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I'm a celebrity - get me out of here!

Part of the editor's job is to respond to press and TV enquiries about our hobby. Until recently these were a comparatively rare occurrence and usually came from journalists wishing to write a 'humorous' piece about grown men playing with toy plastic cars.

In recent months though there seems to have been a mass outbreak of interest in Scalextric in general and the NSCC in particular which is probably a reflection of the current boom in slot-car sales. Rob Smith and the Farnham club were featured in 'Intersection' magazine a few months ago and I believe Max Winter's Maxi-Models concern is also about to have its 15 seconds of fame in the same publication. Just today I have received two phone calls; one from the BBC about an auction type programme containing an early Scalextric set and another from a freelance journalist enquiring about James Bond items.

Yet another call came from 'Choice' magazine which wanted to do a feature on how couples coped when one partner had a hobby which the other half didn't share. "Could I recommend one of our members who might be interested?" - cue 'Bloody Daft Idea Animal'! Thus it was that Chris and myself spent a pleasant Sunday morning entertaining staff photographer, Clive Nicholls.

The end result can be found on the shelves of a newsagent near you (February or March issue) and should include some shots of your editor hard at work. Take care though - the magazine is aimed at the over fifties so best you hide it inside a copy of your daily newspaper if you wish to retain your street cred!

I'm still waiting for the invitation from ITV to spend a fortnight in the Australian jungle with Jordan and her pals!

And Finally - A recent email caught my attention; it was yet another of those Nigerian scam letters offering me untold wealth. The author was a certain Chief Kola Simon - is Hornby's Marketing Manager leading a double life? I think we should be told!

Till next month

Brian





The 2004 Scalextric Catalogue hit the shops earlier than usual this year and I'm sure most of you will have seen a copy by now. Edition 45 has a new look and feel and returns to a portrait format not seen for a few years now. The catalogue has a real "buzz" to it and is illustrated with plenty of pictures of real cars and Scalextric cars in action. In these fast moving slot-car days it is already out of date and there are some changes to the proposed range for us to look forward to.

C2583/4 Williams F1

The Williams BMW F1 team have announced a new car for 2004 with a radically different nose cone. Hornby are anxious to keep up to date so we will see a complete new Williams this year, not just a new livery. As a new mould this car will be in both Standard and Sport versions.

C2554/5 McLaren F1

To balance the production schedule the 2004 McLaren will now only be a relivery in a Standard version.

C2574 Ford Mustang

The yellow road Mustang has the slatted rear screen so characteristic of the real thing. Road versions of the Camaro and Corvette are also new to the range this year.

C2592/3 Audi A4

The A4 will not be produced this year but instead we will see new Opel Vectras in both Standard and Sport versions. The C numbers remain the same.

C2506/7 and C2478/9 Audi TT and Porsche Boxster

These cars are shown in the catalogue as computer generated images. The liveries shown are only indicative of what they may finally look like. I was shown the hand decorated mock ups of a Boxster in red with silver stripes and large Porsche lettering and a silver Audi TT with big red Audi logos. The lights are printed on (like the NASCARs). These cars have one piece bodyshells including black painted windows as there are no interiors. In the 2004 price list they have a recommended retail price of only £15.00. They are small and light and go ever so quickly! Exactly which cars will be in set C1180 and the Track Packs is also still to be decided.

C2553 Ford Torino

This car is huge, a good 10mm longer than a NASCAR and at least as wide. I was shown an early prototype and the final details are still being revised. The catalogue makes no mention of a Sport version but the price list does. Your guess is as good as mine! The other car in set C1137 will be a Corvette but the livery is undecided.

C2564/5 BMW Mini Cooper S

These are shown in the picture as ordinary Coopers but are in fact the S model.

C2585/6 ASCARs

These are the Pontiac GP NASCARs with inline motors. They will also be in set C1135 "Bash-n-crash".

⇒

Set C1147 Hot Pursuit contains a version 1 Subaru Impreza. The final livery is yet to be decided.

**C2545 Ford Mustang "Modelzone"
No3
Limited edition of 1000**



C8296/7 Banked curves

These are suitable for all cars and have gentle 10° banking. The curves are raised by several wedge shaped supports under each piece. Radius 3 supports are higher to go outside radius 2 banked curves giving a smooth four lane track surface. Ideal for the new bikes these curves will also be popular for the NASCAR banked ovals.

Moto GP

The news of the forthcoming Moto GP motor bikes has raised much interest. Catalogue 45 doesn't provide much information and a special bike catalogue is due in the next couple of weeks. I was lucky enough to try a couple of pre-production examples and found them great fun. Being 1/18th in scale they have a fabulous amount of detail. The rider is held on with a magnet so that in an accident he falls off. A new, small motor powers the back wheel through a shaft with pinion and teeth on the rear wheel rim. Although they don't lean they do go extremely well. Balance is provided by a pair of wings that just skim the track surface. When the bike is moving they are hardly noticeable.

Sport Digital

The Sport Digital press release has also raised a huge amount of discussion as it may well change the face of slot racing as we know it. With the launch being at next week's Toyfair information is still thin on the ground but Hornby did share this information with us.

For those of you have missed the press release Sport Digital allows up to 6 cars to race on the same two lane circuit with opportunities for both blocking and overtaking the opposition.

The cars contain a microchip on a small PCB and an infra-red LED. The chip controls the power and the LED the lane changing equipment. The LED shines through a small hole in the chassis positioned centrally just behind the guide flag. This equipment can be retrofitted to any car where there is room for the PCB and there is a hole for the LED. New chassis of the current range of cars should be available with appropriate clips and hole.

Lane changing occurs on a 90 degree radius 2 curve. There are right and left handed versions. They only work in one direction. This curve takes the car from the outer to the inner lane. A half straight precedes the curve containing an infra-red sensor. When the car passes this sensor with the button on the throttle depressed the lane change is activated. It all happens so quickly that any cars following do not make the same change inadvertently. The initial Digital set will contain just one lane change track piece and a normal racing crossover. This should ensure that the cost of incorporating digital in your circuit is not too high. Another key success factor to Sport Digital is the fact that it is compatible with all of your other Sport Track, and via the track converters all of your other old track too.

So who is going to have the first digital tinplate cars running on rubber track?

Sport World

Another revolutionary new idea from Hornby that has been confused with Digital already; Sport World allows up to 6 cars to be raced against each other. Nothing new there, but they

don't have to be in the same location. The idea is that the same circuit is built at several locations and the Internet used for race management. This is not just a simple case of lap counting and timing but, thanks to sensors around the track, the computer simulates where the opposition are on their circuit and represents the whole field graphically.

Update

Just before Christmas the two new Australian V8s began to circulate. These are C2519 Holden Commodore VX Valvoline No34 and C2520 Ford Falcon AU Shell No17. Both have excellent liveries but have black windows.



C8157 and C8159 Challengers appeared in small numbers just before Christmas too. For those having difficulty with them there is a new FAQ on the Scalextric web site. Having really round rear tyres is critical to their smooth operation.

Oops

When is a limited edition not a limited edition? Apparently when it is C2394 Dallara Indy "Red

Bull" No52. In the UK this model was only officially available through the Scalextric Collectors Centres in a limited edition run of 1000. A gold sticker on the sleeve identifies them. However, the car is available everywhere else in the world in unlimited numbers. Many of these have come straight back into the UK to meet demand. They don't contain limited edition stickers. So it would appear that the only limited edition bit of C2394 is the sticker!

Very plain

When production in Margate stopped and everything went to China there were a number of items part way through production that were never completed. This included several boxes of unfinished body shells. Whilst tidying up in the warehouse recently these boxes came to light and a number of plain bodyshells have appeared on the market. Those spotted so far are:

Toyota Corolla – light red, dark red, white

Subaru Impreza – black, white, pale blue, yellow

Williams F1 – white shell with red wings, barge boards and airbox

Metro 6R4 – green with BP on the roof but no printing on the sides

If you know of any others please let me know. I wonder what else is lurking in the dark corners of the Margate factory.

Moving house

It was reported last year that Hornby were trying to do a deal with B&Q next door to swap buildings. B&Q would build a new warehouse on the old Hornby factory site and Hornby would convert the modern B&Q building into new offices, research and design facilities and a new heritage centre. Despite widespread local approval and the fact that lots of jobs would be created the government rejected the planning application in a statement made between Christmas and the New Year. Something to do with stopping out of town development. Hornby are reconsidering their plans and may renovate some of the existing site or move elsewhere. Unfortunately this means that plans for a heritage centre have to be postponed for the time being. ■

Traders travels

By Robert Learmouth
(Westwood Models)

After nearly 30 years of waiting patiently, I finally got to visit the Hornby 'factory' in January, courtesy of the 2004 Dealer Presentation. Well great, I wait that long and then find out that production moved to China some years ago. No seriously now, having referred to it as the factory for all these years, it's still that in my own mind so I was still pleased to 'step inside'. Okay, so there really isn't much to see any more and one of the highlights was the opportunity to view (twice) the remarkably original washroom facilities but I was still happy! And it was worth the trip just to see Adrian in a suit!

