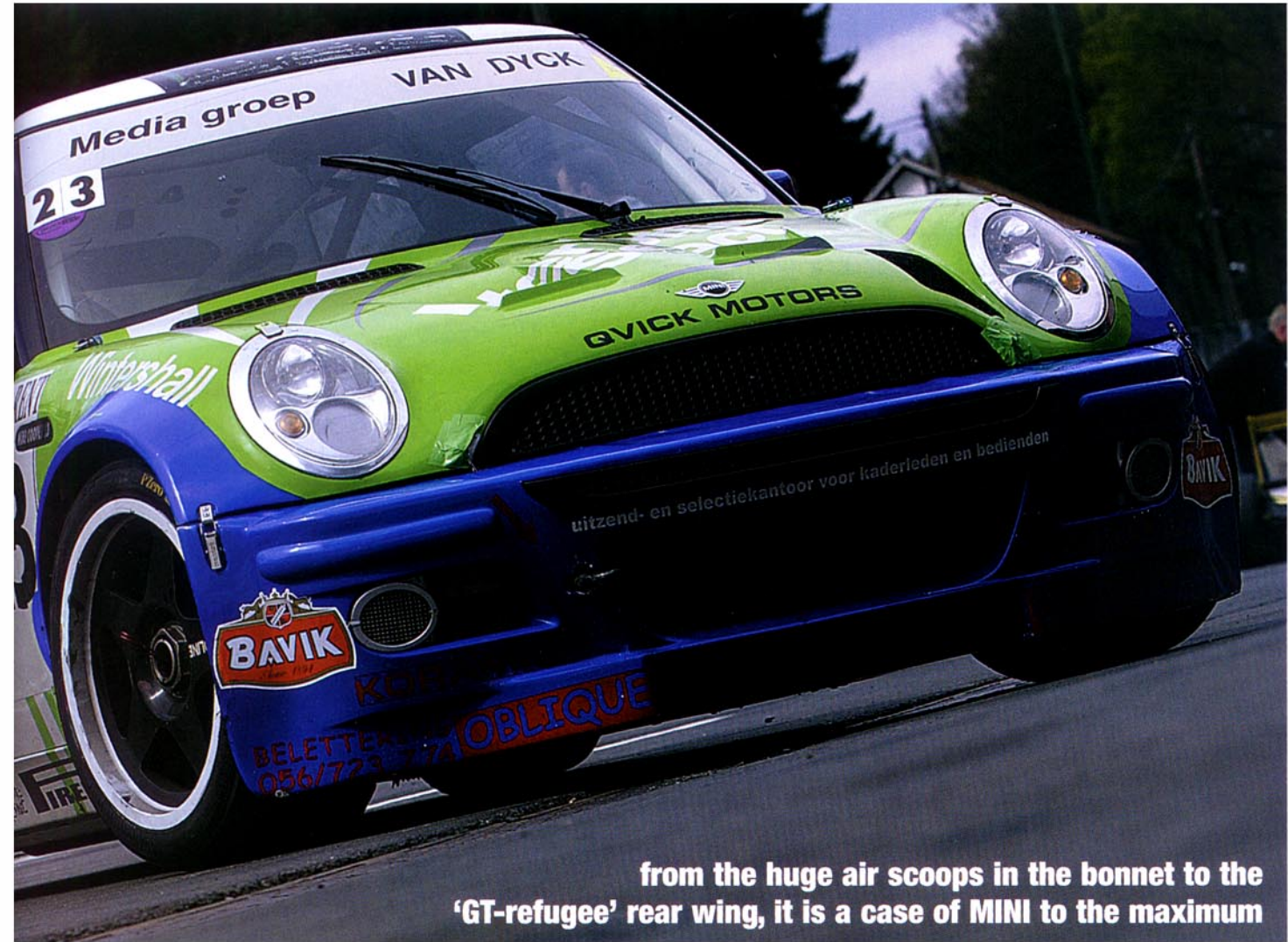
Driver and main man, Eddie Qvick, explained the reasons behind the project: 'The Belcar Championship allows you to use any engine from a manufacturer in any bodyshell from the same company.

So we thought we'd go for something a bit different.' Eddie shows us what looks suspiciously like a Revell die-cast scale model. He lifts off the bodywork to reveal a miniature spaceframe chassis made from metal piping just a few millimetres thick. 'This is how we started,' explained Eddie. 'It is almost exactly the same as the one we use in the racing car – only a bit smaller!'

The racer itself is unmistakably a MINI, but a caricature version. From the huge air scoops in the bonnet to the 'GT-refugee' rear wing, it is a case of MINI to the maximum – as if a standard Cooper got involved in a bizarre genetic experiment with an M3 GTR.

