

# From little acorns

JEREMY SHAW explores the 15 year evolution of Formula Ford, explaining how an original cost-cutting idea has inspired the most competitive motor racing category in the world.

Formula Ford is without doubt the most popular single form of motor racing in the world with national championships for this category now being run in virtually all parts of the globe. Yet it all began almost by accident following a decision by Geoffrey Clarke, then head of the Motor Racing Stables school at Brands Hatch, to try and provide a cheaper car on which his pupils could learn than a pukka Formula 3 car.

He reasoned that the fitting of a standard Ford Cortina GT engine as well as road wheels and tyres to a proper F3 single-seater would still provide an interesting and informative car on which his students could learn the basics of driving a racing car, while at the same time making less impact on his pocket each time one of them made a mistake.

Motor Circuit Developments' boss John Webb lost no time in forseeing a potential future for this kind of low-cost racing car, and after an approach to the Ford Motor Company, who shared his enthusiasm and quickly agreed to back the scheme, Formula Ford was born. A deal was struck up whereby Lotus would produce a batch of cars for the use of both MRS and the rival Jim Russel Racing Drivers' School, and the new category was announced to an unsuspecting world during February, 1967.

In an editorial at the time, AUTOSPORT greeted the arrival with some caution: "FF could certainly provide fairly low cost single-seater racing, but AUTOSPORT sincerely hopes that no promoter will jump into the category too hurriedly, otherwise it could be killed stone dead, with few starters and, even more disastrous, too few finishers. Far better to wait until fairly large fields are assured, otherwise it could quite easily suffer the fate of other formulae which never really got off the ground."

Cautious indeed. But there was no need to worry. The inaugural Formula Ford race took place at Brands Hatch on July 3, 1967, and resulted in victory for the MRS Lotus 51 of Ray Allen, who led home a trio of JRRDS Lotuses in the hands of Malcolm Payne, Claude Bourgoignie and Malcolm Fletcher. There

had been 15 starters in that race but fields grew gradually in subsequent events, prompting more optimistic remarks in our Seasonal Survey of that year. There were still some doubts expressed as to its claim to be a true 'low cost' form of motor racing, although it was agreed that with the promise of more manufacturers being attracted for the following season: "The outlook is bright", we wrote at the time.

Formula Ford was growing up rapidly, thanks in no small way to the efforts of the British Racing & Sports Car Club, whose Executive Director, Nick Syrett, and FF racer Nick Brittan joined up to form the 'Formula Ford Register'. At their instigation, and due also to the successes enjoyed during the formula's first year by young Belgian driver Claude Bourgoignie, the first International FF race took

place at Zolder on April 21, 1968.

This proved a very successful venture, even though Bourgoignie was forced to retire when holding second place behind Australian Tim Schenken, who emerged as a very bright talent by the end of the year, claiming no fewer than 36 race victories during the season! Already it was estimated that over 300 cars were in existence and the formula continued to thrive over the following seasons.

By the early 1970s, several gifted young drivers had established their reputations in Formula Ford, among them Schenken, Dave Walker, Emerson Fittipaldi, Jody Schecter and James Hunt, yet the formula had changed hardly at all. True, the original price ceiling of £1,000 for a complete, ready-to-race car had gone by the board, but costs were still within reasonable bounds and a huge number of events for Formula Ford not only gave the aspiring youngster plenty of practice but also ensured ample opportunity to display his worth.

By 1974, Formula Ford was well established around the world. In England, in fact, the category had almost out-grown itself, with organisers regularly running heats and finals at each of their championship rounds and some drivers even having to be turned away. Entry lists were frequently over-subscribed and so it was decided to initiate a second category to act as a stepping stone between FF and F3.

It was intended to draw away the cream of the FF racers and introduce them to a formula that would demand different skills, allowing drivers to develop their talents one stage further. The result was Formula Ford 2000.

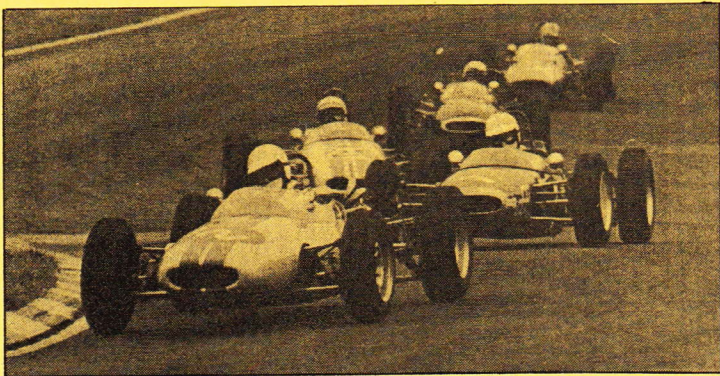
Regulations were to follow similar

lines to the ultra-successful Formula Ford 1600: only spaceframe chassis to be allowed; only the specified 2-litre, ohc Ford Pinto engine could be used; and tyres were standardised to a treadless 'slick' of Dunlop's design.