More on Ebay (just for a change) later but worthy of early mention this month was the appearance of a superb collectable in the shape of a very special Merc CLK. This was a one off photo shoot car decorated ('Your logo here') to show off what the factory could do in the way of low volume promotional production (resulting in cars like the Cummins Jag XJ220). The car came complete with a copy of the promotional literature. Now to my mind, this is a genuine 'rare' and special item. Very symbolic in showing that just a few years ago Hornby were sufficiently in the mire to go drumming up business for a profit that couldn't have run much past a few hundred quid on occasion. The final price was £731, past my own already high estimate but as £700+ spends go, this was a worthy one.

How times change. The early indications are that Hornby are likely to go roaring ahead of the chasing pack this year with a mind blowing product range announcement. There are no less than 80 new vehicle releases, to say nothing of Digital and Sport World. Plus the return of the Banked Curve – in 2 variants! Bearing in mind deliveries don't start until the 2nd quarter, that's 8 or 9 new cars a month on average. Flippin 'eck!

The Mercedes wasn't the only tasty item witnessed through Ebay last month. Other cars hitherto unknown to many were a blue 40th anniversary Mini fetching £315 and a light blue March 6-Wheel hitting £205. A pair of GT40 test shots offered on behalf of Hornby attracted generous bidding approaching the £500 mark each with proceeds going to a very worthy cause. A P&G green Bentley (albeit mint/boxed) attracted curiously high bidding at £87. That would normally get you a decent unboxed 60s original plus a little change. Meanwhile a considerably more desirable mint/boxed NSCC Datsun fetched just £100 with 1 bid only. And if I see anyone else describe the German GT40 as rare I think I'll shoot them. 2000 made, just a few weeks ago - rare? Sought after yes, rare no.

And while we're having a giggle about misappropriation of the word 'rare' on Ebay, here's some more items for you described as such. Crash barriers, wedges, round blue transformer - all in 1 bumper lot; Sport Track Leaflet, Rev Start, C4 Javelin, C126 Lotus and BP/Esso Metros.

One of the bargains of the month had to be an employee car (with name - these are usually removed) that went for just £172. These change hands for around £350 normally. Ebay is a curious place and the longer this sort of stuff goes on the more you question whether conventional terminology and pricing, ie amongst NSCC members is really the norm any more.

I'll close this month by wishing everyone a happy Milton Keynes that may or may not be over by the time you read this. No other swapmeet has the same buzz around it with dealers spending the weeks in the run up deciding and talking about what they are going to take. And with the event occurring not long after the start of the year you feel like it kicks off and sets the tone for the rest of the year. ■

Talking Tracks

Model Maker - January 1962

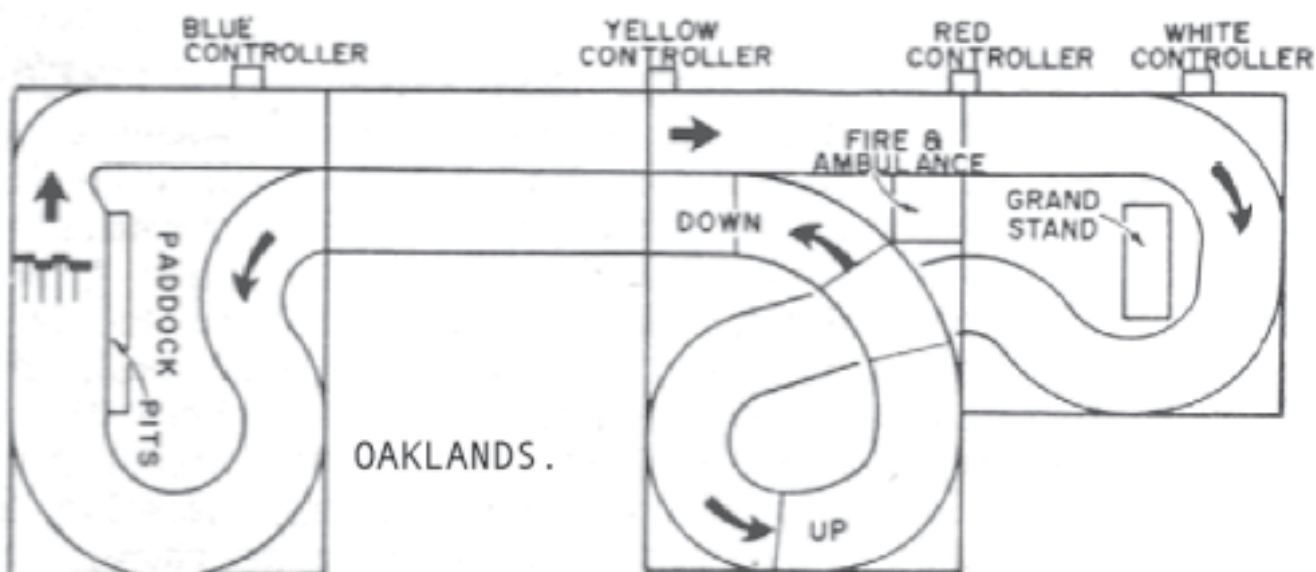
From Vince Feeney

On 6th/7th January, 1962, the Oaklands Park Circuit in Birmingham will see the first Classic meeting in the Midlands proper. These notes are by way of an introduction for the many drivers who will be travelling from all parts of the country to compete.

O.P.M.C.C.'s first circuit was 3-lane 26ft. laps. No doubt many remember seeing it featured on I.T.V. two years ago. The present club track is 4-lane, 42ft. lap, and is laid on a chip-board base giving good tyre adhesion. For the Grand Prix the track length will be increased to 50ft. M.R.R.C. rail on nylon pegs is used as a negative and guide and 18G. phosphor bronze wire for the positive. no doubt many will not agree with the latter. However, it has been found that a small positive does not interfere with drifts on left-hand bends, nor are narrow-track cars thrown by catching the usual big low rail. The Grand Prix track has a 30ft. fast section and the remainder is tight bends and a hill.



Transformers, rectifiers and relays are all government surplus and housed in a separate control box which is plugged into the track. The starting mechanism incorporates two warning klaxons, a red and a green light. The track is not "live" until the green light is on. The dial lap-counters are visible to all and in the eleven months of operation have yet to miss a lap - a point which is worthy of note. ■



www.Scalextricauctions.co.uk

Children In Need 2003

By Rob Chambers

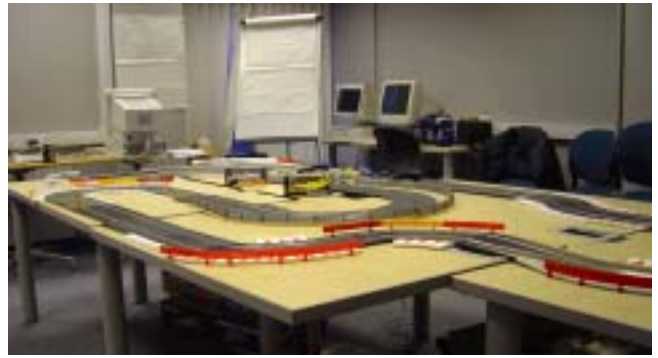
Around the end of August last year, a colleague mentioned in passing that he would like to do some kind of fund-raising event for Children In Need; this had come about by him picking up a sponsor pack from the local BBC offices. Nothing more was said on the matter, until the Monday morning that I returned from the NSCC / Hornby weekend at Ramsgate, and mentioned that we should organise a Scalextric fund-raising event at work. This was deemed to be an excellent idea; we would get a day off work (annual leave of course), to have some fun, the chance to play??!! with toy cars, and the best bit, raise some (hopefully a lot of) money for a good cause.

We had short of 3 weeks to come up with an idea on how to get this idea into something a little bit more concrete, and also to find a location where to hold the event. This was sorted within a day, as permission was given to us to use one of the training rooms in an annexe building. Suggestions for the race format were then debated; these were along the lines of 12-hour endurance races, team challenges, and all sorts of other equally ludicrous ideas. Eventually we came up with the following format four days before the big day:

1. Charge each racer 50p entrance per race.
2. A 20p forfeit would be paid each and every time a racer would come off of the track (whether by their own means or some dastardly deed by another racer).
3. And finally a losing monetary forfeit.

