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Reader's bespoke three-wheeler build

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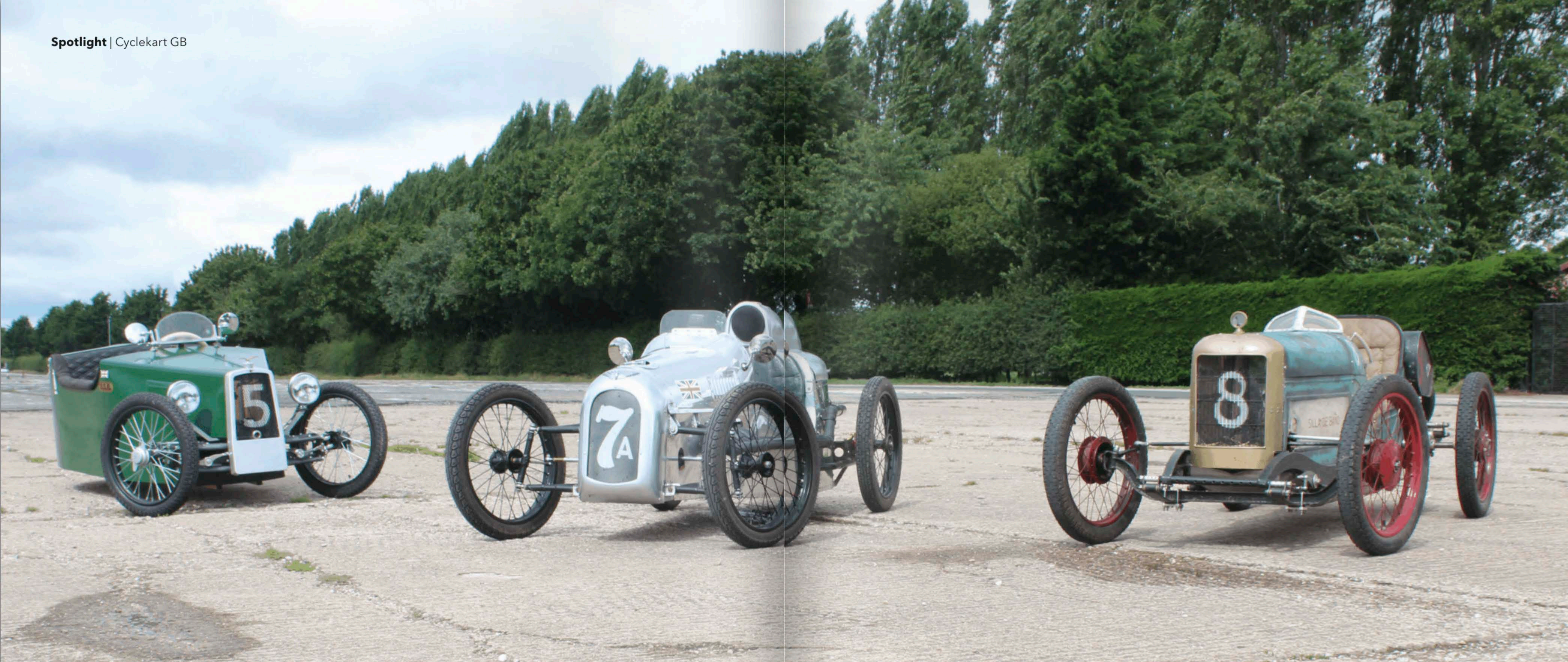
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RUDDY GOOD FUN

These Cyclekart GB specials may not take themselves too seriously, but perhaps it's time that we did. We drove three of the club's best to see what all the fuss is about

Words and pictures Jack Wood

As a kit car, special and vintage race car enthusiast, it was difficult not to immediately appreciate the ethos behind Cyclekarts GB and the peculiar little cars its members build. The diminutive specials sell themselves at any show, each build showcasing a gem from motoring past in miniature form. Their 200cc and 10bhp limits may not impress on the page, but don't let their size fool you... judging by the reaction at the Newark Kit Car Festival, this intriguing sub-genre of self-assembled race cars could be the most exciting thing to happen to the specials market for some time.

If you missed our stand while dodging the inclement weather at the show last month, you would have also missed these three adorable little vintage racers. To clue you in, a cyclekart encapsulates everything that makes vintage motorsport so exciting, but in two thirds scale, for less than a hundredth of the price and with a much reduced risk of succumbing to... well... an unbelievably horrific end.

Every cyclekart must follow a loose set of guidelines, cost no more than £2000 to construct – you can mark your own homework here – and be inspired by a real car from an era when motor racing was the biggest killer of the UK's aristocracy. Beyond that, the only limit is the imagination of whoever is wielding the welder, with bonus kudos points awarded to those who innovate or bring a bit of humour to the paddock. As such, each car is unique.

