

Jacer Turns

FIFTEEN

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JACER CELEBRATES 15 YEARS IN 2010...

After a decade and a half in the business, Jacer has established itself as one of the leading manufacturers of Formula Vee's globally. We sent Mat Coch to find out why.

In a green tin shed in the western suburbs of Sydney motor racing history is made. There is no glitz, no glamour, and certainly no wind tunnel save the gusts that howl through the gum trees around the back. Out front stand countless trailers, each a part of the rich tapestry of Australian motor sport while inside Jacer, the worlds premiere Formula Vee manufacturer, is hard at work.

2010 marks Jacers fifteenth anniversary, the companies impact and legacy on Formula Vee cannot be overstated. Run by David and Jason Cutts they have become accidental heros playing a large part in the salvation of what was, in the late-1990's, a dying category. At a time when new cars simply weren't produced, and the category looked to be on its last lap, a teenage Jason Cutts built his first car.

"At 19 I decided to design and build a Formula Vee that encompassed all the performance qualities of existing Vees," begins Jason. "The biggest goal was to make it look like a Formula Ford and be extra safe.

"The 'Cutts' was first conceived in early 1994, and was constructed from August 1994 to August 1995. In reality, the car was an evolution of a previous design that had been started by David, who had a partially completed chassis and body plug. David's spare time was minimal and eventually work, a growing engine building business and competing week-in week-out meant the project was shelved until I was afforded the time to take it on."

"The original car was named Cutts - Jacer, a combination of Jason and Racer," explains Jason. "I wanted the car to have my name in its identity, so as not to confuse a chassis I built with one David would build. Ultimately the car would be renamed Jacer, a play on Jason and Racer though also drawing on 'Jason Alan Cutts Engineered and Raced'.

David remembers the first car and had early insight into the potential impact the Cutts - Jacer could have on the category. "I said 'well,



if you start building cars yourself, be prepared to have people ask can you build me a car?'," David warned, "because no one was doing it, no one was having a go at building cars. You could buy a second hand Sabre which was the same as the Elfin you bought ten years ago."

Build it Jason did, debuting the Cutts – Jacer in October 1995. It first took to the track, qualifying last for an event at Eastern Creek after teething problems plagued qualifying. By the end of the weekend Jason, and the Cutts – Jacer, were winners. With his success David's premonitions came true, the orders began to trickle in.

"We had no intention of becoming a production line, and had to be talked into building a second chassis," laughs Jason. "The original car was still running with the plug as the bodywork, and we had to build a new body, the '97 shape, for the new cars."

The first customer car went to friend Mark McHenry, who alongside Jason enjoyed a hugely successful year. Success breeds success and another car was ordered, followed by another. By 1998 Jacer was a full time job in need of full time staff.

A partnership between Jason, David and father Alan Cutts was set up. David has been a mainstay at Jacer ever since, building the chassis while Jason takes care of evolution and project work. Jason and father, Alan, share

the fibreglassing while Alan is also responsible for whatever paperwork needs to be done, a role he's performed since day one.

Building chassis is only part of the business however, with the core work coming from the support of existing cars. "It wasn't just a case of building cars," explains David, "there was engines, gearboxes, front ends, cylinder heads, flow bench work... There was seven points to the triangle, if the is such a thing. There was a bit of jack of all trades in things so the eggs weren't in one basket!"

"I was doing that sort of stuff for people, and the engine maintenance and development was there to start with, so it has been pretty core to it all the way along." An experienced Volkswagen mechanic, David's formative years were spent at Group Automotive in Brookvale, before he applied his trade to the preparation of racing cars.

"I started [racing] in '83, I won my first race in '85. My first customer engine won his first race in '86. I won my first championship in '86 myself, so it dates back a long time before Jacer," he says.

Jacers success was not guaranteed however, the company was initially conceived to help support Jason's racing career, relying on Formula Vee only for additional income. "Mark [McHenry] and Jason had a successful '97 and they were looking to do Formula Ford in '98,"

JASON CUTTS

Debuting at the age of 14, Jason set new records for the youngest driver in Australian motor sport.

With two Australian titles to his credit, coupled with a swag full of NSW State Championships, Jason was one of the most talented drivers competing in the early 1990's.

Without the breaks he needed to make the big time, Jason continued to compete in Formula Vee well into the 2000's.

Retired from full-time racing he remains actively involved in Formula Vee both through Jacer, his work for the NSW Formula Vee Association, and his spanner work for others.



"AT 19 I DECIDED TO DESIGN AND BUILT A FORMULA VEE..."

DAVID CUTT'S

Softly spoken David has been involved in Formula Vee since the early 80's.

After success at state level David progressed to Formula Two, competing in the support category at the 1990 Australian Grand Prix.

