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The Voice of the Racing Marketplace

Volume 21, Number 8 August 2006

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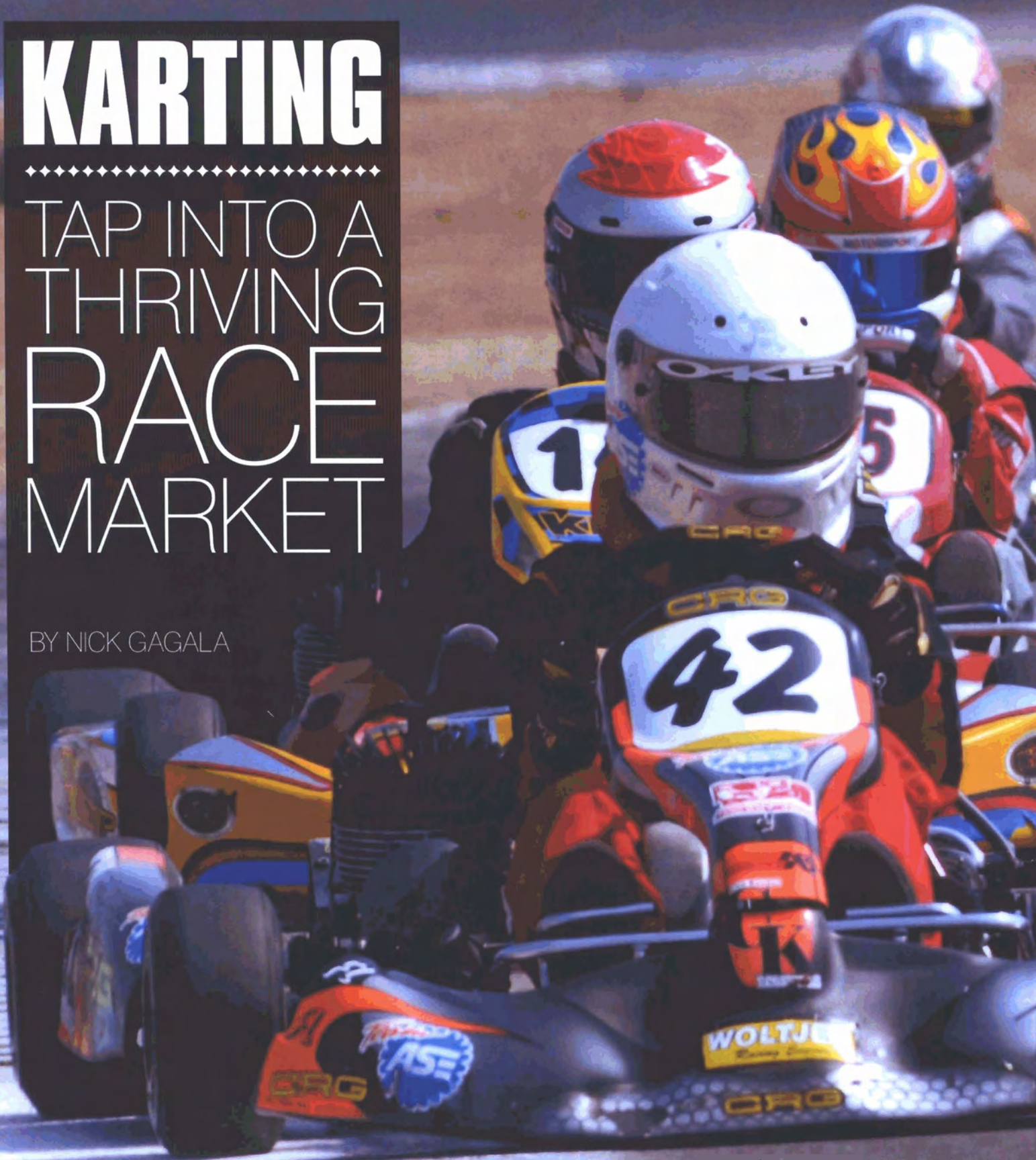
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KARTING

TAP INTO A THRIVING RACE MARKET

BY NICK GAGALA




A huge grassroots motorsport, karting in its many varied forms offers savvy racing retailers sales opportunities galore, and the chance to foster life-long relationships with loyal customers.

