

Chapter 45.

Customer Racing: BMW M Motorsport Brings Factory-Built Race Cars to North America

by Jackie Jouret

Since its founding in 1972, BMW Motorsport has supplied a bevy of race-ready cars to customers worldwide, but few of those cars were suitable for racing in North America. On this continent, sanctioning bodies tend to impose their own, often idiosyncratic rules, which excluded nearly all of BMW Motorsport's customer-racing touring and GT cars.

While BMW of North America's factory team was adapting Euro-spec racing cars to IMSA specification, private customers who wanted to race BMWs had to convert street cars into race cars. BMW Motorsport didn't want to sell cars like the endurance-racing Z4 M Coupe or E92 M3 GT4 in markets without an official structure for parts and technical support. Since BMW NA had no such structure, US racers would be forced purchase roadgoing 3 Series, strip out the interiors and fit their own roll cages, suspension, brakes, and other race equipment.

In late 2013, longtime BMW racer Will Turner found a way around that prohibition. Turner bought a pair of used Z4 GT3s from Belgium's Marc VDS racing team, which had raced them in the Blancpain championship as well as Germany's VLN endurance series. Turner Motorsport had already won six professional championships with BMWs converted from street cars, and Turner was keen to move on to a real Motorsport-built race car. At the same time, BMW NA felt that supporting only two Tuner customer race cars would be a manageable task while customer racing support systems were developed. The Z4 GT3 needed only minor alterations to conform to the rules for IMSA's new-for-2014 GTD class, and it proved competitive enough to

win that year's championship with drivers Dane Cameron and Markus Palttala.

"After proving how serious he was by buying the Z4, Will was able to purchase an M6 GT3 directly from Motorsport," said Gordon McDonnell, then BMW of North America's Motorsport Manager.

In fact, Turner was allotted the first and second M6 GT3s built, which he purchased for approximately €379,000 each in 2016. For the price, Turner got a pair of 2,860-pound, purpose-built race cars with carbon fiber bodywork and crash structures, 535-horsepower 4.4-liter M TwinPower Turbo P63 V8 engines, Ricardo transaxles, and other racing-specific equipment. Competing as before in IMSA's GTD class, Turner Motorsport scored the M6 GT3's first win worldwide, cementing the team's status as a valued BMW Motorsport customer...and the US as a potential market for BMW Motorsport's race cars.

"Will buying the Z4 really accelerated things for customer racing in the US," McDonnell said.

That applied not only to GT3-spec race cars but to the entry-level M235i Racing, which Turner was among the first to purchase in the US.

Introduced in Europe for the 2014 season, the M235i Racing was the brainchild of Klaus Fröhlich, an engineer who became BMW AG's Board Member for Development in December 2014. Attending the 24 Hours of the Nürburgring in May 2013, Fröhlich noticed many teams racing E36 and E46 BMWs, cars that were a decade or more out of date. He resolved to make a new, entry-level race car available, and the development of the M235i Racing proceeded under BMW M GmbH chairman Friedrich Nitschke. The car was designed to be a turnkey race car, one whose price was set at a very reasonable €59,500, fully equipped. "The car has been more successful than we

expected, with huge demand," Nitschke said that spring. Indeed, the M235i Racing soon made up a significant portion of the field in Germany's VLN endurance series, which consisted of ten rounds on the Nürburgring Nordschleife.

The M235i Racing was built on the standard 2 Series production line at BMW's Leipzig plant in Germany, and thus there were no constraints on how many could be built. "We said from the beginning that we wanted to have the car available in the US," said BMW Motorsport Director Jens Marquardt in 2015. "It's really just a question of which series it fits in, and of having everything sorted out so the cars can come over."

In January 2015, Fröhlich was on hand as the M235i and the M235i Racing made their debuts at Las Vegas Motor Speedway. By then, McDonnell had moved to another position within BMW NA, and his post as Motorsport Manager was taken up by Victor Leleu.

Leleu arrived just as racing in the US was reaching a crossroads. "The teams that were racing BMWs in the Continental Challenge series had purchased E90 3 Series and prepared them for track duty, but that was becoming increasingly difficult once the F80 M4 arrived," Leleu said. "Between the electronics, the turbocharged engines, and the cost, teams were getting discouraged. Somewhat serendipitously, BMW Motorsport came up with the M235i Racing at the same time that the Pirelli World Challenge series was looking to change things up for their entry-level format."