Items 2 and 3 were dropped as it could prove to be too expensive for us crap racers!

The night before, we got back to the office around 17.30 and unloaded the car of my entire track. Designing and building the track took around an hour; this was done by carefully placing 5 average office desks of slightly varying heights together, and throwing down a couple of wanted special features, which included side swipe hairpin, a pair of racing cross-overs and an SCX ice effect skid set.



With the track completed, all that was left was to briefly test the circuit to make sure electrical continuity was perfect. During this test session the decision of which cars to be used was made. GT40s were discarded as they stuck too well, Mini Clubmans fell off too often, Renault Méganes and Porsche GT1 cars were found to be the perfect cars for the following day's activities. With new braids fitted to all the cars, it was time to call it a day.

The following morning came the realisation that the advertisers had not done their part of the job. This, as you can imagine, was due to the fact they were too busy testing the circuit the night before. You just can't get good qualified staff. An hour then was spent perfecting posters, printing, amending them, printing again, then adding the location, printing the damn things once more, and distributing these around two buildings on the site.

The event was the only one held at ntl in Nottingham last year, the first one that the network department, for whom I work, had ever arranged and the first race event, and I use the term loosely, that I had organised.

A total of £101.30 was raised for Children in Need on the day and, although not a vast amount, it was better than doing nothing at all. And a lot of fun was had at the same time.

Roll on November this year, as we are planning to do a similar thing again, hopefully Scalextric will have their Digital system out, 2 lanes 4 cars this might be more of a gas than 2003. One final thought. This fund-raising business could be an expensive game. Seems worth it though. ■



Sir,

I was wondering if either you or any other members could help me out with a few questions I have?

1) First I'd like to know the best way to put power to a track (I'm currently using "Scalextric Classic" track). At the moment I'm using two 12 volt power supplies (one for each lane) which were in sets I bought from car boot sales, the number on them both is C922. Ideally to cut down on the amount of wires running around the place I'd like to use a "power base" but after trying two (from the early '90s) I find there to be quite a lot less power than there is running straight from a power supply. Do the latest power bases suffer from this problem?

2) Now on to lap counters, I'm running on a budget and would like to know what the best lap counter is. I don't have a computer I can use so it can't be a computer based one. The only one I have is one of the old "dial" type with a "switch" in the track which is very unreliable, even more so as I don't run with magnets all that often and find the cars often hop over the "switch". I'm probably not looking to spend more than £40 at the moment, is it unrealistic to get a reliable one for that price?

3) A question on brakes! How can I wire my track to work with brakes? I know it probably isn't worth it for a small circuit (about 9 metres) but I'd like to know anyway as it might be worth considering when (if) I start up a club locally.

4) Is SCX track compatible to Scalextric "Classic" track or would I need some sort of converter track? I have an idea that it is but want to know for sure. Does it give the same level of grip?

5) What cars would these be? The first memories of Scalextric I have are from the early 70s when I was very young so I can't remember a great deal, all I can recall is having a set which had crossovers in it and there were three cars, I presume one was bought separately but I wouldn't know which one. All the cars were sports prototypes sort of thing, the two that were alike were orange and the one that was different was blue. The only other thing I can remember is that the blue one had a body that was a bit rounder whereas the others seemed to be sharper. I actually saw some at the Newark swapmeet and meant to ask someone but got my mind on something else and forgot. I couldn't really put a date to them but I think it could have been around 73 or 74 but, knowing my dad, he probably got them second hand anyway.

While on the subject of sports prototypes, while I was at the Newark swapmeet I picked up my first ever non- Scalextric cars, two Fly Chevrons, one that says "Lucky Strike" on it, which my dad thinks were cigarettes, the other says "Tergal". Does anyone know what Tergal is or was? Does anyone know anything about the Chevrons when they used to race, things like, what engines they used, how successful they were, what nationality were they? I have quite a few car books but only one has a reference to them and doesn't say anything about them (there's a nice picture of the Tergal one though!). I must admit to being very pleased with the Fly models; they are by far the quickest cars I have now, as quick as any of my Scalextric, yet looking at the motor it looks like the same sort?

Also while I'm on the subject of sports prototypes, does anyone watch Motors TV? I was watching the Le Mans 1000km event a short while ago and the commentator mentioned that there is going to be a series of 1000km events run next year. The series is of four rounds held at Hockenheim, Monza, Spa, and Silverstone. I think they're the ones he said! Apparently these events will be used to help determine which cars will race at Le Mans.

This whole thing got me thinking (that's the second time this year!) and I wondered if anyone would be interested in doing a similar series for our slot-cars? Are there any clubs out there which would like to run a round? (It would have to be run at the weekends in case people have a long way to travel)? Obviously it would be a nightmare trying to work out 1000km on a 1/32-scale track, but as the full size races have a six-hour race limit as well, why not use that instead, each team getting an hour in each lane. It is something that I would be interested in doing and maybe even help organising it, if anyone is interested in such an event then why not give me a ring and we can put a few ideas together, I can be found on 01246 208193.

I am, yours etc,
Paul Roach

It is easy for us "old hands" to forget that newcomers to the hobby are baffled by the simplest (to us) questions. I can answer a few of these but hopefully other experienced members can give Paul a ring on the others.

SCX Track - yes converters are readily available. Get in touch with one of the dealers who advertise in the Journal and they will sort you out.

Mystery cars - almost certainly an Electra and a Javelin. I strongly recommend you buy Roger Gillham's book (new edition out in the Spring) for full information.

Chevrons - see Dave Yerbury's article in the January issue or give Dave a ring on 01254 875262 for more details.

Do we have a volunteer to answer new members' questions via the Journal?

Sir,

Early Nov '03 found me at the Haydock Toy Fair where I bought two motorcycles and sidecars, probably dating from the early 1990s.

I thought to myself - my brother-in-law likes motorbikes, so when my sister Jane invited us to Christmas day dinner, I suggested I took some Scalextric for a racing session. In her large house with a ready supply of guests (competitors?), she agreed. After the lovely meal we needed an interval before we re-arranged the dining tables and set up the track (a type of dog bone shape using the new crossovers as well).

Four types of cars were used:

2 x TR 7s from the early 1980s - re-motored but with old rubber on rears.

2 x Porsche 911s from early 1990s - heavy cars but good with new rear tyres and old magnets removed.

2 x 1990s style Mini Coopers - re-con. motors, new rear tyres, no magnets.

2 x Motorcycles, original motors and tyres (I think) - magnets removed.

Initially, we were short of competitors but once Emmerdale and Coronation Street were over we were ok for marshals, etc.

Most party guests had a go, some for the first time! We also had a female guest beat her partner in the races!

I think the Minis were the most popular; it's a while since I saw a Mini spin on its roof! The motorbikes seemed the hardest to control but good fun none the less.

The relatively new sport track with its lap counter/timer worked very well. My son Pete helped me pack away later and our host Jane handed out nicely wrapped chocolate bars to the race winners. Most of us won at least one race; it must help having a variety of cars to try out.

Thanks to the NSCC hints and tips, the cars behaved faultlessly. I suspect like many Scalextric owners, my cars and track don't see enough use and this was an ideal opportunity. The friendly rivalry and laughter I will remember for a long time.

I am, yours etc,
C.Rustage

Ninco 10th anniversary set

Reviewed by the Editor

In this second golden age of slot-cars it is easy to forget just how far we have come in a short time. Newcomers to the hobby have access to a vast array of exquisitely detailed cars from a multitude of manufacturers on the retailers' shelves.

But, cast your mind back to January 1993; Exin (the original Spanish Scalextric firm) went bust in late 1992. They would eventually be taken over by Tyco and produce some absolutely abysmal cars. Fly cars are four years down the road yet. Scalextric themselves are only just beginning to emerge from the dark days of the 70s and 80s. MRRC are still producing the same cars as they did in the 70s and nobody outside of Germany has even heard of Carrera.

Take a look at Scalextric catalogue #34 for confirmation - 1st page, "the Mighty Metro Set" - AAARRGGH! Page 22, cars with lights - Sierra Cosworths! Page 30, F1 - new car - a Minardi and that is a repaint of the already venerable Ferrari 643! Page 34, single seat racers - repaints of 1970s F1 cars! Page 38, Power & Glory cars - dire reissues of 1960s cars! Get the picture?

There is, however, one bright spark on the horizon. Two former employees of Exin, Eduard **Nin** (Development Director) and Eladio **Coscolluela** (Product Manager), formed a company to manufacture plastic products for the automobile industry, domestic appliances and computers. **Ninco** was born and within a year the two founders had returned to their first love, slot-cars, with the first offering appearing on the shelves by Christmas of that year.

