CCC Test

Photography: Peter Robain

Size matters

Compressing 8 litres, 10 cylinders, 600 bhp and a CCC reporter into a two-door coupé was tough. Jeremy Walton volunteered to be our Y2K stuffing in the Viper sardine

No company has more publicity hunger – and therefore the bottle for cunning stunts – than Chrysler. The DaimlerChrysler merger may have strangled the corporate suits, but over where they wear Chrysler or Dodge race suits, the madness – I'm very glad to say – continues unabated.

Back in 1996 Chrysler had hired the versatile French Oreca race and rally preparation concern to turn its rumbling V10 street car into a racer that could earn respect around the world. Oreca and loan Chrysler engineers had done a good job with the simple front-engine, rear-drive formula, but the competition Chrysler was due for radical changes between 1997 and 1999.

The Vipers dropped into GT2 and eventually gave private and occasionally works-assisted turbo Porsche 911s such a regular thrashing that Stuttgart rear-motor runners faded from category prominence after the Vipers won nine out of ten FIA GT rounds in 1998 and '99.

Such a win rate brought Olivier Beretta the FIA GT title both years, paired with Pedro Lamy in '98 and Karl Wendlinger last season. Beretta and Chrysler [running under the Dodge brand in the USA] also took the 1999 American ALMS title with wins in every race they contested [six of eight rounds] versus Chevy Corvettes, Ford Mustangs and Porsche 911s. That role of honour, on either side of the Atlantic, made the Oreca Vipers and their drivers the international team to achieve most victories [16] in 1999…

Next season 13 Vipers are scheduled for FIA and American Le Mans Sportscar [ALMS] championship chases. Factory team Oreca Vipers will drop FIA GT events - having won the title in two successive years - in favour of a direct confrontation with Chevrolet's finest Corvettes in US events.

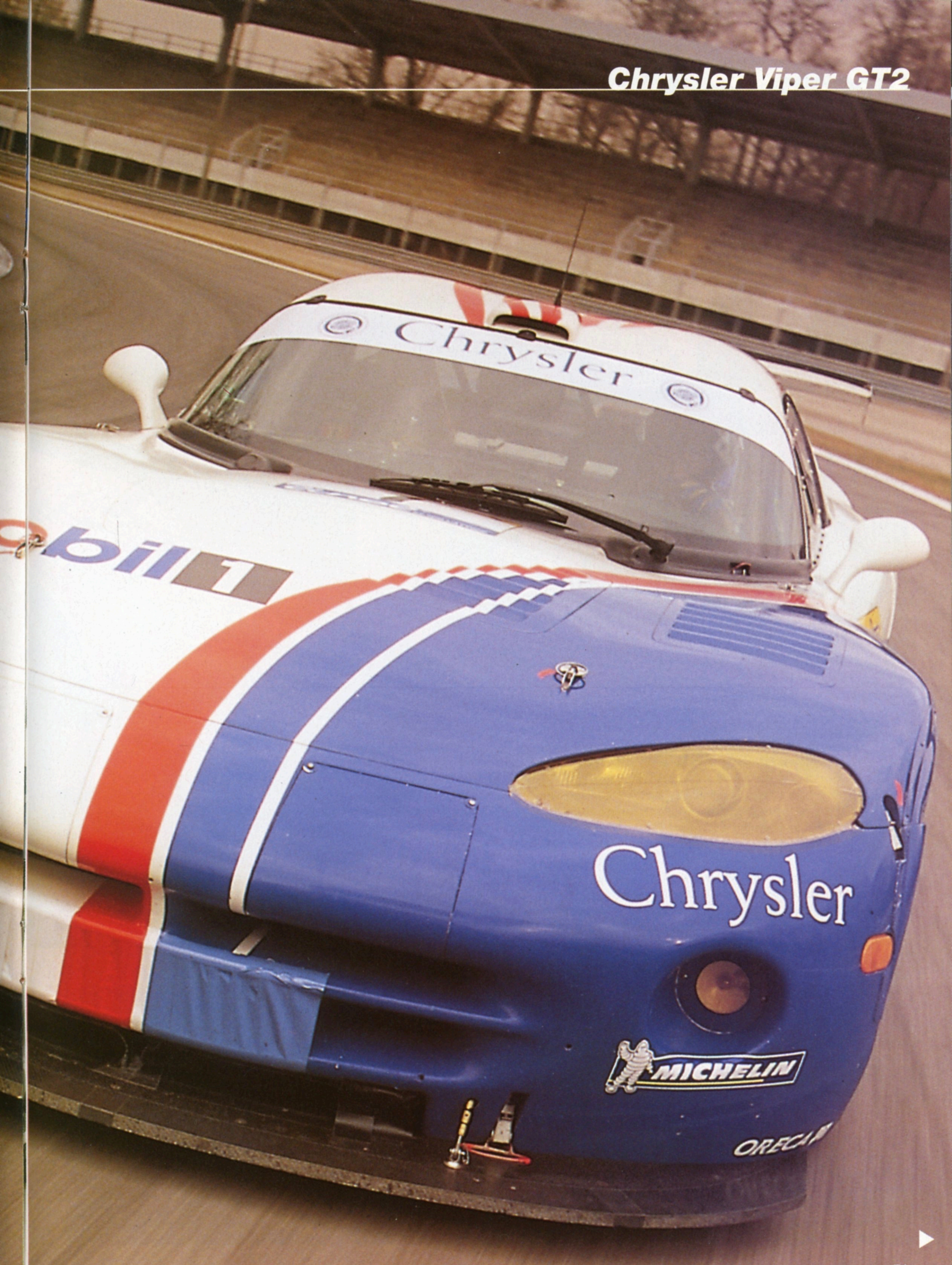
The politics of DaimlerChrysler's merger is evident in one future respect: Oreca and Mopar [Chrysler's traditional parts division branding] have taken delivery of the latest Reynard prototype sports racing chassis. It tested just before Christmas with a Judd V10 at Paul Ricard and then came to our Monza sessions with Mopar aluminium V8 power sounding every bit a match for the thunderous Ford V8s utilised so effectively in the front-engine Panoz. This Reynard Mopar V8 could provide Chrysler/Dodge with a very serious Le Mans/ALMS challenger in 2000, one to beat Cadillac and Audi, if the Daimler management allow the project to go ahead after their own Mercedes-branded airborne disasters in France last year.

