



The Formula Vees are easily the most competitive and likely entertaining group to watch on any vintage race weekend.

Jumping In the Deep End One Guy's Experience with Formula Vee

— *story and photos*
by *Brandall Binion*

Wow, what a ride!

To say I am hooked would be a gross understatement. As I drove to work and back over the last couple of days I wondered why my vehicle wasn't lighter, smaller and lower to the ground... and what is with all the switches... and why aren't there more sweeping turns on the drive into work for everybody? We need to petition our elected officials and get them to make the drive into

work more fun. Seriously though, I cannot stop thinking about the whole experience. It was a busy weekend for me but I can remember every single lap of every session that I was on track.

What I am talking about is the Corinthian Vintage Auto Racing Drivers School, which I attended last fall at MSR Houston. The school started on Fri., Sep. 29 and concluded on Sun., Oct. 1, but for me, it actually began on Thursday, as I was still a member of the Bigger Hammer crew and had to unload cars and set up the pits for all the Formula Vee cars

we bring to races. I didn't touch my car all day as I tended to the other cars and getting everything else set up. It started to hit home when I took my safety gear over to Tech Inspection and get registered late Thursday. Yep, there was my name listed as a registered race entrant. Cool. I knew that once night fell, I would wake up and transition to being a driver the rest of the weekend. I was fortunate to be able to see what was on the other side of the fence. It was exciting and I don't remember sleeping much that first night.

On Friday morning, we had an early student classroom session with Dr. Merrill, our Chief Driving Instructor. We would have several classroom sessions throughout the day in between the track sessions, as we learned what was expected of us with regard to following safe racing practices, and good on-track etiquette to both the track officials and our fellow drivers. With all the information coming to us, we were drinking from a fire hydrant as they used to say in the technology world.

The early on track sessions were interesting as they had a mix of students in the class, with four of us being in Formula Vee cars which are all very similar and would run in the same group... along with three students in full bodied cars comprised of a Mustang, a Porsche and a Datsun Z car. Very dissimilar speeds on different parts of the track but more on that later.

We would end up just a class of six, as we lost one of the Vee students early on. Mike Olmsted had a car that wasn't ready to run so



#87 Dwight Calkins, Lynx B; #62 Mac Wolff.

he is going to try to make the Spring School next year. I am sure he will have as much fun then as we had this past weekend.

My fellow students were George Curl IV in his well sorted Zink, John Williamson in his ex-Palermo Caldwell, and myself in a quirky little Australian vee called a Stinger.

We would ultimately have a couple of different instructors while on track in Dwight Calkins and then Mike Rogers. Bill Griffith is the usual Vee instructor but he is still recovering from an injury earlier this season and was busy trying to get his race car to work, so he handed us off to Dwight and Mike. Both were really smooth and you could tell that these guys were quick whenever they wanted to be by showing excellent car control. It was really helpful following those guys around the track seeing the lines they took. Dwight would go on to run in the top two places in pretty much every race later on in the weekend.

Once on track, I was buzzing with excitement and it was almost surreal as I rolled out of the pits for the first time and onto the track right in the middle of the Carousel which is a long right hand sweeper. In my head was a running commentary, someone just let me loose in this racecar... they don't seem to care which side of the road I am on... and they don't seem to care how fast I drive it. Its nuts. They are going to call me back any minute and say this was all a mistake... I just knew it.

Then it started to click. This was the very first time I have ever driven a Formula Vee, the very first time and with each lap, it all started to make sense. I had been working on them as a race mechanic for Bill at Bigger Hammer Racing for 3 race seasons and none of the pieces fell into place until I actually turned a lap in one of these beautiful, elegantly simple race cars... and make no mistake, these are true race cars. With each blip of the throttle, the car would respond. With each kink of the steering wheel, the nose did what it should... and under heavy braking the car would squirm and move just like I expected it to as I slowly started to find the limits of the vehicle, and



#32 Nick Leonard, Shark FV; #119 John Strnad, Zink C4.

more importantly, the limits of my abilities.