It is a commonly held view that the Fly A1 Dodge Viper of 1996 was the (much needed) kick up the arse for Scalextric which led to the current superb standards of slot-cars. I do not agree - Ninco were already causing the English firm severe grief. By the time the Viper appeared they had an impressive line-up of no-nonsense, sensibly priced, good quality models making inroads into Hornby's market share.

Following on from the initial success of the Renault Clio they had produced virtually every DTM car, the first of the McLaren F1 GTRs, an impressive selection of rally cars and two "classic" cars from the 50s.

Which brings us to the point of this article - 2003 was Ninco's 10th birthday and they produced (an unusual occurrence for them) a limited edition set to celebrate the fact.

I don't know how "limited" this is - the one that the Hobby Company sent me bears the number 03477 - but it consists of an updated replica of the first Ninco car, 50101 Renault Clio, plus a glossy book detailing the history of the firm. Needless to say it is housed in the obligatory "fancy box".

The car

This is an exact replica of the white Clio with two exceptions - the decoration is now tampon printed instead of relying on the original stickers and it is fitted with the latest sprung guide. Everything else, including the NC1 motor, is as it was in 1993.

No doubt it would be seriously outclassed on the race track these days but, as very few of them will be removed from the box, it really doesn't matter very much. All in all a lovely little memento from "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away".

The book

This is a bit of a 'curate's egg' - good in parts; 222 pages providing a full history of the firm and colour pictures of every car that Ninco have made. It is well produced and neatly laid out in year chapters.

However there are two drawbacks - the English translation from the original Spanish is far from perfect and the authors have been a little "economical with the actualité" as regards slot-car history. ⇒

Now Spanish is notoriously difficult to translate as its sentence construction is markedly different to the other European languages; just take a look at the early issues of GSR magazine if you need an example. This book has all the hallmarks of being translated by a native Spanish speaker - parts of it are total gibberish. An English speaking proof reader would have transformed the thing.

It would be easy to get a cheap laugh by quoting parts of it but I have read it through twice now and, overall, it is understandable if a little heavy going in places.

More serious though are the liberties that the authors have taken with recent history; I can understand a manufacturer wanting to present his product in the best possible light but some of the claims made about Ninco's 'innovations' are simply ludicrous.

Just one example to make my point: "Ninco were the first to introduce perspex display cases in 1995". Try telling that to Airfix/MRRC who had them as standard in the late 70s; even Scalextric tried them with the Super Formula cars in the mid 70s.

Ninco have undoubtedly been responsible for some major innovations over the years, not least of which was their brave investment in a totally new track, but this book would have you believe they invented the wheel!

Buy it?

Ninco, and their English distributor - The Hobby Company - have been very supportive of the NSCC and I am a great fan of their products but I am in two minds whether to recommend this set.

On the one hand it is a nice little collector's piece but there are faults and I don't really think it justifies its full retail price of £55. No doubt diehard Ninco enthusiasts have already bought it but the casual buyer would be well advised to look for a discounted price.

Mind you the following quote (page 39), about the limited edition Clio they produced for us, could put things in a different light: "The British NSCC (National Scalextric Collectors Club), the most prestigious slotter's club in all of Europe"! Ninco - a firm that recognizes real class when it sees it! Go out and buy it folks - here's to the next ten years! ■

The Cocoanuts!

By Joel Thura

As you may remember, sometime last year, I told you about the Southend Slot Racing Club going to Paris in 2000 for the Spring swapmeet. As a reminder for 2004, this is how the 2003 trip went.

David Lawson had again decided to join me for the journey; this time, you may be glad to hear, I had booked in the correct hotel in plenty of time and planned to make it a 2-day trip.

As usual, the Circuits Routiers club organized a race on the Saturday before the swapmeet. This year, they decided to run SCX rally cars, on a 2-lane track using the Davic lane changing system. David was a little dubious about the whole idea, it's not a class of cars we normally race, we had to use the supplied throttles, and he was not convinced about the lane changing. Having used the lane changers myself, I managed to persuade him it was worth a try.

We set off early on the Saturday, and after a peaceful journey, we arrived at the venue around mid-day. We were promptly enrolled by Guy (the organiser) into helping him to set the room up.

The racing rules were explained, we were to race 4 cars at a time on a 2 lane track, the lane changing points being along the start finish straight; the system we used this time was automatic! I.e.: if you went past the sensor following another car, the system automatically assumed you wanted to overtake and changed lane for you!

Don't try this at home kids

By now, I was the one with doubts about the whole scheme. To spice things up, portions of the track were lifted up to create bumps etc... Worst still, a whole section was liberally sprinkled with cocoa powder to simulate a loose surface, not something you would want to try at home especially if the track is on the front room floor.

We started practice, promptly realized that there was too much cocoa clogging up the sensors, making lane changing haphazard. Apparently the brand of cocoa powder used is very critical, one brand is too sweet and sticky, another is too coarse, and I think the most effective is "Banania", a very well known French brand. But then again, they could not possibly use "Terry's All Gold" could they?



At some stage during practice Derek Cooper and Phil Smith arrived. I think Paris is one of their favourite swapmeets; one of the reasons is the Saturday race, as both are keen racers.

Practice went fine; David was getting used to the lane changers very well, and enjoying the experience. But I soon realized it was not going to be my day, tall rally cars with no magnets, have a tendency to fall off the track whenever I get near the controls.

The racing used a fairly complicated system of heats and finals. Off we went slip sliding through the cocoa powder, I don't think I managed to overtake anyone all day, but David seem to be doing fine. In the end, Derek Cooper came 2nd and David Lawson 3rd. And me, I hear you ask? Well I did manage to beat the two 7 year old boys, the 10 year old girl who had never raced before, and the sandwich woman who was drafted in to make up the numbers. Still, 28th isn't that bad if you say it quickly enough. =>



As ever during my French trips, I have to stock up on my favourite foods and wine. Because French shops are only open Sunday mornings (when we would be in the swapmeet) I went shopping Saturday evening after the racing was finished, and filled up the car boot with Camembert, goat's cheese, saucisson, tinned choucroute, brioche, chocolate coated Frosties for my son Shane (better than English Frosties he swears) etc...

The Saturday evening meal was fine, the swapmeet was great as usual. I can't remember what I bought, but Paris is always full of unusual stuff at reasonable prices.

Sunday turned out sunny and very warm, as we got back in the car, the smell of cheese was overpowering, we had to ventilate the car for ages with the doors and boot open, we then raced back towards Calais with the windows down.

This years spring swapmeet is on March the 7th; we'll see you there. ■

BITS AND PIECES

Oh rats!

We have all heard of the Rat Race, some may even think they are in it but does it look like this?



The latest infestation that has appeared on Rod Moore's Cumberland Toy Museum Scalextric layout

Ebay bargain time

Here are some interesting items that went for silly money on Ebay recently:

Scalextric Roadtrain "Mobil" sold for £201.50;

Scalextric low loader sold for £180.50;

Scalextric Roadtrain blue T45 sold for £311.75

Finally, Scalextric Roadtrain "Parmalat" which sold for £335.75.

All the above trucks were un-boxed but had the chrome fitted - I wonder if they got to their destination without that chrome snapping off!

Karl Cornell

More new tyres

R/S Slot Racing can now supply replica tyres for C76 Mini front wheel drive. This has been a very popular request at swapmeets. Also new to the range are racing tyres for Fly GT40/ Ferrari 365 and Slot.It Porsche 956/Audi R8. There are more new tyres due next month. You can now view the range at www.rsslotracing.com.

Rail Racing book sales for charity

Jeff Davies' book about Rail Racing should be available by the time you read this. Part of the proceeds will be donated to the "Round Table Children's Wish", a charity that has been 'granting wishes to children with life threatening illnesses' since 1990.

To this end the first run of twenty copies will be auctioned, as will a Slot Classics Auto Union - the first rail car built by a slot company and one of only 13 made. All offers are to be mailed to Sean at Pendle Slot Racing; the highest bid will get book number one and so on. Each book will be signed and numbered 1 through 20.

Jeff will also be motoring from Lands End to John O'Groats, visiting slot-car clubs on the way, to raise further funds.



One of a selection of postcards sent in by Don Siegel - I think it is advertising something!



Norman's conquest – revisited

Six years ago we ran a series of articles about Norman Griffiths – general manager of the Minimodels factory at Havant from 1964 to 1971. In a revised and expanded re-run of the original articles, Norman recalls his career, particularly those glory days of 1960s Scalextric.

