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It's a go

New indoor kart track offers taste of open-wheel competition

By Jim Mueller
Special to the Tribune

Two-Ton Baker would have loved Chicago Indoor Racing. Remember good old Two-Ton sausaging himself into a Go-Kart for those Riverview Park commercials?

"Laugh your troubles away!"

Same sensation at Chicago Indoor Racing in Buffalo Grove, though management probably wouldn't appreciate such comparisons. CIR is no carnival Go-Kart track, they point out. That much is obvious from the moment you enter the cavernous facility and come face-to-face with a Jim Beam Indy car on a banked pedestal.

These guys are serious about their racing.

British karting entrepreneur Tony Stewart said he wants to give the Average Joe (or Jane) an open-wheel racing experience. Sit a guy in a Honda-powered Bowman racing kart one-inch off the ground. Have a gal slide through turns—and occasionally spin out. The karts produce a printout at the end of each 10-minute race showing the driver how well (or poorly) he or she has done.

Six-horsepower motors wind out to 6,000 r.p.m. and offer 25- to 35-mile-per-hour performance, though the sensation of speed is much greater, given the tightness of the track turns. CIR's British-built Bowman karts are about four inches wider than the old Sears putt-putts you remember, making them incredibly stable.

"I've never seen one flip," said Stewart, as he demonstrated a sliding stop.

CIR is all about racing and times. Horseplay is verboten. Indeed, spotters stationed along the tracks can kill engines on karts when poor sportsmanship is observed.

"That rarely ever happens," said Stewart, who shouldn't be confused with American NASCAR great Tony Stewart. He built and raced karts as a kid, moved up to running single seaters in England and Europe, then retired to design and build karting facilities.

"We set a professional tone for drivers. Everyone is issued the same red racing jumpsuit, neck brace and helmet—all quite proper. There is a briefing session required for each driver, where driving etiquette and safety rules are reviewed. They know what's expected—and they respond in the appropriate manner." (A Breathalyzer unit is kept trackside.)

Stewart entered the kart track business in the late 1980s after finishing his racing career in England and Europe. He has designed and built high-end kart tracks in Malaysia, Colombia and India; his F1 Racing facility in Boston is what attracted Chicago investors.

The concept? Take empty industrial space and retrofit it with paired tracks approximating a road race experience. (CIR typically runs 10 cars on one track and eight on the other, though each can handle up to 15 cars per heat.) Build out additional rooms for booking corporate events and private parties. Take on sponsors—Jim Beam and Red Bull. Hook up with a familiar local outfit to handle food and beverage operations—Catering by Michael. Keep evening and weekend hours available for Open Racing.

As for insisting on a Breathalyzer while being sponsored by Jim Beam, Stewart says, "Jim Beam promotes its Drink Smart [public awareness] campaign and our zero-tolerance approach to drinking and driving obviously echoes their message."

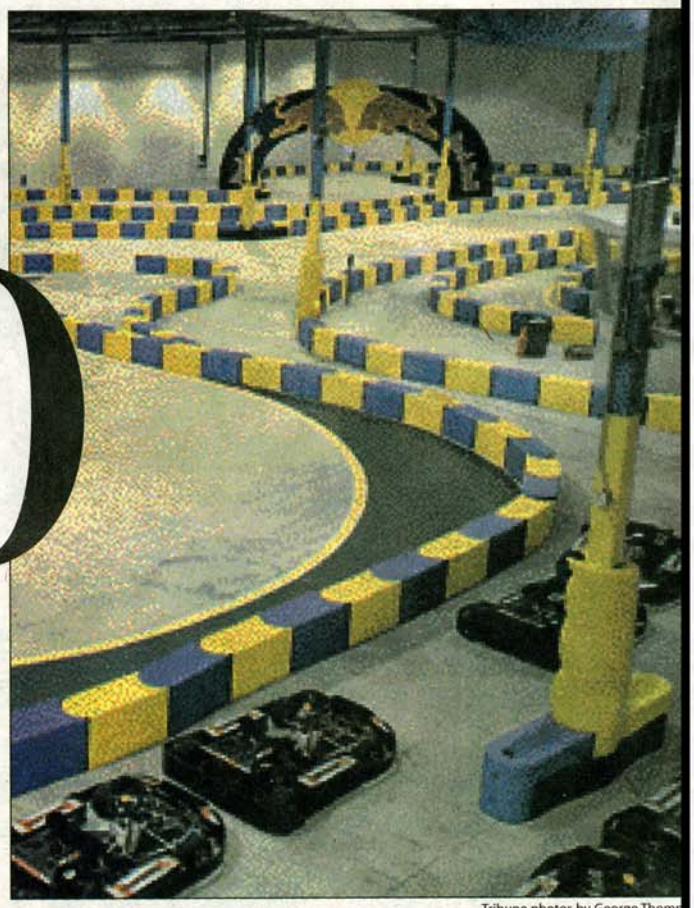
Then market the shebang to adults.

You need to be 18 and have a valid driver's license before even thinking about stepping into a Go-Kart at Chicago Indoor Racing. (Stewart did indicate CIR might offer limited Junior League Racing for kids 7-to-17 beginning in early 2004.) The facility, which opened Oct. 30, is courting private party/corporate function business.

According to Stewart, Go-Kart tracks of the CIR variety are hugely popular in Europe. He estimated there are 200 karting facilities in England and about 350 in Germany.

"It all started out so simply in the 1980s," he recalled. "Very rough indeed. Basic. Two guys would rent space and lay out a few turns and throw in a few karts and add a Coke machine. The next group opens close by with two Coke machines and a video game. That's how the business evolved to what we have at Chicago Indoor Racing."

Chicago Indoor Racing is at 301 Hastings Drive in Buffalo Grove. Call 847-941-9400 or visit www.chicagoindoorracing.com.



Tribune photos by George Thomp

Chicago Indoor Racing, an indoor Go-Kart facility in Buffalo Grove, has paired tracks approximating a road-race experience.

George Wachter tunes up one of the open-wheel karts, which have 6-h.p. motors that wind out to 6,000 r.p.m. and offer 25- to 35-m.p.h. performance.

OFF TO THE RACES

Go-carts run indoors

Can the everyman appeal of NASCAR gain some do-it-yourself traction in Chicago? In winter, no less? That's what Chicago Indoor Racing is banking on, opening its first indoor go-cart complex in the Chicago area last week in a converted warehouse in Buffalo Grove.

The $3.5 million complex boasts two tracks, one of 800 feet and another of 600 feet, with the choreographed feel of real racing: jumpsuit, helmet, lots of guys waving flags to police the drivers. With the low-riding carts going 25 to 30 m.p.h., the sensation is one of high speed, though an initial run turned up a cart with a few bugs to be worked out in its balky 200-cc Honda engine. A second attempt with a different vehicle was a hoot, with the cart squealing around the turns.

The 85,000-square-foot facility features a restaurant overlooking the tracks, a virtual-reality game room and pool tables.

Chicago Indoor Racing is at 301 Hastings Drive, Buffalo Grove. Racing costs $25 for 20 laps. To drive a go-cart, you must be at least 18 and have a valid driver's license. For more details, log on to www.chicagoindoorracing.com.

—Patrick Kampert

Tribune photo by George Thompson

Mechanic Kurt Wachter tunes up one of the carts before last week's opening.