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A smashing night out

Fed up with Formula One? Rebecca Feiner recommends an evening at the Banger races



Men of steel: an action-packed night of racing at Wimbledon Stadium

By Rebecca Feiner

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The yellow street lights are wreathed in a wintry mist as we approach Wimbledon's Plough Lane Stadium for what is billed as the biggest night in the national Banger racing calendar, the 2003 Championship of the World. There is a palpable mood of anticipation as a jolly crowd, all wrapped up against the cold, crisp night, form chaotic but good-humoured queues. There are mums, dads, babies, children of all ages, couples, grandparents, friends on a night out and what seems to be a fairly even split between the sexes, all adding to a sense of genuine, welcoming friendliness. A burger van at the gate dishes out its wares with a very British sense of style and fills the air with a heady scent of sizzling onions that mixes well with the waft of racing oil coming from the nearby pits.

It is certainly a long way from the manicured, prima-donna world of Formula One. As we shuffle up to the front of the queue, the ticket-booth lady searches in vain through the envelopes in her old cardboard box and my suggestion of looking under Daily Telegraph is greeted with gutsy laughter: "Is that some kind of wind-up, love?" For £14 (£7 for children and OAPs) we get pre-race entertainment in the form of the Mega Mini stunt show and the Romford Marching Band, then eight races for Bangers and Stock Cars, including the main attraction, the World Banger Championship, and a firework display that promises to be the loudest south London has ever seen. If you've still got the energy, the total-carnage climax of the evening is a Demolition Derby.

The indoor bar and catering facilities are basic but welcoming; toddlers play among the tables while patient queues form for chips, burgers, hot and cold drinks or pints of lager; many of those

outside on the terraces have come equipped with flasks and blankets so they don't miss any of the racing. As a Banger virgin, I haven't been that far-sighted, but in future I'd recommend a flask of hot chocolate, adding a touch of brandy (if you're not driving) to see the night through; on a warm summer evening, you could omit the hot chocolate. At Wimbledon Stadium you can watch from glazed, indoor stands, but I want to get as close as possible to the action.

Out in the dark paddock and pits area, illuminated only by pools of light from portable inspection lamps, small groups of eager spectators gather around sturdy-looking mechanics tuning up unsilenced engines and admire the astonishingly shiny and colourful bodywork of the lethal-looking, stripped-out and windowless racers, all lovingly painted with monikers such as Eco Warrior, Team Mental, Gonzo, Beevis and Captain Damage. On a quick walkabout, we find lots of Ford Granadas, plus Jaguars, Datsuns, assorted hearses and a most unlikely looking, electric-green Daimler limousine. With drivers from 16 to 60 years of age, this is real DIY racing, with a sense of humour and a stylish abandon unhampered by image-conscious sponsorship deals.

I take up a ringside position a few yards from the starter's rostrum, noting that the democratic proportions of the stadium allow everyone a good view. By now the place is heaving with a capacity crowd eager to see whether the reigning world champion, Mark Simmonds, can defend his title against all the odds. There's a distinct whiff of gladiatorial combat amid the burning rubber as more than 43 armoured warriors noisily take their places on the grid — drawn by lot — to do battle for a place in the Banger Hall of Fame.

This is the big one. To cheering crowds and the strains of The Knight's Dance from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet on the lo-fi PA system — the lesser races make do with Lt Pigeon's Mouldy Old Dough — a blonde in a short skirt walks through the grid with a little sign saying "Gentlemen, Start Your Engines". Beside me, a small, golden-haired girl is held aloft by her dad as she eagerly strains to get a better view of the vivid, cartoon-like machines, growling like circus lions under the floodlights.

Behind the flashing lights of a pace car they move off slowly for a rolling start, so many that the tail-enders have hardly left the line before the pace car is almost upon them again. With one more rolling lap, the chequered flag drops and they're off with a mighty, discordant roar, drivers swerving chaotically through clouds of dust as they try to get through the combat zone ahead — within seconds of the start, there are mammoth pile-ups at both ends of the oval track. The survivors hammer their way around with ever increasing damage, radiators smashed, boot lids pointing at the sky, sparks flying amid trails of steam and the sound of tortured engines and mangled metal.

Some cars, done for, coast off into the centre of the track or grimly crawl and grind around as their clutches fail and their wheels fall off. Others, having lost all chance of victory, decide to settle scores instead and perform shuddering three or four or five-point turns, taking cover among the wrecks that litter the track and lying in wait for the return of their still-speeding foes before launching themselves into the oncoming traffic to more or less devastating effect and huge cheers from the crowd. As the programme says: "No one remembers a hit for as long as a Banger driver, and eventually they are going to get their man — provided they haven't been got first."

Above all, there is plenty of daring skill and good-humoured showmanship; the proximity of the audience allows everyone to feel as much a part of the event as the drivers and their mechanics. There are only eight cars running at the end of the 15-lap race and rusting pick-up trucks immediately descend on to the track, Mad Max style, to clear the carnage, to tumultuous applause. The smoking wrecks are dragged out of the stadium back to the pits, where the mechanics miraculously revive them by hook or by crook (but mainly by sledgehammer) for the next race.

Despite all the mayhem, the crashes and occasional fires, this combination of automotive armageddon and floodlit theatrical extravaganza causes fewer injuries than football or rugby. The fans are here for a good night out and a laugh, as reflected by the widespread hilarity induced when a naked male (with an obvious fondness for pies) runs his own spontaneous lap of honour at the end of the prizegiving ceremony — in which Dave Vincent from West Row, Suffolk, is crowned 2003 Banger Champion of the World. Last year's champ, amazingly, managed to come through from the back of the grid to finish second.

Though cold, I am sorry to leave. The post-race pits look like a battlefield full of twisted metal, yet nobody is going home broken-hearted and the drivers, mechanics and spectators alike have clearly enjoyed the simple pleasure of taking part in a smashing night out. It's good to know that old-fashioned sportsmanship is alive and well.

- The next Banger event at Wimbledon Stadium takes place on Wednesday night (Dec 7) and features "Siamese" races with Mini Metros mounted on top of Ford Sierras (the driver of the Metro steers while that of the Sierra operates accelerator and brakes). For more information, telephone Spedeworth International on 01420 588020 or go to www.stockcar.co.uk.