



OPTIMUS PRIMED

*Driving a big race truck is a larger than
life experience*

WORDS by ABHAY VERMA | PHOTOGRAPHY by VIKRANT DATE

YOU CROUCH, CRAWL, contort and squeeze your bulk into a racing car, crawling through the narrow opening of the roll cage and then craning your neck for a good view out thanks to the seat being mounted as low as possible for the lowest possible centre of gravity. That's just how it is in the racing world. You don't ever climb up into a race seat, right?

But that's just what I'm doing, hauling myself into the 6.8-tonne behemoth that is the Tata Prima T1 race truck. I have driven a few quirky machines but a race truck is beyond imagination. At least the track for the drive was the familiar Tata Motors test facility at their Pune plant, which is a kilometre long straight, which starts with a large skidpad followed by a fast sweeping right-hander, a kilometre long straight, and a tighter skidpad to turn around and head back. My past experience of trucking has been limited to a straightline trundle in an empty 25-tonne tipper and I remember it being rather cumbersome to drive, steer and brake. And given the general notion that race machines are tougher to drive compared to their road-going versions, being highly strung as they are, I had my apprehensions. Relatively speaking, since the 2014-spec Tata Motors T1 Prima Racing Truck had a top speed of 110kmph.

Before we got anywhere close to the truck, we were whisked into the presentation room for a quick brief. The moment I was informed that the race truck was powered by an 8.9-litre, in-line six cylinder diesel engine, everything I have driven till date suddenly felt minuscule. That's a displacement of roughly 1500cc for each cylinder, which is the combined total of the Ford EcoSport diesel I'm driving these days. Gulp. The engine produces 370bhp and a humongous 1550Nm of torque, and is mated to an eight-speed Eaton gearbox. The very mention of which had me conjure up images of slotting through the gears one by one.

A stock Prima weighs about 7.5 tonnes, while in race trim, the weight was reduced by 350kg last year, and the engineers have been able to shave off another 300 kilos this year. Talk about weight reduction! The idea has been to make the truck lighter and faster for this year's races, and the top speed is now up to 130kmph. The powertrain remains unchanged and outputs are the same as stock, but a host of changes make it quicker, including reducing the height by 50mm. A peek inside the truck made me realise the cabin was larger than my cubicle back in office! This was certainly something out of this world, especially with the towering view it offered and I could imagine looking at two,



Above: The Tata Prima looks sporty from the rear without its trailer. Note bull bars at the back to protect in the event of getting rammed by another truck from behind. **Left:** Interiors have been stripped bare, removing everything that's not needed in the race



possibly three corners ahead at a racetrack.

This is a race vehicle, and everything unnecessary has been stripped off, including the dashboard and all panels. Windows have been replaced with nets to meet regulations of the British Truck Racing Championship that the Tata T1 Prima Racing is based on, and all you get in the name of equipment is a racing steering wheel, a basic instrument cluster and a race seat with a five-point harness. In our case a passenger seat too, to have the instructor sit next to me while I pilot the beast around. A quick brief later I was in the hot seat, and as I started the engine, the cabin shook noticeably. The instructor observed my startled reaction and was quick to tell me that the only suspension active on the truck in race trim is the one on the wheels, while the suspensions

under the cabin and under the driver's seat are deactivated to keep a check on body roll.

Slotting the gearbox into first was easy, but looking at the lever I wasn't sure if I could figure out where to slot in for third or fifth! The first two gears are crawler gears and when I tried a normal 'launch', I found myself hitting the rev limiter – which is at about 2200rpm – doubly quick, but third gear onwards it was easier to gain momentum. Progress wasn't quick by normal standards, but the truck felt quicker than I imagined, and even the steering wheel felt surprisingly easy to use. I was also able to slot gears better than what I expected, and before I knew it, I was shifting up through the gears, and was in eighth! Wait, or was it just sixth? Heck, no time to think, since I am closing in on 100kmph, which feels very fast

Putting this Goliath of a race machine sideways was something I wasn't even remotely dreaming of



Above: The cooling system for the brakes gets pneumatic assist this year, the tanks for which sit at the back.

from where I am perched, and the roar of the engine without windows and the flapping net on my side are collectively drowning out a lot of things.

It is time to brake hard for the U-turn, and I was expecting a brick-like feel, but was surprised at the minimal effort and progressive feel from the pedal. The brakes use a cooling system which sprays water on to the brake drums to cool them during the race, and unlike last year, the system now gets pneumatic assist to enhance cooling. Making the U-turn was

surprisingly easy too – the turning radius was a lot better than expected and the specially developed JK Tyre race (cut) slicks seemed adept at their task. Another run down the straight and I felt confident, while imagining the truck hurtling down the 1.2km long back straight at the BIC. At the other end of the test track, I could make the U-turn even more easily with more space, but at faster speeds there was a fair bit of body roll, and the rear seemed to hop noticeably. This had me wonder, were four massive radials at the back actually spinning faster than the front?

Putting this Goliath of a race machine sideways was something I wasn't even remotely dreaming of. Easing off the gas, I turned around and headed back to the straight. Slotting into the right gear took time getting used to, and some effort as well; and I could imagine the gear changes needed around the technical sections of the BIC. A couple of laps later, I was able to see 120kmph on the digital speedometer, following which I pulled over to wrap my head around the whole experience of driving a gigantic race machine like the T1 Prima Racing Truck. Come to think of it, driving it was a lot easier than I anticipated, at least easier than clambering up into the truck. ✕



Tata Motors unveiled the 2015 race truck that we drove, with refreshed livery for the 2015 T1 Prima Truck Racing Championship just as the issue was going to print. As compared to the 2014 race truck, the T1 Prima Racing Truck gets ten percent more of everything for 2015 - better acceleration and top speed, while having lost ten percent weight too! The truck we drove looked plain-jane sans any stickering, but for the races it gets proper racy livery, which makes it look like a proper race vehicle. The 2015 championship will see 12 such purpose-built trucks line-up at the starting grid of the Buddh International Circuit on March 15, split into six teams. Tata Motors also took the opportunity to launch a new driver selection program called the T1 Driver Program to train potential Indian drivers for truck racing, aiming to create better truck drivers in the country.