

# AUTOCAR

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# Samurai **EXCLUSIVE** street fighters

**Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution VII  
takes on Evo VI and Subaru  
Impreza WRX STi**



## TESTED

Hyundai Matrix • Renault Avantime • Jaguar XKR-R  
TD 2000 Gatsby • Citroën C5 • Rolls-Royce Corniche

## SCOOPS

New Mercedes E-class • Mini Cooper S

## M3 vs C32

TWIN TEST OF  
BMW SUPER  
STAR AND ITS  
MERC RIVAL



## ON THE ROAD

230BHP FORD  
FOCUS RS  
AIMS FOR HOT  
HATCH CROWN





# Clear future for Lotus

**Exposé Superlight 340R racing prototype points way for new production cars**

LOTUS HAS created a prototype 340R called the Exposé to showcase new lightweight materials that could find their way into future production cars.

The flyweight Exposé has a polycarbonate body and weighs in at just 545kg – 130kg less than a standard 340R.

The new body has translucent panels which expose the mechanicals underneath – like an Apple iMac computer. Crucially, the lightweight body gives the Exposé even more scintillating performance than the standard 340R. Project leader Tony Shute said the car will sprint to 100kmh in 3.5sec and 160kmh in 9.5sec with a



**Flyweight Exposé should sprint to 100kmh in 3.5 seconds**

top speed of 225kmh.

"My young son and I came up with the idea for the Exposé at a hill climb," Shute told *Autocar*.

"He was racing a one-tenth scale polycarbonate model of the Elise which weighed just

1.5kg and we realised we could use the same weight-saving technology on the 340R."

Lotus backed the project and donated a 340R with an uprated 190bhp engine. Work began in September 2000 and the car was ready by January



**340R weighs 130kg more**

this year – at a cost of less than £35,000.

Polycarbonate is used to make police riot shields. It is light, strong and bounces back into shape after small impacts. A vacuum-forming process moulds the four body panels

from polycarbonate sheets, which are 3 to 4mm thick.

In the quest to trim excess flab, the car is stripped out, losing its heater and windscreen. Exige wheels and racing tyres are fitted – 17in at the rear, 16in up front.

Shute said the material is recyclable and relatively cheap: "We have taken out patents on the technology. Lotus road cars could start using it in four or five years."

Shute says the lighter weight makes the Exposé three seconds quicker on a hill climb than a standard 340R – equivalent to having an extra 40bhp.

**Tim Pollard**



## Focus gets new face

THE WORLD'S current best-selling car, the Ford Focus, is being readied for an autumn facelift. Caught here for the first time, it will get fresh styling cues and new engine and equipment options.

*Autocar* has learned that the new Focus will hit right-hand drive markets after being unveiled at the Frankfurt Motor Show. Despite the upgrades, prices are expected to mirror the cost of today's range.

Our exclusive spy photo captures a 2-litre model thought to be the new 170bhp ST170 hot hatch. It was in Germany towing a heavy trailer during exhaustive high-load testing.

