

AMATEUR KARTING

A DREAM COME TRUE FOR LOCAL RACE FAN

BY DAN BAIN



Futch, left, edges out his opponent by 19 thousandths of a second to come in third place at Daytona in 2007. (Photo by Curt Davis)

IT'S BEEN CALLED "THE BEST-KEPT SECRET IN MOTORSPORTS". BUT IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE JEFF FUTCH DISCOVERED IT, HAVING SKIRTED THE PERIPHERY FOR SEVERAL DECADES.

"I've loved motorsports and racing my entire life. My mom used to joke that one of my first words was 'vroom-vroom,'" says Futch, a medical device rep from North Raleigh. "Nobody else in my family had similar interests, so I didn't really get to pursue it until later in life. I never attended a real race until I was an adult, but I always wanted to be involved with the sport somehow."

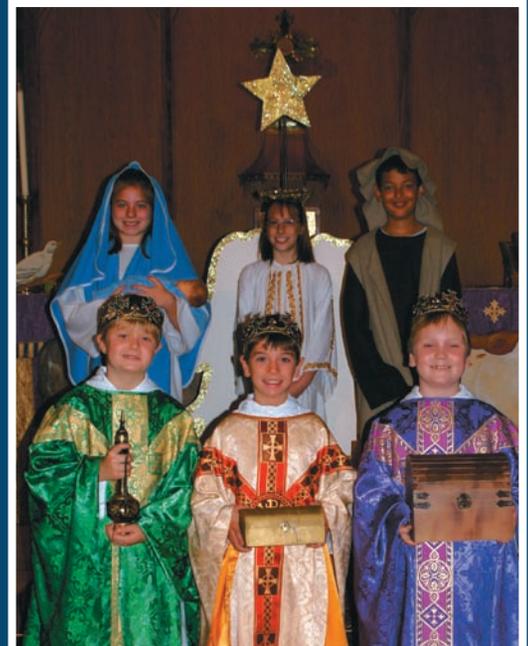
In 2006, the opportunity presented itself, and Futch finally realized his dream of entering the world of competitive motorsports. So what's the secret? Karting.

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Futch races a kart, but don't let the word fool you – racing karts are not what people first imagine when they learn of the sport. Most people picture go-karts, or fun-karts, but racing karts are quite different from what Futch refers to as the “five laps for five dollars” karts.

“Granted, it's not a real car, but it can get pretty serious, depending on the class you're in,” explains Futch. There are many classes of karts, he adds, ranging from small-engined up to 250cc Superkarts, which boast a higher power-to-weight ratio than a Corvette, can go faster than 150mph, and take corners at more than 3 G's.

Karting is popular in Europe, where Futch says it has “a lot of credibility” and is not regarded as an oddity. It's still catching on in the States, but has come to be known as a good entry point for young, talented drivers hoping to race for a living one day. Two notable former karters are Indy star, Danica Patrick and Formula One legend, Michael Schumacher.

When Futch reached a point where he had the means to compete in some sort of motorsport, he chose karting. “It's the least expensive form of an expensive hobby,” he explains, “and was a perfect way to indulge my love of racing.”

Futch chose a shifter-style kart, which he races in the DD2 (“direct-drive, 2-speed”) class. The kart uses a direct-drive system rather than a typical chain and sprocket, which means the axle passes directly through the engine and helps enable the kart to reach speeds higher than 100 mph.

The kart's 125cc Rotax engine is sealed and can't be modified, keeping its owner's maintenance costs down and ensuring a level playing field. It's also a plus for drivers like Futch, who freely admits he doesn't profess to be a mechanic. Racers with a Rotax engine are generally in karting purely for the fun and art of racing – just what Futch was looking for when he entered the sport.

In 2006, Futch raced in Florida over the course of the spring and summer, and qualified for the Rotax Challenge Grand Nationals at the Road America track in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin. The ROTAX MAX Challenge is a worldwide program of regional, national and world championships. This year's world championship will be held in Italy, prompting Futch to point out that it's possible to start out as a local racer and end up with a paid trip to Italy – not bad for a hobby.

After moving to North Carolina last year, Futch began racing more frequently in events sanctioned by the World Karting Association (WKA). He participates in the WKA's National Road Racing Series, which has events at tracks including Road Atlanta, Mid-Ohio and Daytona – yes, that Daytona, which is the most famous track Futch has raced on, and which he says “is not nearly as wide as it looks on television.”

It was in Daytona that Futch raced in his first WKA National event, beating an opponent by 19 thousandths of a second to come in third place. (If you're still skeptical or even derisive toward karting as a sport, you might want to ask yourself how many people you know who can say they came in third at Daytona...)

Interestingly enough, karts at Daytona race a longer track than the standard 2.5-mile lap known to NASCAR fans. A one-mile portion of the infield is used in addition to the oval, resulting in a 3.5-mile lap.

