

TT Race Day 2012: The other side of the fence **Tony Corlett, Pit Crew Member & Friend**

I've tagged along with Team Oscar since day one, I've been there for the highs, the lows, the laughs, the tears and the downright crazy but today was always going to be something else...today was the day that for the past couple of years had been the target...reaching the tip of Everest.



Race Day

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Earlier that day

Suddenly it was real, Debbie and Rob had pulled it out of the bag two days before and managed to qualify for their first TT race. The day before had been tense and relaxed at the same time and while some gave Oscar the required TLC he so much deserved others began to think about what was about to happen, our friends or family were about to take on the most famous, the most dangerous race course in the world. The day, once again started off wet and cloudy and there was speculation about whether the races would go ahead as planned or not. We weren't due to go until 3pm so there was time for conditions to improve and concentrate on preparing and relaxing – although there was an odd feeling of tension in the air that nobody really seemed willing to discuss. Much of the work on Oscar had been done the day before so today was to be all about the race. Camp Oscar had been saturated in the recent bad weather and the 'workshop' floor had taken on the properties of a waterbed. There wasn't a lot for me to do at this point so I decided to take an hour off-site and upon returning hadn't missed an awful lot. The news came through that the sidecar race would be delayed until around 6pm for some this was a bit of a breather but for others, myself included, this only allowed more time for the tension and frustration to build. Debbie seemed to be managing ok, sipping away at her energy drink and even managing to eat, Rob was clearly keen to just get out there and enjoy it. And then, at around lunch time the news came over the speakers "sidecars out at 1.15pm" ...THAT'S ONLY AN HOUR AWAY!!! All hands to the deck, or it would have been if we hadn't been so well prepared...Tim and Stig were good to go, I had already done my by-now ritual of gathering everything we might need in the holding area so all that remained was for the three of us plus Helen to take Oscar up for technical inspection, I of course carrying the main fairing making me, apparently, the most photogenic of the pit-team. Usual routine by now, crowds gathering at technical bay hoping to catch a glimpse of their racing heroes or take photos of bikes and sidecars or just watch a part of the TT process taking place. Oscar passed the ever careful eye of the technical inspectors and was pushed out to where Helen and I awaited with the fairing and was quickly dressed up...I seem to recall asking several times "have the plugs been taken out" (dust plugs for the carbs)...not that I thought anyone would have forgotten them but experience tells me by now to check, and check again just to be sure...or endure the same consequences we had faced at Jurby only a few weeks before (blown up engine!). So, Oscar was ready to roll, the holding area was full, crews were arriving, cameras seemed to be clicking away from all directions and then as if by magic

Debbie and Stig, Rob and Helen, Janet, Julie, and Stuart appeared seemingly from nowhere, NOW there was tension! Looking around nobody seemed to be looking at each other. The call came and we started moving, through the holding area up onto Glencrutchery Road and into the queue...every now and again I'd catch a glimpse of an Oscar t-shirt in the crowds but I was far too intent on not screwing up to take a lot of notice. At this point the atmosphere changes and for me the job is to stay available if needed but otherwise out of the way...Debbie is very clearly focused, having already given her thanks to the team beforehand and now only Stig, via the unwritten rule, is allowed to work within her zone of concentration. Rob also has become focused on the task ahead but the excitement is evident and every now and again a grin and a joke slip out. We start to move and I follow with the tool kit, silently hoping that we won't need it. As the starting arch gets closer the moment I've been dreading arrives, time to bump start Oscar and as we create a space I pray that everything mechanically is in place and once again ask (albeit in my head) 'who's got the plugs'. Oscar doesn't start up on the first attempt and I stop breathing...at this point having to remove the fairing and try to find any problems is incomprehensible. Suddenly Oscar growls into life and I catch up on several seconds worth of lost air, the relief at this one simple thing was immense and I remember thinking to myself "does everyone else feel like this"? Everything is quiet as we reach the arch and the only sound is ahead of us as sidecar after sidecar sets off. There is a complete feeling of helplessness once Oscar and crew go through the barrier just before the starting line, all we can do is watch now from behind the railings, they're on their own, it's an odd feeling to watch them creep slowly forward over those last few spaces, almost like some bizarre parade...there is however a certain relief that for now our job is done and there seems to be no obstacle left from getting Debs and Rob over that start line. All focus, or at least the focus of the crowds and the cameras, now shifts to our guys who have made it to the start line, focusing firmly on the road ahead...and then the tap on the shoulder, a final growl...