Paul Strange reports:

Part 1: The first inklings of Scalextric

Today we take plastic for granted and it's easy to forget that before the Second World War it was a relatively new product. The plastics moulding industry was a highly specialised field in the 1930s and, not surprisingly, quality plastics craftsmen were thin on the ground. As a young man Norman Griffiths – originally from the Midlands – found he enjoyed the trade, learning the craft of plastic mould making with different firms in southern England before the war broke out. Back in civvy street, he returned to plastics, first making insulation cables for a firm in Tolworth, Surrey, followed by a job as a mould or “tool” room manager for a company in Ashford, Middlesex.

In August 1953 he heard that Rovex Scale Models required a tool room manager to oversee production of plastic model locomotive bodies for its blossoming line of HO/00 trains. Norman was intrigued by the job because the detail required on the trains was a different aspect of plastic moulding that he was keen to learn. Later that month he took up the appointment with Rovex in Richmond, Surrey, just before it was bought by Lines Brothers. Thus began a 17½-year career in Tri-ang model train and car manufacturing, that eventually led to Norman's appointment as general manager of the Minimodels factory at Havant, overseeing Scalextric production for much of the 1960s.

As tool room manager for Rovex, Norman inherited ten toolmakers, but quickly didn't see eye to eye with many of them, feeling that they

didn't meet his high standards. Within a week he was left with just one man. An urgent recruitment drive began, but the low wages on offer at Rovex didn't help.

“That's when I realised my problems!” says Norman, as we settle down for a long and fascinating chat at his home in Broadstairs, Kent. Now in his 80s, he pauses for a moment to cast his mind back more than 40 years.

“Plastic locomotive bodies are complicated to mould,” he continues. “They're virtually split down the middle with a join over the top of the boiler. I remember that a fin had broken off on one of the moulds and had embedded in part of the boiler contour. You have to cut back into the body, put a plug in there and then re-cut all the detail. I was working on that job myself when someone in the office said, ‘There's a toolmaker here for interview.’ We met and I showed him what I was doing – cutting out a cavity, filling it in, recutting all the pipework and the back of the boiler, and one thing and another.

“He looked at me and said, ‘This is very interesting. It seems good work’, and I agreed. Then he said, ‘How much are they paying?’ I



1964: Norman Griffiths (left) and assistant works manager Fred Harris cut a birthday cake for a member of the Scalextric production staff.



*Unveiled in 1957, the new Scalextric system was an immediate hit.
(Photo courtesy of Roger Gillham)*

told him and he said, ‘They want their brains tested!’ That’s when I realised I was going to have a slight difficulty in getting more staff!’

Shortly after this, Rovex’s new owners, Lines Brothers, announced they were moving train production to Margate. After some thought and an improved offer from the firm, Norman agreed to relocate and to continue work on train production, with increased responsibilities. He was still having problems finding good staff, though. “We got in touch with the labour exchange in Margate and recruited five tool makers. They were skilled men, so we put them up in digs in the Thanet area, where they could be trained up in our type of work. We chose Thanet because at the time there was a lot of plastic mould-making going on there. It was more or less the centre of the plastic-moulding business.” Once the men were trained, they, along with the rest of the staff at Lines Brothers, relocated to Margate in 1954.

Just two years later, Scalextric was born. Conceived by Fred Francis, the inventor/ proprietor of Minimodels, he modified three of the 1/27th scale metal-bodied clockwork Scalex racing cars produced by his company, installed

an electric motor (the E1, with a built-in axle and two pinions), and devised a rubber-based track system for them to run on. The track had two parallel grooves, metal rails within the grooves carried an electric current, and a unique “gimbal” wheel on the cars picked up that current, powering the engine which drove the rear axle. The car, controlled by a rudimentary on/off hand controller – or “dabber” – was guided round the track by the gimbal wheel embedded in the metal slot. Francis called the new product Scalextric (Scalex-electric).

Unveiled at the January 1957 Toy Trade Fair in Harrogate, Scalextric caused a sensation and went into immediate production, hitting the shops in July of that year. It was so successful that Minimodels were swamped with orders and the factory was unable to meet demand. To avoid making massive investments in a new factory, Francis sold Minimodels to Lines Brothers in November 1958.

Norman Griffiths was baffled – he simply couldn’t understand the appeal of Scalextric and why it was selling so well. He was soon to find out . . .

Next month: the French connection



**DTM 'Doppelganger'
SCX Mercedes CLK DTM "Vodafone"
Ref 61170**



Reviewed by Scott Brownlee

Another week: another new slot-car release. Sadly, too many of them are of models already made by rivals. Were these mass market, RTR affordable versions of some rare resin kit it would be no bad thing, but usually it is a case of Hornby copies TecniToys copies Fly copies Ninco copies Hornby. And so it is with the latest DTM racer to come from SCX, the Mercedes CLK DTM, which fights for shelf space, both retail and domestic, with an all but identical car from Hornby.

The car presents no technical novelties. The faithful RX-41 driving the rear wheels via a 9/21 gear set and copper strip wiring, providing not only robust reliability but a sprung front guide. The so-called Xenon lights impress with their brightness and focused beam making it possible to read trackside banners as you lap in the pitch dark. The body is held together with three screws in the usual 2-1 formation and the external bar magnet is easily removed via a couple of screws.

On track with the magnet still in place, the car is noisy and quick, but not fast. That is to say, it will corner as if on rails or even in a rail it is magnetically attracted to. The trouble with such a configuration is, it's no fun.

Without the magnet, the car becomes no quieter, although at least the need to modulate the throttle brings with it a change in pitch. The car also becomes visibly faster in a straight line and much more fun around the bends with the tail very happy and the front end rooted in the groove. Thanks to the torquey nature of the RX-41 the car is very controllable, perfect in many ways for those wishing to go magnet free for the first time since it will slide and whip around without endlessly de-slotting. The noise diminished somewhat with a little lubrication and running, but never really subsided enough to allow me to carry on listening to Christopher Lee reading Sherlock Holmes stories on the radio. Sad to say, the rear wheels were not round in the truest sense =>





Mirror image - or is it? Spot the SCX car



of the word, but then few are these days. As mentioned, this isn't the year's first Vodafone CLK since Hornby released their version about six months ago. Swapping between the two the close visual similarities are not matched by sound or action. Where the SCX car sounds like a coffee grinder the Hornby is a dentist's drill. Where the SCX sweeps its way round bends the Hornby car tips and darts.

Against the clock the senses are confounded, for the SCX car, despite apparently spending too much time sideways, is faster. Specifically, it took 7.2 sec vs. 7.4sec to cover 15m of mostly classic track with a bit of Sport arranged in four longish straights with U-bends of all possible radii. So convinced was I that the SCX car's advantage was merely a consequence of its forgiving nature that I repeatedly tried to beat the time with a smooth, perfect lap with the Hornby car. I never did, but all the practice made me able to lap the SCX car even quicker. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

The Hornby appears to suffer, if that's the right word, from too much grip. The tyres won't slide so much as tip, suggesting a higher centre of gravity, while the SCX car is more stable and forgiving. My guess is that on all but a big, smooth track the SCX will lap faster.

Curiously, the cars on-track behaviour is predicted by their static appearance. Viewed apart the Hornby car looks smaller, but is in fact the same size. The optical illusion is caused by the SCX car's slightly bigger window apertures, wheels and logos. These have also helped the Spanish maker capture more of a low slung racer look that seems right even if it might fail a micrometer test.

The Hornby car is summed up by the word finesse. The livery is crisper, the moulding sharper, and the details smaller. The SCX is typically, well, SCX. It's all there and it looks right on its own, but closer examination reveals the shape and livery are a bit more blunt and the colours a bit thinner. For on-the-shelf appeal the SCX wins by virtue of those apparently bigger wheels filling the arches and the correctly positioned driver figure making up for the less glossy finish and absence of small metal details

such as brake discs. It's swings and roundabouts to be honest and unless your club has a concours section this will matter little. As ever, if you want precise replication on a smaller scale buy a die cast from Minichamps.

It should be noted that the SCX car is cheaper to buy than either the Hornby or die cast. At about £25 or less it is very good value. Maybe it is that bit cheaper to ship from China to Spain than to England.

I think SCX cars are fun and this Merc is no exception. I am looking forward to racing it on both plastic and wood tracks this week. Given the poor past performance of the Hornby version I have no doubt it will be more competitive, if only because of the better retardation afforded by the RX motor when racing without brakes and the general stability in bends. But will it beat the Nincos? - Time will tell. ■

REVIEW BITS AND PIECES

By Ray Harper

“Dunlop Turm & Shell Saule” (Dunlop tower and Shell silo)

Produced by Bauer (08010)

I have recently taken delivery of this pre-printed card building kit. It features two structures, both of which are based on those to be found at the Nurburgring. The largest is the Dunlop tower, which is a control tower and score keeping facility. In model form it is over a foot tall. The other model is the Shell silo which is a large promotional feature. Also in the kit are five large trackside adverts which could easily be placed on crash barriers. I have not constructed the kit as yet, but the instructions seem to be clear and straightforward and I do not anticipate any problems. Although card kits are not that common in slot racing circles, they are often used by railway modellers to good effect.

