

When Winners are Losers

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In the last of my 'winning at all costs...is not winning at all' articles, I offer my thoughts on driving standards and why winners are sometimes just losers.

The problems of aggressive and contact driving are now so engrained into the culture of kart racing, that it is simply asking far too much of race officials to eradicate the problem on their own, just by stricter interpretation of the regulations and applying stiffer penalties. This is now a deeply embedded issue that requires everybody, drivers, officials and teams to make a step change in their attitude to driving standards.

More than in other forms of motorsport, the close proximity of karts in nose-to-tail racing means that good standards of driving and race craft in karting are fundamentally vital, not only from a safety perspective, but also in terms of reducing costs and making sure that all competitors have an enjoyable racing experience.



For me, (and 'racing incidents' aside), poor driving standards fall into three distinct categories:

1. Unintentional and isolated 'poor or misjudged' manoeuvres resulting in avoidable contact, perhaps attributable to inexperience, driving outside one's abilities or just a bad split second decision by an otherwise competent driver in a particular race situation.
2. Frequent 'repeat offenders' who indulge in overly aggressive driving; causing contact and invariably incidents at multiple events.
3. Blatant 'cheating' by attempting to take another driver out of the race or gain an unfair advantage by deliberate contact, blocking or other manoeuvres, or worse still by prearranging for a team mate or other co-conspirator do the dirty work for them.

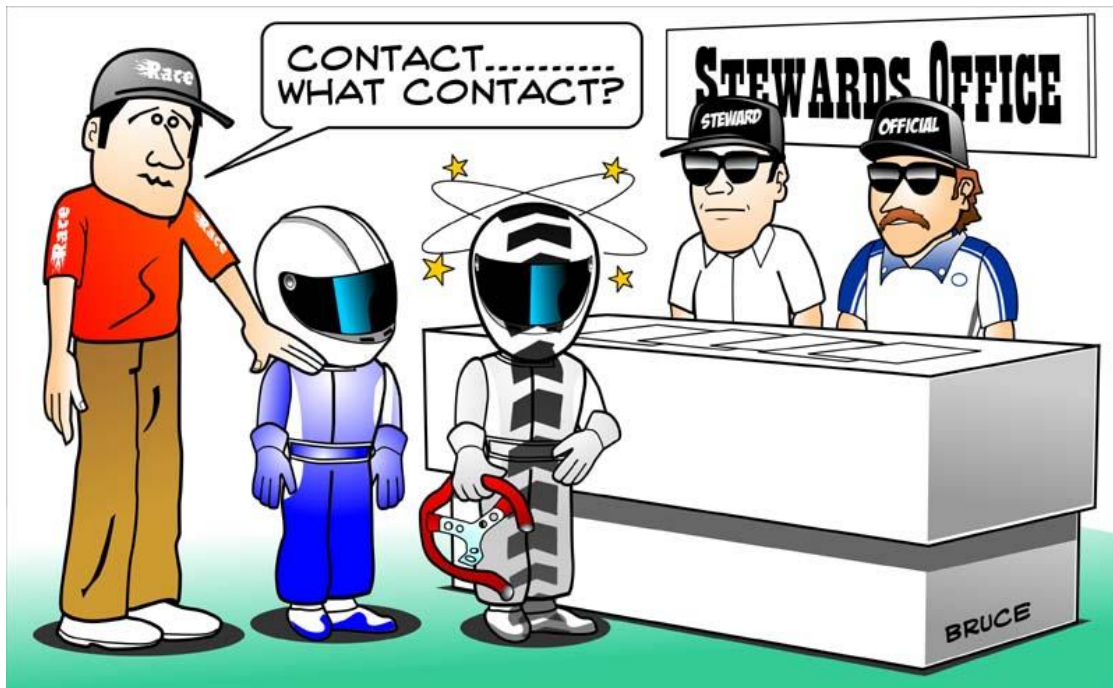
In considering these failings, it must be understood that it is usually difficult for an official to determine 'intent' and therefore each of these infringements may attract a penalty; however, it is the increase in the blatant cheating aspect of driving standards that is causing concern amongst the governing bodies. I personally witnessed several 'malice aforethought' scenarios in the RMC last season, even in the junior classes.



But before delving further into the problem, let us remind ourselves that motorsport is inherently dangerous, and the risks of karting must never be overlooked. In fact, if you ever get the opportunity to participate in the 'world's greatest driving event™' at 'Palmersport' in the UK, (highly recommended ☺) you will hear the Chief Instructor go out of his way to point out the dangers of karting.

He warns everybody that it will not be the BMW M3, Jaguar LMP 2, Ariel Atom, Caterham or even the 150mph single seater, V6 Formula Jaguar on the car circuit that poses the biggest risk of accident and injury, but the karts on their kart track.

Careless and reckless driving just puts others safety at unnecessary risk in karting.



