

Competitive spirit fuels racing fan club drivers at annual go-cart race



Mark DiOrio, Daily Sun Bill Ponstein of the Village of Bridgeport at Lake Miona drives by with the checkered flag Sunday after winning the second annual Villages Cup go-cart race at Original Speedway Park in Fruitland Park.

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Competitive spirit fuels racing fan club drivers at annual go-cart race By JESSICA GREENE, DAILY SUN

FRUITLAND PARK — A little speed and some competition were all members of The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club needed to get their motors racing this past weekend.

On Sunday, Village of Bridgeport at Lake Miona resident Bill Ponstein took the checkered flag during the second annual Villages Cup, bumping the 2010 champion from the top spot.

"I didn't hear anybody behind me, so I knew I could go easy into the corners," Ponstein said after taking his victory lap around Fruitland Park's Original Speedway Park.

Since the go-carts didn't feature mirrors, and spotters weren't part of the event, drivers relied on their other senses to determine whether the competition was closing in.

Much of the time, there wasn't much spread and the carts drove close.

"It got pretty hot and heavy out there (during the championship race). They were pulling out all the stops," said Gerry Hafer, club president and event organizer.

The fun began shortly after noon with a noncompetitive heat.

The park's two sets of viewing bleachers were packed with spectators there to cheer for friends, neighbors and fellow club members.

"I'm amazed that so many people came," said club member Silky Meegan, who participated in the noncompetitive "fun run."

Then it was time for the driving to start.

Two rounds of double-elimination heat races made sure that each of the event's 24 drivers had the chance to race twice.

Village of Sunset Pointe resident Wendy Touchette was the only female club member to race competitively and had a tough job ahead of her — defending her 2010 third-place finish.

"They've been trash-talking me all week," she said jokingly.

And they didn't take it easy on her, either. Touchette was eliminated in the second round of heat races.

"You gotta be brave to run with the boys," she said.

Some of those boys were big, which made fitting into the tiny cars — and getting out of them — a little tricky.

"For a person that's 6-foot-4, you gotta get a seat that's big enough to fit your tush in it," fourth-place winner Village of Santo Domingo resident Dave Bockman said with a laugh.

The five go-carts club members raced were provided by the track. Given their small dimensions, they were assigned to drivers each race by "best fit."

Starting positions, on the other hand, were decided by a random drawing.

The clay track coupled with riding so low to the ground also made things interesting for the drivers.

"The main thing is your starting position and keeping the dirt out of your eyes," Jan Veenendaal said of his strategy. "But it's one heck of a lot of fun."

Veenendaal's fan club may have had something to do with his enthusiasm. Village of Mallory Square residents Karen and Fred Crook attended the event to cheer him on. They hoped that Veenendaal could see the sign they crafted out of a shoe-box top and a broomstick from the track. "Go Veenie," it read.

"It's good competition. The last three races were ferocious the way they were really going for it," Fred said of the two semi-finals and the consolation race.

In all, the event featured eight heat-races, two semifinals and a consolation race leading up to the championship.

Village of Hemingway resident Steve Kessenich, Village of Largo resident George Glotfelty, Bockman and Ponstein were the four drivers who made it to the feature race and the chance at a year's worth of bragging rights.

It was a choppy beginning, though.

Just one lap into the 10-lap race, Kessenich collided with Glotfelty, who nearly stalled after hitting one of the tire cones lining the infield and stalled.

On the second lap, the brake cable came off Bockman's cart, causing him to putter back around with barely any speed.

After a third-lap restart, Ponstein leapt well ahead of the other drivers.

That's when the real race began between the 2010 champion — Glotfelty — and club newcomer Kessenich for second place.

The pair were racing side-by-side coming into lap three's first turn when Glotfelty cut to the inside, sending Kessenich into a spin and setting off the race's second caution.

Then it was on again between the two as Kessenich bumped Glotfelty hard going into a turn on the fourth lap; Glotfelty finally pulled ahead on the eighth lap and managed to stay there through the checkered flag, taking second place.

Turns out it was Kessenich's first time racing a go-cart.

"It was pretty intense all the way," said Kessenich. "It was pretty exhilarating," he added.

After the trophies were handed out and congratulatory hugs and handshakes were distributed, event special guests, youth go-cart racers Nic Fernandez and Aiden Turman, and racing veterans Al Mincey, John Gamble and Buddy Pearce prepared for two separate "celebrity" races.

Nic, a Villages Charter School third-grader, took the checkered flag over Turman, the Original Speedway Park's reigning 2010 beginner-class champion; and Pearce beat his former car owner Mincey, and Gamble.

As for the first person Ponstein planned to call up and share his win with — he said it might be his son, race car driver Andy Ponstein.

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