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## Virtually Affordable Racing

If you're looking to avoid the high cost of Ferraris once driven by Hill & Gendebien, a vintage Formula Ford may be the answer.

By Peter Egan



Virtually Affordable Racing

John Lamm

When people are searching for the perfect oxymoron, they usually go with "military intelligence," though I prefer "affordable racing" myself. Having both raced and been in the Army, I've encountered a lot more genuinely bright intelligence officers than I have inexpensive race weekends. Racing always seems to cost more money than you expect, whether it's a go-kart or a Can-Am car. When you hit the track, stuff gets used up. It's a basic rule of physics.

Still, all things are relative, and it is possible to keep the costs down quite a bit in vintage racing if you pick a class where the cars were built in reasonable quantity, so the number plate on the chassis isn't worth more than the car itself. Or your house. When you buy a [Cobra](#), a Lotus 23B or an Aston DBR1, you are (let's face it) spending

about 90 percent of your money on historical charisma and rarity, and 10 percent on metal, glass and rubber.

We want to avoid that.

A very clean example of one of the most popular-and fast-vintage Fords, the Titan MK6, here driven by owner Steve Grundahl.

Or at least I did, when I went shopping last year—at the age of 63—for a fun but not ruinously expensive vintage racing car that could take me into my golden sunset retirement years without draining away every last bit of our savings. My finalists in this quest were either a Production class sports car of the MGB/TR4/Lotus Seven variety or a vintage **Formula Ford**. Having owned and raced both types of cars in the past, I decided to look for another Formula Ford.

Why?

Well, I like the rules, which were originally formulated in England in 1967 to keep costs down and the competition intense.

Lotus 51 was the earliest purpose-built Formula Ford, developed from the Lotus 31 F3 car, and still has that classic 1960s' cigar-shaped F1-car look.

The engine is a reasonably durable and nearly stock 1600-cc English Ford unit with five main bearings and a crossflow head with a single Weber downdraft carburetor. Blueprinted, ported and balanced, it normally puts out something between 112 and 118 bhp. If you race only three or four vintage events per season (which is all I have time to do), these engines should easily last two or three seasons without needing a rebuild. Or blowing up when you least want them to.

Tires are a big help as well. Here in the Midwest, most clubs require the use of treaded Dunlop vintage Formula Ford tires—which look nearly identical in tread design to the classic Dunlops Jim Clark might have used on his Lotus 25 in 1962. These are marvelous tires; they warm up to operating temperature almost immediately, seem unaffected by multiple heat cycles, are fun and predictable to drive on and yet wear like iron. A friend of mine won a race at **Road America** last year on a set of Dunlops that was three seasons old. They're a little slower than new racing slicks, but when everybody's on them, who cares? Your tire bill is approximately \$1000 every couple of years instead of every weekend.

Hawke DL2A was designed and built by David Lazenby, Jim Clark's Lotus mechanic at Indy, supposedly to improve on the Lotus 51 frame and get rid of its Renault gearbox.

The transmissions are Hewland 4-speeds, true racing boxes that are overbuilt for the

car's power output and nearly bulletproof. Gears and shift dogs are easily replaced, so you can tailor your gear selection to any track. Chassis design? Tube frame only, to keep repairs (relatively) simple, and front and rear suspensions use a double A-arm design with outboard tubular shock absorbers inside coil springs.

In short, Formula Fords are real race cars, with components designed to take the punishment a track deals out, so they're quite tough and don't require a lot of fabrication and re-engineering, as Production cars do. (Still, don't throw away those wrenches, files, drill bits and rivet guns...)

Lola T200 of Martin Bagby is nearly identical to Egan's first FF, a Lola T204. This Formula Ford is somewhat short of wheelbase, but beautifully crafted.

Beyond all this supposed logic, of course, I simply like Formula cars, having become fixated on photos of Moss, Ginther and Hill drifting through the streets of Monaco in 1961. It was my visual introduction to the world of F1 racing at the age of 13, and I was knocked out by the clean simplicity and spidery beauty of those cars. Vintage Formula Fords still hold that appeal—and also add their own particular glamour, as FF was the principal steppingstone class for virtually all young F1 and Indy drivers from the late '60s into the early '80s. If you couldn't run at the front in a Formula Ford race in 1975, your driving career wasn't going anywhere. It was the crucible.

Also, a well-balanced formula car is the closest thing I've found, automotively, to a good pair of skis. No street car I've ever driven, no matter how expensive or exotic, slithers through a corner with the same sense of control and speed as an ordinary, sub-\$25,000 used Formula Ford. The driving experience simply doesn't get a lot better. Okay, except with more horsepower, but you can't have everything. Unless you buy a Brabham BT29 Formula B car with a nice Twin-Cam and wider tires...

Egan claims to "love the smell of Hewland gear oil in the morning," and not mind working on the strong and simple chassis of the Crossle 32F.

Where was I? Ah yes, about to buy a vintage Formula Ford, having talked myself into it again last summer.

After scanning many websites and classifieds in the vintage racing magazines, I located a nice looking black 1978 Crossle 32F for sale in North Carolina. I'm partial to these cars, not only because I used to race one during the '80s, but because they're strong, good handling and easy to work on. So I bought a cheap used open trailer and towed it with my blue Ford van from Wisconsin to North Carolina.