A wealth of knowledge David, like brother Jason, was at one time one of the best drivers in Australian motor sport, holding lap records at numerous circuits across the country.

His racing days now behind him David focusses his energies on Jacer, continuing the work his brother began.

David is also a Life Member of the New South Wales Formula Vee Association, for his contribution to the category over the decades.

recalls David. "They really needed someone to just change ratios and tow cars around at the track, and we were going to supplement things with the Formula Vee work, because nobody makes a living out for Formula Vee!

"Suddenly all the money that was coming in to do Formula Ford didn't come in," David adds. Coupled with the Formula Ford set back, CAMS released a document listing Formula Vee as a category it didn't see a future in.

Unchanged since its inception in the 1960's Formula Vee was becoming tired and stale, with parts increasing scarce. New thinking was needed to reinvigorate the class if it was to see out the millennium, and for Jacer to survive. "In '98 the white paper, the report that listed Formula Vee for extinction came out. You don't go out there and borrow \$50,000 and set up a business when CAMS have said that your core product is going to be extinct in three years time," David explains.

Jason picks up the story: "In 2001 Jacer pioneered the update of Formula Vee in Australia to 1600cc engine cars. Jacer assisted Ray Filetti and Greg Hepburn, both long time associates of Jacer, to convert the original Jacer 951 to 1600 specs. This test car was used to demonstrate what 1600 spec Formula Vee offered." It was the formula that would save the category in CAMS eyes, who approved the changes.

"Jacer then purpose built its first 1600 Formula Vee, the Jacer F2K2 model. It essentially used the same chassis and panels of the V2K

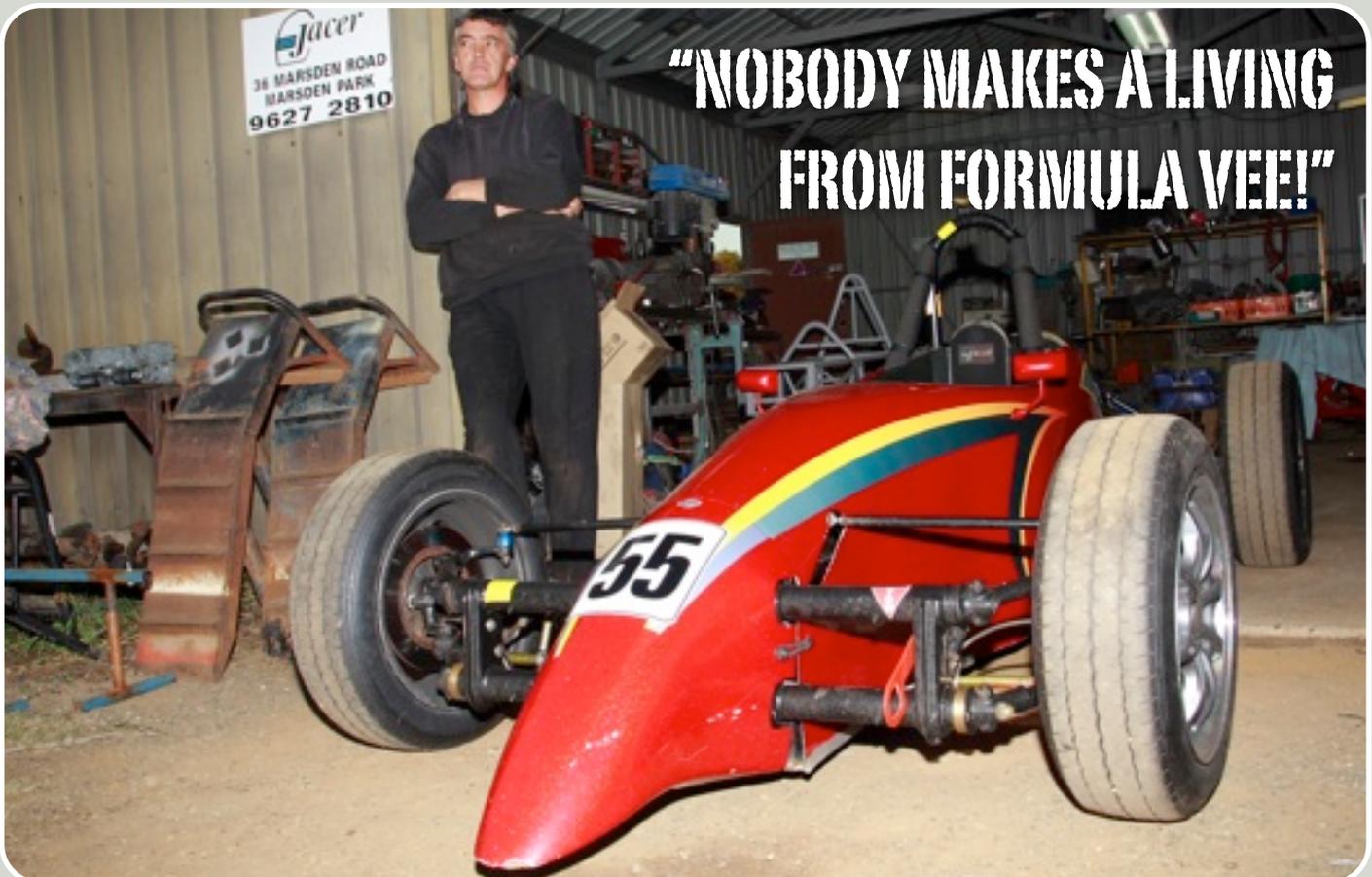
design, however offered ball joint front suspension, in board front shocks and of course the 1600 engine."

