

The inside track

Go-karting is swiftly putting the pedal to the metal in India. With some institutional support, it could well produce a new generation of Formula-series champions

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Listen to Abha Mankar talk about her love for motorsports, and it's hard to imagine that her car did a mid-air somersault during one race. During another, a ballast plate flew off a vehicle in front of her, ripped through her car, shattering the visor on her helmet, and leaving her with a broken nose.

The 25-year-old, who works as a performance instructor with Jaguar — which entails introducing people to the British luxury car's full potential — remembers being momentarily stunned when the accident took place. "You have to be fearless, if you want to be in this line," she says, while mentioning how she got back on the track for the very next race.

At 17, Mankar ranked among the top 10 in Force India's nationwide talent hunt. She had already been racing for five years by then, having started with go-karting at an early age. "My father is a bigtime Formula One fan. I'm told, the day I was born, he expressed the desire that he wants me to get into motorsports,"



Abha Mankar trained under Rayomand Banajee

she says. "In 2007, I came second in my very first race — the MRF karting national championship. Karting is still where my heart is. I only shifted to cars because that's where sponsorships are available."

This is hardly surprising.

While go-karting is widely considered as a fun, recreational activity, put the pedal to the metal, and some of the more developed karts can reach speeds exceeding 260 kmph —

delivering the same sort of rush that Formula One drivers experience.

In fact, many see the sport as a launch pad to Formula racing (an umbrella term for any form of open-wheeled, single-seater road racing, the best-known being F1, F2 and F3).

The starting line

It's no coincidence that British F1 champ, Lewis Hamilton,

who's widely regarded as one of the best drivers in the history of the sport, started off with karting at the age of eight. Or, that the motorsport careers of Michael Schumacher, his younger brother Ralf, and four-time F1 champion Sebastian Vettel, all began at a go-karting track — the same one, incidentally — near Cologne, Germany.

And though, there were no kart circuits here when he was rising in the ranks, Narain Karthikeyan, who put India on the F1 map, believes the sport is the key to finding a new generation of international racing champions. Speaking at the Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India Awards in Mumbai in February this year, Karthikeyan said: "The focus needs to be on affordable karting. That's what will push more drivers up the ladder."

The interest in karting — and in motorsports, in general — is seeing a surge, observes Nayan Chatterjee, 22, who has bagged 25 national trophies for karting. Three years ago, Chatterjee finished second in the

Indian National Rotax Max Karting Championship, and he also has a

number of car racing awards under his belt.

Increased traffic

"I was around eight when I became interested in Formula racing," says Chatterjee. "At the time, all people knew was that the red car is Michael Schumacher's. Now, there's a lot more awareness. I am frequently approached by people who want to know how to get started." India's first F3 champion, Chennai-based Akbar Ebrahim adds, "When we launched the karting academy, in 2003, we'd see about 10 drivers signing up per year. Today, we enrol 150 each year."

The 55-year old racer runs Meco Motorsport, to groom fresh talent. Under that label, Ebrahim — who serves on the FMSCI council, and is India's deputy representative, at the Federation Internationale de L'Automobile (FIA) — operates recreational karting circuits and training academies for racing and karting.

The karting scene in India is only just beginning to pick up pace, he notes. To reach the tipping point, Chatterjee adds, the sport needs some serious institutional support and infrastructural development. When Mankar decided to start karting, at the age of 12, for instance, she had to make regular trips to Mumbai to train, as there were no tracks in Pune back then.

Changing lanes

Mankar trained under Rayomand Banajee, the founder of Rayo Racing, a team that's won four international

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