



**Lewis Hamilton is a fine advertisement for starting young on the go kart track. So how safe is karting for your child. Jo Stagg investigated at Birmingham's Grand Prix Karting circuit. Elisabeth Walker went along to take the pictures.**

It's safety first, fun second, and whoever wins third.

This is how Patrick Jukes, managing director of Birmingham's Grand Prix Karting, sums up a philosophy which has led to what must be one of the best safety records in the karting world.

In its 18-year history, the company has had one broken bone, an enviable achievement when you consider that the familiar disclaimer "Motorsport is dangerous" greets you whenever you venture anywhere near a racing facility. And in the past 10 years, there have been just 12 entries in the company's accident book, with none of the incidents requiring first aid.

Such a record seems all the more impressive when you consider that each weekday sees an average of 40-50 people driving at the circuit, many of whom will be karting for the first time. These visitors will be behind the wheel of machines ranging from 120cc Honda

powered Junior Karts, to twin-engine Biz Honda Competition Pro-Karts which have a top speed of 75mph.

It is 12 years since Grand Prix Karting was featured in RoSPA's former Water and Leisure journal. In that time, the company has moved from its indoor facility in Walsall to a renowned outdoor site a mile from Birmingham city centre which boasts three circuits and can accommodate up to 400 competitors at one time.

American servicemen introduced karting into the UK during the Second World War. Since then, the sport has become established as a popular starting point for single-seater racing drivers. Take Formula One's newest star Lewis Hamilton, for example, whose talent for racing was discovered when he began karting as an eight-year-old.

body, such as the Motor Sports Association, which conducts venue and track inspections).

Prior to the 1995 Water and Leisure article, RoSPA had received a number of requests for karting-related safety information. The article guided readers through "Guidelines for the operation of circuits", which had been produced by the Commercial Motor Sports Association.

Since then, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has produced a range of advice relevant to karting:

- Health and safety at motor sport events: A guide for employers and organisers (HSG112) - describes the main risks at motor sport events and some of the steps which can safeguard the health and safety of employees, volunteers and spectators.

- Go-karts: Guidance on safe operation and use (HSG200) - intended for those involved in the design, manufacture, examination, supply, importation and use of go-karts. It lists hazards and outlines the precautions needed to avoid them, with advice on design and inspection, buying and selling, track design and maintenance, and safe operations.
- Karting: A guide to safe circuit operation (video) - highlights the most common areas of risk at karting circuits and suggests ways in which these risks can be controlled through good track design, driver instruction and a high standard of track marshalling.
- Effective safety briefings for drivers at karting circuits (information sheet, ETIS21) - relevant to users of go-karts at separate karting tracks which are not part of a fair-ground or amusement park. Includes advice in the form of a basic framework for producing briefings.

The National Karting Association and Fairgrounds Joint Advisory Committee were consulted by the HSE in the preparation of its driver safety briefings information sheet.

Because drivers are in control of their own safety,



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and that of others on the track, the guidance defines effective briefings as an important part of the "safety system" at any karting track. It sets out examples of best practice.

Advice within the document includes:

- Surroundings - where a briefing is given, preferably on or by the track
- Delivering the briefing - light-hearted jokes can keep drivers' attention but should not distract from the importance of the information
- Testing - ask the drivers questions to see whether

comes first at Grand Prix Karting.

Some interesting control measures have been introduced into the circuit's overarching health and safety system. Even features which are typically seen at many circuits have taken innovative turns at the Birmingham venue.

For example, around 2,000 used Formula One tyres are among the tyres bolted together to make up the circuit's safety barriers.

They have superior energy absorption and add a special touch for those who are keen on motor sport in general. The

the machine. There is the crucial reminder to put your left foot on the brake pedal while you are stationary rather than your right foot on the gas. Staff also ensure that race rules cards circulate around the paddock area during events.

Some other control measures at the circuit range from the policy that drivers are free of alcohol and drugs, to the calming music played while visitors are kitted up for their event.

And nothing is left to chance during an event - a barometer on the race control building enables the karts to be set up for the exact weather conditions they will encounter, and every marshal point around the circuit is equipped with a fire extinguisher, flags and a radio. If any of the marshals' radios goes down, the event is stopped immediately. In the rare event of floodlight failure, battery-operated spotlights illuminate every section of the track.

Patrick estimates that the club secretary spends around 60 per cent of his time on health and safety matters. "That seems a lot," he says. "But part of it is walking around the circuit and thinking things through."

And Grand Prix Karting is reaping the benefits, as shown through its accident record.

"It is a proud record and we have fought hard for it," says Patrick.

**Around 2,000 used Formula One tyres are among those bolted together to make up the circuit's safety barriers**

- they have been listening
- Briefing order - overview, safety equipment, kart, race/practice rules, flags, other important points, return to flags
- Use of props - for example, demonstrate how to get in and out of a kart
- Familiarisation with the kart and track - either through a walking tour of the track or use of a diagram. Also, allow drivers the opportunity to have some practice laps before the main event begins.

As we have seen, safety

track-facing side of the tyre barriers is also covered in fibre-reinforced rubber sourced from the conveyor belts of a Doncaster coal pit. Plastic water-filled blocks, resembling giant Lego bricks, are used as barriers at various points around the venue's flagship national circuit.

Driver safety briefings are conducted with humour, but the importance of the information given is never diluted. In the briefing room, a circuit map on the wall enables staff to point out the best lines and an actual kart facilitates a demonstration of how to get in and out of

# Start the Lewis way



Jo Stagg and Elisabeth Walker ready for action

