

INSIGHT: A BIG LORRY

MAT JACKSON GOES FROM

JUGGERNAUT TO SIXTY

The Motorbase BTCC star traded his Ford Focus for a monster Volvo



Jackson normally drives this Ford Focus



Volvo says its FH16 is the world's most powerful truck



Having a clear dash is key when in charge of a massive truck



Jackson's new racer: might struggle at Druids hairpin

TECH SPEC

FORD FOCUS BTCC CAR	VS	VOLVO FH16 750
two-litre turbo	Engine	D16G750
300bhp	Power	750 BHP 3550Nm
six-speed sequential	Gearbox	AT031 12D 12-speed I Shift
17in x 9in lightweight Alloy race	Wheels	22.5in rim Durabrite alloy wheels
Dunlop slick	Tyres	Michelin ESG energy saver green tyres
Ohlins four-way adjustable	Suspension	air on rear bogie leaf spring front suspension
1.4m	Height	4m
4.3m	Length	16.5m
1.8m	Width	2.55m
1170kgs	Weight	44 tonne
£150,000	Cost (approx)	truck and trailer £180,000
n/a	Equipment fitted	17in flat screen TV, fridge, microwave combi oven

I have been in a few racing cars that handle like a truck. Or so I thought. But only now do I realise how wrong I have been. Volvo offered me the chance to have a go in its new FH16, which it claims is the world's most powerful truck.

I wasn't going to turn that down and it was certainly a huge change from my Motorbase Performance Ford Focus that I race in the British Touring Car Championship.

We went to the Transport Research Laboratory in Surrey to handle the 750bhp beast fully laden with 44 tonnes of weight on the back.

I thought I was used to coping with success ballast in the British Touring Car Championship but this was a whole new level. I am sure BTCC series director Alan Gow would approve of this type of handicap. As added ballast, I had my touring car team-mate and Porsche Carrera Cup GB racer Michael Caine along for the ride with me as well.

The first thing you notice when you climb into the cab of the FH16 is the luxurious surroundings. I guess it is a requirement, because my BTCC car isn't the sort of place that you want to spend any more than 40 minutes in it at a time, but truck drivers have to sit in their cabs for hours at a time driving all around Europe.

In the back, there was a bed which was bigger than the one I have at home. There was a fridge, a TV, a microwave, everything – it was better kitted out than my house!

Climbing up into the cab, I felt like I was going to get vertigo...it is massive, but it has a nice cushioned seat and the

dashboard and all the controls are clearly laid out. It does feel like a big, comfortable luxury car and the only difference is that I was about 15ft off the ground.

It has 12 gears that are operated in a semi-automatic fashion, where you use the gearshift but it works like an automatic gearbox, or you can put it in automatic, which I wanted to do because I was just concentrating on getting used to a new vehicle. I have enough trouble coping in my Ford Focus, so I didn't want to make things too tough for myself.

Interestingly, it also has another four reverse gears so that if a pick up involves a driver having to reverse for miles down a one-track road, for example, he won't have to sit there on the limiter for the entire duration.

We did a run around the TRL test track at first to give me a clue as to how the truck performs and that was when the real wow factor became evident.

The acceleration was so strong and I could tell that it had huge torque even lower down in the rev range of the 16-cylinder engine. I could feel the driven wheels at the back of the cab light up...it was an amazing thing.

I expected a truck to be just overly heavy and very one-paced, but the Volvo was just so powerful with its 750bhp.

I could actually get the thing out of shape if I tried hard enough. In normal conditions, the truck has all of the traction control systems that you would expect but, because I am brave, I decided to try it without any of the tricks and gizmos on it. I scared myself a bit...

I did a couple of laps and I felt at home behind the wheel. It is like driving a massive road car, and I only noticed how

much weight we had over the back when I came off the throttle. Normally, you get used to engine braking in a car and it will slow pretty quickly, but in the truck the momentum carries you forward and you quickly realise that you aren't in a saloon. The truck is limited like all UK lorries to 56mph and you can see why. When you have 44 tonnes on the back, you simply can't stop in a few metres.

