

# Winning at all costs..... isn't really winning at all!

*In the first of a three-part series, Gordon Mellis, Clerk of the Course for the UAE Rotax Max Challenge series, argues for junior kart racing to be brought into perspective.*

As the collective thoughts of the UAE kart racing fraternity turns to the new season ahead, parents of aspiring junior drivers across the GCC will by now be wrestling with the inevitable questions of; How much do we have to spend? Which chassis will we use? Should we join a team? Which team should we join? Do I need a driver coach? Who do we pick? Do we need a 'fly-in' mechanic?

But there's one more key question that should be asked, 'just how important is winning in junior kart racing'?

In my mind there are three dimensions to 'winning at all costs', invariably starting with the very word 'costs' and then migrating into the realms of technical non-compliance (in other words cheating!) and driving standards. In this first article let me focus on costs and the junior racing categories.

Success in motorsport has always been attributed with the size of a competitor's wallet, just as much as their driving ability and karting is no different. Choosing how and where to spend your hard earned cash and the best path for your young charger can be a daunting task. There are many options to choose from and vested interests to navigate, not all of whom will have the best interests of you, your wallet and your driver as their number one concern.

Those new to the sport and the unassuming, can, if they are not careful, soon be swept along in an ever increasing spiral of technical hype and unjustifiable costs in the relentless pursuit of that elusive podium place, but as Ben Taylor, Motorsport Development Director for the Motor Sports Association (MSA) in the UK says, "the sport has developed a whole series of ideas about the way things should happen in motorsport that are simply not backed up by any sound impartial evidence."

"People getting bad advice and making bad decisions can lead to bad experiences, or perhaps a loss of finance, either way that will take them out of the sport quicker than necessary" warns Ben. So is it really necessary for parents to spend ever increasing amounts of money striving to be 'race and championship winning competitive' in order to realise their child's 'potential'?

Potential is a concept that motorsport struggles with. Does a race or championship winner necessarily have more 'potential' than the driver who came fifth? Or was it just down to the winner having a financial advantage with a larger budget, maybe their older, been competing longer, or developed their skills sooner or practiced more?

In racing, as a general rule of thumb, there can only be one winner, but because a driver has not won races or succeeded in becoming a champion, doesn't mean that their motorsport careers are doomed to fail, quite the contrary. Parents (and teams) need to be more realistic and understand there is a distinct difference between developing a driver's skills and their race results, for they are not necessarily mutually exclusive!



## **TODAY MICRO MAX.....THE FUTURE???**

Remember, while young drivers may be dreaming of Formula 1.....Formula 1 is certainly not thinking about them...just yet!

The MSA point to an alarming correlation between short-term success and long term failure; and that those who chase race wins and titles at all costs at a junior level could actually be harming their chances of repeating that success at senior motorsport levels.

This advice is entirely consistent with other sports talent development programmes and as the innovative work of the MSA Academy in the UK has revealed, karting should draw on the lessons learned from other sports in the way that talent development works, in particular, “the way people learn and acquire skills, and the way future champions are created” says Ben.

Another one to argue that winning in the early years is not as vital as many claim is Formula 1’s Red Bull, team Principal Christian Horner, who has been quoted as saying that “instead of spending thousands of pounds each year because they [parents] felt it necessary to win various titles, karters would be better off spending much less, coming in the top five or ten, learning their racecraft, developing their skills and having fun”.

“The money saved in karting years could be put to better use funding their first season of car racing, which realistically is the stage at which the teams really start to take notice of up and coming drivers”.

MSA Performance Director and former World Rally Championship co-driver Robert Reid goes on to state, “If you always have the best machinery, drive for the best teams, and have the most track time, all in the pursuit of winning this year’s championship, you will never deal with the times when things get tough”

Robert believes that drivers who have had it 'all their own way' in their formative karting years will find it increasingly more difficult as they climb the motorsport ladder, trying to cope with the psychological and technical realities of competing against drivers that are faster, in an arena where there is very little difference between the competitors, both in terms of lap times and skill levels.

I certainly don't want to detract from the principles of motorsport competition and the natural desire for every driver to 'want to win' but creating 'we can win every time' expectations for junior drivers only causes unnecessary stress and disappointment when the results fail to materialise. The sulking and sometimes inconsolable young faces that can be seen among the junior ranks in the paddock are a testimony to the persistent 'must win' pressure being exerted by some parents and teams on their youngsters.

Robert concludes that ".....if we keep mistaking success for potential, we might end up cutting out those who could go on to be world beaters, in favour of those who looked better in the results.....It's a challenge that other sports have understood, but here we are, still judging young drivers effectively by the size of their parent's wallet'.

As competitive as karting is, there needs to be some real step changes in the mindset of teams and the attitude of parents to junior karting (but without degrading closely contested racing into the realms of the anti-competitive 'nanny state' prevalent in today's junior school sports), instead parents should be setting more realistic and progressive goals for driver development, without creating undue stress and spoiling the fun experience.

Now back to the costs of competing; I might be 'old school' and have only raced karts in a bygone era, but as a true enthusiast I can still rejoice in the fact that today, karting around the world is a highly professional and ultra-competitive sport. The advent of dealer teams, impressive transporters, and spacious awnings, travelling pro-mechanics, custom painted helmets, 'designer' overalls, factory drivers and sponsorship now enables top level karting to enjoy a presence and a profile that puts many other forms of motorsport to shame.

But on the other hand, the fact that many annual kart racing budgets, even for juniors, now exceed the budget for a season of 'arrive & drive' car racing is simply insane and surely unsustainable in the long term. Karting costs need to be reined in before it spells the death knell for the privateer competitor.....not everybody can afford, or wants to be part of a dealer team.

Unfortunately, the warning signs of 'premature professionalism' and the 'win at all costs' mentality even began manifesting itself in the region's entry level Bambino class last season.

These drivers are just five years old for goodness sake!

Please parents, take a reality check and just let the kids enjoy driving and have fun, after all..... for them it's only a sport, a hobby, a pastime, you won't see Ron Dennis or Christian Horner looking for a new F1 protégé at Al Ain anytime soon!

Coming next; ..... The two other dimensions of winning at all costs; driving standards and technical compliance (or 'no, it's not OK to cheat').

*Acknowledgement and thanks are given to the UK Motor Sport Association and Ben Anderson for permission to include excerpts on this subject matter from the Spring 2014 edition of the MSA magazine.*

The author is a licenced Clerk of the Course, Steward and a senior race official in various forms of motorsport up to and including F1, and competes in both the UK and Middle East Radical race series.