Karting is where many of the best professional drivers in the world got their feet wet. "Karting is important to the upper levels of motorsports because it is a tremendous training ground," said Randy Kugler, World Karting Association (WKA), Concord, North Carolina. "The one thing

that karting does more than anything else for developing young driving talent is it teaches consistency."

"Karting has always been the most logical training ground for not only drivers but all other corresponding personnel positions found throughout the sundry forms of



Karting offers terrific sales opportunities from a very loyal customer base.

Mark Ouimet, SSC East, Braintree, Massachusetts, said a new demographic is getting the karting bug. "There is an increasing popularity of a new kart racer demographic, such as luxury and sports car owners who seek the thrill of speed and competition, but can't get that thrill safely or legally on the road," he explained. "Also, with extreme sports enthusiasts—including snowmobile owners, dirt bike riders, speed boat owners—kart racing offers them the adrenaline rush they crave in a safe, affordable and highly competitive environment."

company became a new Margay and Bridgestone karting distributor in 2006, said his company became interested in catering to the kart market from something they read in these pages. "PRI ran an article about 10 years ago on how lucrative the karting business was and if you weren't thinking about it at that time, you really should," Marmurowicz explained. "It was something that was a natural progression, especially for a lot of our customers who come in here and buy parts for their cars. They've got children as well. You can start them in some sort of

"Karting is important to the upper levels of motorsports because it is a tremendous training ground."

Deborah Davidson Harpur, International Kart Federation (IKF), Ontario, California, said karting safety equipment is a product area where racing retailers can flourish. "For the Junior drivers particularly, the number one thing is the chest and rib protectors," she said. "The parents are huge on those. IKF made those mandatory this year."

Davidson Harpur said other items to address include helmets, with helmet painting, the karts themselves, and accessories that go with the karts such as tires and hard parts. "If it's Christmas time, or that type of thing, they'll usually buy stop watches, heat guns, gear bags," she said, adding that trailer accessories are also popular.

Mike Marmurowicz, Pegasus Auto Racing Supplies, New Berlin, Wisconsin, whose

career in motorsports or just go out there and have some fun on the weekends with mom and dad. Obviously, this is something that can spawn into a much larger endeavor as the child grows older."

Ready, Set, Go

Marmurowicz said popular karting parts in his store run the gamut. "We sell a lot of seats; a lot of people are starting to realize that a seat is a disposable item just like tires or anything else," he said.

Tires, lubricants, oils, spacers, washers, nuts for spindles, and sprocket hubs are just a few of the other items karters buy, according to Marmurowicz.

"There has been a trend toward a lot of data acquisition," he added. "It seems like years and years ago when I was involved in karting, only the fortunate few had any

auto racing," stated Paet Hidalgo, Douglas Wheel Technology, Vista, California. "And in the past five years, karting has finally begun to achieve unilateral inclusion and recognition as an accredited, and in some cases nearly exclusive prerequisite to ascending up the auto racing ladder."

kind of data acquisition systems on their kart. Now it's everywhere."

For the most part, Hidalgo said, karters use all of the same gear as auto racers, with some minor variations, such as suits and gloves of hybrid nylons in place of Nomex, neck supports in place of integrated head and neck restraints, but no belts or harnesses. "Everything else that an auto racer buys the kart racer buys, from magazines to entry fees to fuel."

Jeff Hoisington, Rage Karts (NC Chassis Company), Medina, Ohio, said the high price of fuel had an effect on kart counts recently. "When fuel spikes up, we see attendance go down a little bit, but I think that the industry is still strong," he said.

Rage Karts offers sales and service, trackside support, and assembly of its karts, with chassis welded by NC Chassis. "We're really a full-service part shop manufacturer," Hoisington said.