Many believe that driving standards in karting, even in top international events have been deteriorating over the last few years. Perhaps it can be argued that full plastic rear bumpers and side pods have contributed to this decrease in driving standards. The CIK have openly described kart racing as looking more like 'NASCAR stock car' racing at some events. It's not often that a regulator will openly admit to the shortcomings of their own sport like that, but it does at least mean the CIK have acknowledged there is a problem, albeit without any supporting data.

In recent years the MSA in the UK have instructed their officials to clamp down on 'advantage by contact' offenders and have adopted a stringent fixed penalty scheme for infringements. Now the latest move by the CIK, sees the introduction of anti-contact, 'droppable' front bumpers in 2015.

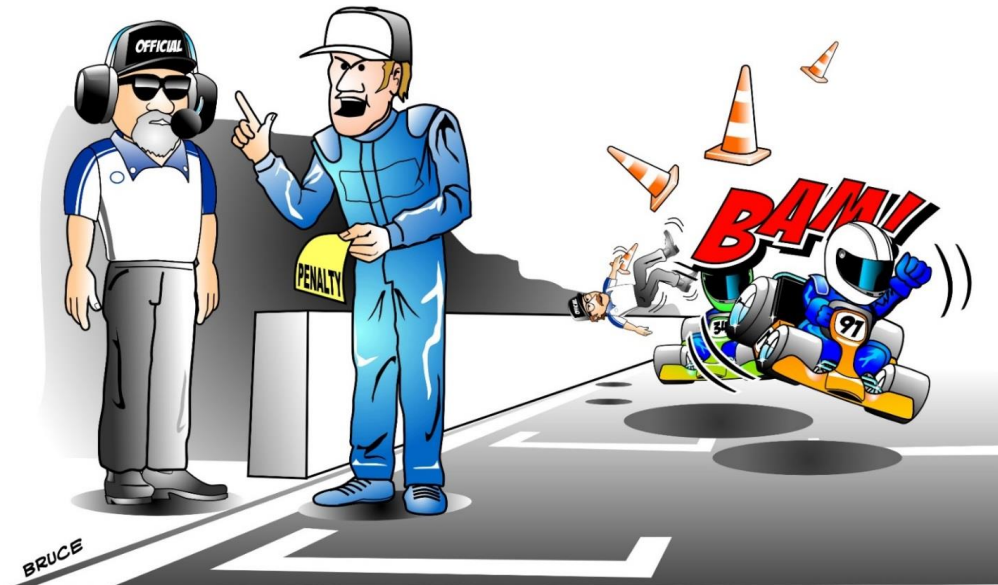
Droppable bumpers may not be the most elegant solution and they alone are definitely not the 'silver bullet' that will eradicate the problem - the use of the new bumpers currently poses more questions than they appear to answer. Nevertheless, all credit to the CIK for attempting to find a solution, only time will tell.

Invariably, there will be innocent drivers who will be visiting pit-lane with a dropped bumper after being unavoidably involved in someone else's incident. Can we also expect to see some intentional brake testing intended to deliberately dislodge the bumper of the competitor behind? Moreover, are they tamper proof?

I understand that the national governing bodies will still have the freedom to decide against adopting the new bumper system, so there is every chance to observe how it works within CIK competition before our own ASN decides if they should follow suit.



However, in reality, the solution lies not in bumpers or technology, but between the ears of the driver, their mindset has to change (or be changed) and each must accept full responsibility and be accountable for their on track actions. No longer can drivers expect to get away with putting the safety of others at risk, causing other competitors unnecessary repair bills, jeopardising the race results of others and spoiling the enjoyment for all. It's not acceptable and the penalties must be commensurate with the 'crime'.



A fundamental part of this 'big picture' rehabilitation needs those of you who have become successful in karting to continually mentor and coach the younger drivers, share your stories of both success and failure and to take the time to highlight what 'success' really means, and that it can even be achieved without a podium place.

Karting is an ultra-competitive sport, where winning does matter, but not everyone can be a champion or even a winner. Real winners use their driving skills, guile and finesse to get to the front and only losers try to barge, bump, bore and bully their way around the track.

Putting the responsibility of driving firmly back in the hands of the drivers rather than hoping the officials spot every incident may be the only way forward. Action too is required by parents, teams and officials alike if karting is not to lose the enviable tag of the 'purest form of motorsport'.

There will always be a bell-curve of talent, skills and results, and while scything mercilessly through the pack to take the chequered flag, leaving a trail of carnage behind and showing scant regard or respect for your fellow competitors may make you a 'de facto' race winner on the day, deep down...you're just a loser!



We all need to readjust how we define success on track and to quote the Australian ASN, (Karting Australia) karting should be 'Fun for all.....excellence for some' so please lead by example and help me prove my theory that **'winning at all costs..... is not really winning at all'!**

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