



# A case to answer

Grand Prix aces John Watson and Peter Gethin appeared at a very wet Blackbushe airport with a BMW 535i and Alpinco B9 plus extra wheels and tyres to put *Motor's* criticism of the new 535 to the test.

Daniel Ward reports on the controversial case



Right: Ready to do battle, left to right, Peter Gethin, David Vivian, John Watson and Daniel Ward

IT WAS easy to realise how threatened defendants feel at the start of a law case. The presence of so many menacing figures makes it difficult to believe that you really are innocent until proven guilty.

Being just two, we were badly outnumbered. The prosecuting council (BMW) looked friendly enough, though the presence of Grand Prix stars John Watson and former BRM Formula One driver Peter Gethin — plus BMW's service manager, the company's technical expert, public relations people and the late appearance of BMW UK's boss Paul Layzell — emphasised the seriousness with which the company regarded the charge.

Time for the case to start. The indictment sheets were handed to all the parties. It looked bad. The defendants — myself and *Motor's* top tester David Vivian, "... did in a *Motor* road test of the ninth day of March, 1985, criticise the new BMW M535i. In detail they did say 'in purely subjective terms, the engine

failed to measure up to BMW's own high standards. Perhaps the unit was unrepresentative but it revved with neither the silkiness nor the eagerness we had been expecting. Above 5500 rpm, the engine simply sounded strained and even at lower revs lacked that crisp sporting edge so characteristic of BMW sixes'."

The indictment continued "They also did say 'the quality of the ZF shift leaves something to be desired. It wasn't the dog-leg first that our testers objected to so much as the rather sloppy and ill-defined across-gate movements of the stubby gearlever, it was all too easy to shift straight from first to fourth. Nor did the clutch elicit any great enthusiasm, having a rather long-winded action yet a late and abrupt take-up.'"

The most serious charge was now read.

"In stark contrast to the well-mannered and predictable wet-weather handling exhibited by the 525i — and even the hugely powerful

Alpina B9 — the M535i is an unpleasant revelation mimicking undesirably tail-happy traits that marred big-engined BMWs of old. A surprising degree of lift-off oversteer is part of the concern here, but more worrying is the ease with which rear-end traction can be broken under power. Even the most ardent opposite-lock merchants would tire eventually of the level of concentration needed to make brisk progress in anything less than completely dry conditions, especially since the breakaway is by no means that progressive and requires quick reactions and accurate inputs to correct neatly."

The question was "Could *Motor* defend its position against the formidable prosecution?" We were about to find out. A section of Blackbushe airport had been cordoned off and, with the use of cones, we would be able to produce any bends we wanted. The cars stood waiting — a white 535i (its looks enhanced by the absence of the purely

Below: the tests begin in sideways fashion, the Alpina B9 (dark car) feeling very different from the 535i (white car) Bottom: Sideways and then some — but with both wearing Pirelli P7s the similarities become striking



cosmetic "M" treatment) fitted with the standard equipment Michelin TRX tyres, 225/55VR 390 on 6½ in metric rims. The similarly 5-Series based Alpina car sat on more generous Pirelli P7 rubber, 205/50 VR 16 on 7J front rims with 225/50 VR 16 on 8J rears.

It was time to drive the cars. I paired off with Watson, David with the jovial Gethin. The snow had just turned to rain. By tightening the bend formed by the cones we had a corner ideal for the 535i in either second or third at 50 mph plus, the four-speed automatic of the B9 happy to take it in second.

Watson took the wheel of the 535i. As we headed for the bend for the first time, he sat low behind the wheel, utterly at ease, with no dab of the brakes or confidence lift. The car's whole balance came from the steering wheel and throttle.

The tail stepped out quickly and was firmly, but unhurriedly, corrected. Watson started his assessment — "Initially a little understeer that transfers into oversteer; there is a slight tucking-in on oversteer, though it's not a sudden oversteer. It does straighten itself up (from a huge tail slide) when lifting off the throttle."

Watson demonstrated — but would this keep the average driver on the road out of trouble?

He continued, "While the oversteer is progressive I don't like the need to come off the lock quickly in order to stop the over-correction."

Swapping places it was easy to see what he meant. Once the tail had reached the end of its slide, and was poised to come back into line, the car would wriggle at the back before straightening up in a flash. The pendulum effect from the mass of the body, though, meant that the cabin would heave over, trying to push the car into a slide in the other direction. Even Watson had trouble making the 535i power slide with great neatness.

Yet it has to be said that the car was better than our test on the road had suggested. Less nervous, it certainly benefited from the airport's "clean" tarmac and fresh Michelins. But the impression remained that here was a powerful car that would happily produce a full-blooded slide in the wet when the driver expected just moderate oversteer.

We had gone just a few hundred yards in the Alpina when Watson commented, "Immediately, you can feel this is harsher — that's the tyres."

