

# FOCUS

## Brum Brum

When Nigel Mansell's tyre exploded in the Australian Grand Prix last autumn it was an image that captured the imagination of millions. They are the new audience that follows motor racing as a television sport. Like snooker and bowls, motor racing has found a dramatically enlarged following through the medium of television, and in particular BBC2's *Grand Prix* on Sunday evenings.

You won't find these millions at your average motor race meeting. The British Grand Prix, as one of Britain's premier sporting occasions, attracts over 100,000 people. But after that, a couple of meetings might draw 20-30,000, and then it's 10,000 or more likely much smaller. By and large, only the motor racing enthusiast makes the trek to one of Britain's dozen or so permanent circuits like Silverstone and Brands Hatch.

The Birmingham city council has changed all that. Britain's second city, as it likes to be known but whose national profile has generally belied, set about trying to get a motor race around its city centre many years ago. It made a lot of sense. The West Midlands experience of recession has been more traumatic than most. The city needed a new image and new sources of employment. While, of course, Birmingham, along with Coventry, is the home, economically and culturally, of the motor industry.

After a long quest, motor racing finally took place for the first time around the streets of Birmingham a year ago. On August bank holiday this year, 100,000 people turned out for the Birmingham Superprix, an enormous crowd given it was not a Formula 1 race.

This was motor racing with a difference. It brought it to a community rather than vice versa. As councillor John Charton, the chair of the motor racing committee, puts it: 'The council wanted a spectacular but distinctly Birmingham carnival'.

That's exactly what it was. Jugglers, street theatre, a mardi gras marching band, sword swallows and rock bands vied all day with the motor racing. It

was an occasion for the family, easily Birmingham's biggest turnout for a decade, and highly multi-racial, like Birmingham itself.

But there was another sense in which it didn't seem like an ordinary motor race. Motor racing, like many sports, isn't exactly 'socially aware'. And, for fairly obvious commercial and technical reasons, it's an expensive game. Moreover, big money - from sponsorship to hospitality suites - is more and more calling the tune.

The Birmingham meeting was somehow different. There was the carnival. There was the enormous multi-racial crowd. There were the streets of an inner-city. There were the houses and flats around the circuit bearing home-made stickers, banners and posters, their residents proud to be in the national spotlight. There were the banners at each cor-



Second city's Superprix

ner with the name of the corner and the slogan 'slow down on smoking'. There was the impressive litter patrol. There was a PA system, with its discussions about Birmingham's problems, often (though not often enough) in Birmingham accents.

The Birmingham Superprix showed not only that a council can organise a motor race, but that it can do it differently, with a social awareness. The Labour council captured not only the imagination of Birmingham but also that of the motor racing-public. As the Tories prepare their next assault on local government, Birmingham city council at least has found new friends in a seemingly most unlikely quarter. #

Peter Harvey