



# Why FF1600 is at a crossroads

The big championship winners this year will get a shot at the American dream. So why is there an air of concern among the category's major players?

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**W**here is the British or Irish IndyCar star of the 2020s racing this season? In karts? A Formula 4 series? Already over in the States? Or will you find them on a UK club-racing bill in a wingless single-seater with a 1960s engine and treaded tyres?

Win either the BRSCC National, Scottish or Super Series Formula Ford 1600 title this year and you go into a shootout against 14 other champions from worldwide grassroots series for \$200,000 towards US\$2000 – rung one on a Mazda Road to Indy ladder whose champions' scholarships can take you all the way to the Indianapolis 500. That's still a very long shot for any UK FF1600 racer, but now technically possible.

Road to Indy was the headliner in a string of good-news Kent-engined FFord stories in 2015. A proper UK-wide national series was back. Festival entries were up. Ralph Firman was producing an all-new car. Teams had huge interest in 2016 seats.

But now... "It's not like people have been banging the doors down," admits one team boss, and others are troubled that there "isn't much new blood" or disappointed that talk of "the world and his wife wanting to do FF1600" proved deceptive.

FF1600 is still arguably in better shape starting 2016 than for over two decades. Under Graham and Heather Brunton's guidance, the Dario Franchitti-endorsed Scottish championship has become the first single-seater step for karters north of the border. FFord never really lost that status in Ireland, and all three 2015 Motorsport Ireland Young Driver of the Year finalists will be in National FF1600 – winner Jake Byrne (last year's Northern Irish FF1600 champion) along with James Roe and Jordan Dempsey. Byrne's Bernard Dolan Motorsport team-mate will be 2013 Festival winner Niall Murray. Cliff Dempsey Racing has re-signed 2014 Festival winner James Raven to join Skip Barber racer Chase Owen – an American heading to the UK to try to win a US scholarship prize. Walter Hayes winner and 2008 National champion Graham Carroll and EcoBoost era FFord race-winner Luke Williams will be among those in

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Firman's new machines, while 2013 BARC Formula Renault champion Chris Middlehurst is eschewing GT ambitions for another crack at FF1600 after his 2011 titles.

Still, the 'lack-of-new-blood' concerns are understandable since so many of the above already had FF1600 in their veins, either through past success or family ties. Roe's uncle Michael won the 1978 Festival, while Jordan Dempsey's father Morgan is an ex-FF1600 star and cousin of three-time WHT winner Peter Dempsey. The FF1600 message has gone beyond preaching to the converted, but more to restoring the faith of the lapsed rather than reaching new disciples. Sceptics outside FF1600's fervently enthusiastic paddocks note that its core technical elements are unchanged since 1967, and that cuts it adrift in a world of slicks, wings and paddleshifts.

"We really need to shake off that 'unfashionable' sticker," admits Oldfield Motorsport boss James Oldfield, who ran Stuart Gough to the 2014 National title in a 1992-vintage Van Diemen and is now upgrading to the latest machinery for karter James Scott-Murphy. "People think because you spend under £40,000 on it, it's not proper. There are guys who'll win Formula Renault championships in Europe who'd struggle to do well in FFord because the quality is so high." >>





A potential Road to Indy scholarship berth awaits the National champion

Cliff Dempsey, a long-time FRenault team boss too, is adamant that FF1600 “is the best training ground you could put a racing driver in. But people keep passing it by to go and spend £200,000 on something else. Then in a few years they’ve spent all their money and it’s all over. If they did a year or two in Kents first, they might be better prepared and go further.”

Most in FF1600 accept that many of its young guns are only there because F4-type budgets are beyond them. Middlehurst, a 2013 McLaren Autosport BRDC Award finalist, BRDC Rising Star and BRDC F4 race winner, agrees with Dempsey that FF1600 should be a bigger presence on karters’ radars.

“You learn how mechanical grip works, and how to change suspension because that’s what you’re reliant on,” he says. “You learn to carry speed rather than just slamming on the brakes then going again. And you learn about car control because you haven’t got that aero grip to glue the car to the floor. It gives you a lot of knowledge that does transfer.”

Those on a linear path up the FIA single-seater ladder might not need those sort of lessons but, for the significant majority whose careers are likely to take more varied turns, FF1600 makes you “a very well-rounded racing driver and more adaptable”, reckons multiple category champion Ed Moore.

“You’ll learn about racecraft and how to drive racing cars properly – changing gear with a gearstick and needing to heel-and-toe. I know these days you can get to Formula 1 without such basic skills, but it’s good to have them.”

A comprehensive FF1600 season with a top team costs £30,000-£40,000. Running your own car could get that budget below £20,000. That puts it within range for families such as the Cowlleys, whose classic ‘dad-and-lad’ collaboration between father Ian and son Matt took the latter to last year’s National Pre-’90 title. They chose FF1600 over Super One karting largely because it was cheaper. Unless Cowley Jr secures a scholarship

or benefactor, the budget to progress will be beyond them, but FF1600 at least gives him a chance – and, in Ian’s words, “if you want to just keep going in it, it’s a fantastic club series”. FF1600 thriving gives lesser-funded karters such as Cowley some single-seater hope at a time when Middlehurst fears many “end up giving up because they think they’ll need a quarter of a million for even an entry-level series”.

