

A RUSS OF BLOOD TO THE HEAD

Beached on a kerb on a wet track outside Moscow, RICHARD ASHER realises his talent isn't half as impressive as arrive-and-drive series Formula Russia



Asher with Russian heavyweights Mikhail Ukhov (left) and Yuri Kim



Ignoring Myachkovo's fleet of decommisioned planes is key to a decent lap time in Formula Russia

TECH SPEC

FORMULA RUSSIA

CHASSIS	AKKC Motorsport spaceframe
ENGINE	2.0-litre Alfa Romeo Twin Spark 16v four-cylinder production
POWER	157bhp at 6400rpm
TORQUE	138lb ft at 3500rpm
GEARBOX	32.7kg Hewland LD200-5, H-pattern, five-speed, aluminium die-cast
TYRES	Dunlop S95 slicks (made in UK)
BRAKES	AKKC Motorsport/Brembo discs, Ferodo brake pads
SUSPENSION	AKKC Motorsport double wishbones, adjustable rollbars front and rear, AKKC/Sachs shock absorbers
WEIGHT	550kg (without driver)
0-100MPH	4sec

Racing around a distant circuit in a faraway country isn't in itself particularly weird. It's only when you actually crash that the foreignness of it all really hits you. Getting beached on one of Myachkovo's Lego-like kerbstones allows me to take it all in. Until now, I've been lost in the same thought that unites racers in every corner of the globe – where can I go faster? I haven't even noticed the ex-Aeroflot museum pieces on the airfield at the end of the back straight.

Now I've got a moment to look around. It's wet and my rear wheels refuse to go anywhere except deeper into the mud. This is not a good place to be – I'm pretty much on the racing line at the exit of a corner, and we're in the last couple of minutes of qualifying.

I ponder getting out and running for it, but decide I'd probably fall over on the track. Better wait for help – at least there's a yellow flag out. The other cars are missing me – but only by inches. Then it's session over and the Russian marshals are heading my way. They aren't going to want a conversation are they? Thankfully they're strong, silent types – they give me a push and I'm on my way to the pits.

How did I land up here? After nearly five hours spent as a refugee in Moscow airport two days earlier (visa issues, don't ask...) I'd escaped into town, where Formula Russia creator Yuri Kim took me for my first (and probably last) visit to a race workshop at 1.30 in the morning. I get to see where the one-

make spaceframe chassis are built and mated to their two-litre Alfa Romeo production engines. I also see Kim's macabre collection of crashed cars – and meet the works cat.

Next day we're at the circuit bright and early for testing. Formula Russia is a Formula Palmer Audi-style arrive-and-drive series: €5,000 (!) gets you seven three-day weekends. The cars are tended by some surprisingly efficient and attentive mechanics. I know this because I don't speak much Russian, yet from my seat fitting to the end of the weekend they always seem to know what I want. All I have to do is drive.

To me, Myachkovo had always been just another venue in our World of Sport pages. This fine Friday morning it turns real. For three 20-minute sessions I learn my way around a long track that tests all departments, particularly kerb-hopping through its sequences of 90-degree corners. There's also the tightest hairpin I've seen outside Macau, a flat-out left-hander that takes some building up to and a very quick right-left where I will lose time all weekend as I fail to put my trust in the slicks, wings and diffuser.

Seeing the bare spaceframe in the workshop had been a little scary, but I forget all that once I'm in the car. It gives me immediate confidence – I don't fear it biting or snapping as I might in a more powerful Formula 3 car. I'm able to catch slides and it rides the kerbs well – it reminds me of the bewinged Van Diemen Formula Ford car I'd driven at Silverstone a few days earlier. The Hewland gearbox is clunky but hard to break, and the production Alfa starts every time.

Getting near the limit wakes me up, but only in the most predictable way – it's a great car to learn in.

I spend Friday gently chipping away at my times, working out which gears to use and getting berated by Yuri for not concentrating on my corner exits. He has a point – by the end of the day I've already thrown it into turn one too fast and gone bouncing through the run-off, which at that part of the track resembles an overgrown golf links – bunkers included.

My plan for Saturday is to get on terms with the tail-enders, but the rain makes both qualifying sessions a write-off. I can't do the wet. I spin a lot and end session one with my beaching episode. I'll be starting both races at the back.

Aside from some hairy moments getting lapped by the Formula 1600 brigade, my first overseas races are quiet affairs. I'm not lost in either, but in truth it's only because others had incidents. The races turn into an extension of my testing; I'm just chasing lap times. Satisfaction itself is logging my quickest lap of the weekend on the last lap of race two. Exactly four seconds off the fastest lap of the race.

It's enough to give me hope that I'll have someone to race against if I ever return. I've worked hard to get this close, and I've got a new respect for Russian racing. Formula Russia is a fun, cheap, bulletproof and low-key way to start out in single-seaters. Email Galina Bogdanova on info@f-rus.ru if you fancy showing the Russians that not every foreign visitor is out to block the road halfway around their last-ditch qualifying lap. ■



Honda Accord driver Aleksander Lvov (4) is one of the major stars of the RTCC

BEAR NECESSITIES

Just one track, just one racing package – but motorsport in Russia has huge potential. By RICHARD ASHER

It's easy to dismiss Russian motorsport. There's only one circuit and only one national circuit racing package. In fact there's only one racing package full stop. And 'club' racing as we know it doesn't exist. Yet nothing is that simple in Russia. The world's largest country has yet to produce a Formula 1 driver, but surely that's going to change soon. There's some good talent and some remarkably well turned-out cars in the paddock at Myachkovo – this giant of a land might in fact be the sleeping giant of motorsport.

