

# Stayin' alive

**Formula Ford – you will recall – is the fun single seater category where spindly race cars assault each other in the dash from flag to flag. Is all the roughstuff accidental, or part of something more sinister?**

**Russell Bulgin (our man cowering behind the catch fencing) breaches the wall of silence and asks the pointed questions**

**A**t night, staying unblemished in a big city means avoiding the unlit areas. A census would reveal that you are surrounded by people, but they don't look down the dark alleys, the spaces where the streetlights end. Sticking under the yellow lamps keeps you safer.

These dark alleys at a racetrack are the backwoods spots out in the country. For just as a cheapstreets mugger plays it quick and dirty, knowing that most witnesses are both unseeing and uncaring, so the roughest Formula Ford driving is to be found away from it all – distant from the observers, the pits and the press. It's the same cruel logic for a parallel objective; hit once, hit hard, disable your victim and flee.

Formula Ford racing thrives on being close and tough; so incidents are expected and unavoidable. Most of the time.

Occasionally, a malicious element creeps in, at which point the whole scene coarsens. Contact sport in single seaters is not only foolish, it could prove fatal.

Fresh out of racing school, your major concerns (once you have your car and team sorted) are going to rest on the trivialities; . . . 'how boldly should mother embroider my name on the new overalls? . . . is it worth paying the extra over a regular helmet to get a Darth Vadermask – after all, Grand Prix drivers use them. . . . ' If you have not raced before, then any survival plans or elementary race tactics are going to consist of vague lines on an imaginary blackboard. What you should be attempting to do is cultivate an *awareness* of what can happen when the ugliness appears.

Take the start of a race. Once you have disappeared from a competitor's peripheral

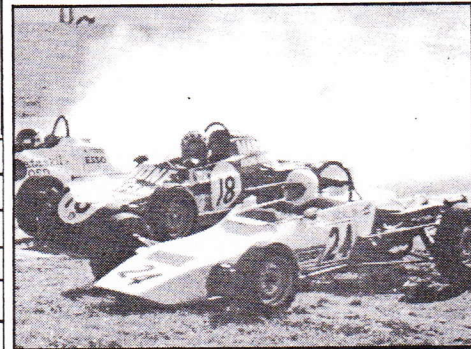
vision, he will naturally move over on you to grab the best line he can into the first corner. Desperation could mean that he cuts across the track and eases you closer to the pitwall. You are frightened – which is natural – but chances are that if you keep your cool you won't end your race then, two wheels torn off the car. Because nobody, however crazed, is going to get physical right in front of the control tower, in full view of the event's organisers. Brake gently and let the guy go.

At the first corner the fun really starts. If you've qualified mid-grid, and there's an established ace on the back row of the grid, perhaps after a practice problem, he will jump the start, and be with you into the corner. There are cars everywhere, all wanting to move up.

Approaching a bend like Copse at Silverstone, those on the inside can slide out enough to give them a little more room. Conversely if you are on the outside, you can move in to put the other guy onto the dirt, and snatch the proper racing groove. Which is vital to any clean break from the pack, because each line is different around the first bend, and he who is neatest, profits most.

Once experience has been gained, then sometimes driving on the grass can prove quicker. Dropping two wheels on the (dry) inside verge at Thruxton for example, can be a good escape route if things are tight; the heavily loaded outside wheels are gripping the asphalt and you can scrabble round inelegantly but efficiently. And, of course, that fine film of soil that you are throwing up might just land in the radiator intake or carburettor of the car behind. . . .

The first lap is like a hoard of commuters rushing for the evening bus, a nerve-edge attempt to overtake the man in front whilst ensuring that the guy behind stays there. Paradoxically, there are few deliberate incidents in the first two miles, simply because tactically, the race is still a mess. Nobody has set any vague plans in motion, or decided just what finishing nth



will do to their championship chances. But after that first lap, all hell can – and frequently does – break loose.

Actions can be offensive or defensive, planned or panicked, but if they are committed with ill-intent, then violence is unleashed. Down the straight; going into corners; at the run-up to a chicane; the list of possible battle zones is endless. Where there are two (or more) racing cars, the knife-fight can begin.

The most dangerous manoeuvre can occur almost anywhere, but is used to best effect under braking for a slow-to-medium speed corner, or chicane. Two cars run alongside each other to the curve. As they enter the braking area, one car moves over on the other trying to put one wheel in the middle of his rival's wheelbase.

It doesn't matter whether you put your

front or rear steel rim in between your rival's wheels – it's just that it's easier with the front. The object is to get your opponent to climb over the intruding wheel and bounce harmlessly out of contention . . . or worse. It's the least common punch below the belt simply because it can go drastically wrong. The timing has to be precise or you risk eliminating yourself. And if your target is race hardened and fast thinking, as soon as he sees you moving in close he will hit the brakes – and you are off . . . the bitter bit.

