FROM LAWNMOWER ENGINE TO THE FOUNDATION OF MODERN MOTOR SPORT: CELEBRATING 70 YEARS OF KARTING

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Ahead of the prestigious 2026 Mondokart.com FIA Karting World Championship this weekend, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the global governing body for motor sport and the federation for mobility organisations worldwide, is celebrating 70 years since the invention of karting and the transformational contribution it has made to motor sport over the past seven decades.

The first kart was built in California, USA, by Art Ingles and Lou Borelli, and paired the 2.5 horsepower engine of a West Bend lawnmower with a steel tube chassis crafted by Ingles. This “little car” embodied a simplicity that remains at the heart of karting today - controlled by just an accelerator pedal, a handbrake and a three-spoke steering wheel.

Originally a way of travelling around the paddock at car races, karting quickly became a recreational pastime among friends in supermarket car parks in the late 1950s. The Go Kart Club of America was founded in 1957 to regulate competitions and by the end of the decade karting had spread to Europe with demonstrations and events.

Karting’s rapid growth prompted the FIA to create the International Karting Commission in 1962 to define categories and technical regulations as spectator races and championships, including the European Nations’ Cup. After the first Karting World Championship in 1964, the arrival of side-mounted engines and then gearbox karts accelerated the sport’s evolution, bringing new categories and championships around the world.

Legends of the discipline emerged through the late 20th century, beginning with François Goldstein who won five world championships between 1969 and 1975, a record only surpassed by British driver Mike Wilson, who claimed six world titles in the 1980s. Alain Prost became the first of many karting graduates to go on to win the FIA Formula One World Championship, as karting began to establish itself as the training ground where motor sport’s champions take their first laps and learn essential racing skills.

Today, karting is enjoyed by millions of people worldwide, both as a recreational activity and as a competitive sport, from local club events through to FIA international championships including the Mondokart.com FIA Karting World Championship. The 2026 World Championship for Original Kart (OK) and Junior drivers will this weekend be held at the iconic La Conca circuit in Southern Italy, where nearly 200 drivers will be racing to secure the coveted World Champion title, a title won by reigning FIA Formula 1 World Champion Lando Norris in 2014.

Recognising the invaluable role karting plays as the base of the motor sport pyramid where the champions of tomorrow emerge, the FIA launched the Global Karting Plan in 2024 to usher in a new era for the discipline. Backed by unprecedented investment and a long-term strategy, karting is becoming more affordable, accessible and globally inclusive.

A cornerstone of the plan is the Arrive and Drive format, in which all drivers race in identical equipment loaned to them for the weekend. This reduces competition costs by two-thirds compared with regular international competitions, keeping the focus on driver skill and racing potential. By hosting dedicated Arrive and Drive championships in Asia-Pacific, South America and Europe, FIA Karting is giving a new generation of drivers from every corner of the globe the chance to compete on the world stage regardless of background or geography.

From a lawnmower engine bolted to a steel tube frame in a California workshop, karting has grown into the foundation of modern motor sport, and with the FIA Global Karting Plan opening the door to drivers everywhere, the next seventy years will make it easier than ever for future champions who haven't yet taken their first lap to rise to the top of the motor sport pyramid.

Mohammed Ben Sulayem, President of the FIA, said:

"As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of karting, we recognise a legacy that has helped shape generations of racing talent and produced many of the legends who have gone on to achieve success at the highest levels of our sport. Over the seven decades of history, we also remember the invaluable contribution karting has made to our sport, helping to grow and develop young drivers as the proving ground for the champions of tomorrow.

"Through the FIA Global Karting Plan, we are helping to secure the next 70 years of karting by making it more affordable, accessible and inclusive, so that talented young drivers from every corner of the world have the opportunity to compete and fulfil their potential."

Akbar Ebrahim, President of the FIA Karting Commission, said:

"Celebrating 70 years of karting history is a timely reminder of the legends who have shaped our sport and how far the discipline has evolved from its roots as a simple lawnmower engine on a steel tube. It is fitting that we mark this milestone as the world's best karting drivers gather at La Conca for the World Championship, a showcase of everything that makes karting so special."

Lando Norris, McLaren Mastercard Formula 1 Team driver, 2025 FIA Formula 1 World Champion and 2014 FIA Karting KF World Champion, said:

"[Karting is where you] learn how to drive; you learn how to feel what is right, what is wrong, all those things that set you up to be an understanding driver and how to drive quickly so it's very important. It's probably key if you want to get to Formula 1 nowadays is to start early and in karting. It's a lot of fun, I think everyone enjoys the karting days a lot and misses them and just the ease and socialness- it's just a lot more chilled than it is in proper racing now in cars, but they were good days. I miss the karting days."

Charles Leclerc, Scuderia HP Ferrari Formula 1 Team Driver and 2011 FIA Karting Academy Trophy Winner, said:

"[Karting] is where you learn all the basics, which is to start working with the team, start thinking about the set-up, overtaking, the way you've got to approach a race and, eventually, also how to deal with pressure when it matters most in qualifying – and a few incidents!

"It's cool as well to see, when I look at the grid today, that many of us were fighting back in karting 15 or 20 years ago. It's very special to find all of us now in Formula One and fighting for much bigger things. The passion is still the same, and the motivation to win is still the same. These were the best days. There wasn't much marketing or media, just racing, and I think that's what we enjoyed most. These were great times."

Pierre Gasly, BWT Alpine Formula 1 Team Driver, said:

"Honestly, [karting was] one of the best times of my life. I mean, when you're a kid, you're just thinking of passion, of feelings, striving. There are no sort of responsibilities to it. You're just trying to get better, and you have this big dream of achieving Formula 1. Funny enough, most of the guys we raced back then are other guys that I see on the racetrack today.

"At the time, we didn't know it, but it's just pure driving. There's no electronics or anything to focus on except your left pedal, your right pedal, the wheel, your lines, and the challenging days racing on slick tyres in the wet because, well, in Normandy it rains pretty much 300 days a year so there were a lot of these days, the adrenaline it provided me was incredible. I could name many races, European or World Cups, where you have that extra pressure and the sort of adrenaline, the excitement, the fear of delivering because potentially it buys you another year in karting. Just amazing times."

The next stage of the Global Karting Plan will be unveiled during the FIA General Assemblies Week in Shanghai later this year. The project will support affordable competition at national level to further widen access to karting whilst supporting the FIA's mission to double motor sport participation globally.