Inside, the car is pure racer, too. The single racing bucket is mounted well back, allowing the long engine to sit as close to the centre of gravity as possible for optimum balance. The essential dials keep the driver informed as to the health of the car and that's it.

The composite coachwork bulges out substantially to accommodate a fatter track (12cm wider at the rear) and those slick-shod 10x18-inch racing rims. The undertray is completely flat for aerodynamic purposes and the ride height is just 70mm. By using such ultra-light materials for the bodyshell, the MINI M3 has a weight of just 1025kg. Not bad when you consider that, after a recent ECU mapping



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session, power from the straight-six now tops 365bhp.

The engine and drivetrain come from the three-litre E36 M3 (to allow the team to enter in the sub-3000cc category) and are fundamentally the same as were used in the team's previous BMW racer. The Belcar Championship is focused on endurance events (there is even a 24-hour race at Zolder on the calendar) so ultimate power is not such a major concern as

bulletproof reliability. Plus, if the team was constantly rebuilding engines, it wouldn't have the funds to continue competing.

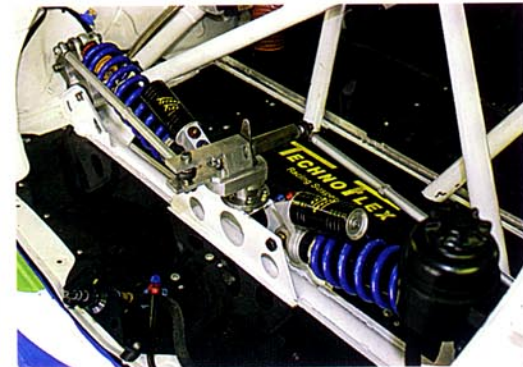
Forced induction is not allowed, but pretty much anything else can be tweaked to provide optimum performance. The mill is hooked up to the three-litre M3's five-speed gearbox, which has a proven pedigree and seems to be doing the job. The team has been toying with the idea of using a six-speed sequential 'box, but

will only use it this season if the car is not in contention for the championship. If it remains competitive, development work will be left until the close-season.

The rear diff is also from the E36 M3, but work is still ongoing and ratios are dependent on each circuit. One problem has been getting the power down effectively and to this end, a new diff with 85 per cent locking is going to be tested very soon.

Like the engine, there is plenty of freedom to allow teams to develop their own suspension systems. Good job, too, because every mounting point on the MINI is custom made, save for the rear suspension arms. The setup incorporates TechnoFlex racing dampers (mounted in-board at the rear) but it still has a long way to go before an ideal balance is reached.

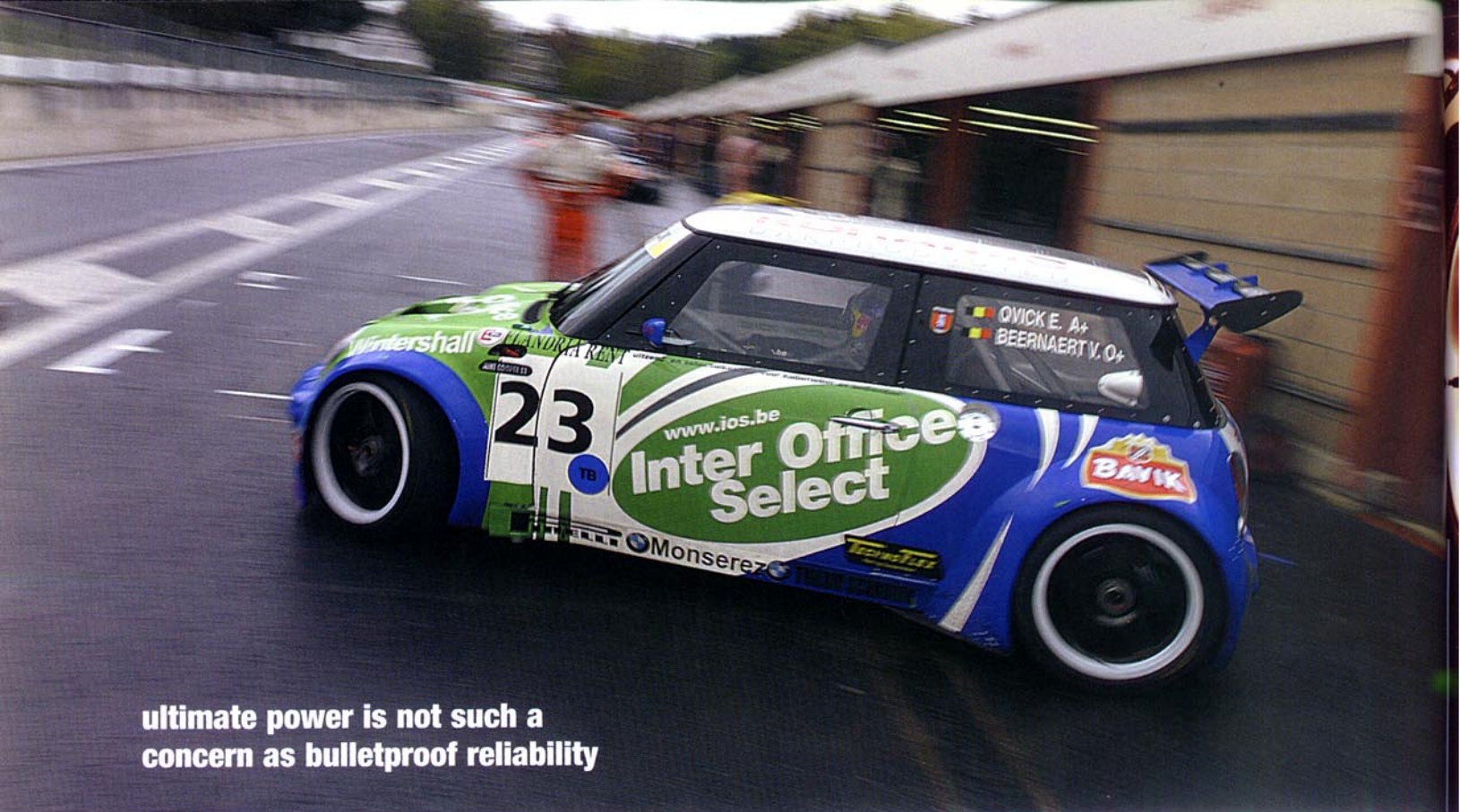
When we met with the team for its first test at Spa, the team had been joined by



