

TRACK TEST: RADICAL SR8

Radical racer proves

Paul O'Neill has fallen in love – with a sportscar. But why exactly



O'Neill ponders how exactly to ask a racing car to marry him



Most of the car's impressive grip comes from aerodynamics



Simple interior had all the controls where O'Neill likes them

I am still smiling. *Motorsport News* sent me to Oulton Park to race a Radical SR8 a few weeks ago and I fell in love that weekend. This is serious – I have been bitten big time. I go giddy when I think about it and get butterflies in my stomach. Is it legal to marry a car?

Let me make something clear from the start – this is, without question, the best racing car I have ever driven.

Usually with a motorcycle-engined car, you imagine that it is going to be flimsy and weak. And I have always thought that a motorbike engine is not an engine that should be in a racing car. But I was in for one hell of a shock when I got into the Radical SR8.

The car was a revelation. The build quality on the car is very impressive. The chassis and the integral parts are well put together. It is very clean and pure engineering and it is something they have obviously put a great deal of thought into. And, best of all, it is British.

Everything is particular and it is all in the right place, all the pedals are perfectly set up and all the buttons are within easy reach. It was spot on.

It feels a lot heavier and a lot more solid than I imagined before I got in the car and it doesn't feel like it is going to break. So it had

already started weaving its magic on me before I had even set off down the pit lane.

I have driven a Ligier in the VdeV series for a previous *MN* track test so I was pretty familiar with the set-up of a two-seater sportscar. It was similar to the Ligier but I think it is a bit more user friendly – and that's because Radical is obviously aware that the kind of people that drive them vary hugely in their build and also their level of ability. They have a broad customer base and they need to cater for that, which they have managed to do well.

I didn't struggle once with anything. There's nothing complicated to get your head around, there weren't any fuse boxes or anything like that to worry about. It was plain and obvious, which suits me just fine. Then you fire the thing up and your heart misses a beat. This was love at first noise.

I just couldn't believe the characteristics of the engine. I thought it was going to be a little revving thing with wheelspin everywhere and that it would be a pain in the backside to get it to put its traction down. It was quite the opposite.

It was very, very torquey. The 2.6-litre Powertec motor is two 1300cc Hayabusa engines joined together and it is lovely. When you press the throttle, the thing feels like it is never going to stop. It was like when you are in a car with an unlimited rev band.

To give you an idea of how meaty it is, I had to get the team to put a headrest behind me because I couldn't deal with the g-force it was creating. My neck's quite strong when it comes to lateral movement but the acceleration of the 380bhp thing was stunning. It nearly took my head off.

Normally in motorcycle-engined cars you can treat the throttle like a switch but I quickly established that I had to treat this thing like I would a Dodge Viper with 600bhp. In bike-engined cars, you can

usually go into a corner then stamp on a throttle because the power is a bit asthmatic and you have to wait for that feeling to go away before it spools up and gets cracking.

That wasn't the same in the SR8. You had to feed the power in, which had the knock-on effect of making the set-up critical because if you had turn-in

LAP TIMES COMPARED

Oulton Park Island circuit

Formula Renault	Tom Blomqvist	1m 18.556s	102.01mph	June 6 2010
Radical SR8	Paul O'Neill	1m 19.516s	100.77mph	May 31 2010
Porsche Carrera Cup	Tim Harvey	1m 24.078s	95.31mph	June 6 2010
Ginetta G50	Carl Breeze	1m 27.525s	91.50mph	June 6 2010
BTCC Honda Civic	Gordon Shedden	1m 27.793s	91.27mph	June 6 2010

oversteer, you couldn't just rely on the switch-like progression of the throttle to get you out of the problem. It was a challenge to handle, but then anything that you are falling in love with generally is.

It has a six-speed sequential gearbox. It is Radical's own system, a Powertec unit and it is a diamond of a gearbox. It is the best gearbox I have ever driven in a paddle shift. The crispness of it is perfect and it is mated so well with the engine. It is probably because Radical builds the engine and the gearbox as well, so they are in harmony with each other. There is no jerkiness as you go up the box and the blip on the downchange is absolutely perfect.

Under acceleration, the 680 kilogramme car ate through the gears like no-one's business. My fingers were zooming around like I was playing a Rachmaninov concerto; I thought I was going to get repetitive strain injury on my digits. Interestingly, though, I wasn't changing all the time because the power band was

small, because it wasn't. The revs actually dropped quite a lot between changes it was just that the car had phenomenal power.

To make you go even more starry-eyed, it has colossal grip. The SR8 puts the grip down very well but you still had to be wary of the throttle because it has so much power. You had to be progressive with the loud pedal and I ended up driving it like a big, torquey V8.