All models across the Focus range

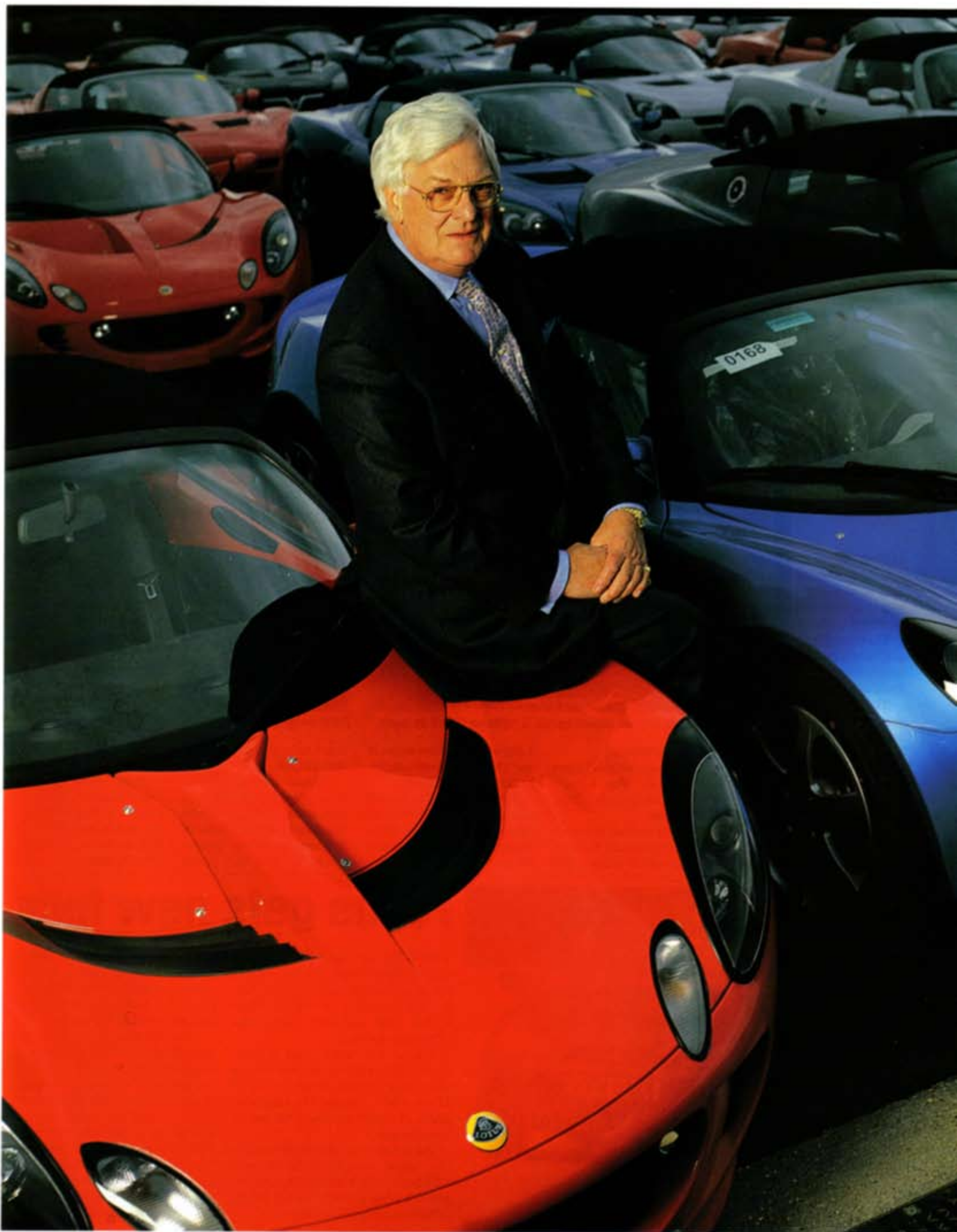
will get a new Mondeo-like nose with restyled bumpers, repositioned side indicator lights and air intakes, and jewel-effect headlamps. But most of the changes will be under the skin.

"The Focus has been a best-seller in many Ford markets for the past year or so and still looks sharply styled," said one insider. "We like to call it more of a freshen-up than a full mid-life facelift."

The revised car will go on sale in Europe with the new common-rail TDCi diesel. The ST170 and 230bhp RS will be added to the facelifted Focus range, but the scorching Cosworth 4x4 variant has been delayed until the all-new Focus is launched in 2004.

**Tim Pollard**

New spec includes sat-nav Reshaped air intake Jewel-effect headlamps



# Can Lotus bloom again?

**Hethel's future** New CEO Terry Playle's vision includes hot new products and a higher output

THE REVOLUTION starts here. In his first major interview since becoming chief executive in April this year, Terry Playle has outlined his uncompromising vision to shake up Group Lotus.

