

TAKING THE FAST TRACK

In Zhuhai, cashed-up racing enthusiasts can experience the exhilaration of training and driving on an international-standard circuit. Both one-cup and classic car racing have attracted their share of fans. But real road mastery – for men accustomed to winning in the corporate fast lane – is another matter.

STORY CAMERON DUECK
PHOTO COURTESY TRACK TORQUE

The roar of screaming engines and howling tyres is never-ending. People try to shout over the din, then pause to let it ebb before resuming their conversations, but it never dies entirely.

It's part of the lure, the seduction of the track. It spells glory and spawns the testosterone-fuelled swagger practiced by all here. The clubhouse wall is plastered with photos of cars blurred with speed, of leggy track girls coyly holding umbrellas, of men standing atop podiums, silverware in one hand, champagne bottle in the other.

Then I look at the photos a little closer. These are not the same young, lean drivers I see on television and in racing magazines. These men are a bit greyer at the temple, thicker in the waist. Gentlemen racers, living the dream that has taken them years of corporate wrangling and investment to afford.

The Zhuhai International Circuit is full of them; amateur racers who pay for the privilege to drive someone else's car, or own their own track cars. It's one thing to come for a few laps around the track on a lads' weekend or birthday treat to see what it's all about; it's another thing to compete in some real racing and put in the work needed to improve your lap times.

Torben Kristensen is of the latter variety. Training



IT'S ONE THING TO COME FOR A FEW LAPS ON A LADS' WEEKEND OR BIRTHDAY TREAT ... IT'S ANOTHER THING TO COMPETE IN SOME REAL RACING

on this muggy March afternoon gets off to a bad start. It's his first time driving on racing slicks, and he's come from Hong Kong determined to drive a lap in 2:04 or less – three seconds faster than his best time so far. He must succeed, because in a few days' time he'll be back here racing in an open class at the Pan Delta Super Racing Festival.

"You feel alive, exhilarated," says the Danish owner of a China-based furniture export business. "You can't think of anything else but to drive the car to your fullest. All your worries and concerns in life get pushed out for the duration of the session."

Three laps into his first half-hour training session of the day, Kristensen locks up his brakes coming up to a corner, the slicks still too cold to keep him on the track. By the time he reacts, he's deep in the gravel pit, there to

Gentlemen racers defy time — and age — at the Zhuhai International Circuit.

catch wayward cars like his. The red flag goes up, and all the other cars making practice laps coast into pit lane to wait until Kristensen has been towed out of the way.

"I got into the gravel pretty deep," he tells me sheepishly back at the garage. "They had to hook three ropes together so the truck could reach me."

Then he sits down in front of a whiteboard in the air-conditioned clubhouse, nodding humbly as instructor Nick Winthrop points out his mistakes without mincing words. "Gotta concentrate, keep it smooth," Kristensen mutters to himself as Winthrop walks away, leaving him to ponder his errors.

Kristensen, like many, is keen to realise a dream, one that he's already invested too much in to back out of now. The upcoming weekend of racing is just the first of several steps that have already been put into

motion. In Malaysia, his 1981 Porsche 924 is in pieces, spread across a mechanic's shop, stripped to the core, ready to be rebuilt as a classic race car for the track. He hopes it will soon be ready, as he has already signed up for the summer season of racing in the Asia Classic Car Challenge on the Sepang International Circuit, and has bought the racing suit and gear. Now he just has to learn how to drive a racecar – fast.

"I am a bit of a petrolhead and I love cars," explains Kristensen, who is also an avid yacht-racer. "I haven't had the finances before this. In Asia it is an expensive sport. Had I been in Europe, I would probably have been involved earlier in life."

There is no racetrack in Hong Kong, so drivers consider Zhuhai or Sepang their home tracks. Winthrop, a former motorcycle racer and founder of

the Track Torque driving school, has seen his share of dreamers. Only about 10 per cent of the punters who come in for a track day end up coming back on a regular basis and making a hobby of it. He currently has about 20 gentleman drivers under his wing, all of them paying for the pleasure of living the dream.

“In Asia, a lot of these businessmen are used to having things done their way, having things done exactly right, and they’re willing to pay money to have it that way,” he says. “They pay the money, and they expect you to deliver. And that means that status and winning is a very important end result. It’s a bit of a different approach and attitude to the racing scene in the UK, for example.”

The men who take part – women remain rare in the sport – come from all walks of life. In their mid 40s and early 50s, all have generated the wealth needed to play the game. Some are expat executives who got their first taste of racing in the UK or Europe. Others are successful Hong Kong businessmen who come to Zhuhai for a regular dose of speed. Most of the men have made a gamble or two in their lives, from starting businesses to brush boardroom tactics, and getting behind the wheel of a racecar is an extension of that attitude.