● ATL racing fuel filler, Techno Flex racing suspension with in-board dampers and 10x18-inch slick-shod wheels show the team's serious intent. Chassis still needs work though



● The driver sits a long way back in Belcar MINI behind three-litre 365bhp M3 straight-six. Scoops, louvres, ducts and huge rear wing are all crafted by Qvick from composites



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former Belgian Champion, Frederique Bouvy. His experience should help the Qvick outfit get sorted as quickly as possible. On a damp track, the MINI looked fast but nervous under braking. It also looked very stiff into the La Source hairpin, lifting a rear wheel and wagging its tail on the exit.

'It's quite interesting handling at the moment,' smiles Eddie Qvick in one of the day's larger understatements. The braking system is a BMW Motorsport setup with four-pot Alcon calipers and ABS. However, there is a problem with the valves that means only one side is functioning properly. 'It makes it want to do this,' says Eddie, winding on an armful of imaginary opposite lock. They also know the car is too stiff at the rear, which is exacerbating the problems presented by a short, wide, rear-wheel driver. Hopefully, the combination of revised damper settings and the new diff should really help to provide balance and traction out of corners.

Other problems encountered on the test day included a poorly anchored front spoiler, meaning much of the running had to be done 'sans' bumper. This allowed air to get in behind the front wing, tearing a chunk out of the carbon fibre coachwork at high speed.

It sounds as if the team has it all to do to even complete a lap. Understandable, given the project was only started six months ago and turned a wheel for the first time less than a month before our shoot. Understandable, but not strictly true. You see, the mad MINI has already raced and is currently second in class! 'We turned up for the first race and the car hadn't turned a wheel,' explained Eddie. 'It ran perfectly until the gear lever broke off! That was the only problem.'

So, with its proven mechanicals, the car is fast out of the box, but will it have the legs of Eric's old steed? 'It's a very different car to the BMW; that was very smooth to drive with very good

balance. The MINI is much more difficult to drive smoothly, more nervous. But faster... Soon!'

So what did it cost to get the car on the race track? 'I don't have a figure yet,' smiles Eric. 'This is our hobby. You cannot put a price on all the hours we have put in on the project.' Olivier Boedt concurs: 'I worked every night on the car after finishing normal work. The project took five and a half months.' It seems the team will certainly be utilising the MINI for a couple of seasons yet. Eric has a few tweaks in the pipeline as well as such modifications as the sequential 'box.'

Thumbing through the team's scrapbook documenting the build process, then seeing the car in the flesh, lurking menacingly in the pit garage, it seems incredible that less than six months previously, the MINI had been just a twinkle in a mad Belgian eye. It deserves to win for audacity alone ●

SPECIFICATION – Belcar MINI S3

Engine	in-line six cylinder
Capacity	2990cc
Max Power	365bhp
Max Torque	295 lb ft
Transmission	five-speed manual
Brakes	M Sport racing arrangement with four-pot Alcon calipers and ABS
Wheels	10x18-inch racing wheels
Suspension	custom-made Techno-Flex setup with in-board rear dampers
Construction	custom-made spaceframe chassis with bespoke carbon/Kevlar bodywork
Weight	1025kg

