

Call Him the Best Driver in the World

Six-time world champion Mike Wilson says karting is key to being competitive

A Gordon Kirby Column

Juan Montoya's father Pablo likes to tell a story about Ayrton Senna mystifying a TV interviewer who asked Senna who he thought was the best driver in the world.

"Mike Wilson," Senna answered.

"The TV guy didn't know what to say," says the senior Montoya. "He stood there, lost for words. 'Who's Mike Wilson,' he asked. And Senna said, 'The best kart racer I ever saw.'"

Wilson won the World Kart Championship a record six times between 1981 and 1989 and Senna raced against him in karts, losing to Wilson many more times than he beat him. An Englishman who moved to Italy to pursue a professional kart racing career when he was 18, Wilson has lived there ever since. After retiring from driving at the end of 1989, Wilson started his own kart company, Rakama, located in Zingonia in Bergamo, about 30 miles from Milan. Today, Rakama manufactures around 700 karts each year.

Pablo Montoya raced karts but not until he was almost 30 years old. For an old guy, Pablo was pretty good, and he credits Wilson with teaching him some real secrets about racing. "The guy I learned the most from was Mike Wilson," Pablo says. "I asked him to teach me. First of all he wouldn't, but I said, 'Hey Mike, I'm old. I'm never going to beat you.' So slowly, we began."

Montoya says the first thing Wilson taught him was the importance of the opening lap, a lesson that Montoya was able to teach very successfully to his son Juan. "The most important and the first thing he taught me was to go flat-out on the first lap on cold tires when everyone is a little worried and a little tentative," Pablo says. "Go flat-out, get to the front, and break their spirit. That was his first lesson.

"I said, 'That's crazy because I'll crash trying to do it.' He said, 'That's right, but you have to learn not to crash.' So slowly I learned, and this is something that Juan has learned very well.

"The next thing I learned from Mike was to drive with your eyes and your shoulders.

Don't drive with your arms. Use your arms and let them follow your eyes. These are some of the things I tried to teach Juan Pablo, and I have to thank Mike Wilson for it."

Before moving to Italy to drive for the factory Ayami team, Wilson won the British junior kart title driving for Brit karting champion and guru Martin Hines. Hines builds Zip karts and is currently developing a new entry-level, low-cost Ford-powered formula car.

"Ayrton Senna, Mike Wilson and Terry Fullerton were three of the greats in karts," Hines says. "Francois Goldstein also has to rate as high as them. I'm not saying there haven't been some greats since then, but I think those are the guys that really stand out in my mind."

Wilson retired from racing karts when he was 30 years old at the end of the 1989 season, after winning his sixth world championship. Wilson decided to go into the kart

manufacturing business and has been very successful. Most years he also runs his own kart team, although he hasn't done so this year.

Wilson never raced a car. He tested a Formula 3 car a few times but couldn't find the sponsorship to pay for a season of racing. "In the tests I did I always went well, extremely well, I should say, without bragging," Wilson says. "But the problem was the first year in Formula 3, you have to bring sponsors, or have money to pay for a full year. Then if you have a good year, possibly you've got a chance.

"But for me, at that particular time, I was a professional kart driver. I was married when I was 23 and we had a child. I had to look after my family and I didn't have the money or any sponsorship, unfortunately, to move on into car racing. If you're a talented driver and get some good results after a couple of years of racing, you'll be able to make a good living out of it, but it's very difficult just to step in there."

Wilson won the karting world championship in 1981, '82, '83, '85, '88 and '89, and had plenty of memorable battles with Senna. "We had a lot of fights together on the track, and a few arguments after races as well," Wilson admits. "He beat me in maybe two or three races, but in the world championship I always managed to arrive before he did.

"As he was in Formula 1, Senna was a very tough driver," Wilson recalls. "He was very aggressive, difficult to overtake. We got to the stage where Terry Fullerton was there, I as there, and Ayrton was there as well. If we raced together in oh, maybe 15 races, I would say I beat him 13 times and he beat me twice."