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I've tried describing several times to Debbie recently the view of the race from those of us on the other side of the fence. The truth is however that from my perspective each of us had completely different ways of dealing with the void that was left once Oscar had disappeared from sight. Stig made a quick exit from the pit area, and I think we all respected that he wanted some alone time, Tim went to the pit lane, I have no idea where Helen, Janet and Stuart went (I assumed they went up to the Grandstand) and Julie, in typical Julie style seemed to be appearing all over the place. For a moment I felt a bit lost so after quickly returning to camp, carefully avoiding Stig (that's where he went) and putting on my overalls I decided to spend the duration of the race in the pit lane where even Tim seemed oddly quiet, sitting alone near the lower end of the pits. Sitting there and discovering that I had no internet-connectivity to my iPod and therefore no way of tracking our guys out on the course we had only the race-boards opposite the Grandstand to give us hints of where Oscar was. These of course were being updated manually which just added to the suspense...not helped by R's appearing all over the place (R for Retirement!). Suddenly the light comes on above No. 50 and Tim explains that this means Oscar is somewhere around Signpost Corner and so it is no surprise when a few minutes later Oscar goes flying past. The following 20+ minutes are calmer but there is still that unspoken but shared thought that a breakdown is a very real possibility and when Stig appears further up the pitlane I get a horrible feeling in my stomach...has he had the phonecall? The previous pickups following breakdowns had been greeted with growing disappointment...how would Debbie feel this time, disappointment on an enormous scale? Happy that she'd done a lap, been a part of the race but been one of the many to breakdown? No, no, no, stop thinking like that and get back to watching the updates on the boards. 20 minutes later they reappear and suddenly a finish is in sight, time to relocate to an area from which I can see the finish line and be there to greet

them when they get back, the very top of the return lane seems ideal. I forget who was there now I remember well that lots of people, familiar and unfamiliar were murmuring about updates on TTlive, Oscar was at the Cregg, then for the final time the light comes up and while I felt slightly disappointed that the big finish was but a black and green blur (not that I quite know what I was expecting otherwise) the crowd suddenly burst out into applause and cheering could be heard from several areas. Now the activity moves to where we are and fans line the upper end of the return lane waiting to welcome Oscar, Debbie and Rob back...there is a feeling of relief and an overwhelming sense of joy, very few dry eyes and lots of clapping. When Oscar finally pulls up at parc ferme I for one didn't know whether to expect laughter or tears...milk was not what I was expecting but it certainly swung the crowd to laughter, and then tears, and then more laughter all of which was captured by a wall of cameras. It's difficult for me to describe the feeling other than one of a great sense of happiness and pride and what our friends had achieved, history had been made, dreams realised and for some of us, the stirrings inside to get more involved in this unique and slightly mad sport. The celebrations began there and then, the hugs and wet eyes continued and more cameras appeared. When we were finally shoo-ed away, having left Oscar under technical holding we rushed ahead of Debbie and Rob (who were being treated to a walk of pride through the spectators) to prepare for their return to camp where members of the team had decorated with banners, balloons, flowers, party poppers and champagne on ice. Suddenly the celebrations took on a more private feeling as Team Oscar only awaited for...and what the hell was taking her so long (!), Debbie to get back (Rob had long since arrived and was enjoying a much deserved cider)...finally the lady of the moment turns up...and the rest is on film.

One particular memory from the rest of the evening that still makes me laugh was Oscar's return to camp..."LOOK! Stig's riding it" a voice shouts, the look on Debbie's face...absolutely...priceless.

This was my first TT being actively involved in an element of the races, a privilege, an honour and an inspiration. The next challenge comes only a week away as I write this in the 2012 Southern 100 and then I'm assured more trips away are on the cards to favourite tracks such as Mallory, Anglesey and even Donnington (particularly memorable for all sorts of reasons by both driver, passenger and pit crew). For now however, the Team Oscar story continues...



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