

Escape Road

Class reunion: Formula Junior toasts its 25th

By Alex Gabbard

This year marks the 25th anniversary of a type of racing that allowed many people to experience the thrill of open-wheel racing at a modest cost. Although Formula Junior was conceived in Italy as a means of training aspiring Italian drivers to Formula One caliber, it spread worldwide and found itself the focus of intense competition.

To celebrate the advent of Formula Junior, the Southeast Vintage Racing Association (SVRA) held its Summer Meeting at Mid-Ohio and drew a list of 31 Juniors (among 135 entries) that showed the evolution of the breed from earliest to last. This was probably the largest collection of F-Jr cars in modern times. Honored guests in the celebration were none other than John Cooper and Frank Nichols. Both men built long-lasting reputations on the caliber of cars they built, F-Jr being one type.

Beginning in 1946 and lasting into 1969, the Cooper Car Co. produced a number of revolutionary racing car designs that challenged all formulae from F-500 to F1.

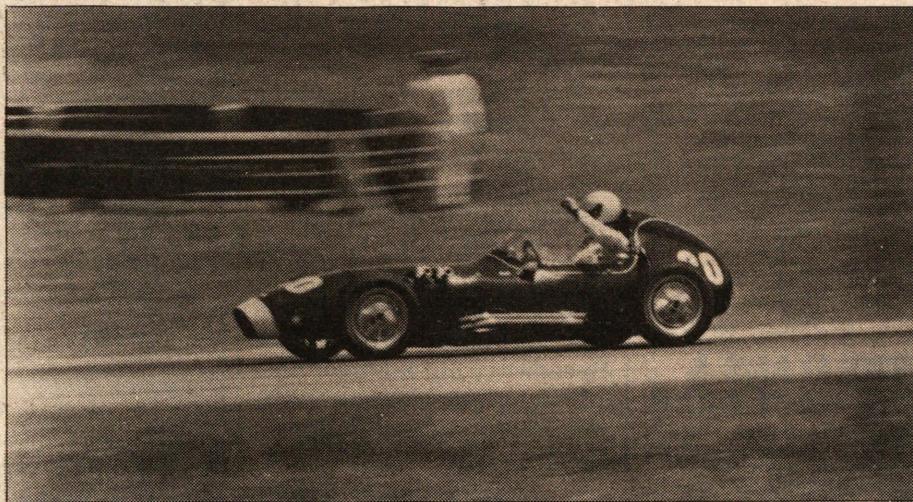
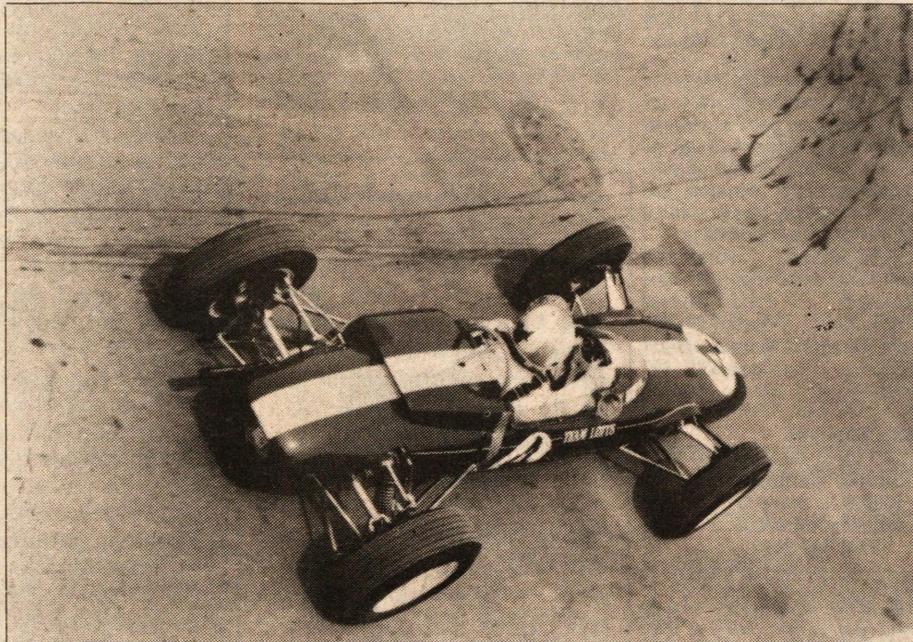
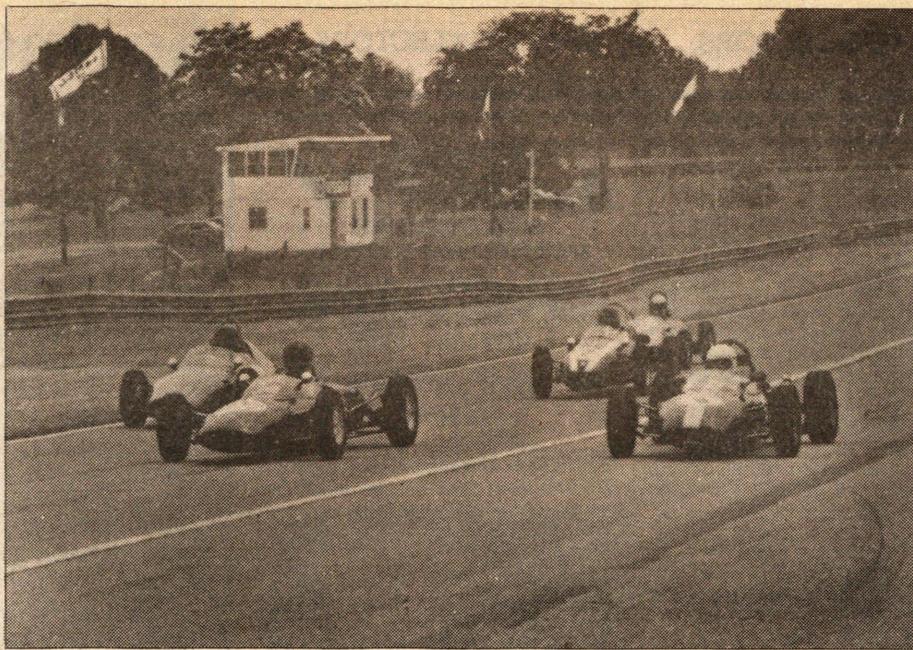
Frank Nichols built the famous ELVA cars, the name derived from the French *elle va*, meaning "she goes." Like Cooper, Nichols built his first Juniors along the lines of Britain's newly instituted (1959) Monoposto Formula using the BMC 948cc pushrod OHV four-cylinder—the Austin-Healey Sprite engine.