I loved how the car felt like it would reach up and bite me if I was overly aggressive in my inputs. Lifting off throttle was a quick lesson I learned as I spun in one of my early sessions. Thankfully I was all alone and it was a long easy spin into the infield and as I came to a halt, I knew exactly what I had done wrong and vowed not to make the same mistake again... or at least make more of an effort to be less clumsy about the next one. It would not be my only spin on Friday but more on that in a moment.

I have to make mention of my fellow Vee students at this point. They were no doubt going through some of the same emotions I was as we slowly went through the follow the leader drills to learn lines, then the pointed passing exercises which would help us once we were in with a full field of our Group 3 brothers and sisters.

Fellow student George Curl IV looked incredibly comfortable in his Zink and he showed himself to be the class of our little group of Vee students. I don't believe he ever put a foot wrong all weekend, with some very smooth and controlled drives. It made sense as he had been autocrossing this same car for a couple of years before signing up to join the CVAR club to go road racing. Oh and fast, yeah, that too.

John Williamson brought his ex-Mike Palermo built Caldwell to class and he drove some really good lines during a lot of the sessions. I think a couple of the long sweepers were a little

daunting because of the high entry speeds. I believe that once they made a change to his rear camber, he got a lot faster in later sessions. I also think they chased some carburetor flow issues on and off all weekend. I have no doubt that John will have some excellent races in that Caldwell once he and the car become friends.

Myself, well I was in a quirky Australian



#99 Bill Griffith, 1972 Truehaft; #12 Dave Phillips, 1969 Zink.

made Stinger which I was "renting" from Bill for the school weekend until I can get my own car together. The Stinger wasn't a perfect fit for me as it was a little narrow at the shoulders, but in the spirit of the Aussies who built this car... I just smiled and got on with it. I am not sure how fast this car was ultimately, but I did try to push hard in every session telling myself that I wanted to improve every time I took it out. In that regard, the car was obviously faster than I was because my times continued to lower all weekend. This means that there was more to get out of the car, and more to get out of myself.

To most people when they ask what kind of race car you are in, the inevitable question of horsepower comes up. It is what car guys talk about. Then you can see the eyes glaze over when you tell them that your car, your race car, only has 50 or so horsepower. They look at you like, why... what is the point? I can tell you that it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because they will likely never feel what it's like to be



#98 Jason White, Zink C4; #8 Sammie Smith, Zink.

Racing Formula Vee

“Drive with your finger tips, preserve every bit of horsepower you use by not imposing extra drag forcing the steering” was good advice by an ex-winner in F Vees and many other cars. This was during a racing weekend in which we were co-drivers of a Formula Vee competing in a two-hour enduro against every type of vintage car and we won!

I've often said that racing a vintage Formula Vee really well is great training for racing any vintage or historic racing car, I might qualify that it might not hold for an ultra ground effects car as I have not driven one.

But I did race and win in a very good Formula Vee in the same few years that I raced and won in a Historic Can-Am car and managed to beat the best drivers in Europe in a vintage 1965 Corvette, raced competitively a Historic Formula One, along with other fast vintage cars. I think about 14-16 racing weekends each year.

One of my best vintage F Vee races, about that time, was at Sears Point (now Sonoma Raceway). Three of us equally matched F Vee drivers each won a race that weekend. We raced in a tight group with anyone leading on each lap trying to get the last extra revs out of each corner and the best braking and cornering. Great Fun!

