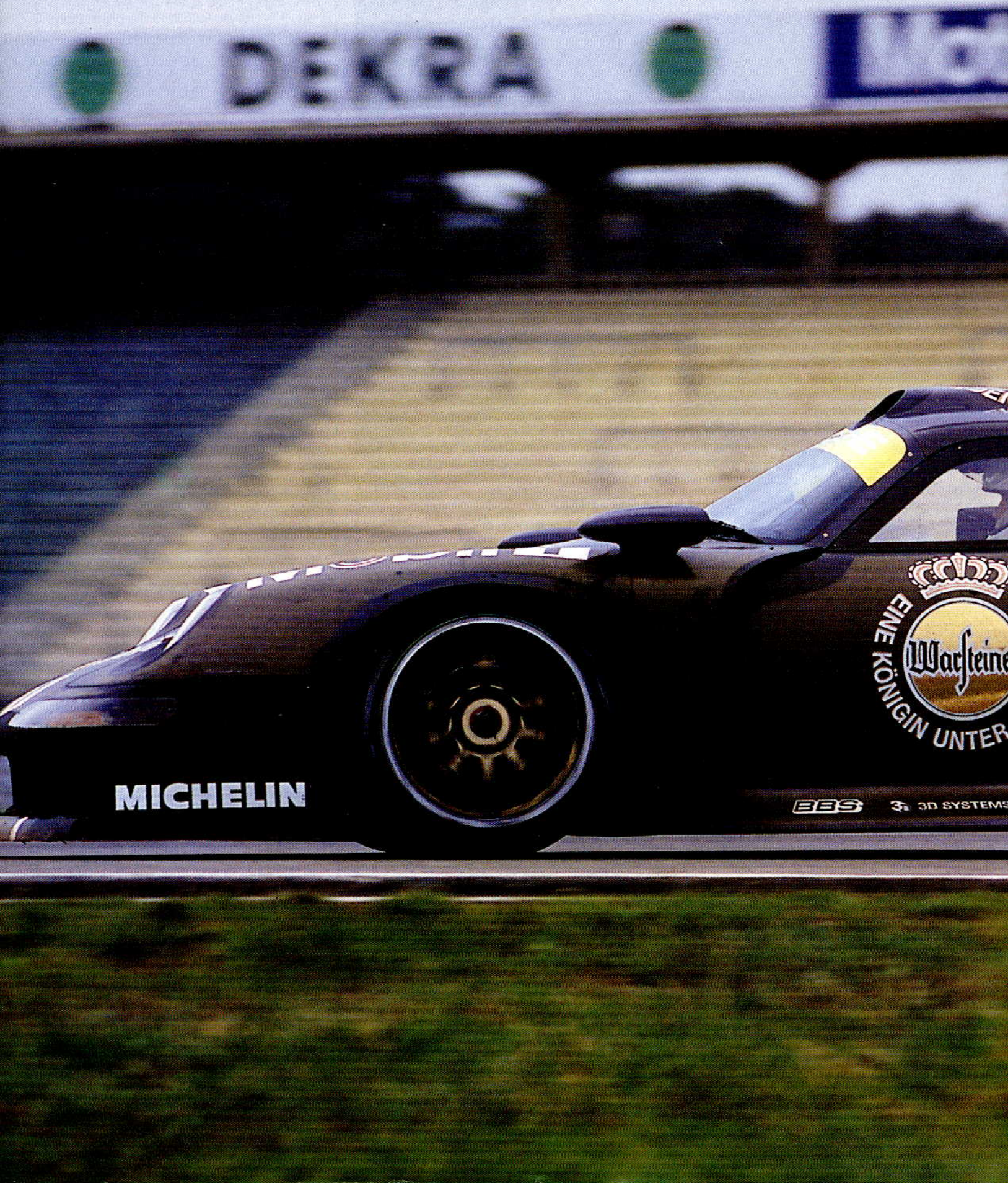


PORSCHE 911 GT1





Is it against the spirit of the rules? Porsche says nice guys never win. Sutcliffe (below left) is dazed, but happy: he can't get within four seconds of Boutsen

detect a slide at the front, it seems, is via a change of scenery, which I find about as reassuring as a slap in the face.

