

T3

Made with Laustahl

The VPP Pedalset Professional

Christoph Schirmer gets to grips with Germany's finest ... and introduces us to Jochen Lau, the man behind VPP.

Christoph **Schirmer**



The last few years have seen something of a phenomenon in sim-racing circles – that is, sim-racers turning their passion and hobbies into business enterprises. Jochen Lau is just such a person. I have known Jochen since the early VRoC days where we had some nice races, especially at Monza. But the truth of the matter is that he was always that much quicker than me ... but, that aside, it was with great pleasure that I first began hearing rumours that Jochen had founded a company that produced high-end wheels and pedals.

René Günther {AutoSimSport's German Editor} established contact for an interview with him and his partner, Alexander Müller, and they were kind enough to give us a test-sample of their much acclaimed pedal set, the Virtual Performance Parts Pedalset Professional.

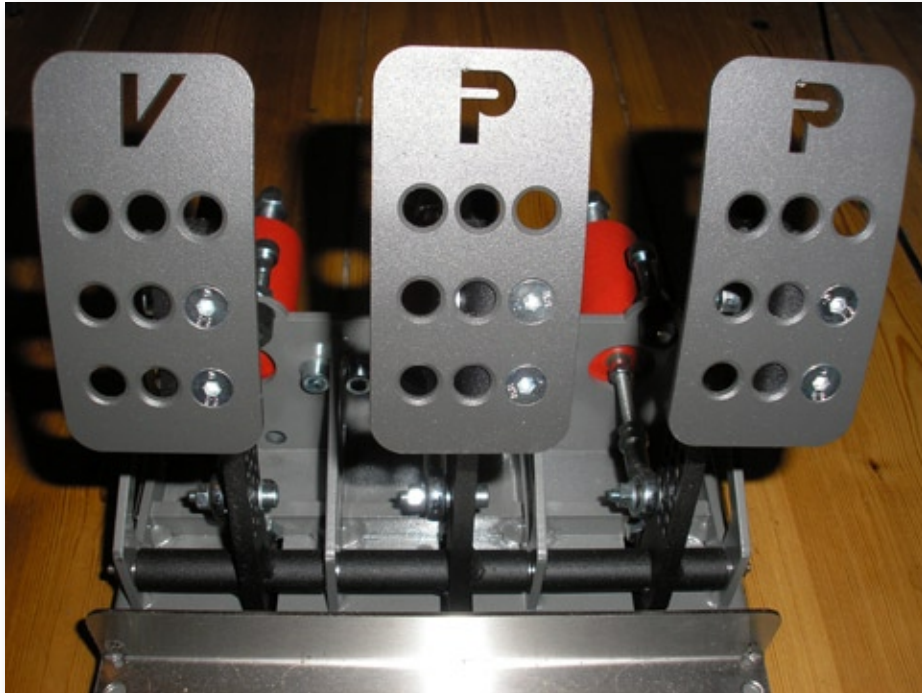
Like many other sim racers, Jochen has had his fair share of used-up wheels and pedals. And also like many others, he was never fully satisfied with any single product – especially since they never tended to last long enough!

So, as with all inventions, necessity caused Jochen to begin manufacturing his own units. Jochen's degree in engineering helped, of course, and the idea – to found a company that produced working tools for sim racers – was forged. From the initial ideas and the first sketches to that first actual unit

required a lot of time and work, but soon the world was treated to their first glimpse of the **VPP** Pedalset Professional. And as a first glance will demonstrate, the wait – and the concept – have been worth their weight in steel.

The Virtual Performance Parts Pedalset Professional 2/3 (the numbers stand for the pedals, the set being available with or without clutch) is filled with unique features and innovations, and some have already been patented by the entrepreneurs: brake with multi-level spring-system adjustable; preloading of spring-tension; adjustable pedal-travel-and-rake; adjustable distance of the pedal-plates; ball bearings for each pedal; pedal-axle made of high quality steel; industrial standard potentiometers; powder coating - these are just some of the elements that make this pedalset stand out in the crowd.

