

John Mills - A Family Dynasty

"It all started by accident really after I had been racing an MGA for two years," was the way that John Mills explained how he and his family first became involved in karting. "At that time in the late 1950s, which included a bit of rallying as well, I was also engaged to be married. Needless to say with the prospect of a wedding coming up some savings had to be made. Karting was just one idea that came up, although at that time there was no such thing as a dealer, or karts that you could just buy. So I decided to build one with various bits and pieces, using an old Villiers engine to power it. The net result was that I ended up building this thing just to have a bit of fun on, except that I was also the secretary of the local motor club. This had a knock on effect with the other lads in the club because they all wanted one! This was back in late 1959, early 1960, and naturally as word got out everybody then wanted to race the damn things, so it was a matter of trying to find somewhere to race. It was therefore from this that the business started and it has just carried on from there."

'John Mills Racing' until just over a year ago, had operated for 40 years from the family home in Worksop, conveniently sited between the M1 and A1 motorway network, before relocating to new purpose built premises 'round the corner' in this small Nottinghamshire town. This move of premises came at quite an opportune time, with 1999 marking yet another achievement for the Mills dynasty. As main agents for the Mari chassis, they added a Super One British Championship title to the business C.V. through Philip English in Cadets, who will compete in the Rookie class this year and whom the Mills rate very highly indeed. When added to the other club championships

at PF International, Fulbeck and Wombwell, it meant they nicely cleaned up the major titles in South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, with the promise of more to come in 2000.

The new Mills workshop is a clear reminder of how karting has progressed since John's earlier effort of making that first kart "from bits and pieces." First impressions count for a lot and the 'kart bay' for want of a better term brought back memories of the Fortec F3/F3000 workshop I visited last year in Daventry when I interviewed Matthew Davies. It was hardly an exaggeration when I turned to John and suggested the place was clean enough to eat dinner off the work surfaces! Overhead lighting gantries gave the mechanics even illumination when working on customer karts which now cover all classes from Formula A to ICA, 100C, JICA, Junior Rookie, Pro-Kart and naturally, the ever growing 125 Rotax MAX. Along with the 'engine bay' that was being looked after by ex-60s kart champion Roger Mills (John's brother and father of James) at the time of my visit, and with sons Adrian and Mike, together of course with nephew James, himself overseeing other areas of the business, nepotism was definitely a positive family trait.

A linking of minds between John and Paul Fletcher (Karting magazine, March 2000) in those early months of 1960 would to most minds appear to be a natural progression for all concerned. "I cannot quite remember when I first came into contact with Paul," John said, "but he did have some spare land around the back of his bakery. By this time we had built another kart, more along 100cc lines, and had become involved with a new manufacturer called Komet karts, a little engineering company out at Billingsbury

which was really where I got my first agency. I think that this would therefore have been the first kart that I took to the back of Paul's place where we raced. Now in those days I suspect that the karts had less performance than the current Pro-Karts have got, but in a confined space and on a very slippery surface, they were still great fun. The problem in those early days, particularly with engines and with other manufacturers becoming involved, was that the thing developed so quickly. You could buy something one month and by the following month or the one after it would be out of date.

Paul and myself became good friends and competitors, along with his father George, and when they bought a kart they thought that they could improve upon it, just as we did. We used the Komet karts to build on our own ideas and more or less took over development of those karts, whereas Paul and his dad started building the 'Bitsatube'. So we developed the spaceframe type of chassis rather than the ladder type. Now, how can I put this? With Roger being younger (by 11 years), smaller and lighter, he was much more competitive than I was. It meant that whilst I continued to race, it was secondary. I started to look after Roger because he was quicker. Both Paul and myself were very aware of power-to-weight ratio back in those days because there were no weight limits, so the karts we built were extremely light, possibly the lightest in the country. If I remember it right, at around 1962, using the purpose built Montesa engines, the karts were no more than 60 or 70 lbs. all up weight, which bearing in mind the Montesa was not particularly light, was pretty good. Roger and Paul then raced against each other and as you know Paul is highly competitive and that



The smart new premises in Worksop

Photo: Mike Hayden



Spotless kart preparation bay

Photo: Mike Hayden



Roger is the engine man Photo: Mike Hayden

tended to drag us along with him to where we are today."

After having made my own race debut at Fulbeck in 100 National in June 1984, you could say that the place holds a special interest for me. John has had close links with the track during the last 40 years and during that time has also served for many years on the LKRC committee. "Did you know that where Fulbeck is now, that was not where we first raced because the original track was inside an old RAF hangar would you believe! Then when Wombwell came along, we had two tracks close by. Wombwell back then was the shorter 'kidney' shape but it was still great fun. We used to have all sorts of funny things back in those days which would not be possible now. Just four classes, that was all, but we used to have a 'devil take the hindmost' where after about six laps the tail-end Charlie was flagged off. Those races

used to have gearbox and 100cc all mixed in together and it was great fun. I also have good memories of Rowrah because that circuit was there from the very early days. There were other circuits at Morecambe, Goldthorpe, Sandtoft, Blyton, a whole host of circuits that sprang up and then died down because a lot of them were using old WW2 airfields and being 15 years after the war were not in the best of conditions. Those that survived were those who were able to get the money together and resurface as they went along. There was even a small track at Worksoop, would you believe, where the B&Q store is built now.