For a lap I just wander around, feeling out the brakes, seeing what happens when I stand on them (it stops so fast I almost stall), arranging the electric mirrors so I can see out of the back. Then, just before re-entering the view of my peers, I open it up. Properly. In second. And the force, even though I'm braced to accept a 600bhp per tonne wallop in the neck, is incredible.

At 3500rpm the rushes and whooshes of the twin KKK turbos start to dominate the engine's operations, acceleration already swelling at a fierce rate. At 4000rpm it is developing sufficient shove to make me think seriously about backing off. But it's from here to 7000rpm that the GT1 enters the twilight zone, an area of performance which, unless you're genuinely used to it, is

frankly uncomfortable to begin with. The acceleration is so savage I'm almost hypnotised by it for a couple of seconds before realising I've gone way beyond the theoretical 7000rpm limit requested of me. In fourth gear. In this million-dollar car.

So, rather than get further carried away, inevitably towards the undergrowth, I try to calm down and take stock of this extraordinary vehicle. Leaning on it a little harder through the long right-hander after the pit straight in fourth at about 90mph, I begin to feel a little more confident about squeezing on the power early, feeling the 14in wide slicks chew into the tarmac, dipping into the incredible cornering forces that this monster so effortlessly generates. This is like no road or racing car I've ever experienced: it's delicately balanced, but at the same time brutally planted to the ground, pushed into the

floor by some immense, unseen hand.

In the end, the bouncing front end and the lightness of the steering, let alone the fact that it has more performance than any other car I've driven, conspire to intimidate me too deeply. I can't bring myself to throw it around as I might a regular 911. I'm glad to bring it and myself back to the pits in one piece after six laps, to be honest.

I'm over four seconds slower than Boutsen, who doesn't mind the bouncing – "you learn to drive through it". He agrees that the steering weight isn't great to begin with, but points out that it is a joy after 24 hours. Yet I'm unusually unconcerned about being so slow in comparison. I knew in my heart this would be primarily a privilege and that ultimately I wouldn't be able to get near this car.

Right now, I kind of know how the rest of the BPR GT grid is feeling. ◊

◆ that of a regular 911's. Bare metal pedals are conventionally laid out and perfectly positioned. And at the end of a complicated linkage that appears from behind my right elbow is a tall baton of carbon fibre, just inches away from the wheel rim.

I prod the brake pedal: rock hard. I dip the clutch and am startled to find it as light as an ordinary 911's. To at least look as if I know what I'm doing, I clack the gear lever around its precise gate: there are six in there somewhere, although today I doubt I'll go anywhere near the last two.

I ask Boutsen to talk me through the controls before I venture on to the circuit. But after a while he loses me. It's like being told traffic directions: you go hazy after the third T-junction. I take in that this car has ABS with two sensitivity settings, one for wet, one for dry. Even though it's dry I go for the wet setting. Just in case.

I prod the little red button on the surprisingly big, suede-rimmed Momo steering wheel and wait, tensed, for the flat six to erupt. Nothing happens. I press it

again and realise I'm actually flicking through the menu on the Stack display. A man wearing a bright red Porsche coat leans in, wiggles the gear lever to make sure it's in neutral, then twists a switch on the dash, right where a regular 911's key goes.

The entire structure vibrates and fizzles when the engine explodes into life and settles on a busy 3000rpm idle. I stab the throttle a couple of times. Instantly, the revs soar, the bar graph on the electronic tacho confirming the spontaneous reaction in a scatter of 500rpm chunks.