The majority of the grip comes from the aerodynamics. The chassis has mechanical grip but it wasn't really a lot. But I actually reckon that is a good thing; if it has buckets of aero grip and mechanical grip too then the racing suffers. At the hairpin and at Knickerbrook, I had to get the aerodynamics out of my mind because it wasn't working. I was used to planting the throttle in a fourth gear corner like Cascades when it had stopped moving around at the rear but you couldn't do that everywhere.

At the hairpin, you had to press the accelerator with just your big

toe. I had to be very gentle with it otherwise it would start to oversteer.

I certainly had to be on my best behaviour when I was driving this car. It was ready to bite me back. Because of what I was dealing with, it is the most respect I have ever shown a car during a test. There wasn't one millisecond around Oulton Park that weekend that I ran wide or made any mistakes because I was going at double the speed I would normally be traveling. And all this from a motorcycle engine.

Radical wants their drivers to get the most out of the car and what I noticed was that the Radical guys were very supportive of every driver of every level. It is very much a family atmosphere and they are out to make the series as good as they can. Everyone was trying to help each other out. It created a fantastic atmosphere, and that is what it should be all about.

I would recommend it. The Radical SR8 is one of the best, best, best cars that I have ever driven. It is one of the only times I have been out in a car and I have been gutted to see the chequered flag.

You just want to keep driving it forever. It is great. It was quick, it was fun and it was a challenge to drive.

There was nothing I could fault on the car. It was the perfect partner for me. If only... ■

"This is the best car I have ever driven"
O'Neill



O'Neill lined up on pole for both Radical races at Oulton Park



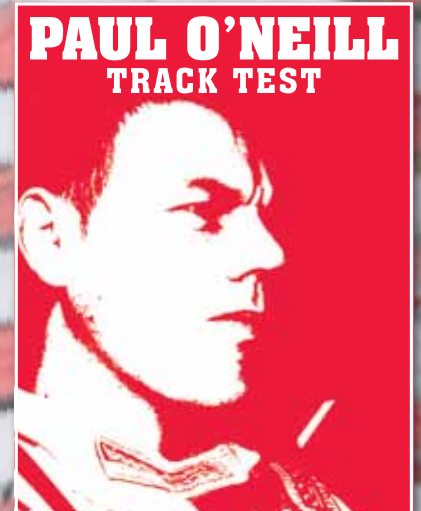
O'Neill: still sporting this grin



Radical provides plenty of support for the drivers in the UK Cup, creating a family atmosphere

a revelation

does he want to marry the SR8?



Two poles, but O'Neill is out of luck in the races

I took part in two rounds of the Radical UK Cup at Oulton Park to get a real feel for the SR8 in race conditions, and I loved it. I managed to score two pole positions and get the fastest lap, but the old O'Neill luck deserted me in the races themselves.

One of the first things I noticed in the wet qualifying session was the stunning brakes. The four-pot calipers were hugely effective, and I was braking where I would on a dry lap in a touring car. They were amazing. I could brake so, so deep into the turns and the steering was direct and positive in the wet, which gave me the confidence to push hard.

The racers were two 40-minute blasts and I had my car all to myself (because I am selfish) but people can do them with two drivers.

You have to pit during a set window, and you find out when that is on the morning of the race. If you are on your own, depending if you are a professional or an amateur, you have to stop for an extra ten or 15 seconds than the two-driver pairings.

I spoke to [ex-Radical racer] Michael Vergers before the race. I had to put four brand new tyres on because we didn't scrub them in due to the wet qualifying. Vergers asked Radical UK if they were trying to kill me with brand new rubber. Then I *knew* it would be a handful...

Vergers also told me to warm the fronts as much as I could on the out lap so I worked double hard. I probably had a heart rate of 195 before I got to the start line.

Myself and Ross Kaiser started on the front row and I made a legendary getaway and cracked on and made sure I pushed as hard as I could. It started to go wrong when I went down to the hairpin on about lap nine. As I turned I clipped the gearbox and it went up to fourth. Ross overtook me because of that. We then went in the pit lane together, but I stalled it and I couldn't get it started again.