Formula 500 and 750 racing, based on motorcycle engines of those capacities, became fierce battlegrounds during the decade following the last world war, and therefore exciting events for spectators. But the step to the next level of formula racing was rather great. Thus, there was a need for an intermediate formula that produced more powerful cars, yet not so demanding as F1. Part of the reason for the origin of Formula Junior was a response to that need.

Another ingredient in the rise of F-Jr was Cooper's Formula 500 cars' domination of the small-engine class. Since cars from all marques were produced largely by individual effort in backyard shops, for one marque to dominate tended to quell interest.

However, the Italians had a more urgent need for F-Jr. The last great Italian drivers up to the mid-1950s were retired with no replacements of their caliber. Yet Italy continued to produce world-class cars. Thus, in November 1956, a meeting was held in San Remo to discuss proposals for a new single-seater schoolroom class of cars. From that, Formula Junior began in Italy as a means of training aspiring Italian drivers for Formula One racing.

Italy's lead in F-Jr came to fruition in 1958 when the Automobile Club of Rome established the "Luigi Musso Driving School," with Giuseppe Farina as chief instructor. Italy had a number of top marques, Ferrari, Maserati and OSCA for instance, but was lacking in championship-caliber drivers. The



Alex Gabbard photos

Formula Juniors frolic around Mid-Ohio: Going into battle around turn one (top); a bird's-eye view of a 1963 Lotus 27 F-Jr (center); a 1959 Elva (bottom) —about as low as you can go with the engine up front.

purpose of the school was to train such drivers who were to bring world drivers' championships to Italy, hopefully in Italian cars. The school was set up in Modena by Mimmo Dei, who had top (but foreign) drivers—Masten Gregory, Carroll Shelby, Jo Bonnier and others—driving for him. Dei moved his operations to the track and acquired the services of Louis Chiron as master and two of Maserati's top mechanics. With Chiron and the best available support, Dei put together the best of schools for aspiring drivers.