Hoisington applauds the karting organizations that are trying to rid the sport of tire prepping and tire cutting. "The prep is just a huge health risk and getting rid of the tire cutting saves money for the racer," he explained.

Keith Freiber, Margay, St. Louis, Missouri, said the biggest trend for his company over the last several years has been the Touch And Go (TAG) powered karts. "Those are some really great packages, and much more user friendly than race karting packages have been in the past," he said. "They are lower maintenance, much easier to use, geared more toward recreational karters

than maybe the hardcore racers."

The TAG engine karts are popular with 12-15-year-old Juniors and 9-12-year-old Juniors, he said. "There's a TAG engine package for each different age group and that certainly is the most popular segment of the market at this time."

Rick Scribner, Scribner Plastics, Rancho Cordova, California, said one interesting aspect of karting is how you are never too old to enjoy it. "I've been racing for over 30 years and some of the people I raced sprint cars with or stock cars with are now racing karts themselves, or their kids are racing karts, and I see them at the kart track," he said. "It's really neat how everything comes full circle."

Mike Burris, Burris Racing, Huntington Beach, California, recently purchased Fast Track, a seven-year-old 1/5 mile asphalt karting oval in Vincennes, Indiana. "I am buying the facility because I feel it is a good long-term investment. I also believe that with a different approach to the rules and classes we can make local and regional racing more economical on a regular basis," said Burris. "The Midwest (especially Indiana) has a very diverse karting population and we want to accommodate them on the Fast Track oval, and where we would eventually like to be included in a series that utilizes both road courses and ovals like NASCAR, IRL and Champ Car do."

Burris Racing, a company that has been in business since 1972, is a supplier of tires in the karting oval track market. "We have some other components for that market, as well, such as wheels,

engine mounts, things like that," Burris said. "Also, we're doing a project with Yamaha. It's called a YF200. The class itself is called F200. It's kind of modeled after some of the other types of racing that is done with the bigger engines, like small block Chevy, where you take certain OEM components and then use a mixture of aftermarket components with it to bring it up to spec."

More Karting Trends

"SSC East's involvement is two-pronged and we're exclusively focused on kart racing, dedicated to importing, selling, servicing and supporting the world's leading manufacturers, including Rotax/Bombardier, CRG, Zanardi, MoGo and GearBox product lines, to both kart dealers and racers," Ouimet said,

SSC East's fully equipped, 10,000-square-foot Race & Pro Shop, located at F1 Boston in Braintree, Massachusetts, is designed to provide kart racers with a complete line of the highest quality equipment and products, including karts, parts, equipment, accessories and apparel, Ouimet said. "Our service organization—F1 Engines—caters to all kart racing service needs: blueprinting, dynamometer service and trackside support," he said. "SSC East support trailers provide trackside services to ensure all competitors are 'race ready' at every competition."

Dave Klaus, Briggs & Stratton Motorsports, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, said for the past five years his company's kart product line has focused on its overhead valve engine, "with tons of torque, reliable, 21st century technology, very advanced at an affordable price point. I think the reason it works for us is just getting our name out there. This gives us an avenue to showcase our best technologies, our software advancements, and everything else in the design of a race engine."

Karting is growing everywhere, according to Klaus. "The top-end motorsports give a natural pull through the industry," he explained. "You look at where Nextel Cup is. Look at the majority of those racers. They came through or walked through the Briggs & Stratton product line on their way to being a professional

Karting is where many of the best professional drivers in the world got their feet wet. "Karting is important to the upper levels of motorsports because it is a tremendous training ground," said one contact. "The one thing that karting does more than anything else for developing young driving talent is it teaches consistency." Danica Patrick, Sam Hornish and Michael Schumacher are just a few of racing's current stars who honed their skills in a kart. The list of former karters making good is long.



driver. So, that natural pull of people trying to emulate and get started in motorsports grows the whole industry."

