

On test: Marlin Sportster.

Roll Model

TWELVE months after looking at their full-winged traditional roadster, the Cabrio, we have returned to Marlin to drive their latest Sportster demonstrator... and their new race car... and their new development vehicle. Just don't try to get away with three lots of expenses, Foster.



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THE mainstream motor industry loves a bit of versatility. If a car can be family-hauler by day and tarmac-melter by night, company accountants are happy. Week-day commuter hatch and weekend racer? Just think of the potential market; just count those would-be punters.

Kitcars, on the other hand, tend to be more specialist. Lotus Seven-inspired Sportscars (LSIS) are just that - sportscars. If you want luggage space, go buy an estate car. A replica does what it says on the brochure - replicate the original. Don't expect to find a roofrack on the options list. Or a family-friendly four-door. But necessity can be a real mother, and if it's a dual role or nothing, people find a way of making it work. This Marlin Sportster, for example, is far more flexible than it might at first appear. It is a pretty spartan version of a very purposeful sportscar, but in fact it performs THREE very different roles. Four if you count Kit-Car photographic model.

ROLE ONE

Company demonstrator - not a job any car should take on lightly. We wouldn't buy a car from any company that did not have a decent demonstrator, and we advise every would-be kitcar buyer similarly. So, no matter how many options or versions a company offers, the demonstrator has a vital part to play in convincing the undecided punter to part with his hard-earned spondoolies.

ROLE TWO

Company race car. Yes, race car. Marlin's Mark Matthews fancied a bit of sport and motorsport is increasingly being seen as a very effective sales aid. Okay, so attendances at race meetings are still relatively small, but the fact that it's out there, mixing it, buys a company big credibility. More if it wins. And track days are huge now, of course. So if would-be purchasers don't get to sample the full potential of the demonstrator's handling during a test drive (and they never will - it takes a lot of serious driving to come close), the racing manufacturer simply points to its on-track performance as testimony of good handling. And it works. Ask Fisher. Ask Sylva. Ask Hawk Cars. The only problem is, as always, money. Race cars are expensive, and no kitcar company has the budget of a Ford or a GM, so Marlin's company Sportster has to double as weekday demonstrator and weekend racer. But then if it works, what better proof is there of the car's potential?

ROLE THREE

This one's a little more controversial. Marlin's Sportster demonstrator/racer is also Marlin's development vehicle. Now, some manufacturers might be a little confused by that because they produce a version of their kit that works and makes money - and then just keep on producing it. Jigs might be modified to make manufacture easier/cheaper, and moulds will be replaced (eventually) when they become worn, but their kits are basically the same, month after month, year after year.

Not Marlin. Marlin's Mark Matthews is a perfectionist and constantly looks for ways of making things stronger, lighter, easier, cheaper (not so much of a priority), or just better to look at. And

the race car has both required and allowed him to look for, and find, a little more.

So in order to fully evaluate this particular Marlin Sportster, we will examine it in each of its three roles. We'll leave you to judge how it performs as a photographic model.

THE COMPANY DEMONSTRATOR

It is no criticism to say that Marlin are a traditional company. It's run by husband and wife team Mark and Terry Matthews; it employs five carefully selected and trained workers who make most components in-house, rather than sub-contracting production out as some newer companies do; and it manufactures three models that compliment each other in terms of where and how they are marketed (alongside the performance-oriented and more purposeful-looking Sportster, there's the more luxuriously appointed, full-winged Cabrio, which is also available in built-up form as the Hunter). And it's no coincidence that all three models are traditional roadsters. Marlin's green Sportster, though, is quite a radical departure from the traditional demonstrator. There's that green paint for a start. It's called Puice ("Like 'juice' with a P, or 'puke with a 'uice'", says Mark), and while the initial impact is something of an eye-füller, it really grows on you and makes a lot of sense when you consider it's going racing. No point in putting a car out there if no one's going to notice it.

