

FEATURE

SPORTS 2000 SHOWS THE WAY



A rekindled former favourite is an unsung – and innovative – success story in UK national racing, as *Graham Keilloh* explains

In a time of struggling grids Sports 2000 is bucking trend

If you don't know much about the Sports 2000 championship, then perhaps you should. It has good claim to be UK national racing's best-kept secret. Yet there's really no reason for it having a low profile.

In an age where many grids have been struggling, particularly in the sportscar arena, this championship – run by its own Sports 2000 Racing Car Club on the MotorSport Vision Racing package – averaged at 28 cars this season to maintain its strong entries achieved consistently since the contest was rekindled in the late 1990s.

Yes, 'rekindled'. As the championship also has a strong heritage. Its first incarnation in 1977 was one of many from the abundant brain of Brands Hatch boss John Webb. The two-seater, open cockpit, prototype category used the same two-

litre Pinto engine as Formula Ford 2000 and was aimed at providing affordable sportscar racing for club competitors.

It was popular with diverting fare, famous drivers including Ian Flux, Divina Galica and Frank Sytner, and an abundance of manufacturers. It even supported the British Grand Prix and established healthy scenes in the United States and elsewhere.

The UK contest stopped in 1993 but came back in 1998, with the same affordable sportscar aim as before. And the comeback was in large part thanks to stalwart Colin Feyerabend.

Sports 2000 racer Mike Turner, part of the team bringing Sports 2000 back, takes up the story to Motorsport News. "We'd been racing Sports 2000 cars in the Formula 1300 championship, and Colin knew there were a lot of cars sitting around there not really being used that regularly if at all. He also knew

there were quite a few cars in the States which could be bought for in those days quite sensible sums," Turner says.

Helped by a "huge amount of support" from the British Racing and Sports Car Club's John Nicol, three standalone comeback events were held in 1998.

"The first race at Cadwell, that got a full grid so we thought 'ooh, ours is pretty good', it's definitely something to build on," Turner continues. "And so we completed that season and had full grids at Donington and at Brands Hatch and it seemed to just tap into a groundswell of enthusiasm. But Colin was the person who did all the groundwork and all the leg work and [had] huge enthusiasm really, it all took off." The following year Sports 2000 embarked on a full season with championship status.

"There seemed to be an enthusiasm for people to do sportscar racing back in the late '90s," Turner adds. "A lot of people

wanted to go racing, but they didn't necessarily want to go the single-seater route, and there wasn't really a sportscar championship for club racers. We were lucky with the timing in a way. But it's just developed from there."

Fellow Sports 2000 racer Mike Fry confirms: "Colin was just indefatigable in just getting people out and over the years it grew into a very popular amateur national club racing series."

The popularity has manifested in a number of ways, including in the circuits Sports 2000 has visited. Adding to its UK itinerary, it added away day visits to major tracks. It has been to Spa several times, and also frequented the Nurburgring, Zandvoort, Dijon, Hockenheim, Magny-Cours, and next year it visits Zolder. Sports 2000 has even been invited to Le Mans.

Turner adds: "I think it was 2000 we ran what was called Sports 2000

Festival at Brands Hatch along the lines of Formula Ford 1600, so we had three or four heats and semi-finals and finals and we got probably the best part of 100 cars there. That was quite something really.

"The whole ethos really was to provide affordable club racing for the club racer. And that hasn't changed to this day. That's still what we're trying to achieve."

It's also manifested in the drivers it's attracted. Miles Griffiths, who went on to historic racing stardom, passed through, while this year's champion Will Schryver was also a historic star. Formula Ford Festival winner Gavin Wills tried a Sports 2000 round this season and plans a full campaign in 2025.

Even Le Mans winner Nick Tandy has sampled it, while Derek Bell as club president has tested both of the

"The ethos hasn't changed of affordable sportscars"

Mike Turner



Colin Feyerabend was a key mover in bringing popular contest back



Festival winner Gavin Wills is among big names racing in Sports 2000

Photos: Kevin Gibson, KJG Photography



F1 aero figure Iley combines racing with technical monitoring role



It's run by racers: here Donnan competes



Fry is an advocate of Pinto competition



Sports 2000's origins are reflected in the Historic Pinto engine class

championship's car types at Brands Hatch.

But there's also a range of abilities and experience in the field, with everyone finding their place. "It's always been competitive, we've always had some quick drivers in it," Turner says. "Some of the younger guys now, I don't know how they do the times they do quite honestly. And then there's the rest of us who make up the bulk of the grid, and wherever you are really you've got somebody to race against. The other thing that we've tried to encourage is we've been quite strict on driving standards. We're very keen to see new people come in."

As intimated, when Sports 2000 returned in the 1990s it used the Pinto-engine spec from the original formula. "It was a beautifully stable platform because it's based on the Ford Pinto but with fairly tight engine regulations which meant that they were pretty reliable. You had two or three seasons in between rebuilds which keeps costs down," Pinto racer Fry notes.