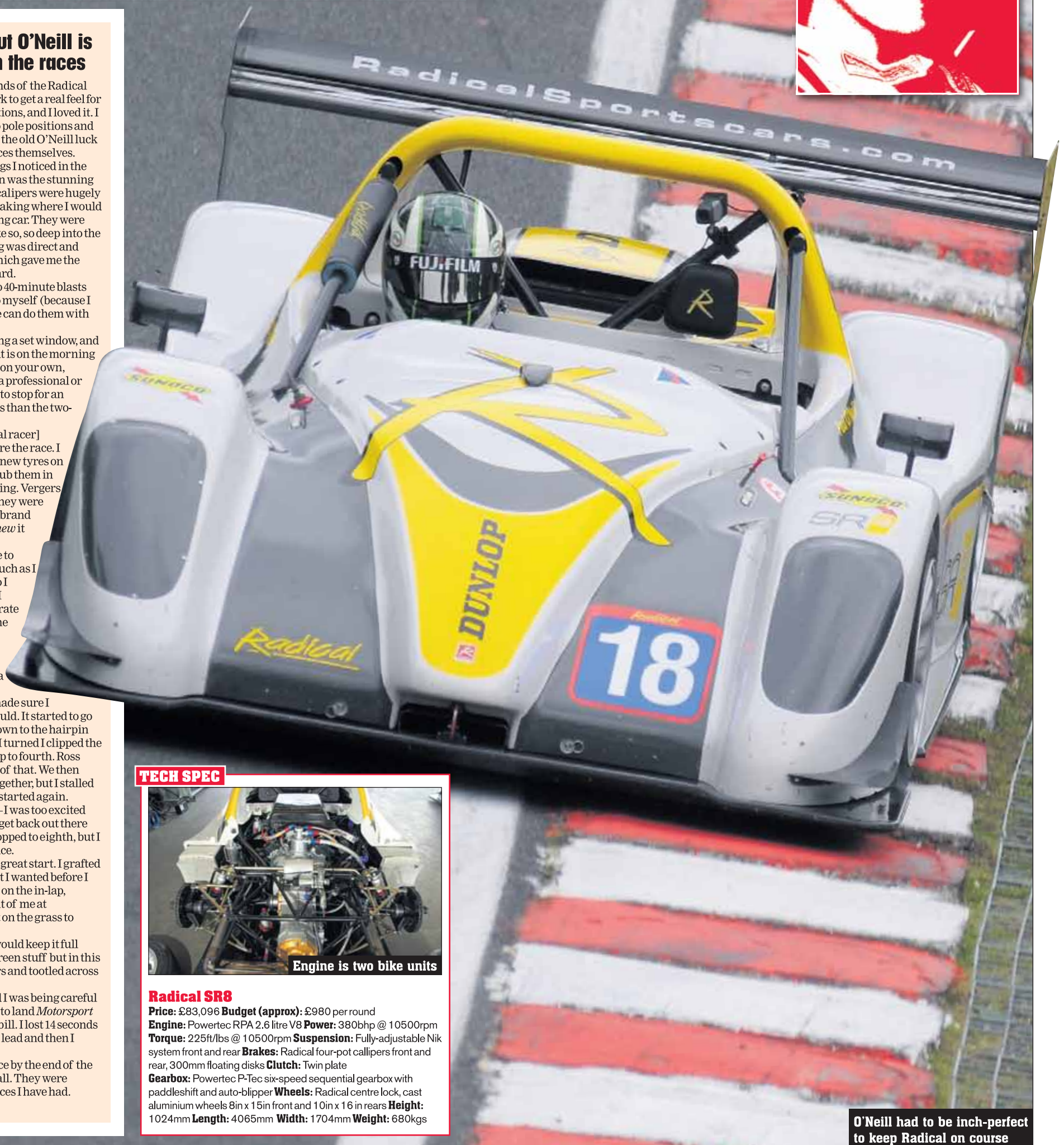
Hands up, my fault – I was too excited and I couldn't wait to get back out there and I mucked up. I dropped to eighth, but I got back to second place.

In race two I made a great start. I grafted the 12 second lead that I wanted before I came into the pits but on the in-lap, someone spun in front of me at Knickerbrook. I went on the grass to avoid them.

In a BTCC car you would keep it full throttle even on the green stuff but in this I went down four gears and tootled across the rough stuff.

It wasn't my car and I was being careful because I didn't want to land *Motorsport News* with a massive bill. I lost 14 seconds on the in lap! I lost my lead and then I couldn't get it back.

I regained third place by the end of the race but I had had a ball. They were the most enjoyable races I have had. I want more...



TECH SPEC



Engine is two bike units

Radical SR8

Price: £83,096 **Budget (approx):** £980 per round
Engine: Powertec RPA 2.6 litre V8 **Power:** 380bhp @ 10500rpm
Torque: 225ft/lbs @ 10500rpm **Suspension:** Fully-adjustable Nik system front and rear **Brakes:** Radical four-pot callipers front and rear, 300mm floating disks **Clutch:** Twin plate
Gearbox: Powertec P-Tec six-speed sequential gearbox with paddleshift and auto-blipper **Wheels:** Radical centre lock, cast aluminium wheels 8in x 15in front and 10in x 16 in rears **Height:** 1024mm **Length:** 4065mm **Width:** 1704mm **Weight:** 680kgs

O'Neill had to be inch-perfect to keep Radical on course