These rules guarantee a varied grid that would not look out of place in the starting strip of Brooklands – where Cyclekart GB raced this year – or Mario Kart, and the opportunity for those with unknown mechanical ability to have a crack at something that every petrolhead must have dreamed of at least once: developing a car from scratch. As a failed mechanical engineer myself, I *had* to convince someone to give me a go. To my surprise, I found three willing parties. Like the racers of the replicated era, our trio could not be any more different above or underneath the skin.

***"THEY'RE SO
MUCH FUN
POUND FOR LB!"***

All three may share the same Honda CX200 single-cylinder engine design in the back, but that is where the similarities end. As with the birth of the automobile, there are many choices a builder can make throughout the development process. From a drivetrain perspective alone, this trio extols the virtues of a single driven rear wheel, the straight drive axle and the differential. Each set-up had its merits on the slippy stuff, and each had its hilarious pitfalls, all of which made this group test the most fun pound for lb I've had on four, three and – for a scary split second – two wheels for some time. So, without further ado, on to our fighters.



There aren't many three-wheelers on the Cyclekart GB grid, but Jim hopes that may change soon

THREE WHEELS GOOD, TWO WHEELS LESS GOOD

Despite the mechanical simplicity, for some reason the three-wheeler has not yet caught on in the UK Cyclekart scene. That reason is, most likely, due to the fact that they're not particularly competitive in this scale; their propensity to tip over being heightened by the fact the centre of gravity rises exponentially with the height of the driver in a 100kg kart.

Competition, however, is never the main aim of cyclekarting, and no roster from this projected era would be complete without at least the one tadpole tricycle attempting to keep up with the big boys. With that in mind, we left the stopwatch in the pits and decided to enjoy Jim Rawnsley's BSA 3-wheeler inspired creation for what is.

Jim's reason for choosing the BSA as his inspiration lies closer to our realm than it does historic accuracy. As he explains, "When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I built a Lomax 223 to go travelling the world

in. Since selling it, I'd always had a hankering to get another three-wheeler and, as the Lomax was loosely inspired by the 1930s BSA itself, it seemed like a natural choice... also, someone in the club was already making a Morgan homage."

One thing that becomes instantly apparent when walking around all of these cars is that their small size and low cost does little to negate the level of detail on offer. At least half of the fun is in the build and the craft, so, while some ingenuity is often required to fabricate many of the key styling cues, every kart on the grid has many nods to its inspiration to enjoy.

The exterior of Jim's car has all of the grilles, badges and approximate – printed out – head lights of the Brummie original, and I particularly like the relatively plush cabin with its wooden dashboard and replica Jaeger tachometer. But, as the aim is to never take yourself or your car too seriously, there are unique additions, such as the 'dragons' and 'she cannot take no more captain' redline warnings on the tacho.

Jim Rawnsley's BSA replica was inspired by his old Lomax



In this company, the BSA replica is the closest to an OEM-style machine. And while it was difficult not to enjoy the level of detail and the correct wooden sub-structure, I was most interested in seeing how unruly the three-wheeled layout would prove to be on the club's tight, muddy handling course. Safe to say, it didn't take long to find out.

I was only on my second lap when I felt myself starting to lean as the outside front wheel gave way, in spectacular fashion I might add, to the immense transverse gravitational force of a 15mph right-hander. I was already hooked on the not-quite-sport of it all, enjoying the opportunity to witness the handling pitfalls first hand of a layout that I'd only been able to read about before. Forever grateful that I experienced the phenomenon at speeds that would only have resulted in a bruised shoulder, and ego, if I failed to get the rebellious wheel back to terra firma.

The crowd's almost mocking cheer only cemented the feeling of being a driving god in the moment, before the righted car politely hinted to me that the steering wheel and throttle should only be used in isolation of each other from this point on.

With my lesson learnt, I made it my mission to work with the car for the rest of my time with it, making the most of its slower 1:1 rack ratio and just enjoying the silliness of it all before I graduated to my first four-wheeler. Terrific fun!



The interior is quite plush for a cyclekart



Wood features throughout the construction

THE DODGE HOMAGE

'Dress for the car you want and the one you built,' could be the revised saying for Jim Tanner, who matched his 1935 Dodge-inspired special to a tee, sartorially speaking. He also cemented the fun loving spirit of the club, playing the role of a gentleman racer spiffingly as he lifted his car into position for each of our shots.

Tanner's car takes its inspiration from a special from the era, as opposed to an OEM effort, and is a great example of how the internet's endless archive of past masters can be used to create something more unusual than the always welcome Silver Arrow and Bentley Blower recreation mainstays.

