

Motorsport has never been the cheapest of hobbies—you need the machinery to start with; but at the grassroots level you can still have a lot of competitive fun for fairly little outlay; and as Neil Fraser describes here you can still achieve some success too.

Motorsport on a budget, or sprinting the eBay way

I HAVE TO be honest, I haven't always lusted after a Caterham—not like my old school friend Tim, who I recall once upon a time in Lewisham, stating that some day he would buy a house in Caterham Road, Lewisham and become chairman of a Caterham Car Club.

That was 25-plus years ago; Tim is still lusting after his dreams, fuelled in the last year by loans of my car. When I looked around in middle age for something more fun, I wanted a Ginetta G15; what I ended up with was a Caterham, a year of cheap(ish) motorsport and a load of fun.

It started with that scenario that passes through most petrolheads' minds at some time: how can you find a car that is fun, but practical? Ever since my employer had offered cash instead of a car, I had tried to square the circle, but doing 25,000 miles a year, having a family and approaching middle age made me realise that after a 12-hour day in meetings I wanted to survive the 120-mile drive home in a leather-clad, air-conditioned, reliable and reassuringly 'safe' car, not the sort of buzzy breakdown wagon that I had covered ludicrous mileages in as a teenager (half of them courtesy of the RAC!).

I realised that it was asking too much of one car to fulfil all my needs so I started to think of a cheap runaround, a practical classic, one I could take on a track. My first port of call was Hillman Imps because of a long history that isn't appropriate for these pages (*Oh, I don't know... enviable sporting history, the link to Coventry Climax... Ed.*) but realised that one should never try to regain lost youth. My mind then passed, via *Pistonheads*, through Ginetta G15s, Porsches even Ferraris until, by chance, I did a Caterham slalom event. I'd been aware of Sevens but thought they were just for tiny, rich, nutters. I was surprised to actually fit into one... and I was hooked.

The only thing I really couldn't get secondhand was an MSA competition licence...

So about a year ago, after a long time looking, I found a basic 1.6 Roadsport which fitted my low price threshold and—as if standing attached to the end of a piece of strong elastic—life started accelerating from there on.

I had decided that I wanted to take the car on a track of some sort and before I purchased the car I had been to an *Introduction to Sprinting* day at Curborough. Suitably informed, I then felt that sprinting probably ticked the boxes: the car wasn't going to get damaged by someone else's incident; the basic car fitted into a competitive class and, finally—appealing to the tiny residual amount of Scottish blood I have, it looked to be fairly cheap!

Now clearly you can't just turn up at a sprint or hillclimb without

some preparation, so the first addition was an 'FIA' rollover bar and petty strut (which braces it to the cockpit side), bought secondhand for £160. Next came a beam-splitter for the timing: I made that myself from a sheet of aluminium (on eBay at £1.50) and some old black paint. Yellow tape to wrap around (and thus clearly indicate) the battery earth—I used the remnants of a PVC roll I noticed at my brother-in-law's place, so that came free.

Then came the more thorny bits: helmet and fireproof overalls—not cheap at all, I thought. Well, persistence and luck can carry you a long way. A Sparco three-layer suit was found on, again on eBay, at £43.90; in hindsight, one size up may have looked slightly better but it fits and does what it's meant to.

Helmet: now I would never recommend getting a secondhand crash helmet, but again eBay announced one available locally (so I could examine it) a make and size that I had already tried on... £56 with a nomex balaclava thrown in too.

The only thing I really couldn't get secondhand was an MSA competition licence... but hey, at £34 that's not too bad!

Finally, some stick-on numbers (from *Demon Tweaks* at £15.50) and, not strictly required but useful, nomex karting gloves—that well know internet auction site once more) at £23.99 and I was ready to roll... for the princely sum of £334.89. Most of that won't be repeated for a second season and could be sold on without much of a loss if necessary.

As for other costs—well, there were the entry fees, which are between £50 and £100 per event and petrol to drive (not trailer) to events. As for the car, new tyres were needed anyway so I went for some Yokohama A539s at £180 for four (fitted) and they still have plenty of tread left now. I have fitted an 'Apollo' anti-cavitation tank as a lubrication safeguard and adjustable spring platforms during the year but, frankly, I'd probably have fitted them just for road use anyway so I don't consider them an extra cost.

I doubt that you can do it much cheaper than that but it certainly hasn't compromised my fun factor while I have learnt my way during my novice year. That fun factor has definitely been helped by the fantastic people I have met through the year who have been generous to a fault in advice, support, mickey-taking, sandwiches and—on one occasion—petrol as well!

Obviously, going sprinting on the cheap, I didn't expect to be terribly competitive but I've ended up winning the Club's Novice Championship and coming third in class one; I definitely didn't see that one coming.

So, do I still lust after a Ginetta G15? No. After all, my K-series engine offers all the same head-gasket dramas; it's just easier to do the repairs on the Caterham!