

What's it like to get behind the wheel of a 270mph dragster? Terrifying

Giles Smith



So, I am at Santa Pod Raceway in Northamptonshire, behind the wheel of a Top Methanol category dragster. And not just any old Top Methanol dragster: the American Car Imports dragster, normally driven by the newly crowned European champion, Dave "Grumpy" Wilson. But Grumpy has gamely stood aside for a couple of minutes to let me have a go. And, as I have astutely observed, within seconds of sliding into the cockpit, the American Car Imports dragster differs from the car I normally drive in a number of key areas.

For one thing, the bonnet is 25ft long, and held merely 3in off the ground by what is in effect a pair of pram wheels. Also, intensive stickering reveals the dragster to be sponsored by, among others, PlayStation 2, whose cash-rich backing for my own, private driving, I have never quite managed to secure. And, unlike in my car, the engine, mounted hard behind the driver's head, and keeping the fat

rear wheels apart, has eight cylinders, generates in excess of 3,500bhp and is only marginally smaller than a three-bedroom bungalow.

Sometimes, under acceleration, it burns so much fuel so quickly that there isn't room for all the combustion to take place inside the engine. Thus some of the fuel leaps out and does its burning in a startlingly orange halo around the back end. At which point, the dragster appears to be emerging from a ball of fire. Again, this isn't really in the repertoire of the car I drive at home. I did once have a Peugeot 205 which did something similar towards the end of longer journeys, but I decided to get rid of it.

Something else the dragster does which my car doesn't: it routinely reaches speeds in excess of 250mph in under five seconds. That's quite

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fast. It's not the fastest-accelerating race car in the world: that's the Top Fuel dragster, which looks exactly the same as the Methanol dragster, but runs on nitro and would hope to reach over 300mph in that time.

But that's just silly. You've got to ask yourself: do you really need to go that fast? Surely, 250mph is enough for any normal person's everyday needs.

A Top Methanol dragster would leave Michael Schumacher's Ferrari chewing on its dust. Then again, Schumacher's Ferrari can go round corners, and that's not something that dragsters are entirely comfortable with. Just as problems with staircases hampered the Daleks, so an inability to do bends has prevented the dragster from achieving global domination.

Other performance aspects of the dragster that might cause concern for the private owner: the fact that you need to strip the engine after every quarter-of-a-mile run; the consumption figures (see adjacent box); and the need for parachutes in the deceleration phase. I don't know what kind of a driveway you've got, but that would certainly be a problem on ours.

Anyway, let's start her up, shall we? I pull on the health and safety headphones, exchange a firm-jawed thumbs-up with Grumpy, and the pit crew fire the engine. The sensation is

immediate, visceral and terrifying. The noise is two parts jet plane to seven parts Motörhead, with a sweet top note of pneumatic drill. The fumes are yellow and the consistency of tarpaulin; within seconds, they fill my eyes, causing me to weep copious tears.

I've got my foot flat on the clutch, but the engine is fighting it, kicking back, trying to get away. The vibrations shake my chest and threaten briefly to liquidise several of my most cherished internal organs. But it doesn't last long. Two minutes or so later, the stationary engine check on blocks in the pit is completed, the engine is shut down, and I get out.

You weren't expecting me to drive the thing, were you? We looked into it, but a) the insurance would have been prohibitive, and b) I would have killed people, starting with myself. That's as-

The lowdown

American Car Imports Top Methanol dragster

Price: £150,000

Top speed: 270.36mph

Acceleration: 0-255mph in 5.4 secs

Consumption: 30 gallons to the mile

At the wheel: Buzz Aldrin

On the stereo: Pardon?

En route for: Anywhere straight ahead

suming I didn't stall on the line, which, actually, was the most likely outcome. Holding one of these machines at the biting point requires the nerve of a fighter pilot and the legs of a boxer.

I left the driving to Wilson. He's the European champion, after all. He's also 60 years old, so he's had time to build the necessary muscles and hone the required reflexes. The team director, Anthony Cohen, who owns American Car Imports - Britain's leading purveyor of top-spec American cars to Premiership footballers and anyone else who can afford them - told me that when he stood behind Wilson on the start-line, he felt like he was sending a man to the moon.

I asked Wilson what went through his mind when he was nailing his dragster up the strip, but he pointed out that there wasn't much time for the mind to get involved. When it worked, it was simply "a blast" - the fastest five seconds of a man's life.

Later, Wilson took the dragster out on to the track for real, for the final meeting of the European Championships, tearing up the strip in a deafening howl, for the pleasure of several thousand whooping petrolheads. He won the event, of course, managing 255.34mph in a time of 5.457 seconds. I couldn't have done better myself.