

KF engines An Independent View

by Ian Salvestrin

It's been just over a year since the 100cc categories that have served karting so well for 50 years were replaced with the promising new 125cc KF. The concept is excellent, long life, low cost, high performance karting. Indeed you would struggle to find a single person anywhere on earth who disagrees with the objectives of the KF Formulae. However has the new formula delivered? Australian Vroom correspondent Ian Salvestrin took the opportunity to drop in on the Winter Cup at South Garda circuit for his first look at the new categories.

Firstly, Ian doesn't work for any engine manufacturer, any governing body or organization that may cloud his viewpoint. He doesn't own any of the KF engines nor does he have a workshop with ICA engines for sale. *"I've been to and seen karting at every level, from tracks in Ethiopia and Zambia (no, I'm not kidding) to the European and World Championships on some of the world's finest circuits - says Ian. I've raced ICA and FA and still race a 125cc Leopard TaG engine back home in Australia, that's about the highest level of karting we have downunder at the moment,"* and he went to Garda with an open mind.

The first thing to realise is that the karting world has changed since the 1990's. The world championship 100cc classes effectively had no competition for nearly 4 decades, if anyone wanted to race at the top there was only one choice: international CIK level 100cc. They were by far the fastest engines to drive as well, exhilarating in fact, so much faster than anything else that even if one didn't race in the top championship events, it was a thrill to drive these 20,000rpm rockets. The market was different too! The story goes that one engine manufacturer claimed that a World Championship win would guarantee an extra 2,000 engine sales in Japan alone in the 1980's and 1990's, even if the win came on the last lap (as happened



so often i.e. Manetti in '94, Mislijevic in '96, Rossi in '99 and so the list goes...). Nowadays the figure of 2,000 engine sales for a KF engine seems like a dream. So what has happened?

In 1997 Rotax introduced something called the 125cc MAX engine and in an instant the karting world changed. Suddenly there was an alternative that was still reasonably quick (28 horsepower), reliable and would start with the push of a button, which sold more than 50,000 engines in countries from South Africa to Sweden, Iran to India as well as the traditional karting superpowers such as France, Italy and the UK. Since then, virtually every other manufacturer



has introduced a TaG engine. Along with the Rotax MAX (and its 2 speed DD2 derivative) there are some magnificent TaG engines lapping the world's kart tracks: the Vortex ROK and Super ROK, the highly successful IAME Leopard and X30 engines, the as-fast-as-ICA Sonik VX100 and 125 engines, Easykart's air-cooled engine range, which even includes a 125cc KZ style shifter kart, the Motori Seven, the PRD Fireball and many others. Most of these engines have been quite successful, setting up dealer networks, professional racing series and most significantly attracting drivers away from the traditional 100cc CIK classes of Formula A, Intercontinental A and even the sadly missed, beautiful Super A class.

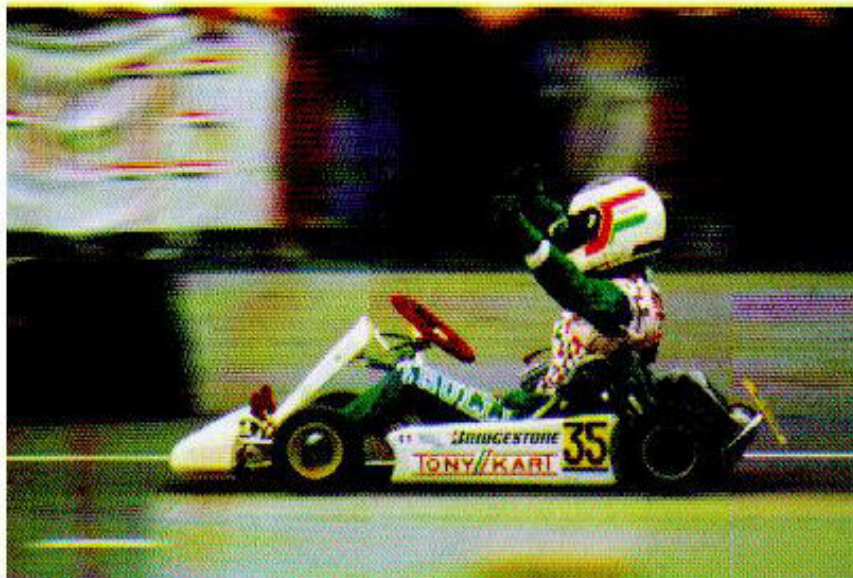
In the meantime the cost to compete in international CIK classes continued to climb to levels equivalent to Formula 3 racing. Incredible amounts of money that drivers (ok,

