
BEN EVANS
THE LEGEND OF THE
FORMULA FORD FESTIVAL
FIFTY YEARS OF MOTOR RACING ACTION
91
146
53

BEN EVANS

THE LEGEND OF THE FORMULA FORD FESTIVAL

FIFTY YEARS OF MOTOR RACING ACTION

pitch

Contents

The origins of Formula Ford

MOTOR RACING is not a meritocracy. If football fans can point to the likes of Robin Friday as the greatest player you never saw, he at least made it to the football league. The greatest racing driver you never saw is most likely hurtling a taxi or delivery van around Swindon, Vilnius or Nairobi, having never set foot inside a racing circuit.

Unlike almost any other sport, a driver with bottomless resources and a reasonable level of competence can find themself on the grid for a world championship-level event, as the lower reaches of the entry list for the 24 Hours of Le Mans will testify.

Even Formula 1 is not immune and has established ever-escalating measures to prevent monied but out-of-their-depth drivers getting on the grid.

So how to identify the top emerging talents, test them against their peers, help the best rise to the top and do it without causing multiple bankruptcies? These are questions the sport has grappled with for generations. In Formula Ford, for the best part of 40 years, it found an answer.

Prior to the Second World War, being a racing driver was a pursuit reserved almost exclusively for the aristocracy and the very well monied. Those that became works drivers, as did Richard Seaman for Mercedes, had in many cases spent today's equivalent of millions of pounds to reach that level. The aspirant Grand Prix driver would generally get their start in a small-engined sportscar before working their way through more powerful machinery until they could secure a start in the biggest races. There was no formal ladder, and certainly very few opportunities for a driver without means to become a Grand Prix driver. The Brooklands tagline – 'the right crowd and no crowding' – neatly summarises the social standing of motorsport in the 1920s and 1930s.

As motorsport restarted after the war, Formula 1 remained the top class, particularly in Europe, with the various Grand Prix being organised into a formal World Championship launching at Silverstone in 1950. Many of the immediate post-war aces were drivers who had established themselves prior to the conflict.

For drivers starting out in their careers, there needed to be a clearer path to the top, one which better identified those with standout talent. The emergence of the 500cc class, officially adopted as Formula 3 by the FIA in 1950, provided just such a route. The slight chassis were powered by motorcycle engines, offering the necessary level of fuel economy imposed by enduring post-war petrol rationing. The plethora of marques, relative simplicity of the regulations and affordability proved a hit. Consequently, the category enjoyed extensive popularity, especially in the United Kingdom, throughout the 1950s. As a ubiquitous feature at almost every meeting, the aspirant driver had no shortage of opportunities to make their mark

In Britain the category was overseen by the 500 Club, which in 1954 changed its name to the British Racing and Sportscar Club (BRSCC), whose future would be intertwined with both Brands Hatch and the Formula Ford Festival.

The best-known graduate of 500cc racing was Stirling Moss, whose talent shone within the evenly matched competition. Moss was one of many drivers who were able to progress from this relatively humble start to Formula 1 within the space of a few years.

One of the best-known venues for Formula 3 racing was the newly opened Brands Hatch circuit in Kent. In 1926, cyclists from London had spotted some bowl-shaped fields that formed part of Brands Hatch Farm. Because the land was unsuitable for agricultural use and had been previously used by the army, the farmer – Bert Cornwall – was happy to let cyclists and cross-country runners use it for racing. A year later the first motorcycle races started with the venue serving two different types – summer grasstrack racing on the kidney-shaped circuit laid out in the fields and winter scrambling (motocross) races through the adjacent woodland.

The venue was certainly popular, drawing crowds of up to 30,000 (despite incredibly rudimentary facilities) during the 1930s to watch grasstrack action on the one-mile circuit. Brands Hatch even hosted the first motorcycle racing shown on British television, a meeting in 1947. However, it was the 500 Club that sparked the change in direction to four-wheeled racing on a properly tarmacked surface. During the winter of 1949/50, at a cost of £17,000 (approximately £600,000 today), the permanent surface was laid. On 16 April 1950, Brands Hatch hosted its first car racing meeting.