About 60 karts race at one time, from three different classes – meaning, essentially, there are three different races taking place, with about 20 karts enrolled in each. A race typically lasts 30 minutes, with the winner completing the most laps in that time, and bringing home pride.

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Above: Futch and competitors navigate the tight turns of Road America during the 2006 Rotax Kart Challenge US Grand Nationals in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin. (Photo by Bill Heck)



Right: Futch relaxes with his six-year-old son, Sam, prior to racing at Daytona last December. (Photo by Jill Futch)

 A photograph of three young girls playing flutes in a music classroom. They are sitting at desks and looking towards the camera. The girl in the foreground is wearing a pink shirt. The girl in the middle is wearing a dark blue shirt. The girl in the background is wearing a white shirt. There are music stands and sheet music in the foreground.

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"There are very few events with prize money," Futch explains. "For the most part, you don't win anything other than a plaque, a trophy, or bragging rights. It's mostly for the enjoyment we get out of doing it – it's a hobby, a passion."

And it's one that he shares with his family. His wife, Jill, hails from Indianapolis, and also enjoys racing. She and their son, Sam, travel with Futch as his "crew." Jill watches from the side of the track and signals key information to him as he drives – who's close behind him, how close they are, etc. Sam's favorite activities are checking tire pressure and pushing the kart around the paddock. He also enjoys reminding his dad of just how often he comes in third place. "I get a lot of trash-talking from a seven-year-old," Futch laments.

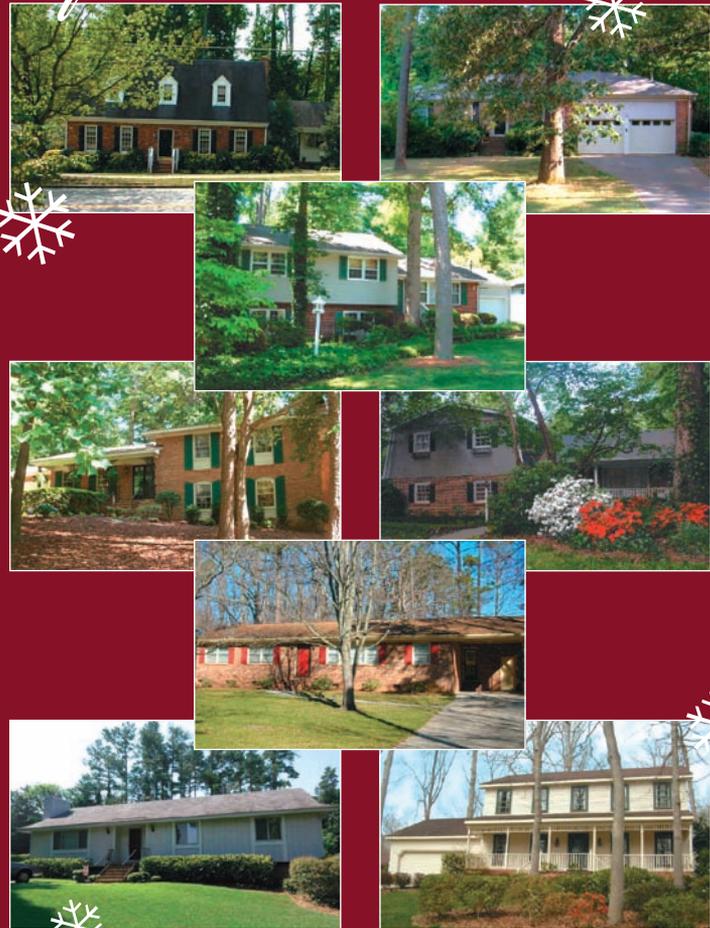
Futch estimates he's taken part in close to 50 heats and races since he started, at 10-12 races per season. He points out that other hobbies like golf take a person away from their family for a day or a weekend, while karting allows them to come along. When they're not playing the part of crew, Sam and Jill spend time in the air-conditioned trailer Futch uses to transport his kart and tools from his home to events.

Additionally, Futch and his family have gotten to know the other racers in his class. "When I first got into this, there was a whole group of guys who became friends," he says. "For the first year, Jill and I didn't know or care what anyone else did outside of racing. We went to the track and it was like an oasis."

Futch has since found out that the other racers come from all walks of life, but nobody cares what anyone else does for a living. He says the pits are filled with stories of great people making sacrifices to help others, and each race feels like a family reunion. "Still, it gets hugely competitive," he adds. "I think underneath, we're all a bunch of 'Type A' personalities. Karting requires a good work ethic, with strong organization and planning skills. Just as in life, preparation and a good attitude are important in being successful at the race track."

But mostly, it's about fun. "It's my 'yahoo!' thing," Futch says. "I'm sure other people enjoy their passions and get similar opportunities – when I discovered this, and went around a corner at 90mph for the first time, I was shouting for joy inside my helmet." ♦

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