



Tuners...Might they sabotage a drivers development

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It's a scenario played out all across America almost every weekend during the race season. It's also a scenario that is somewhat bothersome to me personally. While a driver drives as hard and as fast as possible, an experienced set of eyes watches closely determining how the chassis is handling and starts to decide what the driver needs in the kart set-up to go even faster. During the pit stop, the experienced eyes would examine the tires for more clues to the behavior of the chassis, and after a brief discussion with the driver, the set-up changes are decided and acted upon.

After the changes are made, the driver is probably better positioned to go even faster, might even qualify on the pole and win the race. Everyone associated would feel the sense of euphoria as the trailer is loaded up for the trip home. The driver would bask in the glory of the achievement and call friends and family to give the good news. My question is, who learned more, the driver or tuner/engineer.

There is a growing move within karting to have drivers positioned to not only drive what might be considered the best chassis, but also be paired with the best engineer/tuner possible. The focus of the engineer/tuner is to develop the chassis to go as fast as possible. For any karter who has aspirations of becoming a professional driver, one of the most important aspects of race



competition is learning how to technically tune your machine. How many tuners/engineers are doing a good job, but inadvertently developing the chassis without developing the driver?

Chassis' will change every year, manufacturers will come and go, but in my opinion, the driver is the key element that needs the most development and his personal growth should receive the most focus. I have a sneaky suspicion that well meaning parents,



who write checks that are meant to provide their offspring with the best opportunities available, are actually sabotaging their own kids long term development.

There is a certain age that a driver “gets it”. It is the age when the “light bulb” goes on and everything begins to make sense and come together. It’s a time of maturity for a driver when he begins to formulate what his real destiny might be. This age is different for every driver and the stars of karting have all gone through this “growing and emerging” period. ICC Star, Kyle Wiegand says, that despite the enormous number of races he competed in, he was 15 years old before it all made sense. When it all makes sense, the technical ability of the driver also grows rapidly....as long as he has been taught the basics in his formative years.

One of the most experienced tuners/ engineers in karting, Mike Speed, has raised two of the most successful karters in America; the 2005 Stars ICC Champion, Alex Speed, and America’s Formula One driver, Scott Speed. According to Mike, the age when it all came together for Alex was 16 years, and surprisingly, Scott was 17 years old when he “got it”. Mike will tell you that he could *see it* clearly when Scott “got it”



Now while Mike’s sons were both learning their trade coming up through the ranks of karting, Mike’s mission was to teach them the all important technical side of racing. He forced them to study the computer data and to “think” about how to go faster as opposed to just try to “drive” faster. Today, as he tunes for and mentors JICA driver, Jacob Neal, he says that 90% of what he does is try to develop the driver.

It’s important to understand that because Mike had an emotional attachment to Alex and Scott, he was more inclined to stick with it even when he waded through many a difficult and frustrating day at the track trying to make sense of the technical side of their karts. How many other tuners, who have no emotional attachment to the driver, would be willing not only to tune the chassis but also teach and develop the driver?



Someone with a similar “concerned” opinion is a tuner/engineer who has literally seen it all, Lynn Haddock. Lynn is a 48 year veteran of the sport and although his “day job” is now more concentrated on preparing engines, on the weekends he can still be found developing chassis set-ups for current drivers such as MRP birel America drivers Dominic Sheer and Wesley Boswell. In his past Lynn has prepared karts for names such as Lake Speed (when he won the World Championship), Giancarlo Fisicella (when he competed against Michael Schumacher in a Formula One driver invitational at Bercy, France), Nick Bussell, and he even drove as a teammate to Scott Pruitt when they were both factory-supported Margay drivers.



Lynn is very familiar with parents, who keep paying new tuners trying to get their sons to win, and when the sons are in their mid and late teenage years, they have no clue about what the kart is doing on the race track. Haddock and Pruitt were essentially their own

tuners. They were forced to learn the hard way and as drivers they knew not just why a kart was slow (that’s the easy part) but they knew why their karts were fast. When you understand why a kart is fast...you can reproduce that set up with regularity. How many check paying parents insist that the tuners/engineers develop the driver in addition to the chassis?

It is my opinion that a tuners most important job, for a karter with professional aspirations, should be to develop the driver as he develops the chassis. Every technical decision should be discussed in detail with the driver. The driver should be part of the decision making at all times. The driver needs to be responsible for studying the data (a big Mike Speed stipulation) to learn as much as possible as soon as possible. The driver also needs to take some responsibility in making this discipline happen.

Companies such as Mychron (distributed by Aim Sports) who make on board data acquisition systems for karts, provide a driver with the type of technical information that is invaluable to him....but only if he understands it and uses it to his advantage. What good is data if it stays on your hard drive? How many tuners out there have taken the time to teach their driver what the data means?

How many teenage drivers have ever called Aim Sports to ask them to explain how to use the data properly? Mike McKnight, Vice President of Aim Sports says that he gets very few calls from teenage drivers asking to learn how to understand the data available. Most of the calls for support come from drivers in their late twenties to late thirties who want to learn. Mike says that



the other end of the scale is also pretty active with kids in the lower cadet/sportsman classes, where the Dad learns as much as he can.

The all important early to mid teenage years, when the foundation for a good technical understanding is being laid, might be missing a golden opportunity to develop a more “complete” driver of the future.

If I was a parent looking for a team or a tuner, the first question I would ask is; how will you develop the technical ability of my driver and how will you help him become a more complete package. If you do not ask this type of question, you are in danger of contributing to the development of a generation of instinct/reflex drivers who in my opinion fall short of a drivers true potential.

An instinct/reflex driver is a driver who has a natural ability to drive the wheels off a kart but has no real idea what’s happening to the chassis while he drives. Instinct/reflex drivers are loved by teams initially because the team knows that every time he is in the kart, the kart is going a fast as that set up can possibly go. The instinct/reflex driver also relies heavily on a tuner/engineer to contribute to his racing success. If an instinct reflex driver can be taught the technical side of racing in his formative years, he can become a powerhouse.



An instinct/reflex kart driver, who is one of the most gifted drivers ever, who did not learn the technical side of racing and whose season long performance suffers to this day because of it, is McLaren Formula One driver Juan Montoya. A kart driver who did learn the technical side and who used it to great benefit throughout his career, is Michael Schumacher. Michael’s “complete” abilities have made him one of the wealthiest athletes in the world and has greatly contributed to him winning a record seven Formula One world championships.

Montoya will continue to move from team to team blaming them for not “providing” him with a fast enough car (exactly what happened at Williams-BMW), while Michael has greatly contributed to developing better cars that gave him the edge he needed. If you want your driver to be the very best he can be, choose your tuner/engineer because of more than what he can do with the chassis.

Derek Daly