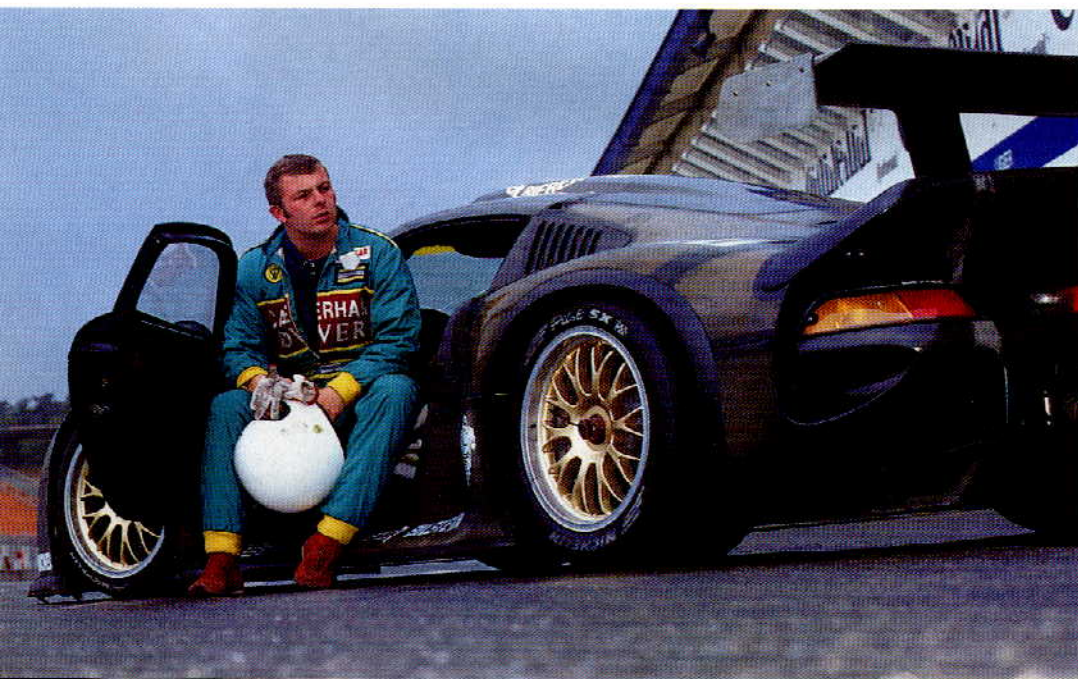
Given that this engine is turbocharged, I hadn't expected it to feel so immediate, so similar in sound and response to the Judd V8 of the F3000 car I drove a couple of years back. It has that same metallic, thrashy, mechanical quality to it that only full-blown racing engines seem to possess.

"Seven thousand," the man in the red jacket shouts into my helmet as he gives one final yank on my shoulder straps. "No more, not this morning." I give him a reassuring nod, snick the gear lever into first, dial in

"The acceleration is so savage that I'm almost hypnotised by it"



Effectively a 911 front mated to a Group C Porsche 962 rear end, the GT1 is the million-dollar car Porsche built to re-establish itself at the top of GT racing.



around 4500rpm and ease the clutch out. Around two-thirds of the way up there is a solid, definitive biting point, so I give it a few more revs and away we go, rumbling down the pit lane without a stall in the bag.

The ride is rock hard and the front end bounces and thumps over the bumps at the end of the pit lane. As I turn the wheel to drive out on to the circuit for real, I can't believe how light the steering is. I weave around from side to side, not to do anything as pretentious as dial heat into the tyres, but to get used to the feel of the steering.

By the time I reach the first corner, a sharp right-hander, I'm already more than a little confused: the engine doesn't feel turbocharged at all, delivering great jolts of thrust the instant I open it up above 4000rpm. But it's the steering that really throws me: it seems too light in my inexperienced hands. The only way to



sharpest innovators, bent them to suit its requirements by also announcing that a road version will eventually be built and sold in just as big a number as the McLaren F1. Nothing in the rules, you see, says the road car needs to come first. All you have to do is prove that one exists – which Porsche already has – after which it matters not when the road car appears.

Next year Porsche will build 15 racing GT1s for private customers, then the road cars, after which GT racing won't be the same again. Which is either progress or an act outside the spirit of the rules, depending largely on your point of view.