In fact, the Sportster was developed by Marlin at least partly because Mark wanted to get involved in motorsport and could see he wasn't alone. People often go for one of the Lotus Seven inspired sportscars (LSIS) if they fancy a bit of part-time circuit action, but Mark felt that a traditional sportscar design could prove just as competitive and offer a more civilised option for the bits between the races. So while it's got all the necessary race bits (more on that later), it's also got a heater, a boot and real doors that allow easy access, even when the full weather equipment is in place. Having said that, the demonstrator doesn't really have a lot else. Companies often dress up their demonstrators to show just what can be done, with leather bits here and polished wooden bits there, but the Sportster's dual demo/race role means the interior is pretty spartan, with no carpet, very little trim and three-point, full-harness belts.

"It's probably not a very good example of what a Sportster can be," admits Mark, "because we've spent no money on making it look nice, but it does show what can be done without spending much money.

And that helps to spread the Sportster's appeal across a wider section of the market: this car could be put together for around six grand, plus paint and donor parts, the cost of which could be kept way below Mark's race spec.

After just a few minutes behind the wheel, though, you soon think every penny was well spent. Although Mark says they didn't spend much on its appearance, he has obviously spent a great deal of time and care and the car looks very impressive, with chromed suspension parts, with red dampers and bushes, and little touches like the drilled bumper bars.

And all those no-frills race parts just make the car look super-tough. The front end of the full roll cage can be unbolted and removed, sliding out of the carefully profiled holes in the bodywork, but it actually looks great in place, and not at all over the top. Although it is... er... over the top. Obviously.

Installing a Rover V8, or any one of a whole range of big engines, was very much part of the Sportster plan from the beginning (although smaller, four-cylinder engines will also work perfectly well).

Said Mark: "I know the latest craze is for high-powered, small engines in ultra lightweight cars, but there are still a lot of people and I'm among them - who prefer a big straight six or V8 engine, and the strength and durability that goes with it."

Mark is a big fan of powerful straight sixes, and a number of different units have been accommodated in Sportsters, including the huge 3.5-litre BMW lump. Just about any four-cylinder unit can be fitted too. For the racer, though, he's opted for the 3.5 Rover V8 and, despite

its race prep, it's a delight on the road.

"The 750 Motor Club kitcar race series regs are free on cam and flywheel, but carbs and manifolds must be standard," said Mark. "So we've gone for a very special cam (developed by Marlin in conjunction with tuning specialist Desmond Hamil, who lives at nearby Exmouth), and virtually no flywheel at all." It has all been balanced and put together very carefully too, resulting in a higher rev limit and one of the most responsive units I've sat behind that can still be called a road engine.

Out on the open road, looking for a photo location (thank you very much indeed Fursford House, near Crediton - thanks for nothing, Shobrooke Park), there was no need for the caution you have to exercise when driving, say, a big V8'ed Cobra for the first time. Rather than a point-and-squirt style of driving - all that's possible in some cars until the driver has clocked up enough miles to get a handle on the handling - I found I was really enjoying the drive, impressed by the turn-in and the balance of front and rear. Apart from the lovely rumble, and the effortless power, there was nothing to suggest that a V8 was crouched under the green bonnet

ready to pounce. It felt like the engine belonged there - not like it had been shoe-horned in as an after-thought.

As a sportscar, all the necessary power and handling is there then, but what about the practicalities of Sportster ownership?

Not being limited by the lines and dimensions of Lotus Seven inspired sportscars, the cockpit is wider and longer, with room for the lankiest and stoutest of occupants, and access is made so much easier by those doors - although you can quite easily step over them and slip in if you're in a hurry. Or if you forget, like I did.

If doors on a truly sporty kitcar are rare, the tilt and slide windscreen arrangement is unique.

"I did think of fitting aero screens," says Mark, "but you don't always want the full blast you get from no windscreen, and it makes it difficult to secure the hood at the front."

The solution was a screen that can be loosened by unscrewing a knob on each side and then tilted back to give the best of both worlds. On the demo/race version, the screen uses shorter glass and looks even sexier.

As a demonstrator, then, Marlin's bright green Sportster works very well indeed. Okay, so it's a little short on frills and bells and whistles, but that is reflected in the cost, and anyone can add carpet and trim and any other bits they fancy or have the budget for.

