

AN INSIGHT INTO KARTPRO STRATOS

Mergers in the karting industry seldom happen. Yes, familiar faces pop up at new companies and on the continent individual tuners regularly change camps. But it is rare for two companies, successful in their own right, to combine up and make one bigger and hopefully better business. Kartpro and Stratos Leisure did such a thing back in 1987 and ten years on it certainly seems to have been the right move.

Kartpro was founded back in 1974 by the late Bob Banbury and his wife Anne, servicing the component requirements of some of the world's largest chassis manufacturers, whilst Stratos Karts was Paul Molloy and Peter Haywood's joint venture in 1983, primarily producing karts for the gearbox classes and curvaceous PMP exhaust pipes. Four years on, in '87, Anne and Paul decided they had a common vision and the two companies became one. At that time a brand new form of karting was starting to spring up, indoor karting, and Kartpro Stratos Leisure was one of the first companies to see the potential of this fast growing market. Andrew Lister from Playscape (who went on to start Speedkarting in Warrington) approached them about the possibility of making some karts and in 1988 Kartpro Stratos supplied their first fleet of indoor machines. That as they say was just the beginning, and indoor karts and their descendant, outdoor Pro-Karts, have been



First impressions count

going out the door ever since.

In October '95 the company moved to their present address in Wilbury Way, Hitchin, just 100 yards away from their first home. The extra space has allowed the company to open a fully stocked shop to supplement their existing retail mail order business. More importantly however, the additional floorspace afforded by the move has provided the company with capacity to produce over 100 karts per month and has

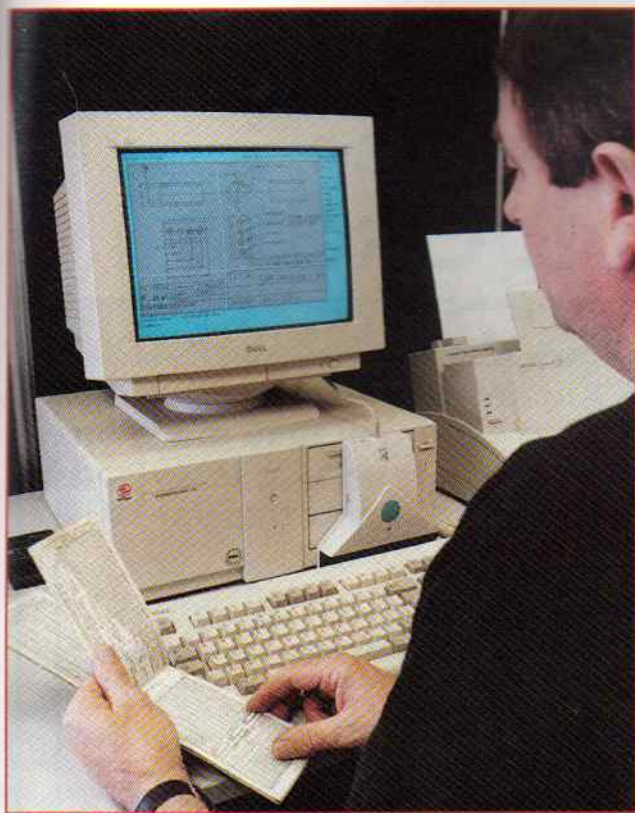
enabled lead times to be dramatically reduced, largely due to the production team being able to work on several fleets at a time. Sales Manager Martin Gilbert explains. "Before moving to these premises, our lead time for a fleet could be as much as three months. Now, not only is it possible to supply karts to our standard specification from stock, but fleets tailored to suit clients requirements can be completed in half the time it used to take."

Another benefit of this large increase in floorspace has been the establishment of a dedicated research and development department headed by Peter Hill. At first glance one would have assumed that the ultimate indoor kart would have evolved a number of years back. But whereas in the early days the thrill and the rapid growth of this new pastime meant that there were new operators starting up almost every week, clamouring for machines with little or no knowledge about what they needed, these days the operator is much more discerning, demanding good looking, good handling machines with low maintenance costs. There are also choices to be made about whether to use petrol, LPG or electric karts, and safety of operation is becoming more and more important so that karts are now being developed with remote fuel tanks, axle covers and the such like, all this ensuring that development never ceases. The dedicated R&D department means new components and ideas can be quickly translated from a C.A.D. drawing to reality in a very short time frame and sent to any part of the world by the four man dispatch team.

Whilst the company's main activities in recent years have concentrated on the four



Order ready for dispatch



Paul Molloy designing on C.A.D. equipment

stroke and leisure side of the sport, they have not been idle on the two stroke racing front. As U.K. importers of the Minarelli range of kart motors and associated products, they service the spare parts requirements of a large proportion of drivers competing in the 125cc classes. Through their sole agent Magnum Motorsports, run by Derek Price, they are supporting Kurt Luby in the Formula 125 category of this year's Super Four Series on a Stratos chassis developed during 1996. His showings in the opening rounds suggest that the former British Champion's season will be a strong one. Paul, an ex-British Champion and GP winner himself, now assumes the role of development driver and is campaigning an example of the new model, the Strike, in this year's Southern Comfort 125 Challenge, formerly known as the P&R Challenge. The non-gearbox classes are also catered for with Stratos karts homologated for both Cadet and Formula TKM, and new rotary and reed valve Minarelli motors on their way.

Export is one of Kartpro Stratos' major strengths with karts and components regularly consigned to five continents. In recognition of this they have been awarded a Herts Chamber of Commerce award for export achievement and have recently been short-listed for a Queen's Award for Export Achievement. Stratos karts are favoured by indoor circuit operators in many countries and have found favour with the likes of Rene Arnoux, Alain Prost and Hans Stuck. No fewer than five new models have been recently introduced including the Storm Pro-Kart which features a unique system of



Kartpro and Stratos, or Anne and Paul

torsion bars to adjust chassis stiffness to suit differing track conditions and driving styles. Such was the interest in this kart at its launch at Autosport International back in January that the first batch had sold out before the end of the show and the second batch had to be commissioned unexpectedly early.

All of this activity means an extremely hectic life for the twenty four employees (19 production, 5 sales/administration) upon whose commitment the company depends to ensure that customers' often very tight deadlines are met, particularly when shipping fleets abroad. "If everybody were not to pull their weight here the way they do, we would not enjoy the lead we do over our

competitors" points out Anne, whose role in the company is essentially that of Financial Director, overseeing a great deal of the buying as well. "I think the strength of our products is the commitment to quality and our willingness to listen to our customers demands. Because we manufacture virtually all of our own components, including such things as brake systems, we can react to specific requests from customers without needing to rely upon outside suppliers all the time. This allows us to be extremely flexible."

With new premises, new management infrastructure and an ever expanding product range, Kartpro Stratos Leisure face the new millennium with confidence in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Their confidence looks well founded.



The fully stocked shop area