

Steven Kane and Team M-Sport Bentley had a superb first season in the Blancpain Endurance Series and hope to go one step further in 2015 by taking the Championship.



Steven Kane's 2014 Bentley GT adventure

2014 has been a great adventure for me racing as a factory Bentley driver throughout Europe. Together we have had some mega highs and tough lows, but I am happy to say that overall the former far outweigh the latter.

For me the adventure started in 2013 when I, along with Guy Smith and Andy Meyrick were signed up by Bentley to be works drivers for the 2014 Blancpain Endurance Series. The series has a big name literally! Really it is in deference to one of the oldest and most respected watchmakers in the world – Blancpain. By any other name though it is simply the biggest and best GT3 series in the world. The grids regularly have over fifty entries and there are works or semi-works teams from Audi, BMW, Mercedes and Ferrari. The competition is really, really tough.

It was a big boost for my career to be chosen by Bentley. I like to think that I had put myself on the map through my years in single seaters, BTCC and racing in sportscars over in the US.

There are some top, top people in the Bentley programme; guys like Malcolm Wilson, who will need no introduction to *CarSport* readers because he is a really

legend and also John Wickham, who has seen it all and done it all in the motorsport industry. M-Sport themselves were chosen by Bentley and they set about putting the right ingredients in place, even as far back as 2012.

I met Malcolm and also Brian Gush, who is Bentley's Motorsport

Director, in the summer of 2013 and soon after that I was one of the initial three chosen drivers. Obviously I was delighted but I also felt very proud to have been selected to represent such a prestigious brand as Bentley. Their racing heritage goes back to the 1920s with the famous 'Bentley

Boys' and goes right up until 2003 when they triumphed at Le Mans with the gorgeous Speed 8 LMP car.

Prior to a full Blancpain campaign in 2014, we dipped our collective toes in the water at the end of 2013 when we took part in the Abu Dhabi 12-hours. We knew it would be a tough event because even though it was held on the first week of December it was still very hot. In fact it was ideal preparation for us all because we learned so much about operating during an endurance race. If we could do well over 12 hours so early then it looked good for 2014.

We did do well. We finished in fourth position and the Bentley Continental GT handled and performed brilliantly. Sure, there was a lot to enhance and perfect at that stage but it was a really strong foundation from which we could build. Team M-Sport Bentley had arrived and we were already looking strong.

The so called off-season absolutely flew by and before we knew it we were heading to Monza in April for the first Blancpain round. There is nothing like Monza in the spring. It's the perfect place to start the season and, in my mind, it's the true

spiritual home of world racing.

Everything was in place and looked good in qualifying. We were quick and I had a real chance of putting us at least on the front row. Then I crashed at the Ascari Chicane! I was devastated. The car was damaged and the guys at Team M-Sport Bentley had to pull an all-nighter to get the car fixed for the race. I rarely make mistakes, probably one like that in a season, at most, and here we were with the campaign barely started and the car was coming back on a low-loader!

I apologised to the team and they were brilliant. They could see I was trying everything to get a chance at the front row. We were still fourth on the grid and after the guys did such an excellent job we had a great race to an eventual eighth position finish.

While we were happy to get a finish and our first Blancpain points, there was much we needed to work on ahead of the next round at Silverstone. We knew we could be sharper as an all-round unit and at the de-brief after Monza we became focused on making sure these enhancements happened. They were to be applied on and off the track and we all took collective responsibility to do them. That is how great team's work!

It all came together and we had an unforgettable weekend at Silverstone at the end of May! The 2014-spec 'Bentley Boys' were fantastic as we scored a dream win at a place which is our spiritual racing home through the links of the original 'Bentley Boys' – Wolff Barnato, Dr Benjafield, *et al*, who formed the BRDC, of which I am a proud member.

The whole race weekend was sensational. I qualified the Bentley Continental GT3 fourth on the grid, the same position that we started at Monza a month before, but this time we were always in contention in the race after great stints from Guy (Smith) and Andy (Meyrick) set things up nicely, despite a twenty second penalty that Guy had to serve for a yellow flag infringement.

The team were phenomenal on the pit work all weekend. The speed they turned us around at our stops really put us in contention for the win and I can't thank them highly enough. They were just brilliant.

When I took over the number seven Bentley Continental GT3, we were just over twenty seconds adrift of the ART McLaren driven by Spanish racer, Andy Soucek. I immediately started to hunt him

Celebrating victory at Silverstone are (l-r): Guy Smith, Andy Meyrick and Steven Kane.



Steven Kane and Team M-Sport Bentley added another victory at Paul Ricard to lead the series.



down but then the safety car came out. I'm pretty sure that even without this I would have still caught Soucek engineer told us and SC helped. Even though it was a help there were still three or four lapped cars between me and the McLaren, which left plenty still to do.

The Bentley Continental GT3 was fantastic all weekend. The real difference for us was just how easy it was on the Pirelli tyres we use in the Blancpain Endurance Series. The wear rates were very impressive and ensured that we could attack pretty much as we pleased throughout all the stints.

A month later we followed the Silverstone success with another win at Paul Ricard to take the lead in the Blancpain Endurance Series and to really let our competitors know we were title contenders.

Qualifying went reasonably well and we lined up seventh but knew that in the race we would come under big pressure,

especially from the ART McLaren.

And so it proved. Guy (Smith) and Andy (Meyrick) were again magnificent in the first two hours and Andy handed the car over to me in the lead. Unlike Silverstone though I was the hunted rather than the hunter, as works Toyota LMP driver Nicolas Lapierre put me under serious pressure throughout the final hour.

Having the last stint is often the toughest and I have to say it was probably the hardest race of my life. However, I dug deep and held Lapierre off to claim our #7 Bentley Continental GT's second win in as many races. Again it felt so sweet taking the chequered flag with the team celebrating on the pitwall.

We had proved we can beat anyone and it is a great testament to the team how far we have come since our European debut at Monza.

The final two rounds of the season were at Spa and the

Nurburgring. As ever in racing, there are a few highs and tonnes of lows. Spa and the Nurburgring provided mainly the latter but it was from no lack of commitment and skill from us.

Spa is the jewel in the crown for the Blancpain Endurance Series and is a 24-hour event. It is a massive step from the regular three hour race but we were as well prepared as we could have been after quite a bit of testing and getting to understand the Bentley Continental GT better.

Sadly at both Spa and the Nurburgring we had our fair share of problems including getting caught up in other people's accidents and also suffering with a lack of wet weather testing before the Nurburgring race, where of course it tipped down for some of the race. The title had been a long shot but our runners-up place in Germany, in our first season, was a major testament to the professionalism and dedication of the M-Sport Bentley operation.

We are a close-knit bunch at M-Sport Bentley. When we aren't racing together we are training up a mountain somewhere or pounding the country roads together on our bikes. I, Andy and Guy have formed a very strong team and we are now focusing on 2015 where we will go all out to go one better and take the Blancpain Endurance Series title.

It has been nice meeting some Northern Irish and Irish fans at races this year. It is always nice to see you guys supporting me at the races. I hope to see many more of you in 2015 all over Europe.