### Crossle 32F

The car was recently restored and nicely detailed, with many new parts, but had a few

obvious problems. The clutch was rattling ominously on its splines, there was a slightly bent frame tube near the right front A-arm, bolts holding the starter motor had been stripped and the oil pressure was quite low (20 psi hot). Most people would have run away screaming and waving their arms as if attacked by wasps, but not me. I see every old car as a mere starting point for a massive shop project in which I not only atone for the sins of the world but create my own personal interpretation of glorious perfection. Or what passes for it, given my midgrade fabrication skills. Anyway, with all these defects in mind, the owner dropped his asking price from \$15,000 to \$12,500, and I towed the car home.

After some minor repair work, I managed to make it through two weekends of racing last fall—or I should say 1.9 weekends of racing, as the clutch let go at the end of my race at Watkins Glen. Time to retire to my workshop for a full winter rebuild—and straightening out of all the car's problems.

### Crossle 32F

And during last winter, of course, I managed to spend considerably more than the original purchase price on the Crossle's restoration. The Big Chunks consisted of a **total frame restoration** and straightening at Prince Racecar Engineering (\$7100, including powder coating and all-new aluminum panels and water pipes), an engine rebuild and dyno test at Elite Engines (\$7016.08, including a new block, clutch and oil pump), a new right rear stub axle and bearings (\$980), and a new Hewland input shaft and collar (\$970).

Of course, there were a lot of other smaller things—new CV joints, brake pads, braided brake lines, starter motor, seat, spare nose, water hoses... The UPS truck came up our driveway so many times last winter the dogs quit barking at it.

A Caldwell D9, similar to the car that Skip Barber drove to win the first FF championship at the SCCA Runoffs in 1969.

And then there's my own shop time, which I value at 10 cents an hour. That's another \$300 right there. In any case, I've spent just over \$30,000 on the whole project—which is more than the car is worth on the used race-car market, but it looks nice and gets around Road America 3 seconds a lap faster than it did last fall. Without breaking. So far.

So, should the reader who ventures into vintage Formula Ford racing expect to take such a ridiculous financial bath?

No, of course not. I just can't help overdoing everything, but with careful shopping any normal person should be able to find a pretty nice car in the \$20,000 to \$25,000 range

and expect to race it for quite a while without spending much money.

## Royale RP3A

My own Crossle 32F—because of its inboard rear brakes—is classified as a Vintage Club Ford, unlike most of the pre-1974 Vintage Formula Fords it races with. The Club Ford class has yet to really take off big time here in the Midwest as it has on both coasts, but it should eventually make the class even more affordable, just because there are so many great used '70s race cars out there.

What are the other likely choices?

Well, in our own region the hot car of choice is the Titan MK6. There were so many of these on the track last weekend at [Road America](#) I felt like a prairie dog caught in a buffalo stampede. Titans were very successful in the early '70s and are still well-liked because they're rugged, good-handling and have excellent aerodynamics. On a long track like Road America, I'd say they can generate a little more top speed than my supposedly more modern shovel-nosed Crossle, horsepower being equal. I almost bought a Titan MK6 last summer, but felt the eternal pull of Crossle loyalty.

## Dulon LD9

Another excellent design is the beautiful Merlyn Mk-11 from the late '60s, a classic cigar-shaped car that was very successful in the hands of some young drivers named Emerson Fittipaldi, Tim Schenken, James Hunt and Jody Scheckter. You see a fair number of American-built Caldwell D9s, too, a similarly excellent car that made its mark when Skip Barber won the first American FF championship at the SCCA Runoffs in 1969.

Among the earliest—and best looking—of Formula Fords are the nearly identical Lotus 31 and 51, which look so much like mid-'60s Lotus F1 cars that several were disguised with fake exhaust pipes and air intakes for the movie Grand Prix. I raced one of these cars as a guest driver, and they have wonderfully supple suspension but are a tight fit for a tall person. The later wedge-shaped Lotus 61s and 69s are also good cars, and a bit faster than the 51.

Egan checks his 1978 Crossle 32F's mirror and wonders if he should have kept his original Lola.

One of the most revered names in Formula Ford is Lola, whose cars always looked great and had a high level of craftsmanship. My own first FF was a Lola T204, bought slightly used in 1975. This short-wheelbase car had a reputation for having more oversteer than was needed, but was so much easier to drive than my twitchy Bugeye Sprite, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Maybe I had.

There are many, many more makes and models of vintage Formula Fords lurking out there—Dulon, Hawke, Alexis, Van Diemen, Tiga, Royale, Reynard, Elden, Citation, etc., to choose from. For a really good rundown on the history of Formula Ford racing and the histories of specific marques, Steve Nickless' book, [The Anatomy and Development of the Formula Ford Race Car](#) is an invaluable source of information.

### Egan's 1978 Crossle 32F

Now that the '70s Club Fords, like mine, are allowed into vintage racing, I hope we see a lot more of them being restored and showing up at the track. There are, by actual count, one zillion of these cars hidden away somewhere, and they just need to be pulled out of the shadows and into the sunlight. I twice started SCCA Nationals in fields of 72 cars in the '70s and early '80s, and not all these cars have been wrecked or destroyed. Many of them, yes, but not all.

I wrote years ago that I thought Formula Ford racing in its heyday was possibly the best racing there ever was. I would say—dollar for dollar—that remains true. Even if you go crazy, as some of us tend to do, and accidentally overrestore your car at an exorbitant shop rate of 10 cents per hour.

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