Released in 2002, the Jacer F2K2 was the first fully fledged 1600cc Formula Vee ever produced. It cemented Formula Vee's position in Australian motor sport and ensured the survival of Jacer. And it all happened by accident, admits a brutally honest David, who confesses that Jacer just continued working despite the CAMS report, hoping for the best, albeit playing a major part in the categories survival. There was no firm business or development plan in place to ensure Jacer continued to grow, and as much good luck as good management saved it from ruin. "We just bumbled on through it all till 2003 and kept producing cars," he revealed.

The company thrived, producing more cars than anyone else, winning championships both in Australia and overseas, with multiple Canadian championships to the companies credit. At last count sixty-one cars have been produced, understood to be the most of any manufacturer of Formula Vee's globally.

"We just built a car that we wanted to build, and we wanted to race, and we wanted to make as good as we could, and then offered it to everyone who wanted it," revealed David.

"I think the 2000 1200 Vee we made was probably as good a 1200 Vee you'd ever want to drive. It probably broke and steered too well for what the power plant was," confesses





“We just built a car that we wanted to build, and we wanted to race...”

David with just a hint of pride in his otherwise modest eyes.

Contrasting their early experiences David concedes that, now an established customer car provider, Jacer has had to take a more pragmatic approach to the design of new models. It's a delicate balancing act that both Jason and David constantly face; building the fastest car on the grid isn't easy, but building a car as fast as the fastest car on the grid for an affordable price is another challenge all together.

“Nowadays we are hamstrung. There's a few ambitious plans with [the new car] that we want to do, that we know will make it a better car. We can't go and run and make our own car as suddenly if we make it work we might have ten people who want it, and then we've somehow got to reproduce it, and reproduce it for a price they can afford. So we are hamstrung to a degree for sure.”

While David and Jason strive for harmony between performance and affordability the pair have never compromised safety, and use their record as a key selling point for their product. Testament to their focus is Ian Chivas, the Formula Vee veteran having suffered a terrifying accident at Eastern Creek in 2006 at the wheel of a Jacer. Having bounced through the gravel trap at 180kph the car was destroyed, Chivas by contrast walked away with no more than a few bumps. It demonstrated perfectly the design brief a 19-year-old Jason had laid out back in 1994.

Developing the next generation of car to be both fast, safe and affordable is a tricky business, and one David in particular has strong opinions on, especially when related to the direction of Formula Vee. “I think the air cooled race car concept is great. It's relatively low tech, low spec, no too many parts to screw up, and Volkswagens keep on going and going around the world. But I think there's a lot of after

market parts out there that would make the car probably cheaper and more even across the board.

“Unless Formula Vee as they are at the moment make some serious five year plans coming up components are getting hard to get again, which is one of the reasons the CAMS report came in in '98. The wide blade cooling fans stopped coming out in road cars in about 1961/62 but in 2010 we've still got to try and find them from somewhere to try and make a 2010 model Vee.”

As for rekindling the desire to move into Formula Ford, David rules it out. “We did look, Jason and I, at one stage about doing Formula Ford. To be honest, unless there was a large cash injection to tool up to do it, it's just too hard. Everything's made on a Formula Ford, at least we start with an engine and gearbox out of a roadie, we just modify, whereas in terms of wishbones and steering racks and uprights. It's just too hard to do [on a Formula Ford].”

Such is the reputation the marque has gained it's developed it's own catch phrase; Jacers win races. It's an undeniable fact, and with more championship wins in Formula Vee history than any other marque, and with more cars globally than any of their competitors, that honour roll looks set to grow.

The history of Formula Vee has been enriched by Jacer, and the future of the category looks much brighter with their cars on the grid. If it wasn't for two men, a green tin shed and a dream, Formula Vee could have been consigned to the history books. Instead Jacer continues to rewrite them.

Eight
Australian National
titles, two Canadian
titles...