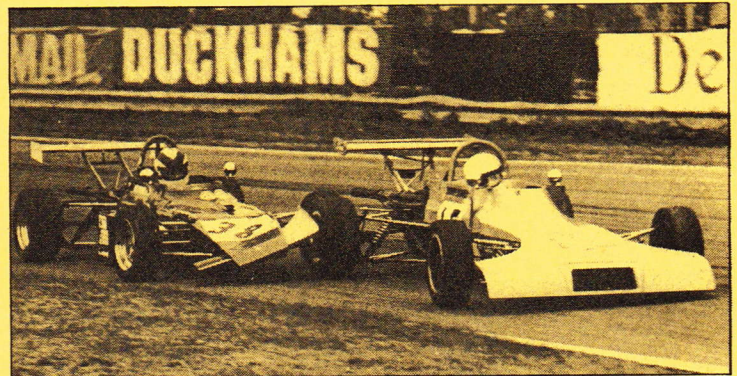
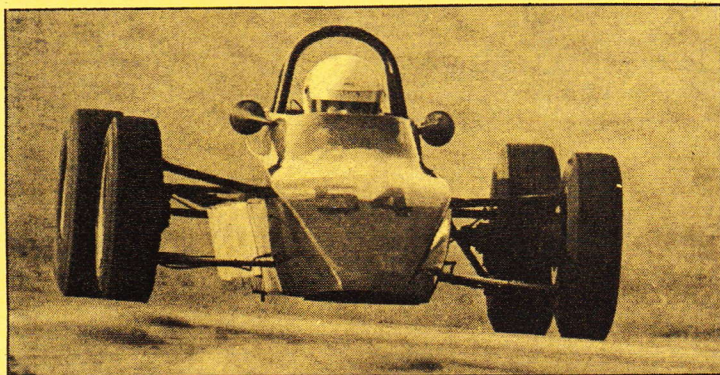
The result was a car that was appreciably faster than an FF1600 and demanded a different, smoother style of driving, while the introduction of rear wings gave the driver the opportunity to learn more about aerodynamics and the importance of 'balancing' his car, rather than furthering the raw, seat-of-the-pants style of driving that FF1600 encouraged.

Yet FF2000 took a while to become accepted as a worthwhile addition to the British club racing scene. The first year, 1975, did not attract as many drivers as anticipated and tended to be patronised by drivers who had already achieved some success but needed a new break to re-establish themselves as forces to be reckoned with. There were fears that FF2000 would become a 'dead end formula' although, happily, these were allayed in subsequent years when youngsters such as Tiff Needell, Rad Dougall, Mike White and David Leslie all sprung to prominence in FF2000. More recently, Richard Trott, Tommy Byrne and Ayrton da Silva have become champions in FF2000 and have virtually assured a bright future for the formula, which, in 1982, provided some excellent racing.

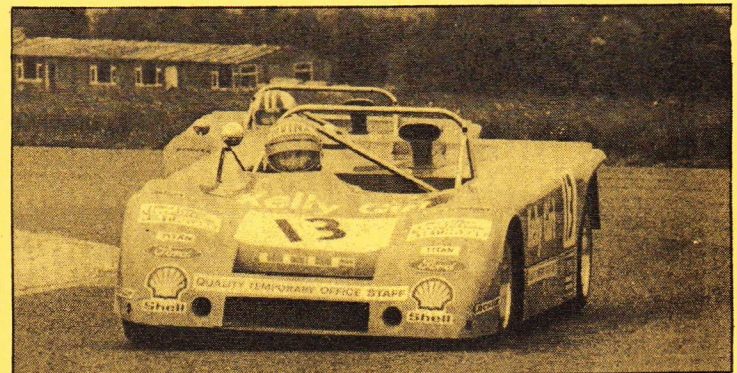
The third and youngest of the Ford-based formulae, Sports 2000, has just completed its sixth year. Sports car racing had always proved a popular category, both with spectators and



Above: Exactly one year after the first ever FF race, Tim Schenken leads a pack at Brands. Below: In 1979, the Quest became the first British high-technology FF1600 car.



Above: Early FF2000 racing as Derek Lawrence (Crosslé) and Bernard Vermilio (Merlyn) tangle. Below: Divina Galica holds off the similar Lola of John Cooper.



## From little acorns continued

competitors, but the failure of the RAC's 2-litre British sports car series in 1976 left this country with a void which proved difficult to fill. Once again, the notion of Sports 2000 was to come from the fertile brain of MCD boss John Webb, and the new division was established in time for the 1977 season.