Jean Genibrel, Genibrel Publications, Long Beach, California, said karting is important to the racing industry for two reasons: "One, karting creates the future drivers and, two, karting is the grounds where the roots of PRI grow by creating the future gearheads from an early



A new demographic is getting the karting bug, such as luxury and sports car owners who seek the thrill of speed and competition, but can't get that thrill safely or legally on the road, according to one contact. "Also, with extreme sports enthusiasts—including snowmobile owners, dirt bike riders, speed boat owners—kart racing offers them the adrenaline rush they crave in a safe, affordable and highly competitive environment," he said. The performance aspect of karting is a major draw as some karts have a horsepower-to-weight ratio equivalent to Formula 1 race cars.

age," he said, adding that karting is not currently capitalizing on this, marketing only to itself.

"Karting needs a program to attract, retain and train its drivers," said Genibrel. "It needs a ladder system to allow drivers to progress on their own merits, not their pocketbook. It needs to be the new training ground for the future pro drivers."

Karting Associations

Paul Zalud, Stars of Karting, Seattle, Washington, said from his organization's perspective, the awareness for karting at a higher level is improving. "At a motorsports level, karting has been something that has been around for years and years, but nobody necessarily knew about," he explained. "The perception of what go-

karting is—just five bucks for five laps down at the beach or wherever—that's changing. I mean, this is a real motorsport. You look at what it is in Europe, and it is a legitimate form of racing that is accepted at the highest levels—Formula 1 and everything."

Stars of Karting takes "the best of the best" karters in North America and showcases them in its five divisions, Zalud said. "We provide a true North American champion for karting. Our series is going to cater to a smaller demographic. Karting is huge. It's a huge industry, but we're just simply the tip of the iceberg. We take the best of what karting has to offer and showcase the talent of these young kids. We are ourselves motorsports promoters, as opposed to just local go-kart races." The organization's first race of 2006 had 278 karters present.

Davidson Harpur said the IKF promotes fun, safe events for all ages. "We have racers from the kids, which are down to five years old, to drivers that are over 70 years old who are still out there racing. We offer five different divisions of karting, which go from asphalt to dirt. We do road race and we also do round racing. No matter what style you are looking for, somewhere we are offering a race that's something that you would want to try.

"We have the sprinters, we have the sit-ups, we have the enduros, which are the lay-downs, we have the 250s, which are those super karts," she continued. "A lot of today's drivers, Buddy Rice, for example, used to race with us in Southern California."

Davidson Harpur said the biggest trend she's seen in karting is the use of TAG motors. "You buy a package, you push a button, and you go. It's fun. For those that like to tinker, I suppose it took a little less out of it, though," she said. "Shifter karts are still really big, too. And you are getting drivers younger and younger. The Junior classes are huge."

In the four-cycle kart racing arena, Kugler said that the WKA is in a transition period right now with its Briggs & Stratton engine. "They had been using the old Raptor flathead engine, and now they have gone to an overhead valve engine called the Animal," he explained. "It has proven to be a much more reliable engine, which

over the long term should help preserve the sport and give people a little easier entry with a little more reliability."

There are two situations where a karter gets into the sport, Kugler said, with both presenting opportunities for racing retailers: Karters either buy a race-ready kart or they assemble their own from parts made by various manufacturers. "Let's say you've got your kart race ready," he said. "You still



Karting in its many varied forms offers savvy racing retailers with sales opportunities galore, and the chance to foster lifelong relationships with loyal customers. Even once a karter owns a kart, there are a number of additional items the racer will return to buy, including helmets, driving suits, chest protectors (for young karters), gloves, spare parts, tires, wheels, and much more. Pictured is the showroom of Comet Kart Sales, Greenfield, Indiana.

need a helmet, a driving suit. If you are eight to 12 years old, you need a chest protector. Gloves are mandatory. Then you are looking at spare parts, tires. Bridgestone, Dunlop, and Hoosier are all companies that make karting tires. There are some wheel manufacturers out there, too.