Crucially, Leleu said, the M235i Racing and Pirelli World Challenge drew interest not just from Will Turner but from Eric Maas of Classic BMW dealership in Plano, Texas [now Sewell BMW]. Classic BMW was already established as a BMW Motorsport Center, as were enthusiast-run dealerships like Brecht BMW in Escondido, ex-BMW factory racer Boris Said's BMW Murietta, Henry Schmitt's BMW of San Francisco, and Bobby Rahal BMW of South Hills, Pennsylvania. All had longstanding ties to the BMW

racing community, with Rahal's Team RLL running BMW NA's factory racing program in IMSA. In all, ten dealerships stepped up to support the M235i Racing program. The car was priced at €59,500, then equivalent to \$65,854, making it an affordable alternative to a converted streetcar.

"Now we just needed to find a way to bring those cars over and sell them!" Leleu said. "We had 50 cars on the way, and we needed to secure a motorsport exemption for a car with no aero, and which looked like a 2 Series with a body kit. I was at Sebring when I got a call from the EPA saying, 'I'm looking at your car, and this is no race car!'"

Leleu managed to persuade the US Environmental Protection Agency that the M235i Racing was indeed a race car. He also managed to get it approved for competition in the 2016 season of the Pirelli World Challenge series, where the M235i Racing would race against the Mazda Miata, Honda Accord V6 Coupe, Nissan 370Z, and Porsche Cayman. "We had to make a change to the exhaust, we added a rear wing, a net in the driver's side window, a skid plate on the front, boost pressure sensors for Balance of Performance, a different fire extinguishing system... little things that were needed to align with the rest of the cars in the new TC class," Leleu said.

The season started with just two M235i Racings on the grid, both entered by Classic BMW. By the end of the year, Classic had been joined by Summit of Everest Motorsport and Stephen Cameron Racing, but the season belonged to Classic Racing's Toby Grahovec. Grahovec won the championship on the strength of two wins in 12 races, and he finished off the podium just twice, when he took a pair of fourths at Lime Rock. The season also belonged to the M235i Racing, which had created what Leleu called a paradigm shift within the TC paddock.

"I remember the curiosity of teams that were running products they had developed

themselves, and they were wrenching on their cars with ten minutes to go before qualifying, changing gearboxes and stuff," Leleu said. "And Classic BMW rolls up, takes the car off the truck and goes racing. Based on Classic BMW's success and the car's reliability, the demand came quite quickly, and that's how we ended up in 2017 with ten teams racing the M235i Racing, and 21 cars on the grid at Utah."

The race at Utah Motorsports Park [now Burt Brothers Motorpark] marked a numerical milestone for the M235i Racing, and it also revealed one of the prime difficulties faced by American teams racing a car designed for European conditions: heat. "Utah in the month of August is not fun. It's really a different scenario to run a car at 52°F on the Nürburgring versus 95°F at high altitude in Utah," Leleu said.

With twin turbochargers, the M235i Racing could cope with the lack of oxygen at high altitude better than the naturally aspirated competition. Even so, Utah's extreme conditions forced BMW Motorsport Support Engineer Dusty Renteria [now Team Manager at Paul Miller Racing] to reprogram each car to deliver about 260 horsepower rather than its usual 300-320 horsepower, helping the BMW teams avoid accusations of cheating.

That kind of support—along with a steady supply of spare parts—was crucial to the success of BMW NA's customer racing program, Leleu said. "It couldn't be 'sell-and-abandon'. I always believed—and still do—that the relationship with the customer starts once you sell them the car."

Also crucial were a few adaptations that made the M235i Racing better suited to American conditions. The US is home to a number of tracks that combine NASCAR's banked ovals with an infield road course, and the steep banking forced BMW Motorsport had to revise its inclination sensors when those devices misinterpreted banked corners as a rollover-in-progress. BMW Motorsport also had to fit the M235i

Racing with a higher-output power steering system that could cope with rapid direction changes like those in the "climbing esses" at Virginia International Raceway.