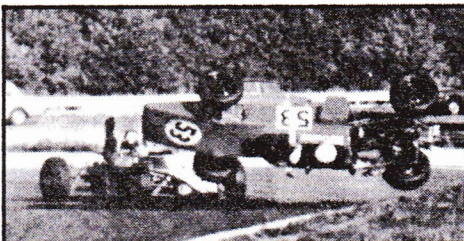
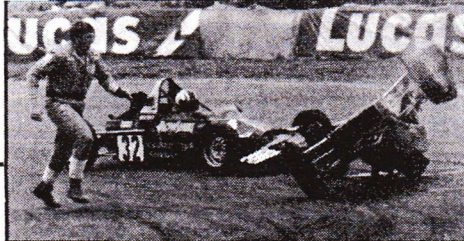
A simpler, less fraught and more practical method of excluding the next guy is to bang wheels with him, make sure that you connect directly rim-to-rim, then hit hard and sharp. Done properly, the victim's camber angles will be knocked askew and if it's a real grit-your-teeth effort, a suspension component could be bent as well.

That sort of uppercut is not only used to get the competition to slow up, but it is also a good elbows-out technique, whether you are on the outside moving in, or vice versa. In the latter case it's often used to push the sucker wide, allowing you to grab the inside line – now it's your corner. And that, is the name of the game.

Until you get a slide on in that curve. Tail-out will give you more room, and hurl a few anxious milliseconds towards the car behind. The problem area is that if a quick thinker is tailing you, a gentle tap from his nose or front wheel can accelerate the slide and send you spinning.

Whereas wheel banging is most effective on a wide track – pay attention to what goes on between Stowe and Club on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit – a well timed nudge is more effective in slowish bends (like Redgate at Donington) or on the entry to a chicane.

The one move that seems to have grown in popularity last season is the best example of on-track viciousness. Race cars don't have brake lights. Running bumper to bumper in the fast lane of the M1, you



expect the trilby hat in front to brake irrationally – you do not in a race car. In the road car you react to the flash of the red warning lamps; in the Formula Ford the only thing that reveals he has hit the middle pedal is the belated realisation that suddenly the car ahead is a lot closer to you – and the time is measured in split seconds. Escape is achieved by jinking left or right. There's no time to brake. Like most evasive action, it's a matter of hot-wired reflexes.

The mid-corner braker only has to dab the brakes to cause his pursuer to drop back, and that is all he is aiming to achieve. However, if he's being tailed by a bunch of cars, then the crowd must scatter – it can lead to numerous trips into the catch fencing. The get-out clause in this unspoken contract is that if the guilty party brakes too hard, then it is easy enough to slip past him, speedy reactions permitting.

Formula Ford racing is based around the premise of having similarly powered cars offering closely matched performance. As the power output is relatively low, so slipstreaming occurs. Weaving evolved – it is claimed – from drivers intent on breaking the tow of a machine behind, and hence managing to claw out a slight advantage. Coincidentally, it is also a significantly effective blocking action.

The manoeuvre works best on a narrower track, with a gentle side-to-side movement

across the tarmac. It's frustrating to those following and especially useful to a closely challenged race leader. Overcoming it is a matter of anticipation and a well timed offensive. It's not easy.

That's fine, you say, but surely somebody at the race is responsible for policing it? Of course, and generally they do an excellent job. It's a task that's both thankless and difficult, especially when the offender is a foreign driver. The hard worked Clerk of the Course often cannot tell just how much understanding of spoken English the latest continental hotshoe possesses, thus it's often conceivable that any verbal reprimand means little. Also, if the guy is so deliberate in his racing actions, then it is equally possible that he will play down his knowledge of the organiser's native tongue. Smart thinking helps you on the way to the top . . .

Just as you look over your shoulder occasionally when you walk where the streetlights fade, so paranoia can creep into your racing. Labels tend to stick in amateur motor racing – particularly if they are reported in the weekly racing press – and so you can be singled out for special attention from race organisers. Which is as it should be – if you are guilty. If you are in fact innocent (remembering that nobody is whiter-than-white in Formula Ford) and find yourself on the receiving end of an organising club's censorious letter, it's best to ride with it. That's tough, but organisers are extremely concerned with ensuring that the racing remains safe, as they have your best interests at heart. Nobody wants to see you leave in an ambulance and your car shovelled into a sack.

Getting beaten up serves no purpose. It's physically painful, infuriating and hurts your pride. As does being on the butt of the asinine driving that spasmodically percolates through to the surface during the Formula Ford year. The answer is the same in both cases. Keep your eyes peeled, aim for avoidance rather than confrontation.

End of survival briefing. ■