"I think where the motorsports industry can take advantage of karting is, if they can get into the karting market to some degree, they can bring a younger demographic into their race shop, into whatever product line they have," he continued. "They can build that customer base and when that young person no longer gets support from his dad, but starts paying his own bills, and gets a race car or a street rod or whatever it may be, he's going to be brand loyal and customer loyal to that person who got him in through karting."

STARS OF KARTING ALL-STAR KART RACE

A new and very exciting feature—the Stars of Karting All-Star Race—will join an action-packed three days at the PRI Trade Show in Orlando, December 14–16, 2006.

Many of North America's top kart racing stars, along with celebrity guest drivers, will participate in an All-Star Kart Race to run Thursday night, December 14, on a specially configured track adjacent to the Orange County Convention Center.

Indy 500 winner Bobby Rahal, IndyCar driver Bryan Herta, and Stars of Karting Promoter Paul Zalud will bring their Stars of Karting competitors to the PRI audience to perform on a special, 12-turn sweeping and twisting purpose-built track.

"We will take the best of the best karters," said Zalud. "We'll have an invite for the top qualifiers for this specialty event at the PRI Trade Show in three of our classes, where we will invite the top six from both the East Series and the West Series. We'll end up having them do a shootout race. We'll take the top finishers from that event and put them to the back of the field in the celebrity race."

Admission is free and the 7 p.m. start time follows PRI's new "Happy Hour" which will run in the lobby of the Convention Center starting at 6 p.m. Show exhibitors and attendees can catch up with industry friends and then go out to watch the kart race.



In conjunction with the PRI Trade Show, many of North America's top kart racing stars, along with celebrity guest drivers, will participate in an All-Star Kart Race to run Thursday night, December 14, on a specially configured track adjacent to the Orange County Convention Center. As an extra added attraction, some of racing's best drivers will return to their roots and square off against the top karters of today in the Stars of Karting All-Star Race.

KARTING CARNAVAL: BRAZILIAN KART MARKET

Brazil's fervor for sports, whether on the soccer field or the auto racing track, is celebrated around the world. In racing, no serious discussion of the best all-time international drivers would be complete without naming Brazil's Emerson Fittipaldi, a two-time Formula 1 and two-time Indy 500 champ, as well as fellow countrymen Nelson Piquet and Ayrton Senna, both triple world champions in Formula 1.

That's not to mention the exciting crop of recent Brazilian international driving aces, including Hélio Castroneves, Tony Kanaan, Rubens Barrichello, Gil de Ferran, and Vitão Meira, just to name a few.

So, how does Brazil do it? What gives these Brazilian race car drivers such a dramatic push to succeed in the upper echelons of motorsports? In short: Karting does.

In Brazil, a country of over 180 million people and continental in size, karting is the most common entry into motorsports for kids, and they start young. The structure of Brazilian karting permits drivers from seven years of age to compete, utilizing equipment with limited power for safety reasons at that age.

Américo Teixeira Jr., of the Confederação Brasileira de Automobilismo, the entity responsible for karting and motorsports in Brazil, said that with Brazilian drivers' very diverse participation in terms of regions and modes of motorsports internationally, practically all of them began in Brazilian karting.

"The history of karting in Brazil began in the 1960s, when the first races were run in the city of São Paulo in improvised street circuits," Teixeira said. "Already in those first moments, some youth stood out, among them the two-time world champion of Formula 1 and two-time Indy 500 champion, Emerson Fittipaldi."

More than 40 years later, Brazilian karting today is an important sector not only in the formation of the sport's latest talent, but also in business, creating jobs and technological development, Teixeira said.

To help keep karting strong in Brazil, the Confederação Brasileira de Automobilismo has established agreements with manufacturers of chassis and motors to decrease costs for the youngest Brazilian karters, encouraging entrance of new participants in the sport.