I also had to be careful about how heavily I applied the brakes because it was carrying a colossal amount of weight over the back. If you sit on the brake pedal for minutes at a time, you will overheat them and the stopping power will not be as good as it could be. To counteract that, most big trucks like the Volvo have exhaust brakes.

In simple terms, they work by stopping the release of exhaust gases from the engine. When you are off the power, the pressure builds up inside the engine and that pressure means it is harder for the motor to turn over. That means that the engine slows down and adds extra stopping power to the tractor and trailer unit.

When you are sitting next to a lorry in a traffic jam and you hear all the hissing and puffing coming from the engine, that is just the pressure being released.

I thought there were lots of technical tricks to get on top of with my two-litre turbocharged Ford Focus British touring car, but there is as much, if not more technology inside the FH16.

Pesky *MN* journalist Matt James decided that he wanted to put Michael and I through our paces when it came to handling the truck so he quickly devised a reversing task that comes straight from the Department of Transport test for Heavy Goods Vehicle drivers.



Caine (r) and Jackson admire 750bhp engine

He set out a course where we had to reverse around a cone, straighten the truck up and then go backwards into a parking bay marked out with cones.

It all looked fairly simple, and I stood by and watched Caine give it a go first. I reckoned he would be good at this because has experience of trailering cars around the country in his job as a second-hand car dealer. Alright, so the Volvo was on a much bigger scale, but he still had the advantage over me.

Michael was straight into action and shot backwards at quite a rate, which made me think this would be a doddle for him but it all came undone when he had to reverse around the first cone. He went way too wide and had the trailer unit pointing in the wrong direction. No wonder people don't want to go around corners side-by-side with him on a race track...

He straightened it up and headed backwards towards the 'parking bay', which was only a few feet wider than the

trailer unit itself. Impressively, Michael managed to make it even though he only had a few inches to spare on the left hand side of the truck.

Then it was my turn. After my earlier laps in the cab I was reasonably confident of a good showing. But what Matt James hadn't told us at the time was the opening laps that Michael and I had done were timed and Caine had beaten me around the course by 1.5 seconds.

What I had lost in outright pace I wanted to make up for with style and poise on the reversing test. I noticed the Yorkie bar on the dashboard as I climbed aboard for my turn. Thanks Mr James...

I pulled the truck up to the starting point and began my test but it quickly became clear that this was going to be one hundred times harder than going forwards.

When I started turning the wheel to point the trailer around the first cone, I quickly became aware that I couldn't see behind me.



Have Yorkie, will travel: Jackson enjoyed truck

All I could see was the side of the trailer in my left-hand mirror, and empty space on the other side. I was effectively blinded as to where the truck was headed and had to use intuition to work out which direction I thought I should be headed.

Luckily for me, it turned out to be more-or-less correct and as I straightened the thing up. All I had to do then was go backwards, park her up in the space provided and hop out. Perfect, slap bang in the middle of the parking space. As far as I was concerned, that was one-one to Michael and me...

Driving something like the FH16 gives you a huge new level of respect for the people who drive these things because you really have to concentrate.

I am certainly going to be a bit more understanding when I am driving on the motorway alongside one of these giants.

I think I will also have to be a bit nicer to my truckies from the race team as well – perhaps I will make them an extra cup of

tea, or something like that. I thought it was one of the easy jobs but it was pretty clear to me after handling the Volvo that they are the unsung heroes of the whole operation.

The thing that struck me the most was that the exercises that Michael and I did was the reversing one but we were only doing it between a set of traffic cones.

If you are doing it in a race track paddock and you are trying to squeeze a trailer into a small space between two other race trucks that carry thousands of pounds worth of gear, then that is when you would start to sweat a bit.

It was a great experience and good to be in something where you didn't have to worry about performance parity with other guys around me.

It is certainly a very different skill to driving the Focus race, but, given the rough and tumble in the BTCC, I reckon the FH16 could be the thing to have in 2012.

Not even Matt Neal could push this thing out of his path...■



This cone took a real battering



Reversing big Volvo isn't easy



Jackson watches Caine attempt to reverse truck



Caine: nearly crushed by cab



The FH16: it's big and it's powerful. Stand well back