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INSIDE

Want to learn the art of car control and experience racing firsthand without breaking the bank? Try indoor karting.

TRACK

If you took a poll of the world's top 50 professional race-car drivers, chances are that most of them got started in karts. Karting is the first rung on the ladder to professional motorsports today. With the increasing popularity of karting on these shores, particularly indoor karting, the sport is becoming more accessible than ever.

Indoor karting facilities are springing up in ever-increasing numbers around the U.S., and typically consist of one or two indoor road-course tracks that, like real racetracks, vary in their complexity and layout. To get the firsthand experience, we visited F1 Boston in Massachusetts, which is considered by many to be the benchmark indoor facility in North America. The creation of pro racer R.J. Valentine, F1 Boston is a long way from the local dirt oval, with two indoor tracks that are supported by a restaurant, game rooms and meeting rooms for corporate customers.

In what is typical of many of the indoor karting facilities around the country, F1 Boston has different options available, depending on whether you want to just experience it once, or get involved in competition on a consistent basis. For \$35, anyone over the age of 18 can walk in off the street and compete in a 10-15 lap race—all

that's required is a valid driver's license. For those that want to do it more seriously, F1 Boston offers competitive adult leagues, as well as racing schools for younger drivers.

We paid \$200 to compete in a four-hour competitive enduro with an entry list of eight teams and three or four drivers per kart. F1 Boston provides a helmet, neck brace and racing suit, and drivers must go through an orientation session on kart operation and track rules.

Like many karting facilities around the U.S., F1 Boston uses a RIMO chassis with a Honda engine that puts out 6.5 horsepower, has only one gear and can achieve speeds of up to 40 mph. Karts have no suspension besides the air in the tires and the flex of the chassis. The seat is around 1.5 inches off the ground, which keeps the center of gravity low and cornering forces high. There is no seat belt or racing harness; the driver is held in place by a tight, deep bucket seat and straddles the steering column, operating the brake pedal with the left foot and the throttle with the right.

Once you're wedged into the seat, it takes some time to get comfortable going fast in a kart. For one thing, you're using your left foot to brake, so you have to get used to modulating the brake pedal cor-

rectly. It's best to wear thin-soled, flexible sneakers or a good pair of driving shoes if you have them. With no power steering, karting is also a workout for your arms if you spend more than 15-20 minutes driving. We saw more than one driver leaving the enduro with blistered palms from wrestling with the steering wheel, so you may want to wear a good pair of racing gloves.

The cliché "handles like a kart" is something we've all heard before and after driving one, you'll know why. Steering response is immediate; a kart can change direction much more quickly than a road car. Smooth steering inputs are essential.

Of course, that direct connection with the track is also what makes karting such a great learning experience. "I attribute a lot of my talent today from karting," says professional sports-car racer Terry Borcheller. "The relationship of your butt to the track is immediate, so it doesn't get any better for developing that seat-of-the-pants feel."

The enduro we entered had a field of drivers that had all done this before to some degree. Some guys were there simply to have a good time, while others were league regulars and were serious about winning. Just like in real racing, there





Clockwise from top left: Single-speed RIMO kart is powered by a 6.5-hp Honda engine; full bumper skirt prevents dangerous wheel-to-wheel contact; pit lane; something for would-be racers to aspire towards.

was a qualifying session to determine starting order, and each driver was required to spend a minimum amount of time in the car to avoid disqualification. Safety is taken very seriously, so like red racing, there are penalties for rough driving, which could be a stop-and-go or an extended stay in the pits, depending on the offense.

Longer races provide a great opportunity to work on racecraft. You have to think about how to deal with traffic on all sides, as well as anticipating where you can set up others for a clean pass. "Indoor karting really helps you learn how to go fast," says top driving coach and professional racer Ross Bentley. "It gets you into the mindset of constantly looking for ways to improve and get faster, which for me is the number-one benefit. You really learn to look and think ahead; it makes you really think while you're driving."

The other key Benefit to karting is that it's one of the few venues where you can

consistently drive on the limit, or even exceed the limit; you learn how it feels and how to react. Like the best pro road racers, the best karters don't slide much, but you're sliding a lot more in a kart than you ever would in a car on a track day, without the fear of going off and possibly doing significant damage to your car or yourself.

There are many options for those that want to move on to more serious machinery. In addition to the indoor race, we spent an hour at F1 Outdoors, which is F1 Boston's outdoor facility, driving a Rotax RM-1, which has 32 horsepower, a 2-speed sequential gearbox and can reach speeds close to 100 mph. Getting fast in the Rotax takes some practice, but it's certainly something to aspire to if you get hooked on indoor karting and want to go faster.

Pro driver Boris Said is involved with the new K1Speed karting facility in California and offers a good summary on karting's benefits: "Karting gives you a great opportunity to learn to drive on the limit and it's also great training for racing, as you also learn hand-eye coordination and timing. It's also a lot of fun!" ●

Online Resources

INDOOR KARTING FACILITIES

www.andrettiindoor karting.com
Andretti Indoor Karting (Roswell, GA)
www.worldkarts.com
Houston Indoor Karting (Houston, TX)
www.f1boston.com
F1 Boston (Braintree, MA)
www.f1indoor karting.com
F1 Indoor Karting (Bettendorf, IA)
www.prokartindoor.com
Pro Kart Indoor Racing (Bursville, MN)
www.k1speed.com
K1 Speed (Carlsbad & Irvine, CA)
www.fastimesindoor karting.com
Fastimes Indoor Karting (Indianapolis, IN)
www.maineindoor karting.com
Maine Indoor Karting (Scarborough, ME)
kart2kart.com
Kart 2 Kart (Sterling Heights, MI)
www.chicagoindoor racing.com
Chicago Indoor Racing (Buffalo Grove, IL)
www.gokarttracer.com
GoKart Racer (Burlingame, CA)

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www.nkn.com
National Kart News
www.worldkarting.com
World Karting Association
www.ekartingnews.com
EKarting News