Jochen and Alexander do not even shy away from giving more than the usual six months warranty for the consumables such as the potentiometers (in the interview, they claimed to give even three years of warranty, but if I recall correctly, the manual says two years. Any errors would be mine, though!). The material used is steel, and it looks fabulous with its Bauhausesque design. Everything is open, and the modular construction allows for any adjustment a driver may need (and as you can see from the reports, adjustments may indeed



be required). In addition, the manufacturing quality is of the highest level, and the VPP partners are proud of their "Made in Germany" label – made with *Laustahl*, so to speak.

The VPP pedalset is – to my knowledge – also the first high-end pedal for consoles. There are many more console gamers than PC gamers, so that may also be reason for the price. While 450 EUR may be a lot for the private bank account, it is a bargain when compared to other high-end products.

VPP have also announced the development of a race frame, and of a wheel. The race frame is scheduled for March 2006, and we shall test it as soon as we get a sample. The wheel is still in development, and is due end 2006. We shall keep you updated about any news.

The features of the race frame - *VPP Racing Rack Professional* – have already been published and here are some of the highlights:

Real racing seat; tube and TFT monitor stands (very stable); seat and pedals are to be slid in separately for maximum ergonomic racing position; monitor and wheel mounting is height-adjustable; keyboard and mouse attachment. Optional: bass kicker seat mounted. The pricing will be approx. EUR 490.00.

A special feature should be emphasized here: upon request, the race frame will also include an ashtray holder! Again, such paramount details show that people with real life experience are designing that kit. If they ever issue a balaclava or a helmet,

you can be assured that these parts will include a small hole where you can feed in your asthmatic phallus. It seems that only one more feature is missing: a small vase besides the wheel, such as you can find in the VW Beetle.

But enough of the introductions, let's get down and dirty with the pedals.

VPP (Virtual Performance Parts) PedalSet 3 Test-Report

Markus Schneider gets to test VPP's much-touted pedals and, along with Christoph Schirmer {translation and additional comments}, finds that true-love comes with time and fine-tuning.

First-off, it should be known that I am one of those personal

T₃ The VPP Pedalset Professional

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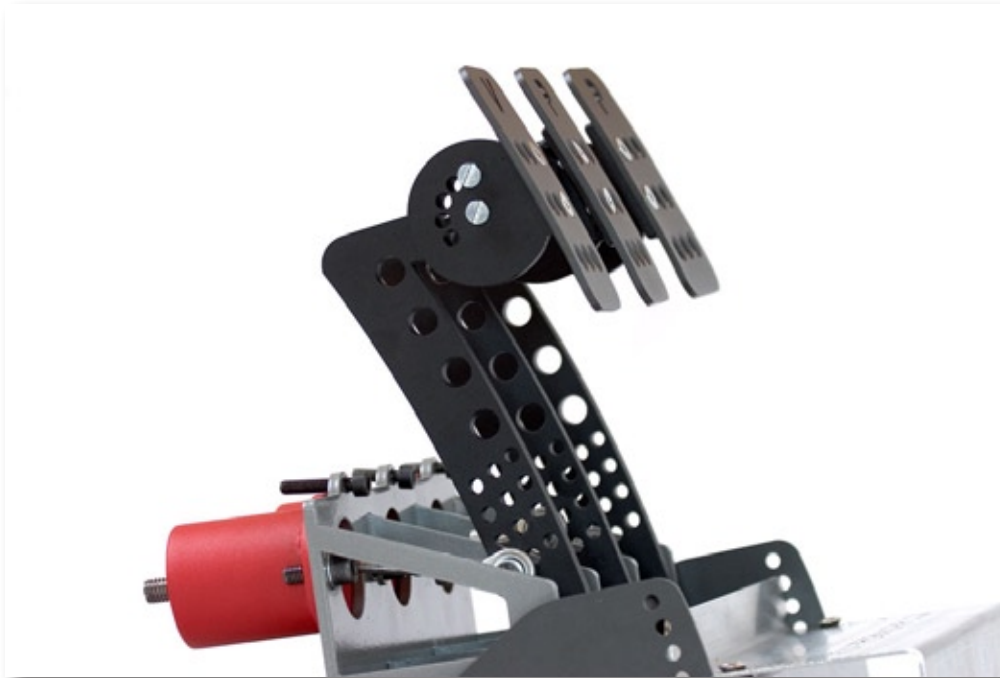
computer racing addicts. Since GP Legends came out, I haven't been able to avoid the magic of simulated racing. With GTR, which has become the ultimate experience for me, I entered what I like to define as level two. This means that I am racing in my second season in the onlineracer.de championships, and I cannot keep record anymore of the hours, championship and test races I have done – nor, indeed, the arguments with my lover because she suspects that I love the computer more than her.

