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(08:30 Dec. 16, 2003)

Formula BMW comes to the U.S., paving the way for a real world championship

By MIKE DUFF

Eyes rolled when the announcement was made at the U. S. Grand Prix that Formula BMW will be coming to the United States next year. The much-asked question: Does the world really need another entry-level spec racer series?



With new championships in America and Britain for 2004, Formula BMW is getting close to being able to describe itself as the international transition series for slicks and wings first-timers.

Yet with new championships in America and Britain for 2004, Formula BMW is getting close to being able to describe itself as the international transition series for slicks and wings first-timers, clearly positioned as an intermediate stage between top-end karting and Formula 3. The two new series will join existing ones already running successfully in Germany and Asia.

"Yes, we do envision a world final happening," says Chip Pankow, series organizer for the U.S. championship in answer to the most obvious question. "That's why everyone is on the same competitive level," he adds. "All the cars in all the series are identical."

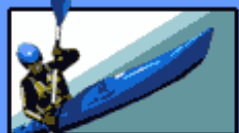
In America, as elsewhere, Formula BMW places strong emphasis on keeping costs under tight control. Each race car costs \$64,000, and buyers will need to pony up another \$20,000 for hospitality and entry fees. The car is powered by a factory-prepared and sealed 140-hp version of the 1.2-liter four-cylinder engine from a BMW

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K1200 motorbike. Chassis setup parameters are limited, as is testing time, with suspension tuning restricted to wheel camber and damper firmness. Aero downforce can be increased by adjustable wing elements front and rear, but only a limited number of ratio sets are available for the Hewland six-speed sequential transmission.

With the prospect of a hard-fought contest between hungry, inexperienced drivers, BMW is equally keen to push the car's excellent safety specifications. The carbon fiber and Kevlar tub is manufactured by Mygale in France, and has been designed to offer comparable impact protection to that of the considerably more powerful F3 cars. The cockpit is roomy by single-seater standards, allowing larger drivers to fit comfortably and also giving enough space for the mandatory HANS device. Like Formula One, the car also comes with a "rescue seat," which can be removed with the driver still strapped to it after a big crash, reducing the risk of exacerbating spinal injuries.

American competitors will be put through exactly the same license and scholarship course already undertaken by drivers from the other championships. This will be held in Valencia, Spain, in January. Designed for those with little or no racing experience, it involves instruction in basic vehicle dynamics, race craft, even nutrition and public speaking. The idea is to produce multitalented drivers, able to offer sponsors and teams a more polished package than raw speed alone.

"Racing these days is about having more than just a good right foot," says Mike Strotmann, the former BMW works touring car driver who runs the Valencia course. "There are thousands of really talented kids out there, but only a few who can sell themselves to teams and sponsors... and they are the ones who will get the chances."

As in Europe, drivers under the age of 19 who do best on the course will be offered scholarships. BMW North America has put \$500,000 into a combined fund for sponsorship and prize money. The series has just been opened for entries, although Pankow says it is too early to gauge numbers. "We're still signing people up and we don't have a figure yet, no. But we're limited to 21 drivers for the license course," he says.

The U.S. championship is scheduled for a seven-round, 14-race series in support of various CART events, which begs the question: What happens if the ailing CART



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“We do have a strong Plan B in place,” admits Pankow, although he would not reveal details. “We will run a full season if CART doesn’t happen, at non-CART events that are similar in flavor and visibility.”

Driving the Formula BMW

Despite compact size and limited power, it is clear within half a lap of the twisty Valencia circuit that the Formula BMW is a serious race car. Even on tired Michelin slicks and idiot-proof chassis settings, the grip levels are astonishing, and the aerodynamic downforce from front and rear wings can be clearly felt on the faster corners. The car also feels far better screwed together than the race-car norm, free of rattles and extraneous vibration.

It’s quick, too. The 140 hp is working against just 1000 pounds of mass (without driver), and the closely stacked ratios of the six-speed Hewland sequential transmission help to keep the power flowing up to impressively high speeds. The presence of a clutch pedal, and the need to heel-and-toe for smooth downshifts, also promises to develop skills and techniques no longer required by some push-button senior formulas. A field of 20 of these running close together, with hungry young drivers onboard, is sure to offer close, likely spectacular, racing.

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