

Performance Racing Industry

The Voice of the Racing Marketplace

Volume 21, Number 6 June 2006

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Retailer Profile

With a pair of karting tracks and a retail store, RJ Valentine and his team have the New England kart market covered.

The biggest races have their places. Indy has its 500 miles. Daytona has 500 miles and 24 hours. Boston has its 26.2 miles.

But veteran professional sports car racer RJ Valentine has a vision that more people from New England will be buying racing rubber in years to come. And it won't be lace-up.

About 20 miles south of the streets where 25,000 people run the famous Boston Marathon every Patriot's Day, Valentine operates F1 Boston to introduce people to another form of road racing that has given many racers from all over the world their first pull of G-force in the corners: karting.

"Racing is a language that most people don't understand," said Valentine, who

has raced in series such as Trans Am and World Sports Cars for the last 30 years. "It's evolved into my business."

The business is a pair of karting tracks, one indoor (F1 Boston) and one outdoor (F1 Outdoors), and a retail store.

"It's been a very small market in New England," said Dave Davies, operations director for the retail facility and dealer network known as SSC East, about karting. "There were very few facilities (for karters), except for a couple of small oval tracks, until F1 Outdoors was built," three and one-half years ago. Before that, the few racers from Boston who were interested in sprint and road racing karts traveled two or three hours to get to a track, Davies noted.

But construction of the 45-acre outdoor

SSC EAST / F1 BOSTON



track was only the second throw-down in a gamble that karting would catch on in New England. Six years ago, Valentine and his partners put a huge down payment on their ideas by investing \$10 million to build F1 Boston. The Wal-Mart-sized indoor event center combines the relaxed atmosphere of a corporate retreat with the adrenaline rush of a race track.

The facility, located south of the city in the suburb of Braintree, includes a pair of race tracks that can be combined into one, along with a restaurant and other amenities that make it a destination for anyone looking for a horsepower theme during an evening of entertainment or a team-building corporate exercise.

Some marketing experts contend that racing has become the “new golf,” as corporations trade the tee box for the pit stall in their search for a place to have fun and create a network of new relationships. If that’s true, F1 Boston is a solid drive down the fairway. One third of the 106,000-square-foot facility is dedicated to conference rooms equipped with state-of-the-art technology to accommodate corporate strategy and team-building exercises. When it opened in 2000, it was already booked solid for two years and has hosted 5000 corporate seminars since then.

“People want to be taken care of when they come in.”

Valentine believes that increased exposure to racing has fueled that interest. “The people who come here are bored with golf and other sports,” he said. “There’s a huge amount of NASCAR presence and a lot of Formula 1 fans. They go to races as a result of a business decision and they come away wanting to do something like that. I built the facility knowing my audience wasn’t going to be karters, it was going to be corporate customers.”

That assessment of the target market for SSC East was critical. If the retail store was to succeed by selling karts

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RJ Valentine’s vision of propelling kart racing in New England became a successful business venture with F1 Boston, an indoor kart track; F1 Outdoors, which is an outdoor kart track; and SSC East, a kart retail store. SSC East is exclusively focused on kart racing in its 10,000-square-foot shop, located at F1 Boston in Braintree, Massachusetts. It is dedicated to importing, selling, servicing and supporting manufacturers, including Rotax/Bombardier, CRG, Zanardi, MoGo, and GearBox product lines.

and parts to racers, and the outdoor track was to give them a place to race, the first step was to generate business. So, the \$10 million F1 Boston was not built to fill the needs of existing racers. Instead, it is designed to create them.

Despite the presence of New Hampshire International Speedway 90 minutes to the north in Loudon, which fills to capacity with Nextel Cup fans, Davies believes that SSC East has to build a tradition of kart racing in New England. And the market they are trying to establish is much different from that in other parts of the country where karting is already popular.

“This is an environment that’s different from a racing town,” Davies said of Boston, where fans brave Antarctic-like weather to support the Patriots in football and where the Green Monster is revered during baseball season. In a place like Indianapolis, for example, “people are

already involved in racing and look to karts as an extension of that,” said Davies, who added that it is not uncommon to see professional NASCAR or Indy car drivers hanging out at the track enjoying karting with their kids. “We don’t have that,” he said of Boston, better known for banking, financial services, higher education and corporate headquarters.