In the current championship standings, I am third, and still competing for the title. All of this as background as to why I was asked – and am amply qualified – to give what I consider to be an honest and knowing review on the quality of one of the sim racer's most important working tools: the pedals.

So far, a Microsoft Sidewinder, a red MOMO, and two black MOMOs have become victims of my hobby. Currently, I favor a Logitech with a MOMO wheel. While the wheel does a fine job, the infamous pedal bug has been the source of much despair to the extent that I have had to face two complete exchanges of the pedal sets; but, I can happily report that it is now not only working, but is still offering me a fine ride in online races.

Of course, from time to time, and like many sim-racers, I cast my yearning eyes on Frex, ECCI, or BRD products. While the visual impressions make me drool, the price of those products usually kills any latent desire – as in immediately!

These days, a new (German) product has joined this eminent list of most-desired hardware ... VPP (Virtual Performance Parts). High-end ergonomics and quality are, it is said, their most important features. Yet, coming in at 450 EUR



for a three pedal set, it ain't cheap. Even if one could get a 20% rebate for collective orders, it still remains far too expensive for me to justify a purchase, and so I justify this by assuring myself that there really can't be that much of a difference to the MOMO wheels – right?

Right! But then I got the chance to test the VPP pedal set for AutoSimSport and for onlineracer.de. The way it happened should remain a secret, but suffice it to say that, on Christmas Eve, I met with René Günther {AutoSimSport's German Editor} at an undisclosed location to take possession of the package [a huge package with 100s of liters of polystyrene noodles - CHS]. I stashed the 11 kg goodie into the car boot, and headed home from the clandestine meeting-point making sure no-one was following.

Boxing Day arrived and found me finally able to test what everyone was raving about ... and the first thing I noticed – like so many that have come before me – were the extremely stiff brakes [Indeed - I thought I needed a gym course. If such brakes were fitted in street cars, no one would ever brake! - CHS].

The stiffness immediately brought about a problem; without being locked, or fixed in another way, the pedal-set has a life of its own, resulting in me flying all over the show since the forces necessary to apply the brakes and the gas are really pretty extreme ... I solve this problem by shoving a shelf between the wall and the pedal set. [Sticky tapes are included in the package which, according to the Jochen Lau, have enough power to keep the pedals pretty much secured. I did not dare to use them because I wanted to keep them for the second tester, who, as we learn now, also did not use them, or did not find them among the tons of styrene noodles (there are some surprises if you go through

them with your hands). So the problem of the pedals' 'stickability' is not one that can be overcome; however, as will be explained below, it is recommended that the pedals are installed either in a race frame, or somehow positioned in an elevated position, or even turned upside down, otherwise one does not reach the pedals with one's feet - CHS].

With that problem solved, on to the next one! Pushing the pedals like a truck driver, I soon discover, is not the most ergonomically way to race a GTR sim-car! [True, but listening to Kris Kristoffersen would be even less ergonomic - CHS]. In their default settings, the pedals may be well suited for owners of a race seat, but they are not suited as stand-alone pedals. What's more, I also wanted to make the brake less resistant to avoid either the gym – or the physio!