So began the internationalization of BMW's customer racing program, which had hitherto focused on Europe. "It made the case that when Munich develops a car, they now need to pay attention to the plethora of conditions and circumstances around the world," Leleu said. "The Nürburgring and Miramas [BMW's test track in southern France] won't provide a comprehensive set of conditions that you can apply to any track and expect it will work."

Most immediately, those lessons were applied to the F82 M4 GT4, which BMW Motorsport was developing for a worldwide launch in advance of the 2018 season. The car would provide additional opportunities for private teams in North America, where Turner Motorsport's IMSA GTD program with the M6 GT3 had been joined in 2016 by Michael Mills' SprintX GT campaign with a Z4 GT3. (BMW NA provided factory drivers Kuno Wittmer and John Edwards to race alongside Mills in this six-race endurance series; Mills Racing took three victories as well as the 2016 SprintX title.)

"The M235i Racing whetted everyone's appetite, including Munich's," Leleu said. "That car and the M6 GT3 were built on the basis of European street versions. This meant that things like headlights and taillights, for instance were not DOT approved, so racers in America could not purchase these parts from BMW NA unless we went to BMW NA's legal department for an exception. This was easy when you only had two Z4 GT3s racing in the US, but it was a different story when you had fifty M235i Racings across the country."

Anticipating considerable US demand for its \$196,000 M4 GT4, BMW Motorsport built the M4 GT4 on the basis of the US-spec car. Its headlights would be DOT-approved, and customers in Europe who needed replacements would have to buy US

headlights. "Which they could," Leleu said. "There was nothing preventing them from doing that."

BMW Motorsport's decision to offer the M4 GT4 in the US was supported by IMSA's adoption of the SRO GT4 standard for cars racing in the Continental Tire SportsCar Challenge, which ran in support of IMSA's top-level WeatherTech Sportscar Championship. US racing teams embraced the opportunity to move up from the entry-level M235i Racing to the more powerful and sophisticated M4 GT4, with all but one team opting to move up the ladder for 2018.

The M4 GT4 wouldn't be available in the same volume as the M235i Racing, since BMW NA wanted to ensure that the cars went to racers rather than collectors. As well, Leleu was reluctant to flood IMSA grids with BMWs or to sell more cars than BMW NA could support. "We are always trying to create meaningful relationships," he said. "Our promise was always that when you get to the track, an engineer will, at the very least, come to you in the morning and come to you one more time in the evening. You will see us, and we're here to support you, but we cannot do that for 50 GT4s."

Running a high-quality but relatively affordable and egalitarian program encouraged teams to move up from the M4 GT4 to the higher-spec GT3 in 2022, when the M6 GT3 was replaced by the G82 M4 GT3. Lowering the cost of operation was one of the key design goals for the new M4 GT3. With power from a long life, inline six-cylinder engine, a proven reliable X-Trac transaxle and next generation electronics, the M4 GT3 allowed more teams to campaign BMWs in high-level racing series, and to do so on a more reasonable budget.

In 2022, Leleu became BMW of North America's Experiential Marketing Manager. As such, he oversees the motorsport division now run by Adam McGregor. Customer racing continues to flourish in IMSA's premier WeatherTech series alongside the

factory M Hybrid V8 prototypes run by BMW M Team RLL, with Turner Motorsport and Paul Miller Racing running in the GTD and GTD Pro classes with their M4 GT3 EVO racers. Yet more teams compete with the M4 GT3 and GT4 in IMSA's VP Racing Sportscar Challenge and Michelin Pilot Challenge, while those at racing's entry level run the M2 CS Racing Cup—successor to the M235i and M240i Racing models—in SRO's TC America series.

BMW of North America continues to support its racing customers with trackside technical and parts support at all IMSA and SRO sanctioned races plus turnkey competitive race cars and spare parts through sixteen BMW Motorsport Centers nationwide. Customer racing is a small but highly visible component of BMW NA's marketing program, one that Leleu said is especially important now that BMW Team RLL is campaigning the M Hybrid V8 prototypes rather than production-based sports cars.

"Customer racing continues to validate the street product," Leleu said. "It's no longer a lab for the road and for proving technology, but having those M4 GT3s and GT4s with their inline six-cylinder engines in a sea of V8s allows us to deliver a very authentic BMW message through those customer race cars."

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