“Besides,” he added, “we focus on sprint and road racing karts, which is a different breed from oval racing.”

Ultimately, the success of F1 Boston is sharing the adrenaline rush of driving a real performance machine. “When we



first tell people we have go-karts, they think it’s something like Coney Island,” said Valentine. “Then, they realize the power and feel the adrenaline rush of going from zero to 60 miles an hour in 4.3 seconds.”

It’s a rush that Valentine knows well. “I’ve basically always had an interest in cars,” he confessed, beginning with a street Corvette that he modified to the point “where it got out of hand.” His self-confessed addiction to racing was only satisfied a little bit as a spectator. “I was watching the 24 hours of Daytona on TV so hard that my wife said I should be driving in it.” He turned professional in 1978, driving a variety of machines ever since.

Valentine began 2006 on a high note, finishing second in his class at the 24 Hours of Daytona, one lap behind the winners, in a Pontiac GTO co-driven by Andy Lally, Marc Bunting and Johnny O’Connell. He had one self-confessed “Maalox moment” when he spun the car but fortunately didn’t hit anything. “Winning that race has been a dream of mine for 20 years now and this is the closest I’ve got to reaching it,” he said.

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"It felt great to be on the podium and now it makes me want to win it even more," he added, reflecting the same motivation that he hopes his corporate customers take away with them.

But the indoor facility caters to more than corporate executives. Besides walk-in customers who can drive a concession kart after an orientation session, the facility operates junior racing programs for kids from the ages of seven to 17. "When I built the track, I mistakenly believed it would be an adult place," Valentine confessed. "But kids ragged on their parents

track and a kart of their own."

But Quast noted the immediate rewards that kids get through karting. She recalled one seven-year-old sitting on the sidelines in a wheelchair, his leg in a full brace, the result of a car accident. "He couldn't use his leg to brake, so we put a hand brake on the right side, and crossed the throttle over to the left, she said. "He competed in a league with other kids his age, won a championship and took home a trophy."

The indoor track includes a retail store, about as big as a medium-sized confer-

SSC East has as much the feel of a race car shop as it does a store. "Everything is as neat as a pin," said Davies. There are displays along the walls and all of the chassis that SSC sells are set up on displays. But the machine shop, complete with a surface plate for chassis setups and lasers for aligning front ends, is also in full view.

The store offers a wide range of specialized, European-built road racing kart chassis, including the Italian-made CRG, and engines such as Rotax, as well as products produced by Zanardi, MoGo

SSC East teamed up with F1 Outdoors, in East Bridgewater, Massachusetts, an outdoor kart facility, to provide racers with a comprehensive race organization. Competitions include the Rotax-Max National Challenge Race Series; regional, national, and international racing; F1 Outdoors Club Racing Series; Red Bull Driver Search; open practice and "test and tune" sessions; "reverse direction" racing; and F1 Junior Racing Academy.



because they wanted to drive, too."

Before the racing begins, kids go through two four-hour school sessions to teach them basic driving skills. "We teach them how to brake and read apexes on the first day," said Karen Quast, general manager of both race tracks. "We push them on the second day by forcing them into oversteer and understeer situations," preparing them for real competition.

The program has become popular simply by graduates talking about it to their friends. Approximately 1500 kids have graduated through the ranks since the junior racing program began.

As kids graduate from one level to another, some eventually move on to bigger karts and organized outdoor racing through the WKA or at F1 Outdoors. "It's like playing a computer game," said Valentine. "They get better and better at it and eventually move to the outdoor

ence room. Displays focus on apparel and safety gear, including helmets and race suits with sizes for kids and adults. Reflecting their corporate clientele through the conference center, the store also stocks the company's F1 brand tailored golf shirts.

The display, however, is mainly used to prime business for SSC East, located down the block in a 9000-square-foot building. "We get our customers from the display at the indoor store," Davies explained. "We fit customers down here for items such as shoes, gloves, helmets and vests."

