

A testament to Karting

Want to be a racing driver? UNLESS you are born and brought up in the sport - and many these days are - it can seem from the outside to be very complex and sometimes impenetrable. You may have watched Formula 1 on the television and thought: I would like to be a Grand Prix driver but you have no idea what to do about it. The answer is karting. Karting is basically motor racing with small inexpensive cars. It is said that during World War II the aircrew of the United States Air Force based in Britain used to stave off boredom between raids by building racing machines from metal tubing and whatever engines they could find. But the first true kart was not built until 1956 when a former pilot called Art Ingles, who was working building roadsters at the Kurtis Kraft company in Glendale, California, set about building the smallest and cheapest racing machine he could envisage.

He fitted a two-stroke Power Products lawnmower engine its a tubular chassis and was impressed by the performance. The device was seen by Bill Rowles, a surplus dealer, who recognized that there was potential to market the device. Rowles then convinced Duffy Livingstone and Roy Desbrow, who were partners in a firm called GP Mufflers in Monrovia, California to take a look at the device and as a result they built a device which they called the Drone because the engine came out of a radio-controlled drone which had been built by the US Army and in 1957 the first impromptu racing events took place in the parking lot of the Rose Bowl stadium in Pasadena.

Soon after that Rowles found a supply of cheap engines from a rotary lawn mower venture which the West Bend has tried and the Go Kart Manufacturing Co Inc. was established and offered kart kits for \$129. Demand was so high that eventually the company had to lease a five-acre facility in Azusa where the first kart track was built. The sport quickly spread around the world, reaching Europe in 1959 and the Europeans were quick to react and began to build chassis and designed engine specifically for karting, rather than converting units designed for other jobs. A World Championship was instituted in 1964 for 100cc machinery with the Italians being dominant in the early years.

One of the earliest stars of karting was Ronnie Peterson, the first of many kart racers who went on to become Formula 1 racers. These included all the modern greats: Alain Prost, Ayrton Senna, Nelson Piquet and Michael Schumacher. In America Al Unser Jr. and Michael Andretti both cut their teeth in karts. Today almost all the top open-wheeler racers in the world started out in karting. Karting in its various forms offers a low-cost way of establishing whether a youngster has the talent that is needed to be competitive in the much more expensive world of motor racing. At the same time it gives those who start young an enormous amount of experience and racecraft which is invaluable as they progress up the motor racing ladder.

Some people think that karting is essential to be a modern racing driver but there are examples of drivers who went straight into car racing, notably Gerhard Berger. The most important of the formative championships in motor racing has long been Formula Ford which began almost by accident in the 1960s when the boss of the Motor Racing Stables racing school at Brands Hatch began looking for cheap engines because his pupils were constantly blowing up the expensive Formula 3 engines he was using at the time. He decided to put an inexpensive Ford Cortina engine into a Lotus Formula 3 chassis and the resulting car led to discussions between the Ford Motor Company's Henry Taylor and Brands Hatch promoter John Webb who wanted to run a low-cost racing series to open the way for more people to get into the sport. The first race took place at Brands Hatch in July 1967 and by the end of the first season of racing there were a dozen firm offering different chassis.

Formula Ford has been successful for more than 30 years and although there are now many other competing series it remains a pivotal part of the sport. If you have not raced in karts and want to know whether or not you have got what it takes to be a star, a good idea is to attend a racing school. Most racing circuits have one. These provide a low-cost way to experiment and to learn from experienced professional racing instructors.

Experience in open-wheeler racing machines is important although pure talent remains the key to being a good racing driver. Some racing schools offer paid drives for the best drivers so it is worth looking around before committing to one school or another. Some schools hold their own racing series and all you have to do is to turn up, pay and race. The cars are as identical as they can be and so driving talent can be recognized. But pure talent is not always enough these days. Youngsters have to be motivated, dedicated and yet at the same time need to have a good head for business because raising the money needed to progress is difficult.

A good foundation in mechanics will always be a help for a young driver to help him to understand how the cars work. This helps drivers and teams to locate problems quickly, an important part of being a professional racing driver. Boring though it may be a racing driver nowadays must be dedicated and fit to ensure that he obtains maximum performance. If you do not there are others who will. Partying does affect coordination, the ability to concentrate and basic reflexes. There is always a danger that a young driver will spend too much and bury themselves in debt.

The key to becoming a better driver is to race as often as possible and so it is good advice to race what you can afford, even if the cars are basic road cars. The more racing you do the better you become. And you have to be persistent when you come up against obstacles. Racing success rarely comes easy and adversity makes for a much better racing driver. If you have any advantages or connections use them and don't be afraid to try anything to raise support.