One suggestion I would make to anyone building the Dunlop Tower is to replace the ‘glazing’ material provided in the kit with something that is transparent. I personally intend to add an extra floor so that figures can be placed inside the building. Perhaps Brian might allow me to let you know the results when I have built the thing. The kit costs 9.90 euros, and can be obtained from:

Motodrom,
Podeldorfer Str.134,
D96052 Bamberg,
Germany.
Phone 0049 9519170381.
Or on-line at:- www.worldofslot.de

Incidentally, two more building kits have just been released. They are, 08020, “Conti-turm & Boxengasse” (Continental Tower and pit garages at 29.90 euros), and, 08025, “Boxengassen Mittelteil zum verlangen” (Pit garages to enlarge/lengthen the pit complex - price 14.90 euros). Both are based on the Nurburgring in the 1960s. Mine are due any day now, I’ll let you know more when I have put them together.

Slot.It Pitlane Babes

Many months ago, amongst other topics, I mentioned to Sean at Pendle that I was surprised that no-one had yet released a set of Hawaiian Tropic girls as they are so much a part of the Le Mans scene (yes, I know that I am sad).

Immediately, he showed me the Slot.It website which had just announced their future release. Needless to say we had a bit of a laugh about this, especially as there was a lady present. Well, the “pit lane babes” have arrived, and very nice they are too. They are sculptured in three er....positions, and cast in pewter. They are very well painted, by hand, and will certainly brighten up the pit lane proceedings. At £22 for a set of three they might appear a tad dear, but remember, they are hand painted pewter, and you will only need a box or two. I notice from the box that they are described as “Pit Lane Babes 1” and “Girls 1”, so does this mean that more are on the way? I hope so. My only concern is that my circuit medical facilities will be overwhelmed with geriatric Scalextric figures visiting the cardiac arrest unit.

“TWR Jaguar Prototype Racers”, Leslie F.Thurston ISBN 0 9541039 1 2 Price £24.95

This is an excellent book with lots of colour photographs of every TWR Jaguar. It has details/histories of each chassis, car, and details of every race. I mention chassis and car here as separate items, as many chassis were rebuilt, sometimes several times. For instance, did you know that the former 1991 WSC Championship winning Jaguar XJR 14 (chassis 691) was rebuilt as a Joest Porsche WSC 95, and won the Le Mans 24 Hour race in 1996 (Fly model A41) and then took a second win the next year (Fly model A42). No I didn’t either until I read this book. If you model Jaguars, super detailing the Scalextric cars for instance, or just like Jags, then this is definitely a book for you.

NINCO *track test*

50313 Renault Clio Muddy Rally Car

Reviewed by Kevin Myler

Christmas 2003 again brought the usual wave of good tidings, T.V. banality, DVDs of films seen on the big screen in the summer, mixed nut frenzy and Newberry Fruits - it also brought the usual and much appreciated gift of a slot-car - this year, the Scalextric Renault R23 F1, and an incredibly handsome beast it is.

However, that particular model has stayed in its box, and, frankly, as a fully fledged collector of many years standing now, I cannot see a point in the near or distant future that it will ever see a track.

How sad is that?

1977 was the start of my Scalextric association, and I can still recall thrashing the Lotus 77 and March 721 round the track on Christmas Day afternoon, and not being able to wait to get to the shops on the day after Boxing Day, to add to the car lot. Now, with the ever-increasing complexity of slot-car design, we are faced with not only an impossibly expanding array of models and liveries to collect, we are now getting models that are of the standards of detail and finish once previously associated with big scale die-cast precision models. And I am now becoming increasingly reluctant to race them.

Now don't get me wrong; we are all in dreamland as far as slot-car variety is at this current time, and the standards set go way beyond the hopes many a collector and racer have had for several years.

No way am I going to whinge about the price - you have a choice - pay or don't pay. Cars like the Hornby Dallara Indy car still indicate you can find a decently liveried and detailed car that you can afford and thrash about on the track, without resorting to oversized jelly mould slot-cars with blacked out windows.

Collector's dilemma

Saying that, budgetary constraints mean greater consideration of what liveries you buy of a model now, instead of a freer buying habit of several years ago. I tend to wait for a model to release three, four liveries now before making a purchase. Am I alone in doing this? My ever-increasing gut has a feeling that I don't think so.

I took a list of the last 20 cars I purchased, and... ALL 20 were new models or moulds!

The current range of slot-car products is magnificent, and each model range now has raised their game manifold, in order to compete. You couldn't dream of the cars such as the Ford GT40s, or Porsche 917s or Renault R23 F1s we have now, 10 years ago.

But, as with most things in life, comes complexity with advancement, and an ever-increasing array of parts make up the average slot-car now - more things to break? Maybe.

The widely held view of past years was that you race a rare and vintage model at your peril, as often a barrier altercation resulted in a hefty spare parts replacement bill, let alone the risk of devaluing the car.

The car

I have the same feeling about the current range of models. Therefore, it's heartening to still see the true racers throwing caution to the wind, and putting these models on the track, for the purpose they were created for. It is becoming clear that there are still models that the home racer like myself can chuck around our front room, and at a reasonable price. When our trusty editor rang me before the Christmas break, and invited me to test run the new **Ninco Renault Clio 50313 Muddy rally car**, I threw my collector's hat off, and put my racer hat on, albeit the plexy track one.

It appears that Ninco are, with this model and the Pajero, trying to re-introduce the type of more rugged “chuckable” racer previously seen by SCX with their TT range of the early 90’s. Now they WERE fun...

I appreciate the “weathered effect” models that are available, and it’s a trend that more companies are embracing. The cynics amongst us will argue that it’s a marketing twist to try and get more sales out of an established model – and I say, SO WHAT? You like it, you can afford it, so buy it!

The designer laddie in me purchased the initial issue Clio in silver and yellow road mode – but, in real life, this beast was meant for competition, and the livery and finish of this rally version is absolutely top notch.

Full circle

It’s a real livery, and a Gauloises tobacco sponsorship shortened to GO!!! for the British rally event it ran in (and also the British Toy regulations). Crisp, clear printings that are spot on. And, of course, mud splatter markings that are absolutely unique – well, are you telling me that ALL the models have the same SPLAT pattern applied. If they have, then Ninco have taken body decoration to the nth degree! It would appear that the mud is applied to the body AFTER being fixed into the display box, prior to shipping, so the base and labelling get a fairly good coating too.

Might there be unsplattered models out there? Surely. The chaps at Ninco wouldn’t go to all that trouble to replicate the livery, only to pour mud all over it! The model is compact, curvy, and compliments the trend for Ninco to produce the less mainstream rally models - Fiats, Citroens - and also brings the Ninco story full circle, as the first model issued in 1993 was the ...Renault Clio.



For me, it’s one of the best models they have ever made. Ninco appear to sit in the camp that promotes realism, but not at the cost of the performance. The cockpit detail is sufficient enough to capture the essence of the real car, without using the real materials! I do think some of the current slot-car interiors - although superb - do rather get lost; after all, when you’re getting hammered on the home or club track, the fact that you’ve got a nice cockpit interior won’t help you one bit. And, aren’t they a bit superfluous, when you don’t actually have a driver in some of the models issued recently?? Yes, the plastic driver doesn’t ACTUALLY drive your slot-car, but in real life, when did you last see a car driven by the Invisible Man, or the Mysterons for that matter?

Looks right – but will it go right?

The Renault feels chunky, yet still retains excellent detail, without you feeling wary of handling it in case some of the bits fall off! In 10 years, Ninco have mastered top grade tampon printing, coming a long way from the stickers used at their outset. I have to say, however, that the early models - Clio, Alfa and Mercedes DTM, for instance - still have a distinctive visual charm, and were a much-needed amount of variety in those earlier slot years, before the wave of manufacturers came in, and the car replication wars began - how many Subaru Imprezas do we really need?

Ninco have issued this model with the NC-5 motor, as opposed to the standard motor previously installed on Ninco racers. The car has the sprung suspension system and guide blade introduced on earlier models, but the thing that most impresses me is the compactness of the design - all tricks and mechanics fit neatly into the sleek body shape.

