



Taking a corner

Photos: Jon Ryan



Many riders bring their own bikes and kit



Knee sliders are needed to take corners at speed



Ashley Hallett, 12, has been riding for about one-and-a-half years



High speeds on the 106m straight

‘The bikes are very quick and the riders are real adrenaline junkies’

By Ian Mat

Dog Leg. Hairpin. Hammerhead. Friday night is minimoto night at South West Karting on Winchester Farm, Cheddar. Riders shrug into leathers, slip on knee pads, tighten calf-high boots. They’ve driven from Bridgwater, from Bristol, Bath and Taunton. Some come weekly to pull up knee sliders, pull down hoodies, flex fingers into vulcanised gloves. Others come fortnightly, from Martock, Exeter, Gloucester, Bideford. All come to drive dwarf bikes.

“People tend to bring their own bikes and they go out on the track as much as they want,” says track owner Matt Moreton. A Red Bull blazoned jersey is sandwiched in a photo frame on a wall of the changing room. Here Matt is nearly audible.

He says: “The bikes are very quick, very fast, noisy, smoky. Most riders are adrenaline junkies. They love danger, living on the edge.” On cue a rider in red, white and green sleeves banks into the Hammerhead and tilts like a toppling tree before straightening. Matt says: “I own this track and 19 bikes and don’t get on them myself. I use the karts.”

Widow Maker. Flip Flop. Sweeper. Dog Leg. Hairpin. Hammerhead. These are all bends in the track. Before them is the 106m straight. Every rider has their own style of pull-off. Take Green Sleeves. His legs hang over the 18in high bike, feet trail behind. Leant forward, his helmet is cannonball straight, elbows tucked in. At the black-and-white start/finish line, his knees swing to a wingnut position, arms bent like a T-Rex’s. At Widow Maker Green Sleeves’ right knee strikes tarmac, the smiley face on his knee slider skids across tarmac. Then he’s round the bend.

One biker in grey hoodie nods hello as he walks into the repair shop, tin cup with spout in one hand, bike in the other. Stacked on a table are bikes in various states of repair. Tightening a screw into a new secondhand seat for his black-green bike, a mechanic points to a white one and says: “That bike over there is a Japanese one. You remember that mobile phone deal where you got a free minimoto? That’s one. Ride that around once and it breaks.”

Under the table is a line of shoe black minimotos. The mechanic says: “Our bikes are bombproof. You can throw



Minimoto night attracts people from all parts of the county - and further away

them down the track and nothing happens. The only money you spend is on the clutch or if the carburetor gets blocked.” The mechanic slots the seat back home onto his bike. “It’s just consumables, really.”

Hiring a bike costs £10. For that you’d get 10 minutes use of a Pollini 39cc 4.2hp that can do 40mph. A bike can cost from £150 for a decent one. Or you can pay more. For sale in the window of Matt’s office is a lipstick red 6.2hp Zocchi. It does 50mph and costs £1,600.

Minimotos are not road legal, hence tracks like South West Karting. Matt says there are two types of track: the national ones where Jenson Button would go and ‘fun tracks’. His track would fit into the latter category. Just.

“I’ve owned this for 14 months and I was a private water engineer before that,” he says. “I’ve always been in to motorsports. From a young age I always had karts and bikes, did some car sprinting. When I heard this track was up for sale I jumped at the chance. It was dirty and full of sawdust.”

He sweeps his arm across the regularly painted changing room where red overalls hand. One corner awaits a new coffee. Out yonder is an island of 22 karts shored away. Upstairs, police hold courses for drivers looking to shave points off their licence. They get to kart in exchange for memorising 100 bullet points of road safety commandments. Surplus money from their course fees buys track time for schoolchildren.

Outside, the evening turns black. In-

Matt says: “This place had no website, no Facebook page, no Instagram. Now that’s where it’s at.” Hammerhead. Hairpin. Dog Leg. Sweeper. Flip Flop. Widow Maker. For the last hour riders do the track anti-clockwise. All bends are new again. In the stands Mandy Hallett of Martock sits and watches a young girl zip around the track. Her blonde hair billows over her red overalls. Mandy says: “That’s my daughter, Ashley. She just turned 12. She’s raced her for 18 months and they say how well she’s progressed. She’s out there with my husband, Jason. I ride a motorbike and done this a few times but I don’t have the competitive bone in my body for this.”

After four hours of adrenaline served up in ten-minute packets of time, with breaks and banter between, minimotos are fed to yawning car boots by knotted arms still vibrating. Fingers are unfurled from accelerator grips, gloves peeled off, leathers shucked. Until the next Widow Maker, Flip Flop, Sweeper ...



South West Karting owner Matt Moreton



Minimotos can reach speeds of 40mph to 60mph