

As if the scorching sun on a humid day was not harsh enough, B. Vijaykumar's outing on the Madras Motor Racing Track went from bad to worse when he blew his engine during a free practice session. The spectacular burst, however, proved to be a bigger disappointment for the 66-year-old's track rivals.

"They all felt genuinely sorry for me. They were eager to see what new tricks I had up my sleeve," said Vijaykumar, the Coimbatore-based businessman who builds his own racing components.

The Saloon car category in the MRF-MMSC National Racing championship which has a heady mix of youth and experience is ultra-competitive, but the respect that participants show for fellow competitors is admirable.

#### Coimbatore quartet

The Coimbatore quartet of Vijaykumar, D. Vidyaprakash (72-year-old), C. Rajaram and Arjun Balu are no spring chickens, but their child-like enthusiasm for speed has made the grid the most competitive. Private teams pour in money to develop their cars, and spare no effort to go the extra mile for the top step of the podium.

For Vijaykumar, who has been racing since the glorious Sholavaram days, Saloon class gets his creative juice flowing. "The most refreshing aspect is that you can come up with new ideas and solutions. Driving the same old car would be boring. I would say 90 per cent of my car is remanufactured at our own facility in Coimbatore. I make the entire suspension; springs and ratings are totally different from the original road car. I completely strip the engine down and rebuild it," he said.

Back in the heyday, Fiats were the preferred Saloon car before the Esteems took over in the early years of the millennium. "We used to pay around ₹25,000 for a Fiat and an extra ₹75,000 for working on the car. The Esteem I am driving now was purchased second-hand five years ago. I paid about ₹3.5 lakh for that. It took ₹18 to ₹20 lakh more to make it a race vehicle," added Vijaykumar who is all set to unveil his 'game-changing' Swift next season.

Fiats, Ambassadors, Heralds and Maruti 800s scorched the airstrip at Sholavaram in the 80s. When the legendary S. Karivardhan, considered the father of Indian motorsport, shifted focus to mass-producing single-seaters, the interest in the Saloon category began to wane. Soon it was reduced to a 'hobby class'.

#### The revival

Arjun Balu, a protege of Karivardhan who has done circuit racing as well as rallying, said the Saloons roared back to life in 2008 when the federation introduced new regulations, allowing certain modifications in the car. "Esteem cars filled the grid and the races turned out to be entertaining with a lot of private teams joining the fray. There's been no looking back since. Now, we have a factory team competing with privateers. The horsepower of the car is more than double of what it was and the lap records have been shattered. Tyre technology has grown leaps and bounds. It has become a colourful category now," said Arjun.

Piloting a Honda City prepared by Bengaluru-based Race Concepts, Arjun is currently leading the championship, keeping the factory-run Volkswagen

Ventos, Vijayakumar's Prime Racing and N. Leelakrishnan's Arka Motorsport at bay.

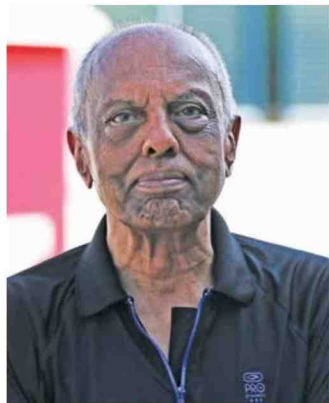
# THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

■ Veterans of Saloon car racing have child-like enthusiasm for speed

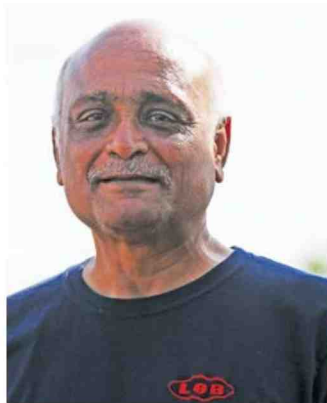


Coimbatore's Arjun Balu steers his Race Concepts-prepared Honda during a Saloon class race at MMRT.

Photos: Anand Philar



D. Vidyaprakash



B. Vijaykumar



**We love the fact that Race Concepts, a private team, are giving us a run for our money. It's a motivation for us to do well and improve our machines. We relish these challenges and it doesn't matter where they come from — SIRISH VISSA, HEAD OF VOLKSWAGEN INDIA MOTORSPORT**



Arjun Balu



C. Rajaram

Apart from the Vento, Arjun's Honda is the only turbocharged car on the grid.

Volkswagen's entry into the Saloon class ushered in a new era as it marked the first manufacturer entry. "The big step in Saloon car racing came when FMSCI and Racing Commission decided to allow turbocharged cars. They framed a new set of regulations allowing the modern chassis. That's probably the most positive change in the last few years. I hope the other manufacturers too join us on the grid soon and have fun," said Sirish Vissa, head of Volkswagen Motorsport India.

#### Healthy rivalry

The racing ecosystem changed for good when Volkswagen fielded a strong team of youngsters against the veterans representing private teams. Sirish has no qualms in accepting that a private team have beaten them. "We love the fact that Race Concepts are giv-

ing us a run for our money. It's a motivation for us to do well and improve our machines. We relish these challenges and it doesn't matter where they come from," said Sirish.

As manufacturers team, Volkswagen have their own share of advantages and disadvantages. While there are a lot of expectations from them, lack of time and manpower haven't helped their cause.

Vissa said Volkswagen are learning from fellow competitors. "You are never working in an isolation chamber. If you do that, you go nowhere. As we strive and improve, the others on the grid are also progressing and that makes it a tough competition," added Sirish.

#### Research and development

The Saloon car racing is not just about competition. It provides a great platform for brand building and research and development (R&D).

Race Concepts owned by

on their track performance over the years which goes to prove their expertise and engineering skill," said Arjun.

According to Sirish, Volkswagen's Motorsport division is an extension of the German giant's technical and marketing centres.

"VW motorsport plays a dual role; building the brand and developing hardcore engineering. There's a lot of knowledge transfer between my department and design and engineering of the road cars," Sirish said.

To bring in younger drivers to the Saloon grid, Vijaykumar has given free drives to Vishnu Prasad and Raghul Ranagasamy. "As I have already invested my capital cost on cars a few years ago, I don't spend more than ₹25 lakh on my five cars per season," said Vijaykumar.

#### Catch them young

Arjun said the influx of younger drivers is a good sign

and the credit should also go to Volkswagen. "Not many youngsters would want to spend around ₹30 lakh a year and drive a full season of Saloon class. VW have set up an impressive feeder series with Ameo Cup, which is one-make. The grid is filled with youngsters. Hopefully, they should graduate to Saloon in the future," said Arjun.

The young Volkswagen trio of Karthik Tharani, Ishaan Dodhiwala and Dhruv Mohite is all paid for and have contracts for racing in the premier class. "However, we spend even less than private teams because we cost-optimize a lot of things," said Sirish.

Sirish said the class can attract more youngsters if they start converting the current road cars into race vehicles. "They don't want to drive the heritage cars! Unless we take that new step, we will continue to struggle with getting new faces," he added.