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Forty Years of Racing for Regular Guys

Formula Ford enthusiasts converge in Elkhart Lake for a weekend behind the wheel

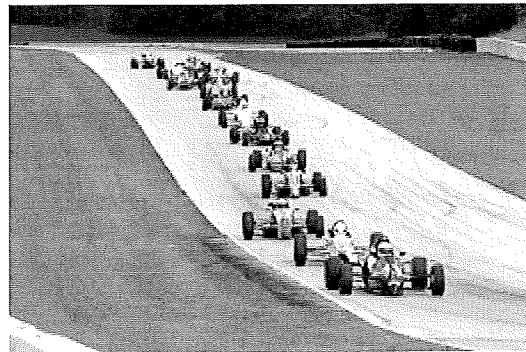
By JOSEPH B. WHITE

For most Americans, auto racing is just another thing on television. The Indianapolis 500, Formula One and Nascar all are racing with multimillion-dollar budgets, big corporate sponsors and celebrity drivers.

But there's a world of racing where the drivers are ordinary guys—yes, mostly guys—with white-collar jobs and busy families. They race Formula Vees or Formula Fords, two of several kinds of “formula” cars with small, four-cylinder engines. The drivers don't have corporate sponsors, because almost no one watches them compete. But it's real racing just the same, not demo-derby mayhem.

This summer marks the 40th anniversary in the U.S. of Formula Ford, one of the most popular classes in the field of amateur racing. More than 200 Formula Ford cars and drivers have signed up for a weekend of racing July 24-26 at the Road America track in Elkhart Lake, Wis.

“We've been working on it for two years,” says Steve Beeler, an organizer of the anniversary event. The unplanned recession intervened, but Mr. Beeler is pleased with the turnout. A Plymouth, Mich., manufacturing consultant, he has been racing Formula Ford cars since 1978, long enough for his team's cars to have accumulated logos of several fictitious sponsors, including OPEC.



Larry Best

More than 200 amateur drivers have signed up for a weekend of racing in Elkhart Lake, Wisc., to celebrate Formula Ford's U.S. anniversary.

Formula Ford racing got its start in the U.K. in 1967, when two British racing promoters, Geoff Clarke and John Webb, were casting about for a way to design a race car that novice drivers could afford. Their solution was to build a light, open-wheel race car around a 1.6-liter, four-cylinder Ford “Kent” engine, used at the time to power the Ford Cortina, a mundane family car in Britain. Other cost-saving decisions included using street tires and a relatively low-cost tubular chassis, according to “The Formula Ford Book” by Nick Brittan.

Formula Ford was a hit in the U.K., and after crossing the Atlantic in 1969, it functioned for a time as a farm team for the big racing circuits. Michael Andretti and Michael Schumacher are among the drivers who honed

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their skills with a Kent engine roaring behind their heads before moving up to Indy cars or Formula One.

Now, Formula Ford racing is mainly a sport for passionate amateurs who have enough money for a race car—they can be found online for about the price of a used Acura—plus a trailer, repair parts and tools and tires—lots of tires. (In the U.S., Formula Ford cars use slick racing tires that can cost more than \$200 each.) “There aren’t too many poor people racing Formula Ford cars,” says Doug Carter, who runs ApexSpeed, a racing community Web site.

“You have all levels of people,” says Dave Weitzenhof, a retired Firestone engineer who has raced Formula Ford, Formula Vees and Formula Continental. There are “people who buy somebody’s used car, and don’t do much with it...all the way up to people who race Formula Ford and arrive in a semi with living quarters,” he says.

Formula Ford has evolved into an umbrella for several distinct categories. There’s “vintage” Formula Ford, for drivers of cars made before 1973, and Club Ford, for cars made before 1983. Formula Ford races focus on modern and much faster cars patterned after the Swift DB-1, a car designed with the suspension parts shrouded inside the body, making the car more aerodynamic and faster.

Part of the challenge of the sport is finding parts—particularly for the old and out-of-production Kent engines. Racers scour the Web, and work their connections, looking for original parts or high-quality reproduction components. There’s talk among Formula Ford racers that Honda Motor Co. is considering offering versions of the four-cylinder motor used in Honda’s Fit subcompact as replacements for the old Ford motors. A Honda spokesman said he couldn’t comment on the issue in advance of a formal announcement.

Some racers are “wrench turners,” doing most repairs and fiddling themselves. Others turn to specialists, such as Lindstrand Motorsports in Darien, Wis. Owner Bruce Lindstrand says he is working on nearly two dozen cars ahead of the anniversary races. For about \$400 a day, he will deliver a car to the track, provide a technician to maintain it and a driving coach (himself) and take the car back to his shop when the racing’s done; the owner merely has to “arrive and drive,” he says.

Formula Ford cars are noisy, bouncy and hard to shift. The tracks have sharp turns and a few short straightaways, and racers can hit speeds as high as 140 miles per hour—which feels very fast in a tiny, open car where the driver’s backside is three to four inches off the ground.

The dark art of Formula Ford racing is adjusting the suspension so the car can power through turns on the edge of being out of control. Racers can spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars trying to get the car set up just right. The reward is on the track. “I have gotten in a position at least twice, where everything was going so good that all I felt was the four tires,” says Mr. Beeler. “That’s an existential experience.”

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