Lotus's new boss has consigned the acclaimed M250 concept to the scrap heap, set up a platform strategy group to hunt down new product opportunities and vowed to push production past 10,000 units a year in a bid to crack the US market.

"Lotus will have to get leaner, meaner and wiser, or we could bite the dust like Marcos. My task is to put right what's gone wrong, looking at the whole group," vowed Playle.

It's been a tough year for Lotus. Elises have been merely trickling off the production line, creating a six-month backlog of orders. Cash flow has also been hit by a downturn in engineering contracts, forcing Lotus to make 300 workers redundant in March. Within

weeks, Chris Knight retired as chief executive, thrusting Playle into the top job.

So what went wrong? "We overstretched ourselves," Playle admitted.

Lotus installed two new production lines, for the Opel Speedster/Vauxhall VX220 and the Elise, adopting new techniques and much higher quality targets. GM demanded 3000 sports cars a year – typically, Lotus' entire annual output – and more

than triple the annual 900 target of the original Elise in 1995.

"We moved the factory and boosted capacity from 3000 to 10,000 units all in one go.

The board thought we could do it, but we got it wrong."

Production is ramping up. The Speedster/VX220 is at full capacity – 80 cars a week – while the Elise's current 30 hit the 80 mark last month. Six quality control points and a no-fault policy – where cars are impounded until the cause of a problem



New quality control measures have delayed production of Elise

is rooted out – mean the Elise should be the best-built Lotus ever.

Quality is the bedrock on which Lotus' bid to crack the US market is founded. Playle knows American consumers will be wary of imported sports cars backed only by a 40-strong dealer network. Lotus currently sells fewer than 100 Esprits in the US each year, though the firm is assessing whether to invest millions to homologate the Elise. The re-engineered M250 – redesigned and equipped for American tastes – will spearhead the US charge.

"I was in tears when I told staff M250 was to stop, but we should have done it 18 months ago," admitted Playle. He acted when he

found product planners weren't sure if they had a global hit on their hands. "When you are investing £30 million in production, you need to know."

Dismayed Lotus fans may protest that the M250 has been scrapped to cater for an indifferent nation 4800 kilometres from Lotus' loyal heartland. But 69-year-old Playle – who first worked with Lotus founder Colin Chapman in 1966 and became a non-executive

director two years ago – is unbowed. "We are not destroying our brand values. We will always stand for performance out of light weight, and exceptional ride and handling."

Although he fears the winds of recession are closing in, Playle predicts Lotus' reputation will ensure the engineering business soon recovers. Manufacturers need Lotus – it has had a hand in 10 percent of all engines on sale in Europe.

Playle is convinced that Lotus Cars will continue to maintain its profitability. The product strategy group is working on a successor to the Lotus Carlton (see panel), although the line-up of Elise and Esprit is unlikely to grow until M250 arrives.

"In five years, I see us as a two to three-platform car maker building 10,000 to 15,000 cars that are always great to drive."

Phil McNamara

## LOTUS CARLTON'S SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR



our Carlton or Cortina [variants] for not fitting Lotus' image."

Lotus is now seeking manufacturers to provide a donor platform, but has yet to strike a deal.

The Lotus Carlton arrived in 1990 and 440 were built. With capacity increased to 3.6 litres, a new twin-cam head and twin intercooled turbos, Lotus boosted power output to 377bhp.

A super-saloon project would take three years, or 24 months if Lotus limited its work to chassis and engine tweaks.

Lotus is plotting to unleash a successor to its legendary 280kmh Carlton. New boss Terry Playle is keen to extend the brand outside its sports car niche, and a performance saloon fits the bill.

"I'm examining other products beside our core sports cars," said Playle. "No-one ever criticised



Esprit is only Lotus available in US, where it sells in small numbers; Playle plans to change that