Right now, I'm disinterested in any such bitching. As all race drivers do, Boutsen gives the engine one last wap of revs as he trundles back into the pits. Then he cuts it and rolls serenely to a halt beside me.

He climbs out and gestures for me to get in. Though my hands are shaking slightly, I make a fine job of looking composed. Until I walk forward and half trip on one of my boot laces, which, in the rush of

anticipation, I've plain forgotten to do up.

All sorts of thoughts spiral through my mind as I walk towards the open door of the GT1. Apart from the fact that it looks more like something returned from a not entirely incident-free reccie over the Gulf than it does a racing car, I am also acutely aware of the privilege of the occasion. This is the first of only three 911 GT1s in existence, the car Stuck & co did all the endurance development work on at Paul Ricard. In years to come, it will become a legend, worth even more than the millions it is now.

I fumble the carbon fibre door and am astonished at how light it is. It feels as if I'm manipulating a chunk of air around via a handle; yet somehow it still feels brittle, strong, engineered. Totally Porsche.

Once ensconced in the deep bucket seat, which I'm equally puzzled to discover is on adjustable runners, just like the road car, I take a moment to drink in the cabin and its multitudinous switches, buttons, cooling ducts, gauges and levers.

The driving position isn't remotely like ♦

"Boutsen drops the clutch and exits the pits in a hail of drama"



Steering feels too light, but that's how the drivers like it during a 24hr race. Thierry Boutsen (above) gives Sutcliffe a few tips. Cockpit bristles with technology

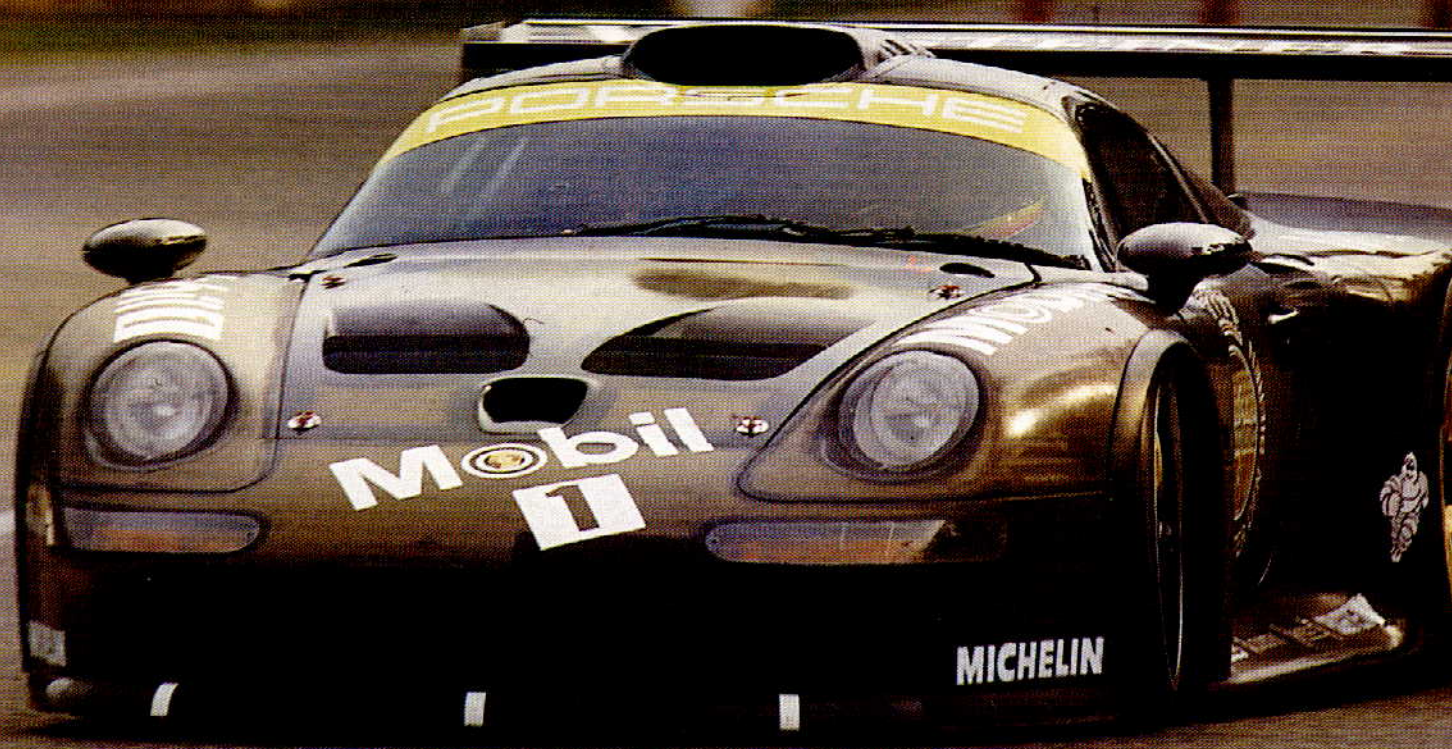
anything I've previously been fortunate enough to drive.