Once through the corner for the first time the commentary continued, "The understeer is greater, but it still oversteers." As he calmly gathered the big car from a slide where he



Above: The 535i before the serious sideways motoring got started



Above: Gethin keeps the amply tyred Alpina neatly in shape



Left: The clinching factor — the switch from Michelins to Pirellis on the 535i

needed all the opposite lock available, Watson emphasised, "It oversteers, but you don't get that over-correction. This is a more progressive and more nimble car. Personally, I am not sure which is the better car into the corner, but the Alpina is nicer in the middle and exit of a bend. The Alpina has less front-to-rear grip initially; the 535 has the balance closer. That might be better in terms of handling, but in roadholding I am not sure one is superior to the other. They are *certainly* different!"

The tautness of the Alpina — that comes from its Bilstein dampers — was a revelation, controlling the body so much

better when the car was sliding. With the Pirellis, the steering feel was enhanced — firmer and more consistent when close to the limit. The B9's initial understeer appeared more marked than I remember from *Motor's* last test, but once this had been balanced out on the throttle the car provided all the signs the driver needs that it would oversteer progressively, accepting the throttle as its lord and master.

Coming off the throttle always got a grippy, reassuring response from the P7s. And, as the tail was pulled back into line, the correcting lock did not need to be so urgently unwound as the car's tautness

eliminated the ungainly over-correction of the 535i.

Time for the first formal exchanges. The prosecution looked confident. Their white charger was different, rather than bad — perhaps. The experts attacked *Motor's* criticism with alarming eagerness. Watson concluded that the 535's only vice is the over-correction, Gethin emphasising that the Alpina does all the same things as the 535, though later. It is difficult to argue against his point that the difference in damping would be less marked on the road, because you couldn't push the cars as hard as on the track. "The Alpina handles



Above: Vivian reserving his tail sliding antics to the tighter corner set up later



Above: 535i on Michelins with Watson calmly exploring the limits



Right: Indictments in hand, the BMW men discuss Motor's criticism line by line

better in these conditions," said Watson, "but the Alpina is a totally different product."

Vivian had the last word. "In wet conditions the Alpina is trying to resist oversteer while the 535 wants to slide." Right, certainly, but if the jury retired now would *Motor* lose on a 10 to two verdict? We had not established our defence yet by some way, but the important stage was only just being reached, for next the Michelins on the 535 were changed for a set of Alpina wheels and P7s — cost for four, £1557.90 plus VAT.

Apprehensively, I took the seat next to Watson in the Pirelli-shod 535i, not certain

whether it would be noticeably better. Once more charging the bend in complete control, Watson was smiling. "It feels like more of the character of the Alpina, feels much tauter. It understeers like the Alpina but there is a less abrupt change than it had before." With the tail sliding wide, the wriggle from the back had gone but, more important, much of the over-correction characteristic had gone, though naturally the body still rolled more than did the Alpina's.

With a barely concealed grin, Watson climbed out of the 535 and admitted, "I am probably more surprised than you are." Of course, I agreed. Things

were looking up for *Motor*. For the moment, he forgot the "case" and animatedly discussed his everyday big-tired Golf GTi. A timely reminder of his skill came when he explained that he likes to make both ends of the chassis work hard, the Golf never being allowed to understeer. He is looking forward to the delivery of a Cosworth Mercedes 190...

Gethin emerged from the white 535i to conclude, "It is now much more difficult to make it oversteer. It eliminates for me any unpredictability: you automatically improve the car (with P7s) for the road, making it more of an

understeerer but that is what the average user wants." Watson agreed that the Italian rubber inspired much more confidence.

In gentlemanly fashion the prosecution had indicated defeat. The transformation achieved by the tyre change had indeed been startling. The 535i had suddenly taken on the character of the B9. The Alpina still uses its set-up of softer roll bars and firmer damping to good effect, but it has to be conceded that the tyres made the biggest difference.

The defence had one last hurdle to tackle before being home and dry — to take a pair of 535is out around the greasy country lanes in convoy, one wearing Michelins, the other Pirellis. By now David and I had driven three 535is and there was no doubt in our minds that all three had been mechanically different.

Variable quality from the Bavarian company is not something we expected but these cars were the evidence. *Motor's* test car was clearly the worst of the bunch, the best of the trio having a much smoother and sweeter engine, undeserving of our criticism of the test car. Its gearchange, while not permitting shifts as smooth or flowing as we would like, was certainly a significant improvement. The clutch was more progressive too.

As to the chassis, the Pirellis certainly provided more grip which manifested itself in a sense of great security — and "on-the-rails" sensation. There was more understeer than on the Michelin car but this never appeared to be a handicap, as there was also less oversteer, and it is the steady progression between these two characteristics that scores on the road.

On Michelins, the 535 felt less nervous than our test car (a magazine with a rather short name had hammered the test car before us, scrubbing the tyres badly) but still it slid rapidly and displayed the same over-correction problem experienced on the circuit. The car's undoing, though, proved to be a fast third-gear bend which curved over the brow of a hill. With no warning the tail flicked out wide. Only pure reflex reactions corrected it in time. A glance in my mirror revealed that the Pirelli car displayed only a hint of oversteer.

*Motor's* case rests. That only a company as thorough as BMW would have gone to these lengths to establish the true facts is beyond question and its reputation for professionalism is untarnished by the fascinating outcome.

With the smile of victors — on this occasion at least — we tip our caps to the men at BMW UK.