CCC/Walton drove a Viper (then GT1, now GT2) with 200mph attitude in France during the 1996/7 winter. We obviously did OK, because they invited us back for further monster motor frights at the close of '99. But this time the venue was even quicker and a lot more emotive: Monza.

The Italian parkland track was dry but literally freezing when we arrived in Voyagers from the Chrysler star fleet. We found two genuine Oreca race Vipers [air-lifted from the last Chinese Championship round] and met their champion drivers; men like former Grand Prix comingman Karl Wendlinger, who would attempt to instil some respect for the task ahead in our motley crew.

The star-spangled Vipers looked much the same as in 1996, but since that means the most menacing track presence outside a marauding Mack truck, that means we were still impressed. About 15 foot long – and most of that appears to be in the slatted and spoilered nose – the race Vipers have grown not just new paint schemes, but also in width. To be precise the track is up almost 4in at the front, and just under 3in at the back.

Chrysler Viper GT2



Chrysler Viper GT2

Top: Viper looks more menacing than ever thanks to a wider track, extended side sills and carbon front spoiler. Above left: Walton pesters team manager Pierre Dieudonne for a job. Above right: Karl Wendlinger talks them through Monza circuit

Quoted length was also up three inches including a carbon front spoiler blade, whilst simple aluminium sheet extended the side sills. Weight was down 100kg/200 lb from 1996, but the team had to race in FIA events with up to 100kg in ballast for their continued success. I calculated that power-to-weight ratio had marginally improved in FIA format since our last encounter, but that was without the penalties for FIA race success. This was a more significant achievement than immediately apparent, because V10 power had been strangled by air restrictors since that 1996 test.

I did not miss 50bhp when our lap allocation was just six 3.6-mile tours [plus three frenetic laps with Wendlinger driving]. Monza is a magic track, one at which Ayrton Senna averaged a gnat's under 150mph way back in a 1987. That Grand Prix Lotus 99T offered just 1.5 Honda V6 litres and something over 850 racing bhp. The best lap for the 8.1-litre Chrysler twelve years later would be almost exactly 20secs slower… Unfair comparison, but some legends deserve their god-like status.

While the exterior of the Venomous Vipers with their main drainage-diameter side sill exhausts has changed subtly, some interior aspects remained unaltered. To my astonishment the biggest remnant was the double H-pattern six-speed gearbox. Yes, it had a different brand name – Borg Warner now absorbed by Tremec – and there was a Ricardo MTC gearchange quality consultant along from Britain to look at the vexed question of improving varying shift quality. But the sequential 'box promised at the close of 1996 and run "a couple of times in 1999" – when it caused one of only two listed Oreca FIA retirements – had not materialised.

When Karl Wendlinger took me out I could see that the existing sextet could be slammed through all ratios ruthlessly – something I only dared on what passed for the straight shifts [1-2, 3-4 and 5-6]. Across the gate every visiting driver reported shifts missed and Oreca team manager Pierre Dieudonne [a former international winner for both Ford and BMW] wryly observed: "when they were new to the car, two of our professionals also crashed the car, both missing shifts." The compensation is that the 'box is virtually unbreakable, and successful changes are of excellent quality. There are not too many affordable transmissions when the motor makes 600 lb/ft of torque – most of it awesomely apparent between 2000 and the 5000rpm official summit to a curve that is really a vast power plateau.

You enter with the now usual swivel and slide two-leg drop beyond the door roll cage. Naturally there are a full set of six-point Sabelts and a Recaro compresses your flesh in an embarrassing reminder that too many puddings have passed this way for too long.

ccc Test

Chrysler Viper GT2

The LHD interior under the double-bulge roof is otherwise much as many current cars, it's the view over that unending bonnet that's intimidating. You are surrounded by switches and control levers. Only an ignition and fuel pump switch need be dropped, prior to squashing a black START button. It's fun to see onlookers scatter with their hands over blitzed ears...