As the sportscar/weekend racer market grows (and, boy, is it growing?), some people are looking for something a bit different from the thousands of Lotus Seven-inspired sportscars out there; something with a little more space; something that's just a little easier to live with; something with a little more style; but something that can still be used for a little fun motorsport at the weekend.

The Marlin Sportster could just be it.

THE RACE CAR

It was with the above definition in mind that the Sportster was first developed and it was always planned that Mark should compete in one of them. While the mainstream car manufacturers can afford to throw millions at developing and racing a team of cars, real life in the kitcar industry ain't like that and a purpose-built racer is a real luxury. Given Mark's modest ambitions, and the fact that Marlin wanted to make the point that you can have fun in a road-spec car, it made complete sense to build a car that could double as demo and race car. And, of course, it was very cost-effective.

Sensibly, Mark did not set his sights too high. The 750 Motor Club-organised series is ideal because the regulations limit modifications and, although the Marlin is unlikely to have Mark spraying around the bubbly, it's possible to have a lot of fun further down the field. And it's ideal for club events like hillclimbs and sprints. Just what prospective customers are likely to have in mind, in fact.

With race regs and on-road practicality limiting the Rover engine to around 220bhp, extra performance had to be found by reducing the car's weight. Careful choice of materials and subtle chassis redesign have trimmed more than 100kgs from the total weight and the complete car tips the scales at less than 650kgs. New lightweight components have reduced the weight of the front suspension by half, for example (and these savings have been incorporated into production versions - see the next section).

Aside from the engine, which as we've already discussed, is hardly extreme, mechanical components have been kept as standard as possible. The rear axle, front uprights and steering rack are all Sierra or Granada, and the front hubs are Granada Mk2 or Cortina - all the same as production versions. Adjustable dampers allow the driver to switch between road and race settings, and the brakes are standard Sierra with harder pads.

The Marlin really scores over the Lotus Seven-inspired sportscars in its basic design. Even without the home comforts, the Sportster is still quite civilised, and drivers can make the journeys to race events, and enjoy normal road use, in relative comfort.

Just how competitive the car will be remains to be seen, but you should remember that any race car that finishes up among the winners on a regular basis is very far from standard spec - and probably hell to live with (and therefore seldom used) on the road. So far, Mark has taken the car out on the circuit at track days and has been very impressed by its behaviour when pushed to the limit (and occasionally beyond).

THE DEVELOPMENT VEHICLE

Designing and building the race car has allowed Mark to try out ideas, particularly on weight saving, that have since been incorporated into the production kits, which are themselves now 80kgs lighter. The weight of the front suspension has been halved, for example, and these new lightweight components have been incorporated into Marlin's production kits.

This is a perfect example of race development benefiting road cars and the process will continue when Mark gets stuck into competition use next season. Kit-Car will keep you informed of results.

THE COST

As always, this bit's tricky because of the variables involved. Mark reckons a budget-spec Sportster could be put on the road for £4,000, plus donor parts and paint, so a sub-6K result could be achieved. More realistically, a typical average build runs out to around £7-8,000.

Preparing one for road/race use, you save on the luxury items, but have to spend on speed parts - and how far you go down that route depends on your bank manager and your nerve. £9-11,000 would give you some real fun, though.

That's more than you'll pay for the cheapest of the Lotus Seven inspired Sportscars, but the Marlin Sportster offers you practical advantages you'll never find in a LSIS, which means it's likely to see a lot more use between blasts round the circuit. And at a time when race paddocks are gradually filling up with cars that look pretty much the same, the Marlin offers a real alternative.

[MARLIN are insistent that they didn't spend money "making the car look nice", but their attention to detail and quality of finish speak volumes. The shortened version of their unique tilting screen and full rollcage give clues to the Sportster's dual demo/race car role. The engine is a Rover V8 with standard carbs and manifolds, "virtually no flywheel" and a

‘secret formula’ camshaft. The result is superb mid-range power that will provide fun on the track, but not frighten potential purchasers. And then there’s that green paint, of course. We’ve grown to like it and it will certainly get the car noticed.]

MORE INFORMATION

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