

# WELSH RAREBIT

**"R**oss-ell, Ross-ell! You organised this, now you come and ride with me." Is this such a good idea? While it is obvious to anyone who watches Grand Prix racing on television that Ayrton Senna has what it takes, he probably hasn't driven for 20 miles on the loose yet. And he wants you to sit beside him in the Metro 6R4 for the last run of the day. The run he says he is going to do with "more push".

He waits while you are strapped in. Why do you always feel awkward being fitted up with a four-point harness? You always end up sitting on a belt and having to squidge around to retrieve it. That never happens to professional drivers. Three weeks ago you sat in a Clubman Metro with Marc Duez – he of the innocent smile and wicked opposite lock – and then moved onto the wild-eyed exuberance of Tony Pond in the full factory ride. That was impressive, but it was at Castle Combe race circuit. There's a smattering of Armco barrier at Combe. Here there are conifers and ditches and a chewed up dog-end of a surface.

A thought. If Ayrton Senna has only ever driven single-seaters and karts – with just one Mercedes-Benz celebrity race and one Porsche 956 sportscar ride, both at the Nurburgring to break the mould – how many people have actually sat with him in a motor sport machine? Only, presumably, those present today.

"OK? We go." With that Ayrton twists the key and blips the throttle. This Metro is noisy. Inside the works car the volume level is reputed to be higher than inside the cockpit of a fighter aircraft. There are various whirrings and clickings and the sharp bite as the engine note rises. Looking ahead it feels closer to the standard Metro than the wacky bewinged exterior would suggest. Senna sits close to the wheel, arms bent, hands at quarter-to-three, relaxed.

He goes for it from the start. In hard to the first left – and you can hear why the sounds from beneath the car worried him so. This Metro is being pebble-dashed. And the Metro flicks around in a gentle half-spin. Senna smiles at you and shunts around like a spinster in a supermarket car park. He had the spin under control from exactly the point of no return – until that time he had fought it, tango-ing on the throttle to bring the front end back from never-never land.

Off again. And he's hard into the power. Hands twitching the wheel: he uses smaller movements than Duez on what is a less adhesive, less predictable surface. But what you notice most is his right foot. It is never still. Ayrton Senna is literally tapping the throttle through a half-inch of travel. Continuously. The rev-counter doesn't flicker, but he's dancing on the accelerator with tiny movements. This car is getting very sideways.

Then you tumble it. Ayrton Senna is using the throttle to keep the front end working, to give him some – as he puts it – bite. The Metro oversteers, drifts, and Senna retrieves it by kissing the throttle to give him some feel as he turns in. By playing with the power he is making the car more manageable. But to do it in such small doses is remarkable, particularly as it sounds as if all hell is breaking loose beneath the car.

End of stage. Senna slows, turns the Metro round. "This is good fun!" he beams at you from beyond his visor slot. And he charges off into the sequel.

There's a long right-hander which Senna wants to take tight. He doesn't aim at the corner but at the inside of the bank. He launches the Metro's inside two wheels at the bank and his side of the car leaps three feet in the air. He doesn't lift: you wonder for a split-second what the hell you've done to offend him. Over the yump the back end gets frisky and leaps high in the air. Senna expected it, caught the car neatly on landing. You didn't. Through the final corners, he's still working at it. Tweaking the wheel, jiving with the power-pedal, aiming to come out fast, shimmying up the shale stacked at the side of the track.

That's it, over. "Thank you" he says, digging you in the ribs. Although it is a terribly unfair comparison, there were no giveaways that he wasn't as used to a rally car as Messrs Duez and Pond. Perhaps on a rally he would be less physical, more concerned about saving the car than on this flat-out sprint-stage. But, to the untrained eye, he didn't look out of his depth or unfamiliar in his new surroundings. He just seemed to be fast.

Riding shotgun with Ayrton Senna is fast, fluid and far from frightening