However it was also soon thought that a new, more powerful, car was needed, and Feyerabend in the year 2000 sourced the Duratec engine, packing 200bhp compared to the around 130bhp of the Pinto. The upgraded car also had bolder bodywork, sprouting a rear wing. These cars provided the frontrunning class, with the Pinto-propelled machines remaining as the Historic class. And the two-class formula is how Sports 2000 continues today.

"The Duratec side of things has really blossomed. There are probably about 50 Duratec-engined cars out there,"

Turner says.

They come from a variety of manufacturers, as Turner also explains: "There's been quite a good pool of cars, once the Duratec side of things was introduced people like Van Diemen and Gunn and laterally MCR built cars and Van Diemen built Pinto-engine cars as well. In the early days the Pintos had lots of chassis, you've got Shrike, Lola, Tiga, things like the Rawlson, you've probably got eight or 10 different chassis makes. MCR, they've built probably 26 [Duratec] cars now."

And the cars' performance per pound spent is hard to rival, with the Duratec capable of lapping Brands Indy in 46 seconds. Club secretary – and Duratec racer – Roger Donnan notes on the car: "It's wonderful. It doesn't do anything unexpected. I'm not a spring chicken and I've never considered myself an expert at this sort of thing. But you know what? You can still get around the circuits pretty damn quick. They're lovely to drive and part of the attraction for me is I like spannering, as I do all the work myself and they're a joy to work on. Simple but very effective. They certainly put a smile on your face."

With the central and enduring aim of affordability, controlling costs is also key to Sports 2000. Donnan explains: "The idea is to avoid chequebook racing and keep it as level a field as possible

and that's gone all the way through from the beginning to the present.

"Our idea is to keep it reasonable cost with cars of very similar performance, so it keeps racing close and you don't just win by bringing a bigger car or bigger engine or better tuning or whatever. It's down to driving skill and preparation."

A major cost source is tyres, so Sports 2000 racers are limited to four sets a season, something aided by this year switching to durable Hoosier tyres. It's also aided by some innovation.

Donnan explains: "Before Avon had its problems and the tyre market went a bit bonkers in lockdown, the Yokohama tyres were about £600 a set. Some people would run a set for every meeting or even more, because cost wasn't an issue. Then all of a sudden they jumped up to about £1000 a set and we said 'look, this just can't go on'. So we limited the number of tyres."

"Then the discussion was how do we monitor this? The first way we did it was each competitor would take a photograph of their barcodes, because all tyres are barcoded, and upload them to a WhatsApp group, but there's no way to check that in parc ferme. So last season I was trying to look for a solution and people were saying using barcode scanners.

"There is an application on the phone for using the barcode scanner or even the phone to read barcodes off tyres and store them in a database to the cloud.

You just scan any tyre and it will say that tyre is registered to this competitor, or this tyre is not registered and therefore it's illegal. Certainly it's been a major impact on costs. Instead of spending £3000-4000 on tyres you're spending £2000-3000. I ran all but the last event on one set of tyres.

"The app [from Canadian firm Racer Scan] was developed for karting, where they're very stringent on tyres, but it hasn't been used in a car circuit format before. But the app was flexible enough to suit our needs.

"We've got a new scrutineer joining us next year who came to Snetterton to have a look at us and he was a bit 'I'm not sure how that will all work' and then he saw it in action, said 'blimey', because previously [you're] actually having to look up sheets of paper and see if that's the right tyre number for this competitor. So simple things, but they make life easier and it avoids argument."

Sports 2000, like many contests, also has had its fair share of competitor grumbling about cheating, and policing technical matters was a time-consuming task of stripping the car or running it on a dyno.

The club therefore last year introduced a deceptively simple way of monitoring cars to ensure technical parity, by strapping a VBOX Sport datalogger to a random selection of machines.

Sports 2000 competitor John Iley – a long-time Formula 1 aerodynamicist

including with Ferrari and McLaren, and who also helped develop the popular MCR – is tasked with monitoring the Historic class.

"We randomly distribute the boxes in the cars and then myself and another driver from the Pinto historic category called Paul Streat, we cross-examine anonymised data from all of the cars and compare speed traces, longitudinal acceleration, that kind of thing," Iley tells MN.

"So it's just a self-policing method and we hope it's a deterrent as much as anything else. But it also means that if anyone is outside of our window of expectation in these kind of parameters we can then take it to the next level and ask their car to be checked on the dyno and take it from there."

Bosses are convinced indeed that cheating is as good as impossible with this and its effectiveness is such that the governing body is interested in using it more widely, helped by that Iley sits on Motorsport UK's technical committee.

And, so far, no outliers have been identified beyond driving talent. "This guy goes 'can I look at Michael's data?'" Donnan recalls in one such dispute. "I say well 'if you get Michael's consent then yes, you can.' So Michael [said] 'I've got nothing to hide' and gave him a copy of his data. And [later] he came up to me and said 'bloody hell, I wish I could drive like that'. It's all about cornering speed, it was nothing to do with power on the straights..." ■