

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 31: “Formula-BMW USA: For the Future of Racing

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To compete successfully at the top levels of motorsport, you need more than well-developed machinery. You also need well-developed drivers. When BMW re-entered Formula One in 2000, its need for young talent became acute. Having focused on production-based racing since ending its partnership with Brabham in 1986, BMW Motorsport had no real pipeline for drivers in open-wheel formulae. Although the company had been supplying engines to Germany’s highly-regarded Formula BMW ADAC (Allgemeiner Deutscher Automobil Club) junior series since 1991, it needed a more comprehensive involvement to achieve its driver-development goals.

In 2001, BMW Motorsport moved to do exactly that. Taking over the ADAC series altogether, BMW would provide not just engines but complete cars. At the same time, BMW created a unique organizational structure designed to help young drivers—age 15 years or older, with no prior international racing experience other than karting—build professional careers through its education and coaching program located at two Formula BMW Racing Centers in Valencia, Spain, and Bahrain. The new Formula BMW series began running in 2002, with races in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Its first champion, Nico Rosberg, won the title as a rookie; he’d make it to Formula One in 2006, and he became F1 world champion ten years later. In 2003, F-BMW added a series in Asia, and Ho-Pin Tung was crowned champion; he’d become a test driver for BMW Williams and BMW Sauber F1.



Shortly after the 2003 season got underway, BMW Motorsport Director Dr. Mario Theissen decided that the series should expand to the UK and North America for 2004. BMW of North America VP of Marketing Jim McDowell agreed, and preparations began for the debut of Formula BMW USA the following year.

McDowell tapped Alex Schmuck to organize the series, a formidable responsibility for a young marketing manager. “It was a big lift, but Schmuck had a passion for motorsports, and incredible amounts of experience in karting,” said Tom Salkowsky, then BMW NA’s team leader for Experiential Marketing.

Schmuck announced the series at the Long Beach Grand Prix on April 13, 2003, hoping to entice ChampCar teams to fund a junior program in Formula BMW USA for the following season. “We had a very short lead time, and we didn’t have a sanctioning body or a schedule when we went out to sell cars,” Schmuck said. “I said, ‘Listen, we’re racing in F1, we’re dedicated to motorsports, and we want to do this in the US,’ but it was a tough sell.”

Schmuck’s task was made challenging by Formula BMW’s high cost of



entry compared to other junior series. The price of a car was set at \$64,000, plus \$20,000 for spare parts and \$20,000 per entry for the season. With travel and other expenses, a full season of racing could cost up to \$200,000—a hefty sum for a driver age

15 to 23.



The cars themselves were certainly worth the money, being far more sophisticated than the steel tube-framed cars most youngsters would drive after moving up

from karting. Penned by Michael Scully at BMW Designworks/USA in California, the F-BMW race cars were manufactured by Mygale in France. With a safe and strong carbon-Kevlar composite tubs, the BMW Motorsport-developed Formula Rescue Seat, and accommodation for a HANS device, each F-BMW exceeded FIA safety requirements for the class.

Power for the 1,003-pound race car was supplied by a 1,171cc K 1200 RS four-cylinder BMW motorcycle engine, mounted behind the driver and delivering 140 horsepower and 86 pound-feet through a single-plate clutch and a Hewland six-speed sequential gearbox. The double-wishbone suspension had adjustable dampers at all four corners; brake bias and aerodynamic downforce were also adjustable, with assistance from Pi Systems' onboard data recording.

Schmuck and his Formula BMW USA Team worked the phones, reaching out to teams in the US and Canada. Among the first to say yes were Indy 500 winner Bobby Rahal, who created the one-car Vitesse team for his son Graham, and Tom Milner, whose Prototype Technology Group ran BMW's M3 program in the American Le Mans Series. Milner agreed to field a team of four cars, one of which would be driven by his son, Tommy Junior.

"That really showed the North American market that if people like Rahal and Milner are going to participate, this is a series that will come to fruition," Schmuck said. Indeed it did. While enlisting teams to participate, Schmuck negotiated a sanctioning deal with Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART),

then North America's premier open-wheel racing series. In 14 races over seven weekends in 2004, Formula BMW would race in support of three CART



races, the F1 Grands Prix of Canada and the US, and two American Le Mans Series races.

“That was by design,” Schmuck said. “CART gave us a fantastic deal, which allowed us to get in front of three audiences. BMW was competing with the M3 in ALMS, and we had access to Formula One races in the US and Canada. That made it much more appealing for teams to participate.” As the start of the season drew closer, Schmuck still hadn’t secured enough cars to complete the grid. On McDowell’s suggestion, he called BMW dealers and racing team owners Roger Penske and Rick Hendrick, both of whom declined to participate but agreed to buy a car that BMW could provide to a promising young driver. That would be especially helpful for drivers of limited resources, as would winning one of the six \$40,000 scholarships awarded by BMW Motorsport following the pre-season licensing school in Valencia. In its first year, Formula BMW USA provided scholarships to Trevor Daley, Billy Johnson, Graham Rahal, James Hinchcliffe, Tommy Milner, and Jonathan Summerton, none of whom were older than 17.