But the budget gulf above FF1600 hurts it. The category could do with some star graduates turning heads higher up to show its worth – such as when Matt Howson emerged from Star of the Midlands FF1600 in 2001 and outqualified his already-quite-famous Manor Motorsport FRenault UK Winter Series team-mate Lewis Hamilton first time out. But if FF1600’s stars are only there because they have little money, they struggle to

move on and therefore can’t advertise it – 2014 Scottish FF1600 champion Ciaran Haggerty was a BRDC F4 frontrunner last season, but on a shoestring budget even with Ecurie Ecosse help. Reigning National FF1600

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champion Jonny McMullan has returned to his previous cash-strapped state now that his year of Motorsport Ireland backing is over, and may not race in 2016.

Moore argues that the financial disparity “isn’t FF1600’s fault, it’s the sport’s fault” and down to “an ethos of greed and stupidity” at higher levels. National FF1600 coordinator Ian Smith is desperate to see a UK equivalent of the Road to Indy, while his Super Series counterpart James Beckett says he’s been angling to create one to no avail so far. In the meantime, he pledges that “we’ll do everything we can to make our winner prepared to go to America, whether it’s by arranging simulator time or Q&A sessions with Jonathan Palmer so they’re prepared for interviews”.

But it’s not just a case of a united FF1600 world being let down by the iniquities above. There are internal tensions too.



IndyCar race winner Newgarden claimed the '08 Kent Festival



Plenty of big names (and recognisable lids) started out in Kents



Current crop could swap Donington and Croft for America



WHT entry shows the category's appeal is huge – and enduring

Cliff Dempsey feels the way interest wilted over the winter after a promising start was down to “half-hearted” promotion of the Mazda link by the two English-based series.

“If the prize disappears because Mazda doesn’t think the series are promoted properly, that would be such a shame,” he warns, while others echo the theme that the championships need to be given a more “professional” air.

Beckett counters: “To move it to the next level, competitors have really got to step up to the plate and support it, and allow the promoters to take it in the right direction and give it that professionalism. People are used to the TOCA paddock, having the artichokes in a line and a bowl of fruit and a palm tree. Fford is not that for everyone, but if you want to be a professional series you’ve got to look like it and help organisers to do that.”

Beckett admits that FF1600’s varied competitor demographic makes that hard, as he tries to strike a balance between bigger teams demanding increased scrutineering rigour or slicker presentations, and clubmen keen to head home post-race.

“There isn’t any other category in the world with that cross-section from absolute racing beginner to those at the front who could easily win in America next year,” he says. “And then you’ve got the people who’ve done all that before and want to come back and beat everyone again.”

Calendars have also caused frustration among teams. Delays in finalising the Super Series put pressure on one-man-band Beckett. Scheduling his opener as an F4 support at Snetterton despite having to cancel an equivalent event due to low entries last year raised eyebrows, while his series’ roots in his Champion of Brands revival means a calendar very heavy on trips to Kent.

Last year’s National calendar mixed classic circuits in the middle of the country (Silverstone, Donington Park) and regional FF1600 heartlands with strong local competitor bases such as Oulton Park, Castle Combe and Knockhill. The 2016 version dismayed some: Combe, Knockhill and Silverstone National out (so no WHT warm-up chance); Rockingham, Croft (neither of which have generated a decent FF1600 grid this century) and Zandvoort in. The Dutch trip is a tie-up with major European FF1600 series, but left several teams up in arms

over potential costs. Smith and Beckett argue they’re limited by respective organising clubs the BRSCC and MSVR, and Smith also defends the Rockingham and Croft moves on the grounds that varying circuits is healthy for a national series. But with FF1600 having depended so much on regional support, it’s a gamble – and Oldfield says “they’ve got it badly wrong”.

Calendars and scrutineering standards were two key items on the agenda of a recent meeting between a group of leading FF1600 team bosses keen to put a united view to organisers in the hope of a smoother 2017. The technical regulations may be a battleground too, with a split between those who fear cost increases as parts get scarce, and those who argue it’s the absolute stability of the rules that has kept FF1600 affordable. The latter faction won out in a recent debate over whether alloy brake calipers should be permitted.

FF1600 hits its 50th anniversary next year, and nearly half that time has now been spent outside the mainstream – 23 years having passed since the advent of the Zetec engine that was supposed to supersede it. But Kent marches on, outliving not just Zetec but Duratec and EcoBoost Fford too.

“If you were starting from scratch now, of course you’d use a modern engine,” admits Moore. “But why are there 120 Formula Fords out at the Walter Hayes? Because it works.”

Most junior single-seater categories are at the mercy of a single organiser or manufacturer. FF1600 is driven by a massive community, one often at each other’s metaphorical throats, but only because they care. In Beckett’s words “the absolute belief in the category keeps it going, and no other category in the world deserves it so much”. Its participants may disagree over calendars, calipers and more, but they all agree on that.

But in 2016, with such a big opportunity to cement its status as the legitimate junior single-seater category its prime movers want it to be, the FF1600 fraternity needs to collaborate.

“If you win the Festival or the Walter Hayes your name goes down with the greats, and the championships have these great prizes,” says Oldfield. “We need to make sure everyone keeps working together on promoting that in a positive manner. If we get complacent, we can very quickly go backwards.” ❖