So after 90 minutes of screwing, gauging, tweaking, adjusting and rebuilding, I have the pedals exactly as I want them. Which brings me onto what I consider to be one of the pedals' crowning glories – the versatility of their design. It is hard to believe that nearly everything can be changed. It is evident that the designers had some first-hand experience in their adaptability. *[The pressure of the pedals can be adjusted via several differing steps, the first and most obvious one being turning those nice red shrouds of the springs. For the pedals, there are many positions available, thanks to the many anchors. Even the width between the pedals can be adjusted. Unfortunately, I did not figure out a position where my feet could rest on the steel plate bottom while still being able to fully reach the pedals, not even with sneakers – and I don't have the smallest feet (shoe-size 43). But it seems that Markus figured this out. CHS].* The manual, too, is actually very helpful for any tinkering and its short chapters guide you through all the necessary steps very concisely.

So, anyway, now that I had the pedals configured just the way I wanted them, I was ready to connect the pedal set to the wheel via the USB wire; that done, the PC was rebooted and recognition of the new software worked absolutely flawlessly *[the 16 buttons shown for the pedals are impressive, and they will be used for the VPP wheel which is in the making].* Calibration is a breeze, too *[same here].*

And, finally *{I'll say, these Germans and their bloody preparations! – Ed!}*, it is time to race!

Report: Test-Day 1 ...

I fire-up GTR and assign the axes. This is accomplished without any problems. *[While Markus did an extensive test with GTR, I did some laps with GPL, F1C99-02, NASCAR 2003, LFS S2, and rFactor. Because I did not adjust it to my needs as much as Markus, I cannot confirm all the detailed impressions, but I can imagine that you get awesome results once you have adjusted them. However, the pedals work with all the sims without any problems. - CHS].* I load a track which I know well in order to have a good reference-point, and start my virgin laps.

Right away, I get excited by the fine metering of the gas pedal. The car reacts to the slightest pressure, and for the first time in my sim-career I am able to allot just as much gas as I need in order to have a precise corner speed, as well as an optimal grip and balance exiting the turns.

But like many before me have discovered, what looks fast is generally quite the opposite, and I am shocked to find that I am an astonishing *two seconds off the pace*. What the hell is going on here? Not sure, but I find a scapegoat pretty fast - the stiff brakes! The brakes are providing so much resistance that they are sapping up all my concentration. Even though they are as responsive as the gas pedal to any movement, and even though locking-up tires is no longer a problem, I find that I need to shove the brake-pedal with the power of an ox to get the car down to a sensible cornering speed *[yes, I really wonder why they want to offer an extra-resistant spring for the brakes! - CHS].* Something, I think, with my leg shaking from the burn-up, must be done about this!

Impressions After a Day ...

After a half day out on the track, my impressions are mixed. The pedals, to begin with, are, to be very precise, *solid [but they are not as heavy as one would expect seeing as the whole block is manufactured from first-class steel - CHS]*, and likely to last forever. The quality of the fabrication is unmatched *[esp. compared to other high-end products - CHS].* Also, many exciting new features have been applied.

And yet ... the *brakes!* Here's the thing - I don't want to compromise, not for 450 EUR. And after one race with the pedals, one has to face cramps in the calf for the whole night, and the next day too! Do I really want to throw half-a-grand for this kind of pain?! Next, the ergonomic problem with the pedals being set up on the floor forcing you to press the pedals in the truck driver style is difficult to get-around. So, I end my first test-day both disappointed and unsure. To date, no-one that I know of has uttered any critique. Do they just not want to admit they wasted 450 EUR? I don't have that problem, I can test them for free, and I just need to send them back.

However, I am not satisfied with those musings. Searching the internet, I discover four other tests. And for some reason, none of them address what I believe to be a critical issue with these pedals. And that leaves me with no option – it is time to start all over again.

I screw, rebuild, adjust, etc. I upend the whole unit – that should be perfect for a truck driver! Then I replace the bars to ease down the nip of the brakes. After another hour, I seem to be on the right track. I end this session with optimizing the pedal travel. *[Note: we plan for next issue some sketches and pictures to illustrate those changes -CHS].*

And guess what? Yup, true to the nature of the universe, upending the unit did the trick! I suddenly have a far more relaxed take on the pedals now. Also, the brake is much less resistant and easy to handle. I am lucky that I can get around the gym, and am instantly amazed at all the options to change parts of the unit, refine, and adjust them. *[And now I am out of here. I would not have dared to rebuild a test unit that much. Also, I am not sure if I really want to buy a 'tinkering kit', esp. one that looks so great out of the box. My hopes are that customer feedback will lead to units which allow one to enjoy the pedals more 'out of the box'. There is no doubt that the VPP pedals are among the best pedals ever, and the steel production quality is unmatched, and it looks glamorous. - CHS].*

Report: Test Day 2 ...