let's be honest, their fathers...) were prepared to pay to see their son follow in the footsteps of Kimi Raikonen, Jarno Trulli, Jenson Button or Fernando Alonso who went from karting to F1 in just 2 years. Whatever it took, they would pay and still do. The point they missed is that these drivers raced for 10 years or more before going car racing, indeed Jarno Trulli was a professional kart racer for another 6 years after he won his first world title at Le Mans back in 1991 (see picture below). There were no shortcuts, just hard work and many, many thousands of laps. They didn't

simply pay top dollars for 2 or 3 years of karting before disappearing into formula car racing so they could include karting on their resume...

So by this point, that is the early part of this decade, the true karter was starting to scratch his head and ask: "Why would I want to race ICA or FA when I can race a top TaG class for a fraction of the price?" Sure it is not the official top CIK level racing, but in the case of Rotax, there is still a very competitive European Championship Series and an unofficial 'world title' that attracts drivers from more nations held in more exotic locations than the official CIK World Championship. The Vortex ROK also promotes a super successful international final, and so do EasyKart and IAME as well. Therefore it becomes an ultimatum. A class like Vortex ROK or Rotax MAX cost a fraction of CIK classes, are almost as fast, quite professional and still very competitive, the question is then asked "Why bother racing CIK?" And it is a very good question indeed...

Despite the increasing number of paying drivers and the diminishing number of paid drivers (perhaps 10 professional drivers now as opposed to 30 or more a decade ago), the CIK Championships still attract the highest level of competition. The first event of '08, the Winter Cup proved that. There is an ever increasing amount of media focused on the international championship events, with television, web media and specialist magazines such as Vroom and its international counterparts. But after watching KF racing at Garda, that's where the attraction ends.





Don't fool yourself, KF racing is still just as expensive as 100cc ever was, if not more so. They are incredibly complex with wires and leads and cables and sensors attached everywhere, a KF kart has gone away from the notion of a kart being a simple machine, like in the early days. The kart's weight (and this applies to TaG karts as well) is bordering on the ridiculous: 160 kg, which is 20 kg heavier than the minimum weight of 10 years ago. KF3 (Junior) karts at Garda weighed an incredible 110-115 kg! Add the driver and the total weight is a massive 145kg! Not so long ago the minimum Junior weight altogether was 115 kg; indeed the minimum senior weight for many years was 125 kg, before we started bolting accessories onto karts.

The CIK had to act and as mentioned, it is unlikely to find anyone who disagrees with the concept of KF racing. But for the World Championship class engines to live on the rev-limiter down the straight and have less

bottom end acceleration than some recreational TaG class engines, makes a driver question racing this class. And from a spectator's point of view, there is just no comparison to the spectacular battles seen in Formula A and Super A. Sure there will always be a desire to race the top level, but when that top level is not much faster than a hobby engine yet triple the price, the validity of investing 5,000-6,000 Euro on a couple of KF engines is questioned.

No doubt that winning the KF1 World Championship will not result in an extra 2,000 en-



gine sales to Japan, in fact it is doubtful that it would result in an extra 2,000 engine sales around the world altogether. That is not the fault of the KF formula, it is an indicator that the market has changed, and professionally promoted single-make series have cemented themselves as truly viable alternatives, not only for hobby karters but professional drivers as well. What is the future for KF? The answer is simple: the market will decide...