During that same time I was racing in a Historic Can-Am McLaren M12 with a tired



#66 Bruce Revenaugh, 1967 Zink C4.

small block 360ci iron engine of about 550 horsepower. I was racing at road America trying to beat other “small block” up to 390ci, well prepared with 650 horsepower and well driven Can-Am McLarens and Lolas and perhaps even beat some Can-Am cars with 427-490ci aluminum big block engines. The only hope for my goal was to use every bit of available horsepower, drive smoother, drive the perfect corner strategy and come out of each with maximum revs just as one drives a Formula Vee. I did just that in the big Sunday Feature beating all the small block cars and all but six of the 18 big block cars in a total field of 35. I also received “The Best Can-Am Drive” award. Thanks to learning in a Formula Vee about using every available horsepower.

I've heard since from many world class drivers after a few near record sessions in modern cars exclaim “How do we get more horsepower?” Even the best drivers, after the car is well set up, always want more power. Some say every car at its limit of lap times is driven as an inertia car, that is keep it on the edge of performance with minimum loss of speed at all times: less braking, taller gear, less steering and drag.

Vintage Formula Vees are well known as cost effective vintage racing cars. They are low maintenance and mechanically easy to work on. The grids are large enough that racecraft is needed to do well. And they teach useful racing skills that work for many other cars.

— Dan Davis

in a Formula Vee at race speeds. They will never know what it feels like to push these cars really deeply into a turn coming down from 90 miles an hour and gathering it all up under braking. They will never know what it feels like to hit apex after apex in a series of 3-4 turns done perfectly back to back. They will never know what it feels like to drift out perfectly to the edge of the rumble strips on exit of a long sweeper. They will never know what it feels like to catch the car from a drift caused by a slight lift off of throttle mid turn. They will never know what it feels like to lift off throttle intentionally to get the car to rotate setting up for the next turn. It is an amazing feeling being in one of these cars at the limit. It really is a great race car package. It is simple, it is direct, and it will bite you quickly if you don't respect it.

It was great hopping out of the car after each session and catching up with my fellow students. I could tell John and especially George were really smooth in the turns 5 through turn 8 twisty sections of the track. I have to say, it was nice to hear George tell me that I was really fast in one or two sections. I am sure he was talking about the faster entry turns... as I would like to think I am nothing if not committed. There are probably some

who would say I should be committed, but I am kind of used to my kind of crazy. Crazy about racing that is.

After 7-8 sessions practicing lines and passing on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning... we were told that we would be practicing starts for our last session Saturday afternoon. I think I can speak for my fellow Vee students that we were hoping that this was going to lead into a decision that would allow us to race with the rest of the Group 3 Formula Vees for the Sunday races. It didn't make sense to keep us running with the full bodied cars in the Student group all weekend. We (as Vee pilots) were faster in the turns, and they were much faster in the straights, and it was going to possibly turn into an incident if they kept running us together in the same session. We didn't have any close calls, but there was a blue flag incident where we needed to let the more powerful cars through at one point. I had my fingers crossed that we were going to get to race with our full Vee group on Sunday instead of keeping us in a group of our own.

I had even asked my wife, Amber, to come down in anticipation of them letting us into the full field on Sunday. It was a great relief when they told us at the pizza party Saturday night that they were indeed letting us join our

own kind and race with Group 3. In my head, I told myself that we must have been a good group of students... when in actuality I know it was because we (meaning more likely I) hadn't done anything stupid during the on track class sessions. Phew. Oh crap, now I really was being thrown in at the deep end.

Ultimately we students showed that we were ready. At least I would like to think we showed that we were ready. Bill Griffith told me and several others around that he was “Proud of my Students” which is high praise coming from the “Welsh Warrior”. As the flag dropped on racing Sunday, George had raced into a 9th and a 10th place where I was able to race into 14th place for both Race 3 and Race 4. John had some car trouble but I am certain would have been right there in the middle of us once it gets sorted. Oh, and with all the cars that spun in Race 3 and Race 4, I am happy to say that none of us students were caught out by it, nor were any of us the cause of the spins. That is a feeling I will proudly take with me as I look forward to my next time in a race car.

The CVAR Drivers School is something I recommend to anyone that is interested in racing vintage race cars. I had a blast and will remember it all for a long time coming. ❧