

Press Release

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Twenty years since Volvo made its debut in the BTCC with the 850 Estate

It is now 20 years since Volvo marked its return to the racetrack – with an estate! The venture would lead to many successful years in the BTCC – including an overall victory in 1998. "When I signed up for Volvo and TWR around Christmas 1993, I didn't know about the estate plans," says Rickard Rydell. "If I'd known, I would probably have hesitated. It was lucky I didn't know!"

Volvo's Back on Track project was tangibly launched in April 1994, when two liveried Volvo 850 estate cars rolled up to the start line on the Thruxton track in southern England. It was the start of the season of the most prestigious standard car series, the British Touring Car Championship (BTCC).

Alongside Tom Walkinshaw Racing – TWR – Volvo had initiated a major investment in the class, and the idea of using estate cars was a great success right from the outset. They attracted a great deal of attention and challenged Volvo's image in a positive way, particularly in the UK. Volvo wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to combine practicality with pleasure!

Behind the wheel of one of the cars was 26-year-old Rickard Rydell who, despite his tender age, had a great deal of experience from karting, Formula 3000 and Formula 3. In the other car was his team-mate Jan Lammers, a 37-year-old Dutchman who had competed in various classes including Formula 1.



"It's hard to believe that 20 years have passed," says Rickard Rydell today. "It doesn't feel like it. But now looking back it is clear that we were focusing on the right class at the right time."

TWR, which had been Volvo's main competitor in the European Championship series during the 1980s when the 240 Turbo was competing against the Rover SD1, had now been contracted for three years and was responsible for the technical development of the racing car. Volvo would be responsible for technical support, marketing and PR.

The decision to compete with two estate cars was taken several months before the start, but was kept secret until the last moment. When the news was released, many thought it was a joke. A large estate is not an ideal track car – with a lot of weight behind the rear axle and a higher centre of gravity, it is harder to get around the corners than a saloon.

"But the aerodynamics of the estate were slightly better than the saloon," says Rickard Rydell. The deciding factor, however, was that the estate would attract more attention.

According to the FIA class 2 regulations, the competition cars had to be based on a production model. The appearance of the body could not be changed, although to make the races close and exciting, the cylinder volume was restricted to two litres, the maximum engine speed to 8,500 rpm and the minimum weight to 950 kg for front-wheel drive cars. Supercharging was not permitted in any form.

Volvo and TWR used their five-cylinder engine as a basis, which in the 850 Turbo had a 2.3 litre volume and produced 225 hp. In the racing version – with no turbo and with a 2 litre volume – it produced around 290 hp. The five speed manual transmission in the standard car was replaced with a six speed sequential transmission. Volvo was the first team to incorporate a catalytic converter in its cars – a feature that was soon to become mandatory according to regulations for the class.

"We hadn't had time to test the car on the track before its launch at Thruxton on April 4th," says Rickard Rydell. "Jan Lammers and I had been able to drive a few hundred metres at the entrance to TWR's development workshop, but that was all!"



From the outset, the first season was designated a trial year for the drivers, team and cars, and they didn't expect to be near the front of the standings. As a result, they could also treat themselves to the PR stunt of driving an estate.

"The Volvo 850 estate was by far the largest car in the series," explains Rickard Rydell. "Our competitors, who were taking part largely to strengthen their sporting image, were not pleased about having to compete with an estate. There were a few taunts from other drivers – but that was no problem. To wind them up, in one heat we drove with a large stuffed collie in the boot during the parade lap!"

When the series drew to a close after 21 heats, at Donington Park in September of 1994, they could look back over a very successful season from a public perspective – even though Volvo only

finished in 14th place overall.

"We had learned an enormous amount during the season, and developed the car continually," says Rickard Rydell. "Our best finish was fifth place at Oulton Park, although there were more column inches written about us than about any other team!"

As early as the following year, the results improved significantly, and Rickard Rydell came in third place overall in the championship, and repeated that success in 1996. However, they only drove the 850 estate during the first season, switching to the saloon model in subsequent years. Even though an estate body enjoys better natural downforce at the back than a saloon, the option of an additional spoiler at the rear was introduced in 1995. This was of no benefit on an estate, although on a saloon body it could make a significant difference. Volvo changed to the S40 in 1997, and Rickard pinched fourth place, before going on to win the entire series in 1998.

Volvo was definitely back on track!

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