Brands Hatch proved to be the perfect venue for 500cc cars. The machinery itself wasn't too quick for the relatively short circuit, whose flowing kidney shape allowed for close competition. Speaking to Chas Parker for his history of the circuit, Moss recalled, 'You could go around corners side by side, more or less, and Brands lent itself quite well to it.' Initially running anticlockwise into a long left-hander at Clearways and a short blast along the Bottom Straight before an uphill left-hand climb at Paddock Hill Bend, the circuit experienced a number of serious incidents involving drivers and spectators.

Safety concerns resulted in two big changes ahead of the 1954 season. Firstly, following the lead taken by motorcycle competitors in 1952, all races would be held in a clockwise direction, turning the left handers into right handers. Secondly, the track was extended uphill from the bottom of Paddock Hill Bend, cutting slightly into the woodland for the Druids hairpin, before running back downhill to reconnect via a swooping left-hand turn into the Bottom Straight. Further developments came in the form of safety banking to protect spectators and ongoing upgrading of the circuit's infrastructure.

The track's proximity to London ensured healthy support from both drivers and spectators, with 500cc meetings during the early 1950s frequently attracting four heats of cars to be whittled down for the main race of the day – presaging the format that would make the Festival such a hit. Likewise, being just a short drive from London, both the BBC and ITV would frequently broadcast meetings live, ensuring the venue enjoyed a high public profile.

By the mid-1950s the 500cc cars had started to be overtaken by technology, with Formula Junior emerging as the entry-level

category of choice, a position that was all but confirmed by the end of the decade when the Boxing Day Formula Junior races were shown live on BBC television. Founded by Count Giovanni Lurani, arguably as a reaction to Italy's limited success in the 500cc class – which was dominated by British marques – Formula Junior was based on the principle of a racing chassis propelled by production car components. The category boomed, and by the early 1960s there were over five hundred manufacturers worldwide producing Formula Junior cars.

Despite the humble intentions of the category, as its popularity boomed it faced two major challenges. Firstly, aspiring frontrunners required the latest equipment, specially tuned engines and other trick parts, pushing up the costs of competition. Secondly, Formula Junior, running as an international category below Formula 1, catered to a huge breadth of experience from absolute beginners to those on the cusp of a Formula 1 opportunity. In time this led to the more uniform establishment of the Formula 3 and Formula 2 ladder that remains today, but it did still leave a hole for drivers looking to take their first steps in motorsport.

Brands Hatch had always been pioneering in offering on-track opportunities to the public, with the Cooper Car Company opening a racing school in February 1957, and Motor Racing Stables from 1958, both of which offered instruction and track time to aspiring drivers. Initially utilising 500cc cars, by the mid-1960s Motor Racing Stables' fleet was predominantly Formula Juniors.

By this point, Brands Hatch was part of the Motor Circuits Development group under the ownership of Grovewood Securities that also included the Mallory Park, Oulton Park

and Snetterton circuits. The operation was run on a day-to-day basis by John Webb. Since taking over the circuit at the end of 1960, Webb had already demonstrated a flair for promotion, bringing big races (both Grand Prix and non-championship Formula 1) to the circuit, whilst steadily supplying the papers with photos of spectacular mishaps. Underpinning Webb's approach was the desire to make motorsport more inclusive. This included ongoing investment in competitor and spectator facilities alongside promotions to get as many people as possible through the gates.

Working alongside Motor Racing Stables owner Geoff Clarke, Webb was keen that this would include opportunities to get on track. Clarke started to experiment with the fleet of school cars to create something that was affordable, punchy to drive and offered parity between the aspirant competitors. Transplanting the Ford Cortina GT 1498cc 'Kent' engine into a Lotus Formula Junior or Formula 3 chassis seemed a good starting point.