"The car that I liked the look of most when I started out was an Argentinian race car that was based on a 1935 Dodge Banquet. I copied it as best as I could, but it was this great big thing in real life, so it was a real challenge to scale the lines down and not make it look too silly, so I have played around with the lines a little." The finished result is a kart that looks more pre-war than most, and it was hard not to be impressed by the amount of upcycling on display. "The front



This wheel boss is from an old shower control!



Builders often go above and beyond with details



Engines can be purchased new for under £200!

grille surround is actually a modified welding mask," explains Jim. "The steering wheel boss is from our old shower, and the tail light is a hybrid of a tea light and a bell... I like to turn it on when people get close on a circuit and pretend I'm braking to get them to back off." While it's hard not to appreciate the jokey additions, one of the best touches to Tanner's car is the paintwork. Where much of the grid looks to replicate as-new, Jim has worked hard to generate a patinated look through a faux fade on the painted steel panels. The sign-written 200cc insignias and the sunglasses holder-turned-pipe storage device to the side acting as the icing on the cake here.

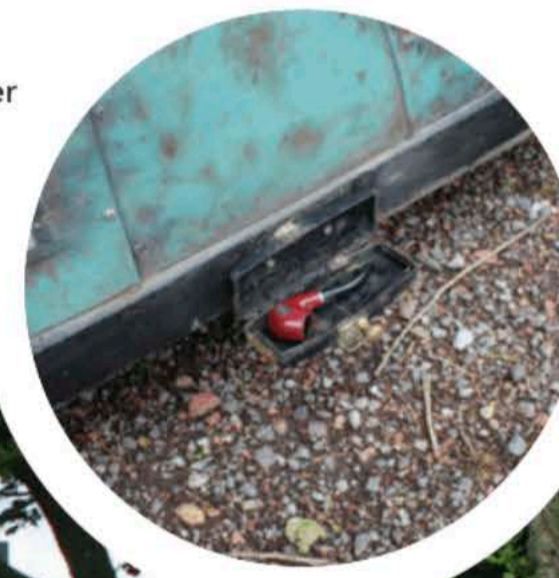
Don't let the charity shop additions and antiquated looks fool you though, as this is perhaps the most advanced kart of our three, mechanically speaking. With a rear differential to distribute all the 200cc single's torque and a centrifugal clutch to push it through, the Dodge homage should have been dynamically brilliant.

A little challenging, but very compelling with it, was perhaps closer to the truth. With solid axles at both ends, and leaf springs on each corner, the

Tanner Special was enjoyably bouncy over the bumps and through the tight curves. The slightly agricultural, thumping single-cylinder only added to the theatre as it did its best pre-war racer impression, popping and banging along as we pressed on through the 'straights'.

It becomes immediately clear after a series of laps in these cars that you don't want a modern, sorted go kart to have fun here. The pre-war suspension set-ups, wobbly wheels and narrow track widths mean you have to put the work in as you bounce from bend to bend. The constant counter-steering never loses its appeal while you watch the spindly pit bike wheels try to make sense of it all. As motorsport cosplaying goes, the little Dodge is, again, terrific fun, and there's very little evidence to believe my GPS speedometer's 20mph claims on the track.

A pipe holder is a must on any pre-war race car!



Jim Tanner got into character on the day. Here he is displaying just how manoeuvrable these karts are



Despite featuring aluminium throughout, Ian's car didn't cost the earth to produce - it was completed for just £1350



Ian Fletcher is well known in the kit car scene

THE SLIDER

Ian Fletcher is no stranger to our pages. His adventures in his Spartan – which is his main cyclekart tow vehicle – were featured in the November 2021 issue (185). He was the first to contact us about the club, which he got into after many years of racing within the top – and most expensive – tiers of kit car motorsport. He makes no bones about moving to cyclekarting for its more sustainable pricing, which has allowed him to put more time into his Spartan kit and travelling with it.

One of the advantages to cyclekarting from a kit car builder's perspective is that there are many transferable skills, plus it's not uncommon to already have many of the parts required lying around. For instance, Ian's Austin Seven twin-cam inspired kart features aluminium, steel tubing and GRP he already had and, once he purchased his £325 stage one tuned engine (brand new, by the way), the end result owed him just £1350; not that you can tell from the finish.

The aluminium bodywork shines just as bright here as it would on a full-size car and, while this miniature homage lacks the supercharged twin-cam unit of the original, it's no less exciting to watch in the bends – which we will get to in a moment.