"While in some places, at 16 years old, the competitor has his first contact with the world of motorized competition, the structure of the sport in Brazil permits that, at this age, the driver already is a veteran on the track," Teixeira said. "Of course, karting isn't the only way a Brazilian becomes a race car driver. In the case when a career begins at 16, for example, the competitor is able choose among the various motorsports categories — formula or touring classes — for newcomers. However, the passage through karting is a common characteristic to practically every Brazilian competitor."

The state of São Paulo, where the Autódromo José Carlos Pace and the Kartódromo Ayrton Senna are located as integral parts of the Interlagos automotive complex, is the country's region that presents the greatest development in terms of karting, according to Teixeira. "The principal karting championships are held in São Paulo, and it is where the largest number of manufacturers of karting parts, accessories, and services are located," he said. "But São Paulo is only one of the 19 states that are affiliated with the Confederação Brasileira de Automobilismo. Therefore, Brazilian karting is reflected in all of Brazil, with regional championships in all of the affiliated states, throughout the year."

Each July (winter school break in Brazil), the Brazilian Karting Championship draws approximately 400 karters from Brazil and outside the country.

There are more than 50 official tracks for regional, national and international championships in Brazil, according to Teixeira. "In addition, the practice of races on city streets without permanent karting tracks is common," he said. "Indoor karting tracks and circuits designed for kart rental form a very competitive picture for the practice of karting."

Zeito Linhares, of the Federação de Automobilismo de São Paulo (FASP), said in the country of futebol, which has 5500 municipal districts, karting still has a lot of space to grow. "The construction of more tracks can attract new practitioners and increase the trade of products, attracting new entrepreneurs, then there would be a structural orientation for karting as a generator of business," he said.

Linhares pointed out that karting in Brazil is a popular sport among the country's upper socioeconomic class. "Within this group, we find various drivers who were supported by their families since a young age, with the specific objective of turning them into drivers in Formula 1, IRL, etc. This fact, combined with access to the top equipment and extremely difficult and selective karting tracks, produces drivers with excellent technical skills," he explained.

The main advantage these drivers have is the availability of excellent tracks on any day of the week, at all hours, Linhares said. "Many karters possess their own private tracks on small farms or ranches," he said.

Linhares explained a typical career track for a Brazilian driver: "If the driver (or his family) intends to pursue a career in the international classes of racing, the first step must be through karting, from eight to 10 years of age. Afterward, a class like Formula Renault or Formula 3 South America, and then proceed to Europe. Already for anybody who wants to participate in racing classes such as stock car, there are various regional championships with the most diverse types of cars. Rally is also practiced a lot, with various races that include beginners, such as

Mitsubishi Cup."

Zeca Giaffone, ZF Racing Products, whose son Felipe Giaffone races in the IndyCar Series, said he thinks past Brazilian success in international racing has planted the seeds for future winners. "I think that karting is strong in Brazil because we've had many world champions in F1—Ayrton, Piquet, Emerson—and this has had an influence on karting, without a doubt.

"Karters begin driving at six to seven years old and they train up to four times per week and race in various championships throughout Brazil, so they are going to be very well prepared to race formula cars," he continued. "I think the success is because Brazilian drivers train a lot from an early age. And because the competition is very strong, which elevates the level of everybody."

Brazilian Champ Car driver Antonio Pizzonia started racing a kart in his country at the age of nine. "Initially my father didn't like the idea," Pizzonia said in a recent interview at the Long Beach Grand Prix. "He thought it was too early for me to start doing something like that. He thought it was too dangerous. After maybe one year, he took me to the race track for the first time and then I fell in love with it."

Pizzonia said karting is probably so popular in Brazil because there aren't many other ways to become a race car driver. "You are never going to jump straight into a Formula 3 car or Formula Renault car," he explained. "Before that there is only karting. All the young kids' dream is to become a karting driver. It was mine as well. I used to go to the race tracks when I was maybe six or seven and watch the go-karts going around and around. I always wanted to be there.

"When I had my first success in a racing car, I was 15 or 16, so basically I had six years in racing already," he added. "Karting gives you a good starting point for when you jump into a racing car for the first time." —Nick Gagala



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