Costs were high (\$75 plus \$50 a day), and driving experience was required. That kept out fun-seekers. A variety of cars were used for training, starting with a 750cc Fiat Zagato. Next was an 1,100cc Ermini followed by a 1,500cc OSCA, a four-cylinder and a six-cylinder

Maserati, a two-liter Ferrari and a Stanguellini F-Jr all leading up to F1 training.

The Stanguellini was among the earliest of the F-Jr cars and met with considerable success. Fitted with front-mounted 1,100cc Fiat engines in mild tune with side draft Weber carburetors, the cars were spirited performers. With smaller everything, the Stanguellini looked like a scaled-down F1 Ferrari of the '50s era. Recall that drivers sat upright in those days, because the cars had yet to become low-slung. They were capable of speeds over 120 MPH, and with nimble handling they were fun cars.

Formula Junior became an official international class of racing in 1959. The single-seat, open-wheel formula was then based on production one-liter engines with a

minimum car weight of 792 pounds, or 1,100cc production engines powering cars of 880 pounds, with all other Italian national requirements surviving. Although British interest was minimal at first (Colin Chapman was originally opposed to the formula, while John Cooper was enthusiastic), Formula Junior found its niche by providing that more powerful, reasonably inexpensive alternative to smaller engine classes. Because of heavy taxes on complete cars in Britain, Cooper and other builders delivered their cars in kit form for tax-free assembly by purchasers. With BMC's little engine cranking out 70bhp at 6,500 RPM, the British Juniors were spirited performers. However, in 1959 they were much less well-developed than the Italian cars, although there was a great distinction between them: The British cars had their engines in the back.

Although originally meant to be low-cost, in time Formula Junior evolved into sophisticated low-slung and expensive racing machines, and the cars inched closer to the lap times of F1 cars of the day. Because they offered such high levels of performance, Juniors attracted such top drivers as Stirling Moss, Jimmy Clark, John Surtees, Jack Brabham, Denny Hulme, Bruce McLaren, Jochen Rindt, Mike Hawthorne and many others.

Because of Italy's lead in the class, 1959 was dominated by Italian cars—Stanguellini, Taraschi, Volpini, OSCA, Bandini and others powered by Fiat engines. The Stanguellini were built in Modena and looked very much like scaled-down front-engine F1 Ferraris. Aluminum body coachwork was by Carrozzeria Gransport (Vaccari and Baccarini).

The Stanguellini was fitted with drum brakes and two sizes of wire wheels with the smaller in front. Its engine was offset slightly, allowing the positioning of a foot box along side on the left. The transmission was right-hand shifted, and the entire car was laid out in small proportions, so much that when Briggs Cunningham imported his first Stanguellini into the U.S. in 1959, he was surprised to learn that he couldn't fit into the car.

By 1960, the rear-engine revolution had taken hold of Formula Junior with Cooper Mk I and Lotus 18 monopostos leading the way. To counter the Brits, Italian builders produced their own rear-engine cars, Wainer and DeTomaso-Isis being examples. The level of sophistication by 1961, the Isis for instance, included an OSCA 1,098cc engine equipped with twin DCOA Weber carburetors, a five-speed transmission with quick-change rear axles, four-wheel adjustable suspension, alloy wheels and a lower, sleeker body very similar to that of contemporary F1 cars. All this came race-ready for \$5,800, a rather remarkable value for the level of competition available.

After a life span of just five years, Formula racing rules were changed. Formula Two, with its larger engines, had emerged and displaced F-Jr. The Juniors were absorbed into that formula, closing an interesting chapter in single-seat racing. In that five-year span, Lotus won 100 of some 250 Formula Junior races run. Cooper took 58, Stanguellini 20, Brabham 17 and Lola 12. The remainder were distributed among a dozen other marques.

