



Marshal for a day

Lucia Forlini-Cataldo becomes part of the 'orange army' at Race Retro

Without marshals, motorsport would not exist. Or, at least, it would not have evolved beyond its early form, progressing from a deadly, niche hobby to a well-respected and (relatively) safe world-class sport. These frequently-overlooked figures are often more at risk than the drivers, with little or no protection and the responsibility of being first at the scene if and when something goes wrong.

As an undergraduate student, I worked on an interview project called "Beyond the Wheel" where I attended the 2019 Race Retro festival and interviewed people involved in motorsport in different roles, including marshalling. This year I decided to take things a step further and get some first-hand experience of marshalling myself. I noticed a post on the event's Facebook

page inviting volunteer marshals to sign up, regardless of previous experience, and jumped at the opportunity.

I showed up on Saturday morning, bundled up in several layers of karting thermals I fished out from the back of my wardrobe. I was relieved to find out I wouldn't be on my own – I would be shadowing an experienced marshal on both days of the festival.

Race Retro operates two separate tracks on the show grounds. My first post was located on the far end of the "Rally Rides" track, specially designated for rally cars taking paying passengers on a four-lap experience. At my designated corner I was greeted by a friendly marshal called Gerry, who introduced me to the star of the show: a green, V8-powered recovery vehicle called Daisy, responsible for towing wayward rally cars back to safety.

But before the circuit went

live at 10:30, there were a few jobs to do: in the absence of co-drivers and without any practice sessions or previous experience of the track, the drivers needed some external guidance to know which way to go. This came in the form of makeshift signs, precariously attached to hay bales on every corner. Gerry and I set about fixing the signs on our bit of track. The initial idea of using a large stapler proved to be ineffective, so we moved onto Plan B: cutting holes in the signs and tying them to the hay bales with zip ties. Gerry's pocket knife successfully cut through the rigid plastic, before continuing its journey into one of his fingers. While my unlucky teammate licked his hand trying to stop the bleeding, I carried on fixing the signs, aware that in less than 10 minutes' time, the first rally car would come flying around the corner and flatten me if I didn't get this done quickly.

I managed to finish in time and Gerry stopped redecorating the marshal post with his blood, so by the time the track went live, the general chaos was somewhat under control.

The rest of the morning session was, thankfully, uneventful for the most part, and I was able to watch the racing without any major incidents happening; the marshals' attention was mostly directed towards mechanical issues or knocked-over hay bales. The most exciting thing that happened during the morning session was the sight of a Skoda whose poorly-secured boot door had flown open mid-lap, somehow without the driver noticing. After the spectators had enjoyed a good laugh, he was eventually flagged down and the misbehaving latch repaired. Another car dropped a mysterious piece of large rubber tubing out of its undercarriage and onto the track, seemingly without



any consequence whatsoever on speed, which left myself and Gerry speculating on what exactly the tube was for. At the very end of the morning session, while I was already making a beeline for the burger van queue, an enthusiastically-driven Renault 5 blasted through one of the corner marker signs I had carefully put in place, running off the track and ending up facing the wrong way. Thankfully, Daisy did not need to be summoned, as the driver managed to pull the car back onto the black stuff and finish his lap, much to everyone else's relief.

Being at the very far end of the show grounds, Gerry and I did not have a very good view of anything that was happening near the main spectator area or the paddock, and as a result all news and updates had to be either communicated via radio or relayed between marshal posts via shouting. At some point during the afternoon session, we spotted

a helicopter circling above; after a few minutes of squinting to make out exactly what it was, we saw the characteristic yellow livery of the local air ambulance. We couldn't see any red flags on our track and cars kept whizzing by as usual, so we figured there must have been some sort of incident on the other circuit. However, the radio was silent, and when I walked up the track to get a glimpse of the rest of the show grounds, I could see that both circuits were still active. We concluded someone in the crowd must have been ill, and went back to keeping an eye on our corner; I didn't find out what had happened until the next morning.

At the end of the afternoon session, the curse of the last car struck again. One of the very last cars due to run that day approached our corner with a bit too much speed, without taking into account the amount of mud accumulated by every other car that had preceded it. After a spectacular full 360, it managed to carry on and drive away without missing a beat. Once again Daisy did not need to make an appearance, so all things considered, we had a pretty successful day.

The timetable provided for the weekend was slightly confusing, so I decided to stay on the safe side and showed up early on Sunday morning, even though this time around I didn't have to register and I already had my hi-vis jacket on me. That turned out to be a poor choice, when I parked my car and walked over to the sign-on hut, all I found was a group of marshals huddling for warmth outside the door, who informed me that "the bloke with the key" was, in fact, not there yet. He showed up almost an hour later, thankfully there was still plenty of time to spare before the start of the day's track activity, but this didn't save him from the grumbled comments of the marshals who were, at this point, getting quite cold. The weather had taken a turn for the worse since the previous afternoon, and the forecast for the day did not look especially promising, with showers and wind to be expected.

This time around I was stationed closer to the action, on a corner in the middle of the main circuit. I had some time to spare before the first cars started their demonstration run, so I walked up to the stand belonging to the

"After a full 360, it managed to carry on without missing a beat"

British Historic Karting Club, who had generously provided me with a free ticket last year and facilitated my interview project. After greetings and a bit of small talk Brian, the club's secretary, asked me if I'd seen the air ambulance the day before. I replied I had, but didn't know what the incident had been, so he told me. One of the people I had interviewed last year for "Beyond the Wheel", a rally driver in his 80s called Alan who reportedly once crashed a Mini off a cliff, had gone out for his demo run in one of the vintage rally cars, but before his track time was due to finish he drove to the medical tent and announced he was having a heart attack. He was right.

We managed to avoid heavy rain for most of the day, but the weather had a strong influence on the number of spectators: most people had either looked at the forecast in advance and decided not to bother showing up on Sunday, or turned up in the morning and then got tired of standing about with muddy feet looking at the same cars they had seen the day before. By the time the afternoon session had started, only nine brave souls remained in the viewing area, and everyone

at the show including the drivers and marshals was eager to get things over and done with.

As I found out at the very end of my Race Retro weekend, you don't get a true experience of marshalling without at least one near miss; while the activity on the track was starting to wind down, and the last few spectators were making their way back to their cars, I took my eyes off my designated corner for a second and was immediately rewarded with a chorus of warning shouts. I turned around, saw a skidding Escort less than three feet from me, and jumped behind a hay bale for protection while it screeched to a halt. The day's on-and-off rain had deposited a layer of mud onto the track, which made the car stray from its trajectory and threaten to turn me into a pancake. Moderately exhausted, smelling of petrol and burnt rubber, and still slightly on edge, I drove back home, happy about my experience and with some extra appreciation for marshals and everything they do to keep motorsport safe and enjoyable.

■ **Next year's Race Retro is at Stoneleigh Park, near Coventry, 19-21 February 2021**



A Skoda Favorit rally car with a misbehaving boot, seen from Lou's marshal post.