Wilson says he has no regrets after Senna went on to enjoy an illustrious career. Wilson and Senna remained friends and after Wilson won his sixth world title in 1989, Senna telephoned Italy's daily sports newspaper La Gazzetta Dello Sport to ask motorsports guru Pino Alievi why they hadn't given Wilson's achievement more space.

"Senna telephoned Pino Alievi and said, 'It's very strange that the Italian journalists who love motorsport don't give credit to a boy who wins the World Championship for a sixth time,' So Pino called me and asked if I would go down for an interview, and the day after they put half a page in the paper with my photograph, and Pino asked me if I was envious of the fact that Senna was the World Champion in Formula 1 and I was still in karting.

"I said I wasn't envious of Senna, and I'm not envious today of Michael Schumacher of Alessandro Zanardi, who's a pretty good friend of mine, or some of the other Formula 1 drivers and boys who are going over to race Champ Cars as well. These are talented drivers.

"I'm more envious of the fact that maybe there are a lot of people who get into Formula 1, and I'm not just speaking for myself, but there are a lot of talented drivers knocking around in karting that will never, unfortunately, have a chance to drive in a formula car, let alone a Formula 1.

"And that's what I said to Pino, 'No, I'm not envious of Senna at all.' I think he deserved to be where he was because he was the best driver that I knew through my karting career.

And other guys like Alain Prost and Nigel Mansell. These top guys deserve to be there.

"I've got no regrets because I had an excellent career in karting. The only thing is it was a dream for me when I was younger to become a car driver, but when you get older and you see the difficulties and you live them yourself, you see it's not as easy as you thought it would have been. I realized it wasn't possible for me to do it, so I said, well, OK, I'll continue doing karting, which was still giving me good results and a good living."

Wilson says Senna always held karting in high regard and kept himself sharp in the offseason by driving karts. "I remember speaking to Senna the year before he had the accident in Imola, and he said he always did a lot of testing in karts in the winter when he was back in Brazil," Wilson says. "He always said that an international kart was the closest thing to a Formula 1 car that he had ever driven."

"I think people have recognized that karting is necessary if you want to be competitive, or a fast driver in formula racing. Look at Jenson Button. He was racing karts two years ago and he's competitive in Formula 1. He can go to a track he's never been to and after three laps he knows the line and that's because he's learned that in karting."

"I guarantee you that if you put a 17- or 18-year-old boy who's raced karts for 10 years into a Formula Ford alongside another boy who's had only a year's experience in cars, that the boy who's coming in from karting will be quicker. A boy with karting experience will also be able to stop after 10 laps and tell you where they have difficulties."

"They'll be able to tell you they've got a little oversteer in these corners, but they've got understeer in these corners, so can we get a little more grip on the front? They can give feedback immediately after only a few laps in something they've never driven before."

Nineteen-year-old Spaniard Fernando Alonzo drove karts for Wilson last year. Alonzo also won last year's Formula Nissan championship in Spain and showed his ability by winning this year's final FIA Formula 3000 race at Spa at the end of August. Alonzo tested for the Minardi F1 team at the end of last year and may drive for the Italian team in F1 next year.

"He's a very, very talented driver," Wilson notes. "It's nice to have drivers like this boy Alonzo. He's got a Formula 1 drive for next year so I'm really pleased for him."

Wilson hasn't run a kart team this year because he's been busy developing a kart for the less-serious Sunday racer that isn't as difficult to set up. "I've tried to improve the looks of the kart and the performance for the normal, standard Sunday racers, not only international racers. People need a kart that works well without having to be a World Champion to set the kart up, and this is what my aim has been this year. So far, I'm extremely pleased because we've been winning a lot of races around the world."

"I get the same enthusiasm, the same kick out of it when one of my drivers wins a race like I used to when I was racing," Wilson says. "It gives me exactly the same feeling inside. It's more or less my life. You're still in contact with young people and I think if you stay with young people a lot of the time, you feel younger. I still really enjoy it."