Playing With Bugs

Racing is serious business, but it should still put a smile on your face. With limits on costs, an emphasis on camaraderie and grin-inducing VW Beetle silhouette bodywork, the Fun Cup series aims to do just that.

by JEFF GLENN photography by DAVID NEWHARDT

Starting a racing series is always an uphill battle, at any level. In 1997, Franz Dubois started his own spec series in Belgium based on the successful model of endurance karting: multiple drivers, long races and cars with minimal adjustability and sealed components.

Dubois was involved in running Belgium's factory Audi team, so it's no surprise he went with Volkswagen and Audi street-car bits as the basis for his affordable full-scale endurance racers. The conglomeration of street parts was mounted to a tube frame chassis wrapped in an absurd-looking, but loveable, old-school Volkswagen Beetle skin rendered in fiberglass. He built more than ten cars, got them FIA certified and staged several endurance events. He called the series Fun Cup for its emphasis on the camaraderie associated with multiple drivers sharing a single car, the close racing resulting from identical specification and for keeping costs and hassles to a minimum.

Fast forward ten years. Over 300 Fun Cup cars have been sold and the franchise, with the help of tiremaker Uniroyal, has expanded from Belgium to France, England, Italy, Spain, Germany and the Canary Islands, with five to six races taking place per year in each country. Races typically see grids of 40-50 cars, but the crown jewel event of the series, the 25 hours of Spa-Francorchamps, had a ridiculous 175 cars start last year.

For Spa, the grid is lined up by practice times, but in many of the events the starting positions are drawn out of a hat, which ensures plenty of action. To further keep things even, there are scheduled pit windows, and even if you're not changing drivers, the driver has to hop out and run around the car, or be involved in the fueling.

Greg Clough discovered the series back in 1998, and with a team consisting of two other friends, raced in it for five years. Now he's bringing it to the U.S., under the banner of Fun Cup Inc. "Before I found the Fun Cup," says Clough, "I was racing Radicals in the UK. There was always some update, and without it you were moving backwards down the grid. Oh, the new dry sump gives an additional ten horsepower and costs £1,500? Right, I'll just take one of those. Oh, there's a new £300 low-downforce rear wing? I guess I need that, too."

There's no such cost escalation in Fun Cup. However, at $35,000 for a turn-key race car, Fun Cup isn't exactly cheap. But the endurance format lends itself to sharing costs, Clough reminds us. Usually, two to four racers will split the car and costs, and with races of three, four, six and 25 hours, there's more potential seat time than in a season of sprint races.

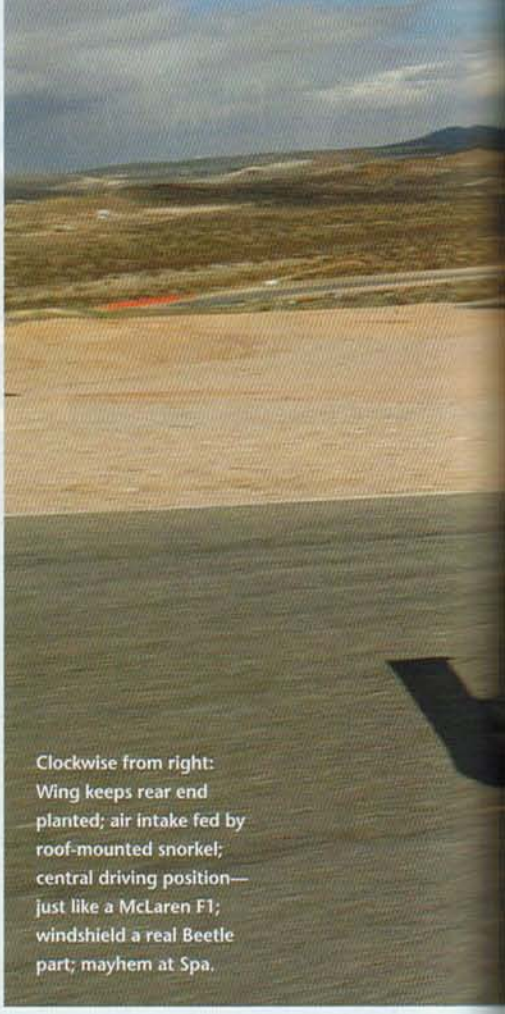
Like birds isolated on the Galapagos Islands, there are a few evolutionary differences between European Fun Cup cars and the New World variety—purely the result of parts sourcing. Over there, the cars run carbureted 1.8-liter water-cooled VW inline-4s coupled with Audi transmissions. Here, a 2.0-liter fuel-injected VW lump is mated to a VW tranny. A 5-speed Passat unit, this gearbox receives beefed-up selector shafts for enhanced reliability. Though the sealed engine's output is fixed at 150 horsepower, it has only 1,700 pounds to propel.