With positive feedback from the drivers, Webb and Clarke progressed the idea through the winter of 1966 into 1967. Not only would a category on these lines produce an ideal race school car, it also had the potential to be the perfect entry-level category. Betting that calling the category 'Formula Ford' would attract some backing from the manufacturer, the pair got to work. Henry Taylor, Ford's competition manager, was soon on board, offering several engines for below retail price. The next challenge was finding constructors to build chassis. After initial rejections from both Brabham and McLaren, it was Lotus and Alexis who made up the first field of cars.

Solider Ray Allen (who was subsequently bought out of the army to pursue a motorsport career) has the distinction of

winning the first Formula Ford race held, fittingly, at Brands Hatch on 2 July 1967. As a precursor to the close racing the category would become known for, the entire field in that opening race was covered by just 31 seconds. The formula was an immediate success, with a plethora of manufacturers entering the fray for its second season in 1968. The combination of regulations that drove parity but allowed engineering creativity was a huge hit, as was the relative affordability.

Within years of its launch, Formula Ford was a motorsport industry success story, attracting a deep talent pool of drivers who knew they needed to win at this level to progress and a vibrant manufacturer community that continued to drive innovation within the tightly specified regulations, all at a price level that gave the young aspirant realistic dreams of going all the way to F1.

Added to the mix were immediate driver success stories. 1970 saw two Formula Ford graduates make their Formula 1 debuts: Tim Schenken having competed in the 1968 season and, more impressively, 1969's star driver Emerson Fittipaldi, who by the end of 1970 was a Grand Prix winner. Although no one could have known at the time, it would turn out that Fittipaldi's mechanic, Ralph Firman, would have a far greater impact on Formula Ford than the two-time Formula 1 champion.

The technical side of the category was appealing too, as a generation of designers and engineers learned their craft in Formula Ford. The combination of tightly regulated mechanicals (engines, gearboxes and tyres), along with a degree of chassis freedom, leant itself to innovation. The multi-marque competition was integral to the category's growth, ensuring technical development and rivalry for those going for national

honours, whilst guaranteeing obsolete gear (if year-old machinery could be described that way) was available to clubmen at low cost. By 1992, at least 160 different Formula Ford marques had taken to the grid.

Formula Fords are immediately distinctive, essentially looking like miniature Formula 1 cars without the front and rear wings. The narrow body of the car houses the driver, engine and gearbox; four wheels stick out at the corners. Even from the earliest days, within this template, each marque's contender had their own distinctive appearance – a 1989 Van Diemen is appreciably different from a Reynard of the same vintage, despite clearly being within the same category.

By the turn of the 1970s, whatever the meeting at Brands Hatch, or indeed any other circuit in the UK, Formula Ford was almost always a feature. With multiple national and regional championships, nearly any given meeting was oversubscribed with the need for heats or qualification races to form the grid for the main event.

The category's popularity wasn't just confined to the participants. Spectators loved Formula Ford. Equal cars, which seemed to just have a tiny bit more power than grip, and hard-charging competitors resulted in a heady cocktail. The racing was rarely anything less than intense, often just on or beyond the line of what was acceptable. Meanwhile the cars entered and exited every corner at all sorts of angles, sliding as they scrambled for grip – the tyres of the day not offering much in the way of traction.

By the time the category reached its fifth anniversary there were some perennial contenders, but the bulk of the field, particularly in the main championships, were predominantly

drivers looking to use Formula Ford as a springboard to greater things. The talent pool was increasingly global too and included Brazilians looking to follow in Fittipaldi's wheel tracks, European drivers who recognised they needed to succeed in the British series to make a name for themselves and several Americans looking to plot a path to Formula 1.

The ladder onward from Formula Ford was also clear: graduation to Formula 3, where results and circumstances permitting, there would be Formula 2 and Formula 1 opportunities. Given its entry-level status, Formula Ford was rarely the headline event at most race meetings, often featuring alongside saloons and homebrewed GT cars in support of Formula 5000, Formula 3 or sportscars. Thus the idea of building a race meeting around Formula Fords – even as a club event, let alone a headline meeting – felt like a step into uncharted territory. But that would change in the autumn of 1972.