⇒→



The test

I decided to try the car on a specially banked and curved plexytrack, to mimic a rally circuit, but still with enough straights to look at the car's speed. As an HO collector and racer as well as 1:32 scale, I fear the day we go to the same kind of level of robot performance of "blink and you'll miss it" will be a hell of a shame, as oversteer and understeer makes slot-car racing what it is.

I know that the club racer with their wooden tracks will view my reviews with little regard, as my home set-up bears no relation to their racing conditions, but, initially, the Clio felt very balanced, solid, but very quick for my humble home circuit.

It is reassuring to see that my fears of a robot performance are unfounded, as the input of speed into corners still allowed for taylor out at high speed. Even with the curves banked to simulate rally conditions, the Clio handled the test well, although I am not sure whether the proshock suspension gives so much input as to totally eradicate ride sensation, although the ride was exceptionally smooth.

You had to really push the speed up to take the car to breaking point, but it was still there, and maybe we are getting a bit blasé in these times of high slot-car engineering, but for a home racer like me, the Clio appears to have the requisite balance of speed and traction to allow

for a good racing experience. You don't feel that the back end is suddenly going to get out of control, or the car is going to head straight over the barriers and into the cat's bowl!

If I had one criticism, I feel that for all the car's excellent speed and traction, the motor - albeit quick - lacked real top end grunt - many a lap was taken during this test, but I feel I was waiting for a more lively and exciting slot driving sensation, with a more on-edge driving style, perhaps it is possible, but maybe it was the collector in me was not willing to go beyond the norm, risking the trashing of the car. I cannot help feeling that if you gave this car to a more dedicated all-out racer, you would get a truer picture of the motor - it is a world away, however, from the motors installed 10 years ago.



The Clio represents a significant milestone in the development of Ninco in its decade of existence, and a snapshot of the commercially available slot-car in 2004. What we have is light years away from the cars and performance of a decade ago, but I hope that the slot-car companies still bear in mind that it's a product for use, and not for display, and that detail and decoration is wonderful, but not at the expense of performance.

Oh, and Santa, please can I put an early word for a Bentley Speed 8 2003 Le Mans winner, and not 6 different ones - I can dream, can't I? ■

NINCO

track test

Ninco 10505 Off-Road Curve (Incorporating Ninco 50306 Mitsubishi Pajero "Masuoka" - Part the third)

Reviewed by Peter Zivanovic

Here it is, the reason for the Pro-Arm guide on the Pajero as well as the Pro-Shock suspension system on the Pajero and Clio ... probably. Ninco's new off-road "raid" track has arrived. Instead of the normal black, it is made of sandy coloured plastic. Instead of a flat and even (albeit rough) surface, these sections are moulded with an uneven pattern. This has slightly raised parts that look stony with flatter surrounding areas showing the sort of tyre tracks that would be left in softer terrain. Otherwise, the electrical/mechanical connections are identical to (so compatible with) regular Ninco black track. These off-road track sections are only available in half straights and standard curves.

Obstacles

The track surface indicates that it was designed to be used with cars featuring suspension but, in truth, the unevenness is not so great, and any car should be able to negotiate it. This is attested to on the box lid which states that the track is "For any kind of cars". However, each track section also has eight pairs of small holes in the surface designed to hold other obstacles. These obstacles aren't huge but they are certainly high enough (up to about one centimetre) to render the track impassable by anything without a drop-arm guide. In Ninco terms, this means the Pajero. These obstacles come in two general styles: grey (with a hint of brown) knobbly stones and brown mud (with more tyre tracks along them). All have a flat lower edge to sit on the track surface with two pegs (occasionally only one for the shorter obstacles) protruding down that can be located into the holes in the track. These are not difficult to fit or remove but they are necessarily a firm fit so they should be treated carefully to avoid breaking the pegs.

As to realism, the stone obstacles are fine but the brown mud ... hmm. Areas of soft mud tend to lie in depressions below the surrounding level. These mud obstacles sit above the surface but I don't think this matters a great deal. They are the obstacles they were designed to be and this style and colour adds variety. But talking of the colour, perhaps I was sensitised by my time at Frome grammar school where, for the first five years, the uniform blazer and cap were a similar shade of brown. The kids at other schools lost few opportunities to remind us what they thought the colour looked like. Fortunately the longest mud obstacle at 85mm scales up to over 2.7 metres (nearly 9 feet) so anything capable of producing lumps of "mud" that size probably became extinct in the Jurassic age.



Walls and some of the "stone" obstacles

No off-road borders are available. It is possible to fit the standard Ninco red and white borders if you wish but these would look horribly out of place. Standard "Armco" barriers would also look wrong but Ninco have addressed both these issues by providing grey barriers designed to look like stone walls. These link together and hook under the edge of the track in a similar manner to standard barriers.⇒⇒

They are thin but look good and will prevent enthusiastic drivers dropping their rear wheel off the track. Sadly, I have never got on with this type of fixing. I find standard barriers hard enough to fit so when I'm putting a Ninco circuit together, my chum Dave always fits them. I found these walls harder still to fit and so did Dave. They are more rigid than the standard barriers so it is harder to bend them in the same way to get the hooks under the edge of the track properly. Quite often we had to ease the hook "open" to make it easier to fit correctly. Comparing the hooks on these walls with standard barriers showed that they are not so securely attached; there is much less plastic between the hook and the wall. This looks and feels fragile so we felt we needed to be much more careful (so slower) fitting these. It is likely that with practice we would get quicker but I still think the hooks should be more securely moulded to the walls.

Half straights (10151) and standard 45 curves (10152) are sold in pairs. Packs of stone and mud obstacles (10251) are available and stone wall barriers (10252) are sold in packs of six (not four as stated in the catalogue). The major offering in the "raid" line is the off-road curve set reviewed here. This contains four standard curves and four half straights. This would make a "U" shape, not a complete circuit so this set is designed to be a feature of an existing circuit. The box illustrates ways in which



Off-road curve set with obstacles fitted

standard Ninco set layouts can be extended with this extra track. Two track sections are unique to this set; two of the half straights have each had one end sprayed black. The track was not masked so there is a gradual change from black at one end to the sand colour at the other. If I wanted to be picky, you are more likely to find sand on tarmac than tar on sand so painting black track might look more realistic but I think it is a nice touch to make the transition from black to off-road track less stark. Less good is that only four stone wall barriers are included. At just under 20cm each, four barriers will barely go 60% around the outside of the curve, which seems very mean to me. Putting a wall around part of a curve risks piling into the start of the wall or falling off after its end when there is suddenly nothing to stop the rear wheel sliding off the track. I would either not use them at all or use enough to form a continuous run around the outside of the curve and just onto the straights. This requires at least eight so, like I did, you'll have to buy some more if you want to do this.

Price

Off-road tracks always seem to cost more than black tracks. The 1992 UK price list shows that Exin's TT tracks carried a price premium; the RRP of these Ninco off-road tracks is 25% higher than that for their equivalent standard track sections. On the other hand, the RRP of the off-road curve set is only a little higher than for the 8 equivalent black track sections and, since it includes the obstacles and walls as well, it is probably the cheapest way to buy this track. Their relatively high cost, (as well as the limited range of sections offered), means that it is likely, for the foreseeable future at least, that off-road tracks will only form a section of larger, black circuits. I suspect this thinking has influenced the design of the Pajero (and probably any other new "raid" cars). They need to be able to negotiate the rough track with its obstacles but they are likely to spend most of their time on black track so need to be fast on that. Hence they have the huge magnet and the low centre of

gravity. If they were more likely to be raced on completely off-road circuits, these features would be less important.

Performance

So, what is the track like to use? Time and space constraints meant that I started with the basic, small oval circuit. First, I reconfigured the black curves from one end and added a Pole Position lap counter/timer and another 1.5 more straight sections to give the cars more chance to stretch their legs. I then completed the circuit by adding the “U” shape. For the first test I used black track then I replaced that with the off-road curve. I put borders on the black track and the stone walls all around the off-road curve. Like all Ninco tracks, these off-road sections were easy to assemble, apart from the walls mentioned above. I used a total of 8 wall sections. Having linked them together it took me seven minutes to fit them to the track! That said, I was having so much trouble towards the end that I thought of using a small, cross-headed screwdriver to push the hook under the track. This worked a treat and the last few were done very quickly in the same way.

At this point, as well as reviewing the off-road track I will include the final (third) part of the Pajero review, which could not be completed before because Ninco’s “raid” track was not available. I decided to use the same cars for comparative timings as I did for the earlier review, i.e. the Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero (4WD, Pro-Shock & Pro-Arm), Renault Clio (Pro-Shock) and Volkswagen Golf (4WD) and the Exin TT Buggy and Nissan Patrol (4WD, springs & drop arm guide). All timings were taken on the outside lane, which S-Plan tells me was 6.61m (21’8”) long. The off-road curve was 1.98m long (6’6”) i.e. about 30%.