The GT1 is the million-dollar car Porsche has developed in order to regain its dominance of sports car racing. And, having already cleaned up in its class at Le Mans this year and blitzed both the other BPR rounds it has contested at Brands and Spa, it's clear this is no half-hearted effort. So much so that many have levelled criticism at Porsche for spoiling GT racing with this works-backed racing car.

The rules say that there must be a road car from which the race car is derived. Which means the paddock usually consists of cars such as the McLaren F1, Porsche 911, Lotus Esprit and Ferrari F40.

Porsche, however, sees it differently. It makes no bones about the GT1 being a racing car first, not a road car. But, in order to stay within the rules, it has, like all the





The 600bhp 911 GT1 is savagely quick in a straight line. It pulls 150mph around the short circuit at Hockenheim with ease. Front end bounces badly over bumps

Hockenheim is deserted when we arrive. Spooky quiet, like a ghost town, abandoned. Except for a lone transporter at the far end of the paddock, surfer-style graphics emblazoned on its enormous flanks, a huddle of people mulling around the back doors as it precariously gives birth to its exotic contents.

As the 911 emerges and is rolled silently into an allotted garage, a team of computer men appear from somewhere and begin firing up their equipment in the corner. Thierry Boutsen, the bloke responsible for much of this car's development, along today to show us what and what not to do with a 600bhp works racing Porsche, seems rather less concerned about the techno than he is about the track surface. "Eet's a little dusty today," he announces, nonchalantly, and then clambers aboard.