The U.S version runs on E-85 ethanol fuel, an idea that struck Clough after watching "An Inconvenient Truth" on a flight to Europe. As a result, the motor is fitted with an aftermarket ECU, as well as injectors, fuel lines and a fuel pump specifically designed for the alcohol-based fuel. The most time-consuming piece of the fuel conversion puzzle was identifying a fuel cell that would work with the ethanol. Fuel Safe came up with a cross-linked polymer bladder that does the trick.

Clough has a fabricator in Ventura, California building the frames on approved jigs from the European series. Most of the mechanicals are straight from the VW parts bin, helping keep maintenance and replacement costs low. For example, the major suspension bits (e.g., uprights, tie-rod ends, brakes) are Golf- and Passat-based. The only items that actually come from a Beetle are the windshield and wiper motor.

Another way the series keeps costs down is by carefully selecting consumables based on longevity. Brake pads are semi-metallic performance street pads ($42 per pair) that reduce rotor wear, and instead of expensive "R" compound tires, a high-performance all-season tire (the BF Goodrich G-force Radial, at $75 each) was chosen for its decent grip, long life and the fact that it can be used in both dry and wet conditions. The wheels are steel ($75 each). The domestically produced fiberglass body mounts in several pieces. The $150 front spoiler—the first thing that will inevitably be damaged in an off-road incident—is fastened with nylon bolts that are designed to break away and not damage the large $699 fiberglass nose. Clough expects the engine to last two full seasons between $1,800 rebuilds.

Limited adjustability keeps the focus on driver skill. Other than air pressure in the tires, mods are restricted to ride height adjustment and choice of soft, medium or



Clockwise from right: Wing keeps rear end planted; air intake fed by roof-mounted snorkel; central driving position—just like a McLaren F1; windshield a real Beetle part; mayhem at Spa.

hard spring. "We found that after you get familiar with the car, the softest spring, despite the additional body lean, produced the best grip for us," Clough said. The Bilstein dampers are non-adjustable.

We drove the U.S.-spec car on the new "Horse Thief Mile" track at Willow Springs on an uncommonly stormy February afternoon. The rain held off just long enough to get in some photography, but then let loose with a heavy downpour just before my time on track. Fortunately, the tires were made for this stuff, and the track was fairly new and green—meaning no oil to avoid.

The car's driving position is a bit atypical if you're used to low-slung sports racers, as you sit bolt upright. The steering wheel pops straight out of a vertical dash that turns into a vertical windshield. Unlike many purpose-built racers, the Fun Cup car's central seating position and generous headroom afforded by the Beetle shape make it quite roomy—no worries of claustrophobia here. The tall shifter is well placed to your right.

To fire it up, you turn the battery cut-off switch on the dash and push the start button. The engine fires immediately and sounds more purposeful than stock through the stainless-steel headers. The digital readout displays engine rpm, in bar-graph form, along with engine vitals.

The track configuration is tight, with massive elevation changes between several second-gear corners and a third-into-fourth gear bend. The wet conditions hampered my exploration of the car's limits, but still provided a vivid picture of the chassis' rock-solid balance. A light touch on the throttle at corner entry led to a little understeer, but with a snap off the throttle, the rear came around to tighten the line. Getting right back on the throttle held the slip angle just as it would in a lower-slung mid-engine racer; big drift angles could be held with additional throttle input. The BF Goodrich tires never hunted or hydroplaned, and the brakes were surprisingly good in the wet.

Gear changes are on the slow side, but this isn't surprising since the Fun Cup car does without a race 'box. One thing that needs some additional massaging is the throttle linkage. The pedal is so stiff that it feels like an on-off switch. This would probably be no big deal in the dry, but it proved problematic in the wet: When trying to feather the throttle through one section of the track, the motor would cut off—a combination of the stiff pedal and a fuel-saving algorithm in the ECU that stops fuel delivery in off-throttle situations. (Clough hadn't had a chance to drive the U.S.-spec car in the wet yet, and when he did, he experienced the same glitch.)

My second main criticism is the car's heavy unassisted steering; a lot of effort was require to negotiate the Horse Thief's tight corners. But as with the throttle issue, this is a minor detail that can be easily sorted. Clough acknowledged the problem, and mentioned he may go with another pinion gear in the rack to lighten up the helm.

As I continued to lap the car and the rain eased, I caught myself laughing. While not lightning fast, the Fun Cup car is quick, responsive and, well, fun to drive. The street-tire formula allows the car to move around a bit more than it would on race tires, so there's more time to catch slides—good for beginners and experienced racers alike.

Fun Cup participants will be able to buy cars and run them themselves, or rent them for an event or the entire season and have the series prep and transport the cars. Prices for each event are worked out at *www.fun-cup.com*. To get things started here, Fun Cup will become a class in NASA's West Coast endurance series, but the intention is to create standalone races and go nationwide. Spec series come and go, but there are 300 reasons running around overseas that suggest this formula might just work out here. ●