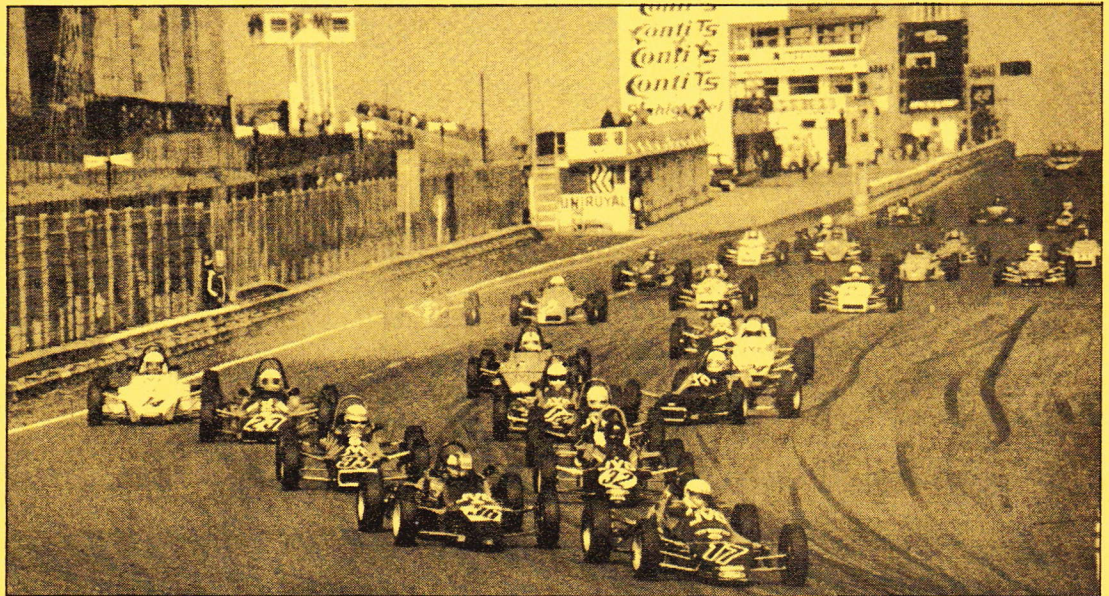
One of the major reasons for the failure of the RAC's 2-litre series had been ever-spiralling costs, so Webb was anxious to ensure that his new category would not fall into the same trap. The use of components already in wide usage, as well as the establishment of a national championship that would include rounds at several prestigious meetings, would hopefully prevent the kind of flop that befell his previous sports racing car venture, Formula 100.

The maiden Sports 2000 race, held as part of the Oulton Park Gold Cup meeting on April 8, 1977, attracted only nine starters, five of whom retired as a result of a variety of incidents and breakages, although matters soon improved and some superb races took place during the season as Divina Galica and John Cooper fought a fine duel for the championship.

Grids were never large in that first season, but much interest had been aroused and the establishment of a Sports 2000 Register, together with the news that the championship's first year sponsors, Sodastream, were to continue and even extend their support into 1978, gave way to optimism for the future. And this was not misplaced. Before long, Sports 2000 had spread its wings into Europe and then to America, where it is now regarded as one of the major National/Regional road racing categories.

## Worldwide

The first International Formula Ford race took place in Belgium within a year of the formation of the category. Since then the formula has spread worldwide and has become acknowledged as providing an excellent grounding for any



Formula Ford 1600 German-style as Rudi Seher (Ray) leads a varied pack of cars on the first lap of a race at the Nürburgring.

young racing driver.

In recent seasons, the European Formula Drivers' Association (EFDA) has been formed by American Daniel Partel as an organisation to help promote the growth of the three Ford formulae. His enthusiasm has resulted in a complete re-organisation of the categories in much of western Europe as well as the establishment of true European Championships for the three divisions, FF1600, FF2000 and Sports 2000. John Village won the first EFDA Formula Ford 1600 European Championship in 1979, while Adrian Reynard made it a British double by taking the inaugural FF2000 title in the same year.

The Formula Ford 1600 series was totally revamped for the 1982 season, EFDA opting for a regional system whereby three zones were delineated (Scandinavia, Benelux and Central) with the top contenders going forward to a one-race championship decider at Zand-

voort. Sadly, no races were held in England, so British involvement reached an all-time low, although, hopefully, this situation will be improved for 1983.

Another development on the Formula Ford calendar has been the annual, end of season Festival. The British Racing & Sports Car Club first ran the event in 1972 at Snetterton. It continued to be held there until 1976, when it was combined with a 'Victory Meeting' to celebrate James Hunt's World Championship success and moved to Brands Hatch. The Festival has been held at the Kentish circuit ever since and for the past three years has incorporated a World Cup element, whereby drivers represent their home nation and score points throughout the meeting before determining a winning country.