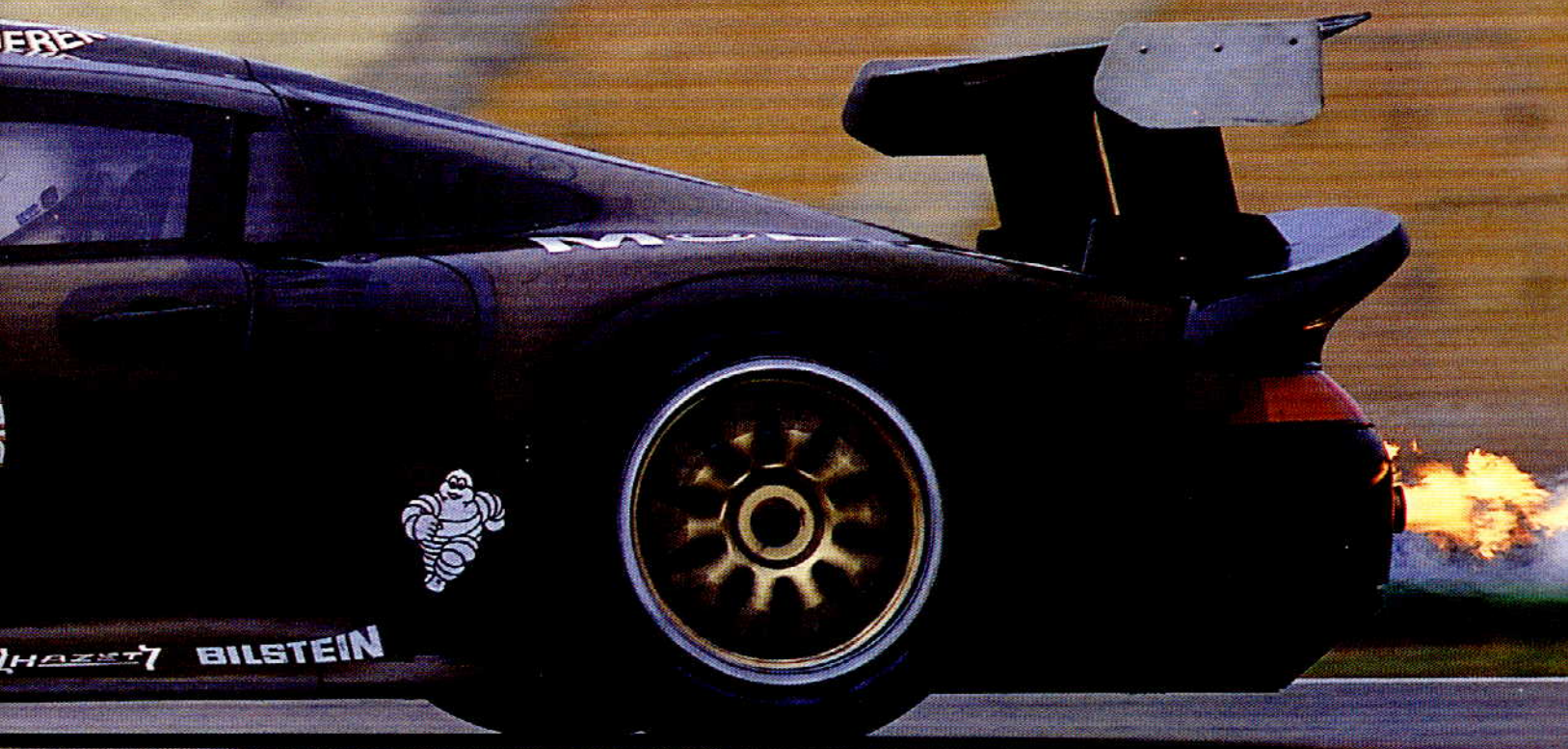
Even before it is ignited, numerous laptops and electronic gauges are plugged into the sides and ends of the GT1. Seconds later they are removed and, before anyone has had time fully to register the significance of the unfolding event, Boutsen has engaged first, dropped the clutch and, in a cacophony of whistles, whooshes and tell-tale gear whine, exited the pit lane in a hail of noisy drama.

Most folk would take it easy for a lap before nailing it on cold slicks on a parky morning with six times as much power as your average warm hatch spraying out through the rear wheels. Not Boutsen. We stand on the pit wall and listen, transfixed, as the GT1's 3.2-litre, water-cooled, twin-turbo flat six is run out to its 8900rpm maximum somewhere out of sight on the back half of the circuit. Between the wastegate chatters that punctuate the barks

of acceleration, the exhaust note hardens and ricochets off Hockenheim's empty auditorium, cackles and cracks of exhaust gunfire telling us clearly when he's backing off or feathering. Which isn't often.

And then finally he reappears, a little shimmy of opposite lock through the right hander that leads back on to the start-finish straight, an outside rear Michelin momentarily thudding along the kerbing, like Schumacher on a qualifier.

It's only when the GT1 blares right past our noses in fifth gear at 150mph, before shedding two gears in no more than a few feet, while simultaneously spitting flames a good five feet long, that we realise the full seriousness of the situation. Because today we are not just here to watch. Unless Boutsen does something completely out of character in the next few minutes, I'm up next. And believe me, this is well beyond



Fire starter

The 911 GT1 is the car Porsche built to blow the McLaren F1 away. At Le Mans this year it succeeded, emphatically. Stephen Sutcliffe drives the car that has changed GT racing forever