

TILLETT SEATS a 'fitting' success story

And the winner is . . . Tillett Racing Seats. As confirmation, if any was needed, that Tillett seats are market leaders in their field, Steve Tillett's company was recently named Kent Exporter of the Year, beating over 150 other entries in the process. Very few specialist karting firms have achieved recognition by bodies outside of our sport, and therefore it seemed timely to visit their Sittingbourne premises and discover what makes them tick.

**The boss -
Steve Tillett**

The story begins with Mr Tillett Senior who is a vintage car upholsterer by trade.

Steve went to work with him and learnt the trade working on such vehicles as Rolls Royces and horse drawn carriages. Late in his teens, in 1978, Steve started to race karts and has continued off and on to this day. Although never a national champion, Steve has proved more than capable behind the wheel with career highlights including 2nd place at the 1986 100 Super British Championships (won by Allan McNish), and winning a Super 1 round at Langbaugh.

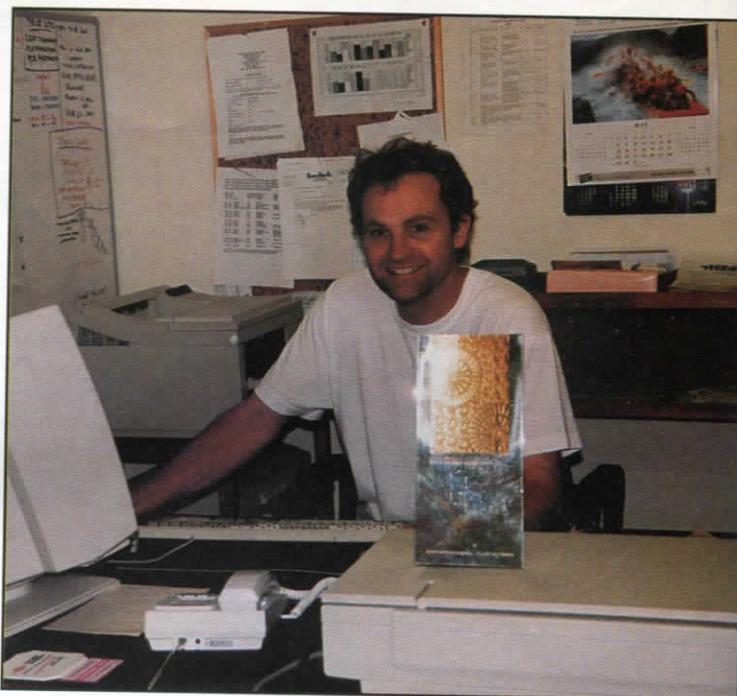
Back in the late seventies though Steve was only just starting out in karting, and in common with others was getting battered black and blue as grip levels increased due to the new breed of grippy tyres. Steve started making loose seat covers for himself out of leather, but it wasn't until one day when Dad covered a kart seat in Rolls Royce boot space lining material that any real comfort was achieved. For the first time Steve found he was being securely held without sliding all around. At first the seat was ridiculed with comments like "why have you got carpet on your seat", but slowly a few drivers such as Gary Prior and Ivan Turner saw the benefits and started to use them. By trial and error Steve then found that some seat shapes hurt less than others and that by introducing some padding under the cover, bruising didn't necessarily go hand in hand with karting. However, at this stage, and for a number of years following, little real effort was put into making a serious business out of these covered padded seats.

**Laying up
the glassfibre**

The end of 1986 was a turning point. Richard Weatherley, one of the top British racers at the time, went to race in Japan aided by Terry Fullerton, and they took some of the seats with them. The seats were sold off the karts, but more importantly Terry came back with an order for 100 and since then Tillett Seats has not looked back. The proceeds from this order were ploughed back into the business and into equipment for manufacturing their own hand laminated fibreglass shells, for all the seats prior to then had been bought in from Gillard and then covered.

**Recognise this
ex-karter drawing
out patterns?**

This Japanese order was the kick start the company needed, but it would be some time before large orders were regularly received. Richard's performances abroad and Steve's sales pitch got them noticed however and soon drivers like Jorn Haase and Rene Bollingtoft were also using them and the results started to come in. Richard won a European Championship round and at Jesolo, and Jos Verstappen used a Tillett when winning his European title.



Now that the company was producing its own seats, modifications could more easily be tried. Some of the areas on the seats that were still producing discomfort were relieved and this seat was named the T4 which is still popular to this day. The next step came when Paul Fletcher

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suggested that there be a flat on the base so as to get his driver at the time, Dominic Connelly, lower to the ground. Prototype flat bottomed versions of the T4 were given to Dominic and the T5 was born. Although it has its fans, notably Terry Fullerton, because it lowers a driver's upper body weight by around 2cm compared to a T4, some drivers didn't like being so low and the seat was restricted in the amount it could be moved for and aft within the chassis so the T7 was developed. This has a smaller flat on the bottom so the seat can be fitted in a wider range of positions, has extra leg support and is deeper around the ribs to spread the cornering loads.