The dash makes good use of vintage gauges

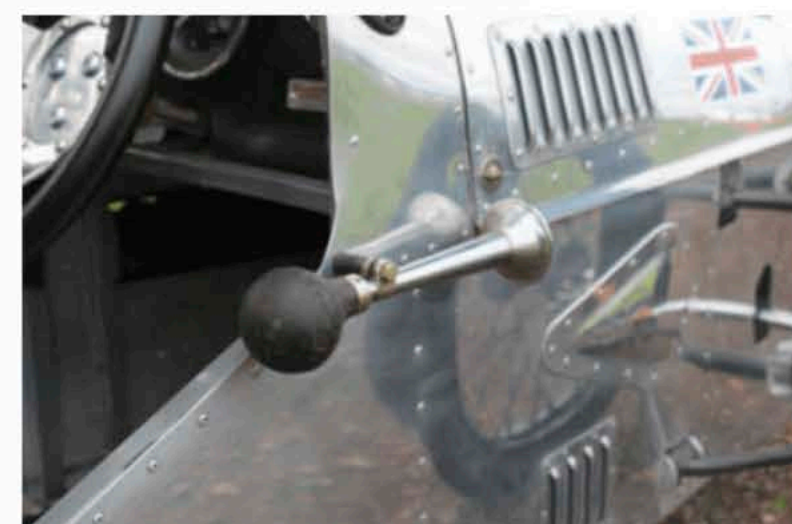
One of the main club rules, well *suggestions*, is that you aim to replicate the appearance of the original car's front suspension and Ian's build retains the Austin's rigid front axle and intricate wishbones – albeit slightly out of scale. Inside the Mountney wheel, full-size speedometer and aircraft-esque dials – and humorous bomb jettison button – dominate the tight cabin, all reminding of an era when motor racing and the pursuit of flight were heavily intertwined.

Mechanically speaking, the same CX200 clone single-cylinder remains in the rear, but is balanced in front of the axle for better weight distribution – an important consideration in a car that weighs less than a wardrobe. The most intoxicating part of the drivetrain, however, is that live, diff-less axle which makes understeer all but impossible.

On the track, it's instantly apparent that the springing is much softer at the front here, which allows for more relaxed steering that brings plenty of confidence as you slide along the grass and gravel. It's



The mid-engined layout aids stability



Sadly, we didn't test the 'awooga' of the horn

easily the most tail happy of the group, though you never feel out of control as each of the rear wheels fight for their individual path of least resistance. Of the three layouts, I'd dare say this is fastest on these loose surfaces. If not, steering with the rear here is, once again, terrific fun. Or as Ian puts it, "It's just hilarious, isn't it?" It sure is.



Don't be fooled into thinking you need the most advanced components possible, the more archaic suspension set-ups win big in the enjoyment stakes

VERDICT

The great thing about special building is that you get to create something that is unmistakably you. All of these karts are exactly as their owners intended them to be, warts and all, and it would be impossible to say any of the three were the definitive best kart here. Where the BSA and Austin replicas are perhaps the most unruly from a traction perspective, and the 'Dodgem' special the most bouncy, my main take back from all three is that you don't get extra points for refinement in the cyclekart world.

The joy is to be found in replicating a time when there was no aero, power or a definitive best layout to complicate matters. They share the spirit of an era when the spills were often as thrilling as they were tragic, but at a scale that is both accessible and safe. The fact that the group pushes its members to go above and beyond in the detail department makes it great for the spectator too, and there's likely to be a few legendary race cars in miniature to spot next season too.

It's unsurprising that increasing numbers of prestigious venues want the club to bring a bit of light relief to their events. As motorsport and car building gets ever more expensive, there's plenty to be said for bringing a bit of accessibility to both scenes. And, while there are no specific kits per se –

that would miss the point of building a special – there are already suppliers, such as Gemini Karts, that can supply the more complicated components, should you need a leg-up or head-start.

With many impressive builds coming in at under the £1000 mark, which is easily achievable should you favour plywood over GRP and blocky panels over compound curves, this up-and-coming almost-sport has the potential to be a key stepping stone for future kit car builders. And, without the space and transport limitations of a full-size kit, a cyclekart can also make a great second project for a previous builder itching to get back on the tools.

With 20 or so events to take part in across the UK each year, there's plenty of opportunity to get out in your car too. And, should the track not be enough, we know of at least one cyclekart that has been put through the simple enough MSVA heavy quadricycle test and registered for the road – and on new plates!

It's safe to say we weren't the only punters at Newark to become enamoured with the concept, and I can hint that we've already started a few conversations about potentially building a kart of our very own, and know of at least two other parties who are also looking to join in the fun. If we did bite the bullet, what car would you like to see replicated in 1:3 scale? Answers on a postcard.



Here's Jack returning after nearly rolling the car

USEFUL CONTACTS

The Club Cyclekarts GB www.cyclekartsgb.com

Parts Gemini Karts www.gemini-karts.co.uk