The first set of results shows the fastest lap times (of 25) I could achieve with the cars on black track and then on the same layout but with one end replaced by the off-road curve.

There were no real surprises with the black track; the relative performance was much the same as it was in the earlier tests. When the end

of the circuit was replaced by the off-road curve, the timings were very similar. I suspect this was because I was only using the outside lane and all the cars rode the walls all the way around the curve. On the other hand, the black track had borders, which required more care. With this in mind, I believe that the unevenness of the off-road track will make cars a little slower than this comparison indicates. What these results do confirm is that any car can run on this track. (F1 anybody?)

Fastest Lap - seconds	All black track		
	Car \ Magnet	Yes	No
Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero		3.13	3.80
Ninco Renault Clio		2.71	3.38
Ninco Volkswagen Golf		3.00	3.48
Exin TT Buggy		N/A	3.72
Exin TT Nissan Patrol		N/A	4.09
Fastest Lap - seconds	Inc. off-road		
	Car \ Magnet	Yes	No
Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero		3.12	3.85
Ninco Renault Clio		2.89	3.44
Ninco Volkswagen Golf		3.06	3.54
Exin TT Buggy		N/A	3.86
Exin TT Nissan Patrol		N/A	4.37

Now it was time to fit the obstacles. I put the Clio and Golf away; their work was done. The obstacles are supplied in a variety of shapes and sizes but there are always two of each pattern. With this (and experience of similar sts obstacles) in mind, I thought that the cars would find it easier to get around a circuit if these were positioned in pairs on both sides of the slot. This would mean that both sides of the car were raised at the same time, there would be less sideways force on the car so less tendency for it to de-slot. (The box illustration also seemed to suggest this type of arrangement.) For the first series of timings I placed seven single obstacles around the curve on alternate sides of the slot at approximately 20cm (8”) intervals. Then I fitted the other seven obstacles opposite their pair and ran the tests again. ⇒→

Fastest Lap - seconds	7 single obst's	
Car \ Magnet	Yes	No
Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero	4.13	4.32
Exin TT Buggy	N/A	4.26
Exin TT Nissan Patrol	N/A	4.83
Fastest Lap - seconds	7 pairs obst's	
Car \ Magnet	Yes	No
Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero	5.16	5.66
Exin TT Buggy	N/A	4.69
Exin TT Nissan Patrol	N/A	4.90

Well, I got *that* wrong, big time. All the cars were slower around the curve when the obstacles are paired - the Pajero significantly so. There isn't much to say about the TT cars, they ran around the track, over the obstacles as to the manor born. They were bombproof around the off-road curve. They would bounce around like manic pinballs on speed but the guide stayed stuck in the slot. I guess that, as before, the wall stopped them sliding but, whatever, it was great fun driving them on this new track.

As far as the off-road curve goes, I like it a lot. Without the obstacles, it adds interest and variety to a circuit and gives drivers something more to think about. The obstacles allow you to add even more interest and variety and to vary the level of difficulty according to how many of which obstacle you place where. It is clear though, that the obstacles I fitted were too much for the Pajero.

On the final test with the obstacles in pairs, I only managed to get the Pajero to complete about 20% of the laps - with or without the magnet. After a few practice laps, I didn't even try to run the tests until my daughter was sitting at that (far) end of the track to replace the car for me. (On several laps she had to replace it twice.) On one occasion, without the magnet, the car was beached with its wheels spinning but the low chassis resting on the obstacles on each side. On another occasion, with the magnet fitted, the rear wheels were pulled down onto the track but the front had been pulled up so high that the guide was out of the slot - just as stationary. I know I'm a crap racer but it seemed to me to be a matter of luck whether the car got around or not. If I went too fast, the bouncing of the car

made the guide come out of the slot. If I went too slowly, there was insufficient momentum to keep the car on an even keel so the guide came out of the slot. Even if the speed was roughly right, success might depend on whether I was slowing down or not. I dare say there was an optimum way to drive the curve but my feeble talents didn't find it very often. It was a very frustrating experience.

The results with the obstacles placed singly were slightly better but it was still harder to get the Pajero around the off-road curve than the TT cars. The Pajero went much faster on the black track so the comparable lap times indicate that it must have been slower over the off-road curve and it certainly de-slotted there more often. I really don't know why there was such a marked difference between the performance of the Pajero and the TT cars over the obstacles but, speculating, some possible causes occur to me.

The Pro-Arm guide assembly doesn't seem to be as effective as the TT drop arm and guide. I believe it is too short even for some of these low obstacles - particularly if the speed onto the obstacle is high enough to launch the car upwards. The wires drop vertically from inside the car and, if they rub on the chassis, may slow the arm's descent. As the Pro-Arm drops, the rear of the guide flag is lifted out of the slot. The same thing happens to the TT guide but because the arm is longer, the effect is reduced. In addition, the TT guide has a leading edge forward of the pivot which goes further into the slot as the arm drops. This compensates for the rear lifting and keeps more flag in the slot.

Quite what difference the suspension makes, I really don't know. On the Pajero the only components that are un-sprung are the axles, which, as far as it goes, is similar to a real car. Unlike a real car however, there is no damping or anti-roll linkage so there is likely to be a tendency for this slot car to bounce and roll. (Mel Turbutt commented on this on page 17 of the September 2003 issue.) The TT suspension is less sophisticated. The springs go between the axles and body with the main chassis assembly (including motor and transmission shaft) able to

move independently between them. The axles can only travel a small amount before they impinge on the chassis. Once this point is reached, only the body is sprung which leaves an arrangement similar to loosening the body screws on an ordinary slot car, which I am told improves its handling. I must stress again though that I have no idea what if any difference the suspension makes.

Another point to note in this test is that fitting the magnet only reduced the Pajero's lap time by about 0.2 of a second. Normally, the magnet improved lap times by around 0.6 of a second - three times that. This raises the possibility that the magnet might be hindering progress around the off-road curve. One particular difficulty I noticed was that starting the car on the curve was difficult. Quite a lot of finger was needed to get the car to overcome the magnet and move. Since the controller was set so high, once the car was moving, it was moving so fast that it often came off again. This was particularly so if the car was up against an obstacle. The band was is nothing like as positive as a direct drive would have been. Holding the back wheels, it is easy to move the car over a centimetre with the front wheels turning against the increasing tension in the band. Switching this observation around means that the front wheels are doing very little (if anything) to raise the car over an obstacle; all the motive force is being applied through the rear wheels. This belt-drive mechanism is simply not as effective as it need to be to get over obstacles easily.

Suggestions

Returning to the off-road track, users need to be careful about number, type and location of the obstacles they fit to the off-road track. You can make the circuit as hard or slow as you wish but if you want the cars to get around more easily I would make the following suggestions:

1. Don't use the higher obstacles.
2. When placing obstacles on the curved track sections, place them to the outside of the slot so that they act against (rather than with) the normal centrifugal force and body roll that tends to de-slot cars.

3. Don't fit too many obstacles.
4. Don't fit the obstacles in pairs either side of the slot; use the other half of the pair in the equivalent position in the next lane.

Having looked at the results and come to these conclusions I thought I would turn the test around. Rather than see how the Pajero went around an arbitrary layout, I would try to set the obstacles up so that the Pajero did better. I rebuilt the track as before but used the inside lane so that the walls would have no bearing on the performance of the cars. (It also meant that I didn't have to fit the walls again.) This lane was 6.04m (19'10") of which 1.7m (5'7") was off-road track (28%). Some borders were fitted to the black track. I ended up using 5 of the lowest obstacles about 30cm (12") apart; the two on the straights were inside the slot, the three on the curves were outside. One of the mud obstacles had a high ridge either side of the lower, central part where the tyres ran. This seemed to act as a tramline and caused many problems so I replaced it with a friendlier obstacle. All three cars ran very well with this set-up so I played for quite some time and the best lap times I got for each were as follows.

Fastest Lap - seconds	5 single obst's	
	Yes	No
Car \ Magnet		
Ninco Mitsubishi Pajero	3.48	3.75
Exin TT Buggy	N/A	3.71
Exin TT Nissan Patrol	N/A	3.91

So, the Pajero wins – and even comes close to the Buggy without its magnet. What is more, it *still* has both its mirrors! Of course, this is just me using one small circuit. Your experiences are very likely to be different. Either way, using Ninco's "raid" cars and track has been very interesting and I expect to continue enjoying both for a long time.

Finally, thanks are again due to the Hobby Company for supplying the Off-road curve and car for review. ■