

Formula First (Vee)

New Zealand Motorsport

Bill Bonow

How Did This Happen: I work as a market manager for the E.H. Wachs Company. Some readers will have recognized, that I work for “Fast Eddie” Wachs, a man who is no stranger in the motorsports community. I had market research business in NZ that would keep me in country for 3 weeks, so why not see a formula vee race while I’m there. I contacted Dennis Martin of Sabre Motorsport thru his web site. His site was listed as Formula First, but I recognized, from photos on the website, that familiar 5 bolt pattern of formula vee wheels. I asked about the possibility of spectating at the February 3, 4 race weekend at Manfeild. Dennis replied back that he had a spare car and asked me if I would drive it as his guest. Needless to say that it didn’t take a lot of arm bending to get me to say yes. There were some minor membership and license details to deal with, but we had plenty of time. The people of Motorsport New Zealand (Kiwi version of SCCA) and Dennis Martin were very helpful and pleasant, so everything was in order when I got on the plane bound for New Zealand. It was 20-hours of flying from Chicago to Auckland and after my first week of business, I was ready to head to the track.

The Class Name: We will always know this class as Formula Vee. Simply put, that just the way it is. The Kiwi’s are a clever group. They thought of the need for young blood and the need to survive. At one point in time, the class was thinning to a point that the Formula Vee Association of New Zealand was worried about loosing National class status. In New Zealand, if you’re not a National class, you’re on your way out. Motorsport New Zealand had recently changed the minimum age of a National license holder to 12. The Formula Vee Association of New Zealand made a bold move to market the class better to the up and coming drivers of the future. They changed the class name to Formula First. It seems like a small move, but it removed

the stigma of a “Beetle” based racecar. It also attracted a lot of young successful Go-Karters looking to advance their way up the racing “ladder”. One of interest is Scott Dixon, the new Pac-West Cart driver, he is a prodigy of New Zealand Formula First. He was the National Champion in 1994 at the age of 13. This set the goal for all young Kiwi drivers. To make your mark in road racing, start your career in Formula First. One small note, Formula First is now, by far, the most popular class in New Zealand.

The Rules: Contrary to my belief, the “Aussie’s” and the “Kiwi’s” share very little, if anything, regarding rules. My findings are based purely on Motorsports New Zealand / Formula Vee Association of New Zealand rules for Formula First. I sat down with Dennis Martin one night as he read the SCCA rules, and I read the MNZ rules. Amazingly, some sentences were exactly the same. So, rather than drag on in detail, I list what the Kiwi’s do differently.

- 1) Intake manifolds are free, with the limitation of using a maximum of 2 (two) Solex 28 PCI’s or 2 (two) 30mm Brazilian Webers. The latter set-up being the most popular.**
- 2) Fans must be used, generators can be gutted, fan housings may be modified (no silhouette rule). Power pulleys acceptable.**
- 3) Front beams can be cut and bent (up to 1”) for camber. Shock and suspension horns may be removed / modified.**
- 4) Two radius rods (upper and lower) per side may be used for rear suspension.**
- 5) AND THIS ONE IS MOST IMPORTANT: Wheels and tires. The Kiwi’s decided a long time ago to remove the stigma of being “VW” based. Especially when “VW” would like to see Formula Vee (as we know it) disappear. This disappearing wish seems to be true worldwide. As a group, they went out and had a large quantity of 13” x 6” aluminum wheels cast and machined for 4-wheel universal fit. At the moment, they are using Bridgestone 175/70 x 13 fronts and 185/70 x 13 rears. A set of 4 tires cost approximately \$140 in US**

dollars. They last up to 2 (two) years. They do not shave them as no performance advantage can be gained by doing so. If it rains, then new tires can help. So most competitors will have two sets, one to race on, and new tires for rain. Eventually, your rains become your race tires.

After racing on these tires, I LOVED THEM.

Everything else is the same as we run in the US (Weight, measurements, everything). I was very surprised that the rules were that close, with little to no communication between us over such a long period of time.