Then in 1963 Paul and Roger went down to a British team selection meeting at Rye House, which was quite a trek back then! They were both still using the Montesa engines and were selected for the British team and I acted as Roger's mechanic. The first international event we did was at Bergamo in Italy. I drove one of Fletcher's bread vans down there. We piled all four karts inside the back of it. There was me, Roger, Paul, Bruno Ferrari and John Brise (father of Tony, the fledgling Grand Prix driver who was killed with Graham Hill in an aircraft accident in 1974). We all learned a lot from that and in the subsequent following years we raced a lot. Roger was in and out of the British team because of College and University which meant he had not been fully available all of the time. David Bewley from Rowrah spoke to me last year and reminded me about an England/France match that they had run up there. Then funnily enough, when I was going through my archives I found the actual programme of that meeting with all the results. As you can probably imagine, team events can get a little bit naughty" I knew what John was going to say, driving standards and all that and I put it to him that could this not have been the start of this French/English war thing? "No, no, I'm not going to put my hands up to starting that," he laughed, "although having said that, maybe we didn't help it! The parties

afterwards though were tremendous fun. We even had team events with drivers from Holland at Fulbeck and they would return the favour on another day."

Like Paul Fletcher, Roger Mills had his own tales of woe when it came to major success on the karting circuits in the 1960s. At Rowrah there was one driver who, shall we say, removed Roger from the track with a cynical move that could not be called sportsmanship, after Roger had led until the last few laps. The perpetrator apparently is someone quite well known in the sport, which meant John refused to name him. Roger dropped back to 4th, recovered to 2nd and as John then remarked, "let's just say that if there had been another lap, Roger would have won the Championship or both drivers would have failed to finish. One might say that Roger was rather steamed up on that occasion." Point taken. Surprisingly it was not until 1980 when the Mills name finally topped a British Championship when Adrian won at Rowrah, "a very lucky circuit for us! In fact it might still be the case that Adrian is the youngest ever Senior British Champion. He was something like 16 years and 2 months. Sadly it was also a race that soured Adrian's feelings because another engine manufacturer finished in the next 14 places and protested Adrian. Tried everything to get us excluded which was unfortunate but we were fully legal and it left a nasty taste. Adrian packed up karting as champion! It is only recently that he has become interested again and is very committed now with Michael."

He will not like it one bit but after watching the way Michael applied himself on the Super One scene throughout 1999 in ICA, for me he starts the 2000 campaign as a potential champion in that class. John himself remains hopeful. "Michael still races just for the fun of it," said John, although with Adrian overseeing his preparation for the new Super One scene, it is clear that Michael is now fitter and leaner than at any time in the last few years. It remains to be seen if his impending marriage later this year allows for



John Mills with son Mike (centre) and nephew James



Roger was a very successful competitor. This is Fulbeck in 1963



Adrian won the 1980 British Championship for Senior Britain

a double celebration. "He accepts the fact now," John continued, "that there are a lot of quick young lads around and because of the fact that he has always struggled with his weight, with him being heavy boned, current weight limits do not really take account of what people weigh these days. Everything is geared to the smaller and lighter competitor. We worked hard last year though on reducing the weight of both the kart and Michael through his training. Unfortunately, one of those weight saving exercises probably cost Michael victory in the final

Super One race at Rowrah last year. He had been using an experimental brake disc to reduce weight and he ran out of brakes. It was just one of those things."

When talking drivers I had to mention Patrick "Paddy" Walsh. To have not done so would have been a serious omission, not just to Paddy, but to the successes achieved by the Mills' operation. Paddy won three British titles, the latter two under the Mills wing, along with two runner-up positions, all in successive years. "Yes, it was a very successful partnership with Paddy. We need to go back to physical size again because Paddy was small and stocky. The ideal sort of size for karting without doubt. Paddy was very laid back and nothing ever worried him a great deal. He would turn up, drive and that was it. The other person you would need to thank for Paddy's rise would be Roland Padley who used to scrutineer with myself at Fulbeck and Wombwell. Roland was heavily involved with Schools karting, which was where Paddy originally came from. It was



Comet 'JM' special with John at the wheel. Power was provided by twin Montesa 100 engines driving through a Manx Norton clutch fitted on the rear axle and hand operated

therefore Roland who took Paddy to his first British Championship."

One final thought on the enduring friendship aspect that karting has to offer and the success it brought to three different families over the last 35 years. "I remember one of the races," recalled John, "was at a British Championship one-day meeting, I think in 1964 at Sherington. I remember it because it was a tremendous battle between Roger, Paul and Bruno Ferrari. It was the first time we had come off the Montesas to use the new Italian rotary valve engines, whereas Bruno was using the Parilla with a Tecno kart. For me this was also the first time when kart chassis had the 'waisted' shape, which was the concept that is around today. The three of them had been swapping places all the way through the race. Roger had just managed to take the lead on the next but last lap when all the teeth stripped off his engine sprocket. Bruno then sneaked past Paul to win the race, which gave Paul one of those 2nds. We all three are still good friends to this day!"

Mills, Fletcher, Ferrari, for sure karting would be all the poorer for their absence.

Mike Hayden



Philip English's Super One championship winning Mari. Of the Mills family, James and Mike are still very active, James coming 2nd in the '97 100C Super One and Mike 3rd in last year's ICA championship



Mike at the 1986 Junior World Champs at Jesolo where he took a 10th, 2nd, 3rd and 1st in his 4 heats. Unfortunately he had to retire in the final following an accident