When the season started at Lime Rock on May 31, 2004, Schmuck and his Formula BMW USA team had persuaded seven teams to enter 16 cars, and an eighth joined later in the season with two more cars. Both races were won by Andreas Wirth, a 20-year-old German who’d finished ninth in F-BMW Europe in 2002 and tenth in 2003. Wirth would win two more races and the first F-BMW USA title, beating Rookie Cup winner Hinchcliffe and Summerton to the \$20,000 prize.

More teams joined for the second season, and as many as two dozen cars comprised the grids for



support races at the Canadian and US Grands Prix. France's Richard Philippe took the 2005 title, followed by Canadians Robert Wickens in 2006 and Daniel Morad in 2007, American Alexander Rossi in 2008, and Colombian Gabby Chaves in 2009. From 2005 to 2009, those winners and their closest competitors would face off against their counterparts from the other F-BMW series at the Formula BMW World Final, the winner awarded a test in one of BMW's Formula One cars.

In its final two seasons, Formula BMW USA was renamed Formula BMW Americas following the addition of a race weekend in Mexico. Only eleven drivers competed in all twelve races of 2009, none of which ran in support of F1. The global financial crisis that had begun in 2008 was still affecting new-car sales, and the entire industry was tightening its belt. At the end of 2009, BMW Motorsport withdrew from Formula One, pulling the plug on Formula BMW, as well.

The series may have ended in 2009, but its legacy continues to be felt throughout motorsport. Formula BMW was far more than simply a step up from karting, and it offered far more than just track time and competition. "Formula BMW offered young drivers an education, which other series didn't," Schmuck said. "We offered them a coach for physical fitness—Jim Leo, who does a lot of work with IndyCar drivers—and advice about nutrition. We gave them PR training with Bill Cobb, doing on-camera interviews and asking them to prepare a presentation on approaching sponsors. We also gave them access to our factory drivers, to hear how they'd progressed through their careers, and access to Mario Theissen, so they could hear from an F1 boss what's important to him as a team manager, and what he looks for in a driver. That's access that no other race series had, and no other race series had a direct path into an F1 test session."



Beyond access, Formula BMW USA provided competitors with structure. “In typical BMW fashion, we had thought out the details from the layout of the paddock to the protocol from when the drivers

and teams arrived at the track to when they left the circuit,” Salkowsky said.

The professional-level paddock included a hospitality tent that hosted media events, and where drivers and their families could socialize, eat, and entertain sponsors. “It really set a new benchmark in terms of what a junior race series could provide, and it provided a real sense of community,” Schmuck said.

The series honed young drivers’ communication skills, not only with sponsors but with engineers. Thanks to the adjustability of the F-BMW car’s suspension, gearbox, and aerodynamics, Schmuck said, “The driver had to work with the team to set the car up every weekend, to get the highest performance for the track, the weather, etc.”

That in itself tended to separate those who’d been fast in non-adjustable karts from those with the technical and analytical skills needed in professional car racing. As a result, those who did well in Formula BMW often went on to long careers as professional drivers.

“For me, the greatest thing was being able to see how we were able to

indirectly affect or make possible careers in motorsports through this program,” Schmuck said. “James Hinchcliffe, Graham Rahal, Billy Johnson... Tommy Milner might not have become a professional driver without this program, but he had the talent, worked hard, and became a successful sports car driver, winning the 24 Hours of Daytona and the 24 Hours of Le Mans twice. Robert Wickens won the series in his second year, and became a global Red Bull driver and went on to drive in DTM and in the IndyCar Series. Alexander Rossi went on to win the Indy 500 after starting in Formula BMW USA.”

Other F-BMW USA graduates include Esteban Gutiérrez, who raced in F1 with Haas, and IndyCar driver Simona de Silvestro. Worldwide, F-BMW alumni include F1 world champions Sebastian Vettel and the aforementioned Nico Rosberg, plus current and former F1 drivers Ralf Schumacher, Sebastian Buemi, Timo Glock, Nico Hulkenberg, Sergio Pérez, Daniil Kvyat, Marcus Ericsson, Daniel Ricciardo, Carlos Sainz Jr., and many more who’ve competed successfully in other professional series.

Formula BMW USA had a positive effect on BMW of North America, too. It cemented BMW’s place in North American motorsport, and it communicated BMW’s brand values to motorsport enthusiasts. “I think it made a connection, created a vertical structure in which the base is BMW,” said Salkowsky, “We’re a brand for drivers, we have these wonderful street cars, which extend to racing with the M3 and elevate to the pinnacle of motorsport in F1. And Formula BMW gave us the ability to communicate that not only do we do this at the highest level, but at the entry level. Who but BMW could do this?”

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