The People: I arrived at Dennis Martin's on Thursday the 1st to get fitted to my drive for the weekend meeting. I found Dennis in back of the house in almost the typical American Formula Vee workshop working on the four (4) cars that he runs out of Sabre Motorsport. They are as follows: 1) Challenge, 1) Comet, 1) Sabre (the first of many that Dennis will build) and my car, 1) Kestral. Dennis is a New Zealand Formula First Icon. Multiple National championships, has over 200 podium finishes, winner of many special awards for participation in New Zealand Motorsports, a licensed instructor and a great promoter of Formula First. That night, he fitted me into the Kestral and then we talked about "the good, the bad and the ugly" in Formula Vee, in New Zealand and America. The next day, we headed to Manfeild for testing (only \$20 US) where I got to meet most of the "Vee People". Other than the New Zealand accent, they are just like us at any race weekend. They all talk together after a session, or help out a competitor in trouble. They all want the class to be a continued success and realize that working together as a group is key. Plus it makes for a lot of fun. After the second session on Friday, a rod bearing started to spin. The Kestral was using the only spare motor that Dennis had available. But just like typical US Vee people, Dom Kalasih, a past Formula First National Champion, came over and gave us his spare engine to use for the weekend. You just can't find people of

this type in any other class. On Saturday night, the Formula Vee Association of New Zealand had its annual end of the season cook-out and presentation. Great people, conversation and food. This year's National champion, Michael Shepherd, was presented his award after dominating the season point standings. I've said it before and I'll say it again, Vee people are unique and you will have a tough time finding people of this caliber in any other class or type of racing.

The Racing: We have what is called sprint races here in the US. A typical race meeting in New Zealand goes like this:

1) 20 minute qualifying session

3) 8 lap National Championship points races

Testing is usually available the day before a race meeting.

Costs of about \$20 US for testing and \$70 US for entry fee are typical.

OK, we tested Friday and got familiar with the Manfeild track; we qualified (18th out of 25) and are ready to go racing. Oh, did I forget to mention that Formula First is a standing start class. That's right kiddies.... Standing Starts.

Dennis gave me some brief instructions for standing starts.

They are as follows:

1) When finishing warm up lap, stop short of box to make sure you're in first gear.

2) When the red light goes on, hold the revs at 4000.

3) Watch for the red light to go out, not the green light to go on.

4) Revs will come up fast in first, just count to two and shift into second.

I got to perform the "standing start" 3 times and I must say that if we could do it in the US, it would make us a very interesting class. It is an absolute blast! Onto the results.

In the 3 races, I qualified 18th, 16th and 17th. The second and third qualifying position are determined by your fastest race lap. I finished 13th, 12th and 14th. The toughest part to swallow about my finishing position, is that in the third race, the winner, Stephen Matthews, is 12 years old. The second place

finisher is 13 year old Christina Orr. It puts you in your place when you get beat by somebody that's not even old enough to drive home from the event.

Problems: The Formula First people are having the same problems that we are facing. Mostly parts availability. They have seen rear drums crack and break, but because of the tires that they use, they typically break after a shunt (not from high loads). They also have had spindles break, but for the same reasons. They are looking into a 4 wheel disk brake conversion. One of the cars running has this conversion as a test program. He runs with the group, but not for points. It seems that the Kiwis are again much like us, they are very nervous about changing a class that has been so good and had so much success. Most of them have come to the reality that they will have to make a change at some point in the future. I can see one thing that is in their favor, they will all work together making changes that will keep the ideals of the class alive.

Conclusion: Formula Vee is still the greatest road racing class in the world. The people are the best and the most dedicated to the sport in which they participate. If you or anyone you know ever gets the opportunity to drive our class in another country, do so, you will never regret the fun you will have or the great people you will meet.

Special Thanks: My little adventure would have never happened if it hadn't been for the kindness of one Kiwi Vee racer, Dennis Martin. He broadened my thoughts about the type of people we race with. Thanks Dennis.

Visit his website

www.sabremotorsport.co.nz

Hope my report can be helpful to our continuing cause.

Best Regards,

Bill Bonow