There's no need for drama moving away. The tickover's about 1500rpm and you need only get 2000-2500 from ten cylinders to chuff away with the Viper at its most docile. Exit the pits and prod the snake in third; exit Mr Nice Guy, hello Sir Vicious Viper.

It's not so much the sheer bhp that provides the palpitations – although 530bhp per ton is enough for most insane travellers – but the torque. The motor pulls harder than most V8s at half the rpm. Full throttle in third gear on this cold day was enough to spin most participants with amusing frequency. We were spared the rotational blushing, but the gearchange had enough tricks in reserve to ensure we arrived at the close of the 150mph straight with another downchange to complete. That last 4-to-3 shift was vital before turning hard into the third-gear final curve they call Parabolica. I now prefer to know this section as Diabolica. The race suit needed a laundry this time.

Below and right: Wendlinger and double FIA GT and ALMS champion Olivier Beretta gave the Porsche 911s something to think about at Silverstone in 1999. 13 are scheduled for FIA GT and American Sportscar (ALMS) series this year

Back out on to the main straight and we were advised to hit fourth early, using 4500rpm muscle to propel Viper on to the main start/finish straight. Oreca telemetry revealed Karl Wendlinger hit the equivalent of 175.1mph before shedding some 125mph in the braking zone. It was not so spectacular for us, mainly because the downchanges took twice as long, but come along for the ride we had with Wendlinger.

The Austrian still has strong single-seater ambitions after a 1994 Monaco crash terminated his Grand Prix career at Leyton House March followed by Sauber. GP graduation came via his Mercedes Junior squad days alongside today's German Grand Prix aces, Michael Schumacher and Heinz-Harald Frentzen.

We did three flying laps and I don't think I have seen a man more committed to proving he has worth outside his present drive. Even Colin McRae's rally rides in Cosworth and Subaru eras - the most violent I had experienced - had nothing on Karl's consistent exploitation of every rpm and braking metre available. I noted what I could on the Monza map before we left for the airport. The huge difference between a top professional and even a gifted amateur is that millimetric consistency, and the gut-wrenching deployment of the brakes at fearless video game speeds in diminutive distances. In ViperLand, as in the SAS, He Who Dares Wins ■

TECH SPEC

Body/Chassis: Steel spaceframe, box tube extensions. Integral tubular roll cage with load-bearing structures, including engine bay braces. Reynard original-design carbon-fibre external body panels, Lexan windows. Flat undertray and rear diffuser. High-downforce rear wing, rear slats/outlets to vent additional oil radiators, roof scoops to feed rear brakes and cabin, twin cold-air feeds to front brakes. Aero Cd: 0.49 to 0.57

Weight: 1150kg/2530 lb

Engine: Aluminium 356-T6 Mopar block with cast iron liners, alloy heads and CNC porting for 2v per cyl; intakes measure 2.02in diameter, exhaust 1.6in. Vee 10-cylinder 90deg. Forged aluminium pistons, 12:1 CR. Steel crankshaft and shot-peened Carillo steel connecting rods. Dry-sump lubrication, Motec ECU electronic management, Bosch injectors. FIA GT2 air restrictor [33.8mm]. Bore x stroke: 101.6 x 98.6mm for 8103cc

Performance: FIA GT2 trim 600bhp by 6000rpm, or Le Mans/ALMS [USA] 620bhp by 6200rpm on larger 34.6mm restrictor. Torque: circa 600 lb ft at 5000rpm. Top speed: 200mph

Transmission: Front-engine, rear-drive via magnesium-cased Tilton triple 7.25in plate clutch, Tremec [ex-Borg Warner] T-56 modified six-speed synchromesh gearbox and abbreviated [97.1mm] aluminium Viper propshaft. Dana 60 rear axle [9.75in] with solid halfshafts carrying GKN CV joints. Choice of plate or Viscous Coupling [FFD] limited-slip differentials

Suspension: Unequal length, cast A206-T5 aluminium wishbones, spherical metallic bushes. Dynamic shock absorbers, separate reservoirs, coil-over springs, 57mm front anti-roll bar, rear adjustable. Modified GTS uprights for Brembo brakes and bigger bearings, Riley & Scott hubs. TRW power-assisted rack and pinion steering

Wheels: OZ centre-lock magnesiums – front 12x18in, rear 13x18in

Tyres: Michelin radial slicks – front 29/65-18, rear 30/71-18

Brakes: Carbone Industries carbon discs or Brembo cast iron options. 15in front discs with Brembo 6/8-piston calipers, 13in rears with 4-pot calipers. All-carbon pads for Le Mans/ALMS, carbon/metallic for FIA GT races. Tilton cockpit-adjustable bias and twin master cylinders

Fuel capacity: 100 litres/26.4 gallons

Price: $300,000/£186335