



LIFE IN THE FASTLANE

Can our self-declared cautious driver get bitten by the speed bug? We sent him for a day racing Formula Fords to find out

words Norman Burns « images Ross Swanborough

I am not a rev-head. I'd snapped up the chance to head to Fastlane Racing for *Scoop* but the truth is I consider myself a very, very cautious driver. Not nervous but very wary, probably the legacy of a head-on smash 20 years ago. Now, on an icy, icy morning at the Barbagallo Raceway, I am kitted up in a racing suit, gloves and crash helmet and listening to school owner and chief instructor Brett Lupton as he runs through the day's schedule.

Brett, a compact, no-nonsense fellow with a lifetime's experience in motor racing, set up the school in 1994. Past students include champion V8 Supercar driver Garth Tander and Perth's Red Bull wunderkind Daniel Ricciardo. Today there are

10 pupils (myself included), all men, from a wide variety of backgrounds and ages. At least nine of them have a burning desire to see if they've got what it takes. They've paid just over \$700 for 40 laps, split into four chunks, to find out.

Any visions of fighter-jet-like cockpits fitted with fancy electronics go right out the window as Brett walks us through the Formula Ford. It's an 'everyman's' racing car – sturdy, basic (four manual gears) but still capable of hitting 200kmh-plus down the straight.

By now, rain's threatening and my nerves are beginning to fray. "We don't run in the wet," says Brett, triggering a groan the other nine in the class.

"I've heard you're really looking forward to this," says Brett's wife Teresa, who handles

the marketing side of the business and has herself raced competitively.

"Err, not really," I blurt out, sending up a silent plea to all weather gods to let the heavens open. But the gods don't respond and the smudges of rain cloud melt away.

By now Brett is in full-throttle prep mode. He isn't afraid to call a spade a f***ing shovel and emphasises that the day is as much about learning proper driving technique as going flat out.

"You've got to drive within yourself. The only person you're here to impress is yourself," he says.

That's not quite the vibe I'm getting from my nine eager co-drivers.

Of the nine, four are from the Reid family (Phil, 50, and his sons Casey, James and Matt) and



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ROAR FUN Powering down the straight to the chequered flag (above); (left) Scoop's man-at-the-track Norman Burns (far right) chats with 'rival' drivers.



their competitive spirit is evident well before even one of the Formula Fords is fired up. Another attendee, California-born Gene Stacey, has flown in especially from the Gold Coast. The 51-year-old is toying with the idea of getting into Formula Ford racing himself and wants to check out the cars.

Of the others, Waroona farmer Kristian Goodchild looks the most laidback but still exudes an air of speed even sitting down – must be the red racing suit he's picked out.

All participants sign a waiver before starting which outlines the inherent risks of racing – this is, after all, not a flower arranging course.

Brett gets everyone's attention with just one sentence: "You are insured; the cars are not." In

other words, bang up the car and you'll be up for a very big bill, buster.

Once kitted up, Brett and his Fastlane crew go through a dry run with each driver. Just getting into the car is tricky (there's a height and weight limit for drivers); I'm no giant but once cocooned in the Ford (you are virtually lying down) it is initially quite claustrophobic. The clutch, brake and accelerator – throttle, in racing parlance – are all in the normal place but the gear lever is a little silver switch to the driver's right.

So far, so good... but then Brett introduces a curve ball – 'blipping'. Blipping is the art of revving the throttle as you change gears, ensuring the revs match the road speed. Or something.

I regret to say blipping and I never meet.

The other eye-opener, to me at least, is the role of braking in 'going fast'. According to Brett, braking correctly – and holding the right racing line – is the real crux of racing.

Time to hit the road. It should all be pretty foolproof – all around the 1.7km track are signs saying when to brake and where to change gear. Brett will lead us out on a 10-lap 'sighter' to get the racing line and some confidence.

Things come unstuck on corner one, where my gear-changing skills evaporate. I completely stuff up the co-ordination needed to depress the clutch while running through the gear changes and the unholy graunching continues for another nine laps. I'm amazed the gearbox doesn't fall on to the track.

I vow to get better. Next we'll do another 10 practice laps before 10 laps of timed 'qualifying' for the finale. The first four drivers to head out

clock times under a minute. Now my turn. My lap times are so slow Teresa suggests, not entirely tongue-in-cheek, that perhaps the pit crew use a calendar rather than a stopwatch to record them.

Maybe things will improve after lunch. As we eat, chatter centres on the intricacies of the morning's driving. My focus is on whether to have another sausage.

After lunch it's the 'real deal'. Runs will be timed but drivers won't know until prize-giving how they've gone. This is my final chance. Using all powers of concentration (but not of blipping) I head off. A battle develops in my mind between Mr Throttle and Mr Timid. With each lap I'm going faster and gear changes are becoming more fluid. I get more bullish on the corners and S bend.

"Go, fool," urges Mr Throttle. "Don't be stupid," pleads Mr Timid. By the time I reach the chequered flag it's a stalemate, but I know I've done better. What's more I've stayed on the track. ("Spin off and you're out of the race," warned Brett.) In fact, I've carved more than a minute off my initial time.

To put this in perspective, in a sport where hundreds or even thousandths of a second can make a difference, if Mark Webber cut a lap by a full minute he'd be driving at something approaching light speed.

Finally it's trophy time. I come in eighth, courtesy of two drivers who spun out. Fastlane's crewman Bruce Gordon also declares me the day's most improved driver – by a straight.

But most improved does not win the biscuits. Waroona farmer Kristian, with an average lap speed of 55.97sec, takes the trophy (I *knew* it was the red suit). I'm not sure who takes bragging rights in the Reid family and from the satisfied look on Gene Stacey's face I think he'll be investing in Formula Ford racing soon...

In the end I had a really, really great day. I was still crap as a race driver but I did improve. And that's what gives Fastlane a big edge over 'hot laps' in V8s and the like, for while they are undeniably an adrenalin rush, on 'hot laps' someone *else* is in control. At Fastlane, you're the one making the moves – however slowly – and the sense of personal achievement is, at the end of the day, immense. 

For 2010 dates and prices of the driving school, check out fastlaneracing.com.au or phone 1300 666 350. Once you've attended the school, private lessons in the Formula Fords can be arranged.



SPEED DEMON Getting to grips with the Formula Ford, which can reach 200kmh.

“With each lap I’m going faster and gear changes become more fluid. I get more bullish on the corners”