And, at SSC East, racers can buy anything from a simple sprocket or throttle cable to a ready-to-race kart. In addition to a full range of parts inventory, the store also provides maintenance and race-prepping services for karts, ranging from chassis setup to engine blueprinting.

and Gearbox. The smallest engine/chassis combo offered by SSC East, the Puffo, is powered by a 36cc engine and is built for children from three to five years old. The next larger, the Bambino, is powered by a 55cc engine and is geared for children from five to seven years old.

But the inventory includes kart chassis for people of all age groups, including adults and some of the highest horsepower kart engines available. With the help of a three-person staff, Valentine oversees parts sales, as well as services that range from dynamometer runs to engine blueprinting.

Davies believes that high level of personal service is critical to SSC East's business, especially since many of their customers are new to the sport and don't have a history of walking around a race track with a wrench and a screwdriver in

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SSC East's service organization—F1 Engines—caters to all kart racing service needs, including blueprinting, dynamometer service, and trackside support. SSC East support trailers provide trackside services to ensure all competitors are “race ready” at every competition. Here, Dave Davies builds a Rotax engine in the main workshop.

their hand and have never had to wrestle with a balky carburetor. “Our customers are all kinds of people,” said Davies. “We have the average Joe who works in an office, CEOs, doctors, lawyers and computer chip engineers,” in addition to the kids being developed in the junior racing program.

“The new kart racer doesn’t want to be a mechanic,” Davies said. “Today, there are karts available that require virtually no engine work,” referring to some that have proven dyno runs as long as 1000 hours without requiring maintenance. Other technological advances include electric starters, transmissions with reverse gears and axles that connect the drive wheels directly to the crankshaft.

By offering a full menu of mechanical and race-prep service, “customers simply arrive and drive,” he added. “But instead of driving concession karts,

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they’re driving their own karts, engineered and maintained by professionals.”

That kind of hassle-free experience makes kart racing appealing to a broader audience, which is essential to healthy sales, Davies believes. “There is only so much business out there,” he said, among the loyal faithful who have already discovered karts. “The business won’t truly grow if you only go after the traditional audience.”

To reach beyond that audience, Davies’ marketing is focused on introducing karting to “speed junkies” who may be looking for an alternative to what they already do for entertainment. “We’re opening up to markets that have a need for adrenaline,” said Valentine.

To complement the corporate customer base created by F1 Boston, Davies relies on direct mail to people who he knows already appreciate a fast ride: drivers of cars such as BMW, Porsche and Corvette. For the most part, mailings go to people within 75 to 100 miles of the store. “That’s the limit that our research shows a high-end user would travel,” said Davies.

In addition, Davies noted that there are many people who might appreciate

the speed and precision of kart racing because it mirrors other sports they are involved in. SSC East targets athletes in so-called “extreme” sports, such as snowboarders, skateboarders and snowmobiles, suggesting karting as an alternative during their “off” season.

But whether a customer is new or a veteran, or someone fishing or already hooked on karts, each gets the undivided attention of Davies and his staff. “I go after every person who walks in the door,” said Davies. “People want to be taken care of when they come in. I value the guy who buys a chain and sprocket as much as a guy who buys a complete kart.”

That personalized service extends to the race track as well. SSC East travels to approximately 60 races and practices a year, complete with a semi-truck “stuffed with spare parts, tires and new chassis,” to support their customers. “We do everything from chassis setup to carburetor jetting,” Davies explained. New customers obviously need the most help, he noted, while more experienced customers eventually need less support. Nonetheless, “we help everybody.”

The existing SSC East store and shop is a temporary facility, Davies noted, since plans are on the books for a permanent retail store to be added to the outdoor kart track in the next few years. “We may be looking at constructing a retail store at the indoor track as a stop-gap measure in the next year or so,” he added, “because it would let us present our inventory better.”

“There are people out there who know about karting,” said Davies optimistically. “We just have to bring it to the forefront because they don’t know it’s here.” **PRI**

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