THE SOVIET LEGACY

You'd think that socialism and motorsport wouldn't have been the happiest of bedfellows. If the revolutionaries deemed golf to be bourgeois, what did that make our hugely expensive and self-indulgent sport? Philosophically speaking, you'd have to put it into the same category. But the practical considerations of running a totalitarian state gave motorsport an unexpected lifeline in the USSR. There was always some state money around for the development of driving talent, because good drivers would be very handy in any military campaign.

So if you were quick in the USSR, you could actually go

racing with comparative ease, both in tin-tops or the Formula Easter single-seater series. It was under the Soviets that modern-day legends like Mikhail Ukhov and Aleksander Lvov came to prominence. But no matter how good you were, leaving the Eastern Bloc was out of the question. Motorsport per se wasn't evil, but Formula 1 certainly was.



The slick-tyred Touring Light cars are Russia's answer to Stock Hatch

Or so The Party said.

New British Formula 3 champion Marko Asmer's father Toivo was among the stars who never got a serious chance to drive in the West, despite winning six Soviet titles in single-seaters. "Of course I wanted to go to Europe," says the Estonian, "but our borders were completely closed to the West. The most we could hope for was to race in the Eastern European Championship."

CHRONIC TRACK SHORTAGE

The Soviet government was scrupulously fair when it came to sharing out the motorsport among its republics. The Formula Easter chassis, for example, was built in Estonia and actually named after the Baltic state. Tracks – often temporary – were located in Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic States and occasionally Moscow or St Petersburg.

The flaw in this plan became apparent when the Soviet Union broke up. Russia itself was left without any permanent tracks, and the lack of facilities has been a problem ever since. In the 1990s the Nevskiy Ring in St Petersburg was reopened, and then Myachkovo to the south of Moscow. But the St

Petersburg venue closed (for now at least) again last year, with the football stadium around which it's built undergoing a rebuild. And then Lada pulled the plug on the street track around its giant works in Togliatti. Which leaves Myachkovo as the venue for all championship rounds.

Hopefully this state of affairs won't remain. There are some serious plans for a track in Smolensk to be up and running next year, a Moscow street race is a possibility and the Russian package promoters are talking to tracks in neighbouring countries (Finland or the Baltic States) with a view to visiting in 2008.

THE STRUCTURE OF RUSSIAN RACING TODAY

The 'national' meetings at Myachkovo consist of four categories, with the Russian Touring Car Championship the headline act. Having completed its switch to WTCC regulations this year, it's no surprise that the RTCC is the biggest crowd-puller.

But this year has also seen an unfortunate dip in numbers in the top RTCC class, with only a handful of WTCC cars running. These include Lvov and team-mate



Ageing Dallara F3 cars mix it with the Russian-built Art Tech F1507 in Formula 1600. Both use Lada engines



The entertaining one-make National Category features the locally built, and catchily named, Lada 21106

Andrey Smetskiy's Honda Accords, which made their names for JAS Motorsport on the world stage last year. The shortage of entries means the field must be propped up by the more standard Super Production cars, which make up the majority of the grid.

Arguably the best tin-top action comes in the Touring Light category, which runs a single long race with a pitstop. These 1600cc slick-shod cars are Russia's answer to Stock Hatch. As in the 750MC series, a Citroen Saxo is a good car to have, even though it has to take on some newer and more varied machinery in Russia. This includes a home-grown Lada works team (running two Kalinas), a pair of well-presented and quick Ford Fiestas in Lukoil colours, some Citroen C2s and several VW Polo GTIs, Touring Lights having mushroomed out of the VW Polo Cup in 2004.

There are single-seaters too, with a handful of Formula 3 chassis making up the Formula 1600 (previously Formula Lada) class. That means some Dallaras from around the turn of the century, but there's also a locally built chassis to challenge them. This is the Art Tech F1507, which first rolled out in 2005 and is finally getting up to Dallara-beating speed. F1600 cars don't use proper F3 engines any more (the Russian F3 championship was last run in 2002), but the race-tuned Lada 1600 does a decent impression of one. The much slower Formula Russia cars (see p62) fill out the rest of the grid.

Finally there is the colourful National Category, a one-make series for the home-grown Lada 21106. The drivers are mostly amateur gents, but that does the racing no harm at all.

THE CLOAK AND DAGGER STUFF

Political wrangling is nothing new in Russian motorsport, and this year it got so bad that the championships almost didn't happen. Race promoters had long been complaining of a lack of cooperation from the much-disliked Russian Automobile Federation, but were caught by surprise when the RAF didn't even sanction the calendar before the Federal Agency of Sport's January deadline this year.

That was the cue for six months of arguments, during which the promoters found a clever way around the problem. They got their races sanctioned by the Moscow Regional Federation, which has enough influential patrons to ensure the RAF couldn't really overrule them. The upshot – apart from the delayed June start to racing activity – is that none of the championships have national status this year. Officially they're all racing for the 'Moscow Oblast Governor's Cup' instead. It could only happen in Russia. ■

LOST CIRCUITS

Myachkovo may be the only active track in Russia at the moment, but there used to be several more



HODYNKA

Popular airfield course within Moscow city limits was lost to noise complaints. It made way for new apartment blocks



MIGALOVO

A one-off offer from this air force base prompted a lone race meeting in 2001



TOGLIATTI-RING

This popular street circuit in Lada's factory town was axed after the car manufacturer's funding of motorsport was cut in 2004



NEVSKIY RING

Build around a football stadium in St Petersburg, hosted races from 1958-77, and reopened in 1993. Closed last year, its future is in doubt



SPARROW HILLS

Build around the Moscow State University; this street circuit was the birthplace of post-Soviet Russian motorsport



LUZHNIKI

Races around the Olympic complex were briefly revived despite a fatal accident in 1965. This tight circuit was much disliked