Winthrope coaches new drivers in a variety of ways, such as lead and follow, where the student follows the instructor around the track to learn the race lines and braking marks, or he puts students in the passenger seat to observe the instructor driving the course. Sometimes they come back to the clubhouse and pore over data downloaded from the car’s computer, which reveals their driving habits.

“Some of them come here and they really want to learn and get better, and then some of them eventually find out they really just don’t have it, they don’t have the skill, and they finally leave. It’s pretty hard for some of them to realise that,” Winthrope says. “It pays off to

keep coming. Most of those who come on a regular basis slowly but steadily get faster.”

Lined up on the grid at the Asia Classic Car Challenge (ACCC) are the likes of Erwin Boon, an executive director at ABN AMRO Bank, driving a Lola T590 Sports car, or Wilson Ning, managing director of Well Sino International, who chooses from a stable of classic cars. Emil Klingelfuss, chairman of watch company Swiss Prestige, describes himself as a “passionate motorsport enthusiast and collector of classic cars” and races a Porsche 911.

A stroll through the trackside garages in Zhuhai reveals a small but vibrant club-racing scene, with a heavy emphasis on front-wheel-drive compact cars. Clio Cup, Ford Focus Cup, Scirocco Cup – all of them driven by amateur drivers, most of whom pay their own way. One step up are the Formula Renault and Audi R8 classes, often helmed by semi-professional drivers who bend wrenches and work at the track to pay their way. One-make cup championships run both professional and non-professional drivers using the latest racing technology. They involve professionally run teams with significant budgets that often require full sponsorship programmes.

Track Torque driving school uses Ginetta G20s, a classic rear-wheel-drive open-top British racing car. And Winthrope is working to develop a Chinese-built version of the car called the TTX, taking the best of the G20 and upgrading it in the hope of creating a new local class.

Classic car racing, by contrast, tends to be more economical than one-make racing, allowing some drivers to operate as one-man teams. It therefore caters to amateur drivers who have an affinity for their specific cars – such as Kristensen with his 1981 Porsche – with racing results taking a back seat to enthusiasm for classic sports cars.

“Some guys come here because they want to race against others in the same type of car, to compete in a championship. Others want to win a race, and money is no object, they’re willing to do chequebook racing. Everyone who comes has his own desires and goals,” Winthrope says.

In 2013, about 40 different drivers participated in the ACCC. An average of about 20 cars were on the starting grid for each race. Interest has been growing.

“In 2014, we already have 27 entries confirmed and are expecting several more cars for the full season, with a number more who will participate in the occasional few rounds,” says Daniel Bilski, chairman of the Classic Car Club of Hong Kong, which organises the ACCC. When not behind the wheel of his Porsche 911, Bilski is the head of finance and operations at Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

The Hong Kong-based club has raced on tracks around China and Southeast Asia, and started holding events in Sepang in 2002. “To race on an F1 circuit,



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- Torben Kristensen



TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

1. Use the whole width of the track – following the best race line demands it.
2. Slow the car down for corners using both the engine and the brakes.
3. Enter the corners slow, exit them fast.
4. Guard yourself against sensory overload. Focus only on the best racing line.
5. Memorise the track so that you can anticipate the next corner before you see it.



01 Winners live the dream at the Pan Delta Super Racing Festival in Zhuhai.

02 Torben Kristensen prepares to race in his Ginetta G20.

03 Post-race decompression for Torben Kristensen and the Track Torque support team.

especially one widely respected as a technical driver’s circuit, adds a lot to the racing experience of our drivers,” Bilski says.

It also allows the club’s amateur racers to rub shoulders with more competitive series, such as the Malaysian Super Series, Ferrari Challenge Asia Pacific, Lamborghini Super Trofeo Asia, Porsche Carrera Cup Asia and GT Asia.

The second practice session of the day in Zhuhai has begun, and Kristensen has a look of determination as he folds himself into the cramped cockpit. He has half an hour of track time to reach his target lap time of 2:04. He exits pit lane with a “blatrrrr, blatrrrr” of the engine, and the Track Torque staff take up their position along the pit lane wall, stopwatches in hand.

His times on the first few laps show very little

improvement, and I’m beginning to feel disappointed for him. Then his tyres become soft and sticky, the engine warms up and the seconds fall away. He clocks a 2:06, then a 2:05 and then, finally, a 2:04. But the session isn’t over, and in his remaining six laps he steadily whittles away at the time.

Winthrope is there to greet Kristensen back at the garage, wordlessly holding the time sheet in front of Kristensen’s face as he pulls his helmet off. He squints at the numbers, wiping sweat from his brow. “Wow! That was worth it,” Kristensen exclaims, a huge smile spreading across his face. “2:02! That was even better than I hoped for.”

Winthrope chuckles and slaps Kristensen on the back before returning to the task of preparing the car for the weekend races. ☺