If you think three shapes is enough permutations in a seat, then think again, for they are available in four different rigidities ranging from very stiff with little flex to a very thin and flexible one, and can also be produced in lightweight Kevlar-Carbon. The T7 is by a whisker the biggest seller, which can be partly explained by the fact that it is available in more sizes (8) than the other models which do not come in the very smallest sizes for the 8 to 12 age group. Large (L) and Extra Large (XL) are the most popular sizes across the range, but it comes as no surprise to hear that most of the top racers slip comfortably into Medium Small (MS). I don't know his seat size, but perhaps the best known Tillett seat user is none other than Michael Schumacher. Although he didn't use one in his karting days (runner-up in the 1985 Junior World Champs and 1987 European Champion), the current Formula 1 World Champion now uses a Tillett whenever he returns to karting, including his publicised bringing of one to the Bercy extravaganza.

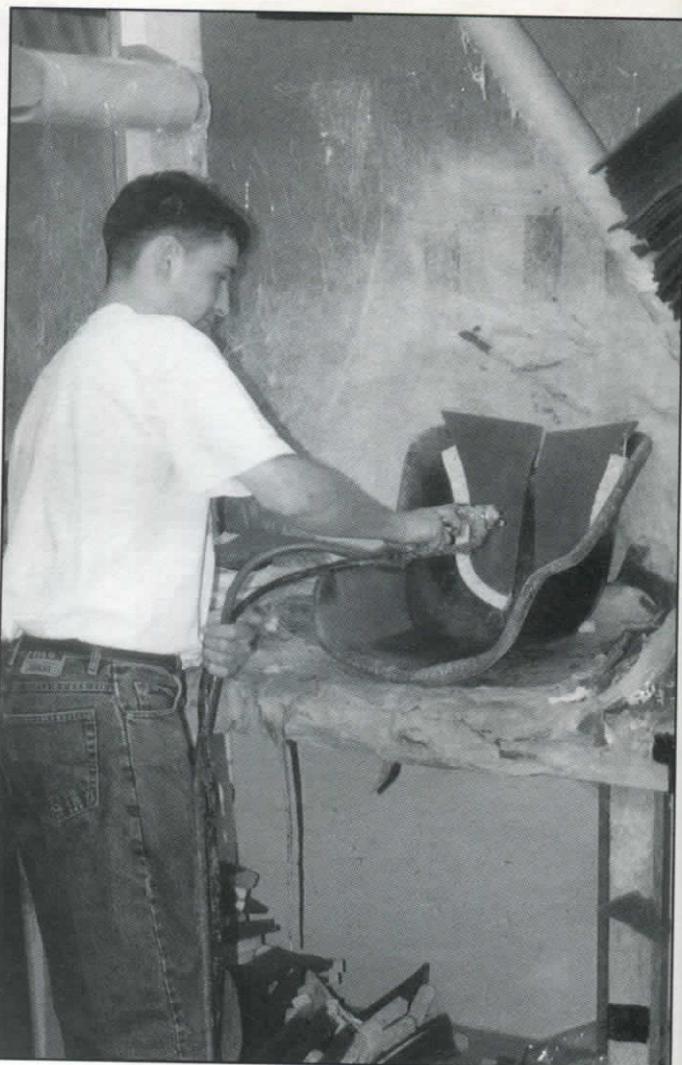
Despite the success of his seats, you only have to glance through our classifieds to see how many make a reference to them, one senses that Steve will not rest until he sees a driver use one of his seats to win the World Championship. To stand the best chance of doing that, and he has already come very close, they need to be used by the top teams, which history has shown really means the Italians, and there lies a problem. Whilst just about every European manufacturer outside Italy buys hundreds at a time, and agents for Italian chassis around the world can't get enough of them, orders from Italy are few and far between. The reasons are probably a combination of cost and that they are not made in Italy, but whatever the reasoning, it does annoy Steve

as he can see the lack of effort that has gone into the ones they do use.

It is perhaps fortunate, although Steve probably wouldn't see it that way, that the Italians don't buy his seats as demand constantly outstrips supply because of the slow production process. At the time of our visit 2,500 seats were on back order, and that against total sales in 1994 of around 10,000 seats. To help increase the number they can turn out, a more mechanised production method has been installed for 1995 which will also produce the new T8 model. This seat will be supplied with or without covers and at a more competitive price, and it is hoped will be fitted as original equipment by chassis manufacturers. Unfortunately we can't show you any photos of the new production process, as over the

Right: Sticking on the pre-cut padding

Below: Stocks are only a shade of this at the moment





Part of that original order for Japan

years other companies have brought out imitations of the Tillett and Steve is loath to give them any more clues than necessary.

Until the new process gets up to speed, producing Tillett seats is labour intensive with 7 employed in the laminating room and 5 in the covering department, and just Steve, Steve Elliott (mould building and R&D) and Margaret Smith (accounts) on the adminis-

tration side. It was Margaret in fact who suggested that they enter the export award scheme. To their surprise they were chosen as one of three finalists out of 150 entries in the category of turnover of less than £1 million. They then proceeded to win that category and the overall prize as well with the judges saying that they had chosen them because of their enthusiasm for the product

and for having created their own market place.

The award was a wonderful surprise and a testament to what they have achieved, but I suspect that Steve would trade it any day for a World Championship won using one of his seats. It is probably premature to say this, but with the likes of Daniel Wheldon going so well, perhaps this could be the year?



Seats produced by the new process awaiting trimming