The Formula Ford 2000 and Sports 2000 European Championships have continued to be run along 'conventional' lines, again with the European market

considerably enhanced through the efforts of EFDA.

Further afield, the Ford formulae continue to thrive, America providing a particularly lucrative market for several British manufacturers. The Ulster-based Crosslé *marque* were the first to properly supply America although they have since been joined by several other manufacturers. Local competition, however, has increased dramatically in recent seasons

For 1983, the Canadian Automobile Sports Club is adopting 2000 as a major promotion, taking one step forward from their popular Walter Wolf FF Challenge. This will be the first time that FF2000 has been seen in America, although it has become firmly established in several countries throughout Europe, including Germany, where the formula was introduced only in 1981 but for next season will be taking over from FF1600 as the major 'club' formula. ■

# Variety on the British Formula Ford scene

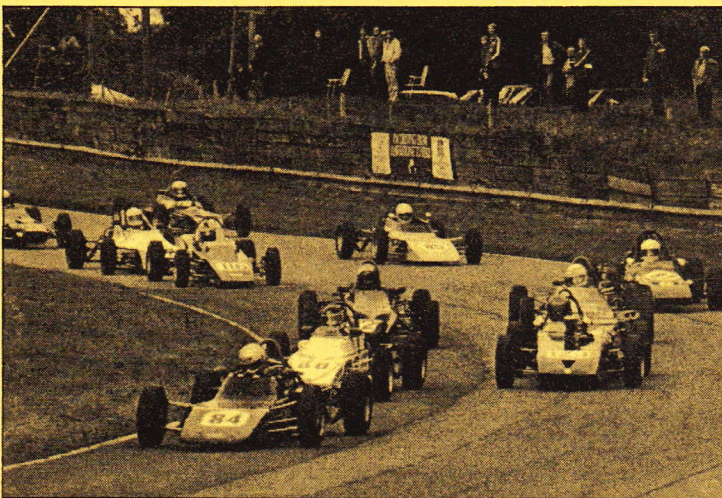
## Pre '74 FF1600

One of the most popular of the vast number of Formula Ford championships run during recent seasons has been that for cars built prior to January 1, 1974. This off-shoot of the formula was devised in 1979 by a group of enthusiasts who wanted to race FF1600 cars but could not afford the expense of a new chassis. They realised that there were a large number of elderly cars made redundant by more modern machinery and that a sensible series could be run. A register of suitable cars was drawn up and all competitors had to prove that their cars comply to the regulations.

The Pre '74 category has blossomed dramatically since then and full grids are drawn to most races. The British Racing & Sports Car Club, who helped establish the Pre '74 series, continue to run a proper season-long championship for the cars and also include a Festival towards the end of the season, which this year attracted over 80 contestants. As an inexpensive form of racing which provides intense competition, Pre '74 probably has no rival.

## 1974-78

Spurred on by the success of the Pre '74 series, the British Automobile Racing Club experimented during 1982 with a few races specifically for FF1600 cars built after 1974 but before January 1, 1979. These races were not very well supported but the BARC



Steve Bradley heads a full Pre '74 Formula Ford field through Old Hall at Oulton Park.

recently announced that they will run a series of races, rather than a championship, for 1983 and have received a great deal of interest from would-be competitors.

## Novices

The greatest asset of Formula Ford is that it

appeals to such a wide range of interests. Many drivers have started illustrious careers in the category and the major national championships will continue to unearth new talents. In Britain, the RAC, Townsend Thoresen, Esso and P & O Ferries championships cater for the 'top of the range' Formula Ford drivers; those with already

some experience under their belts who are looking to further their careers. But there are also a host of other championships that offer the same kind of intense competition but with slightly different aims.

Take the Dunlop/AUTOSPORT 'Star of Tomorrow' and the BP 'Superfind' Junior series, for example. Only novice drivers, who must hold a British passport, are eligible to compete in these championships and they therefore give drivers a chance to gain experience in competition without having to be up against the hardened campaigners, or even professionals that are found in the more senior series.

## Circuit championships

The same goes for single-venue championships. Several circuits now promote championships for Formula Ford cars running exclusively at one track, including Brands Hatch, Donington Park, Oulton Park, Snetterton, Castle Combe and Inghelton, and these cut out at least one major element in a full season's costings: travel.

As far as trying to attract a sponsor is concerned, the one-circuit championships also make a great deal of sense in terms of product-awareness. The 'continuity' and local-interest elements will make a driver's efforts more newsworthy for local newspapers and thereby lead to a greater affinity for regular spectators, who will have the opportunity of seeing local drivers competing on a regular basis.