So let's start test phase two. I go for a stint of 45 minutes to get a feel for the new settings. Boy, what a difference all that tinkering made! The sensation now is great, and the brakes no longer require my whole juice and concentration. Fabulous track immersion. GTR is said to have the best car physics (and now, also GTL). I cannot judge whether this is true as I have not had a ride in a purpose-built race-car yet. But I can say that GTR shows what I consider a comprehensible behavior in the cars on the limit. By this I mean that, should I get stuck in the kitty-litter, I know how and why it happened. However, I also have to note that these cars have a very limited threshold. A bit too late on the brake,

or too fast on the gas, and you can say goodbye to the race. In league races, I therefore avoid that range of limited conditions. I assumed that the real cars were also that hard to control.

I now know that this is bullshit!

With the VPP pedal, a whole new threshold universe opens up like a vista in a 70s truck road-movie! GTR seems to have received an update! Suddenly, it becomes possible to brake late, and with much more precision. One can even brake *into* the corners without locking tires. And once the breaking period ends, the accelerating phase can follow without pause. Smoothly - the gas can be dosed that delicately. If you are now a tick too late with the brakes, you still have a good chance to balance the car by applying fine and – more importantly – *precise* - doses of brakes and gas without eating the gravel.

So, after this revelation, it is time for the next phase. My goal now is to drive 15 consistent laps. I don't check for tire temperatures, or lap times - all I do is drive. Flogging the car over the course is so much fun anyway that I lack words to describe. Back in the pits, I check for the lap times, and barely trust my eyes. I have knocked off 6 tenth from my personal best time! But it gets even better: The gap between the slowest and the fastest lap are a mere 2 tenth of a second.

Now this has made my day. Those pedals do indeed pay off fast!

Summary and Conclusions ...

There can be no doubt: Virtual Performance Parts pedals are exactly as advertised – Ultimate Performance meets Serious Quality. The VPP Pedals kick ass!

Material and machining: Only the best material is used (steel and plastic). The workmanship is outstanding (all selected manufacturers were tested, and VPP attaches great importance to the "Made in Germany" label – that is, it is entirely made in Germany, and not outsourced ...).

Ergonomics and design: There are unlimited options to change the setup. Even truck drivers can get along with it. Clearly, its out of the box design is perfect for those with a race



Made in Germany means no compromise - flower vases for your cars, ashtrays for your sims!

frame. Without, some rebuilding along with some free hours is necessary to achieve a good result. The material of the floor could be a problem. Parquet or PVC flooring could require some additional work in order to get a satisfactory 'feel'. The attached 3M sticky tape is perfect for carpets. [*I think the stripes will do fine on parquet - CHS*]. Many fine ideas have not only been considered, but have been superbly implemented. The installation works like a charm.

On track: The pedals open up a new feel for the track and the car, and shift the limits of the car physics. The unbelievable sensitive response to any small pressure allows for a much more consistent driving style. Driving errors can be coped with much better. For drivers competing in championships, these pedals, I can almost guarantee, offer an invaluable advantage, both in terms of raw-speed and consistency.

Price: 450 EUR may be a bit of an investment, but the pedals are worth each cent. The money is an investment into a future which will last longer than the three years of warranty (on all but the electronic parts).

Service: Each part can be ordered from the VPP website. The construction allows for easy replacement. Additional parts can also be implemented any time (e.g. if one starts with a two pedals set, it is no problem to add the third pedal at a later date). And the kit can be upgraded by oneself with any new developments. For example, currently a "hyper real brake" is under construction. Thanks to the modular construction, any new parts or replacements can be performed without any problems.

VPP also runs a support forum at their website.