

Cluster champs

How racing cars built an industry.



Button, Brawn and Britain – AP

Wailing an awful rendition of “We are the Champions” into his radio, Jenson Button drove to fifth place in the Brazilian Grand Prix on October 18th. It was all the 29-year-old needed to clinch the Formula 1 (F1) championship. Mr Button became the tenth British driver to win the title, after Lewis Hamilton snared it last year for the McLaren team. Victory was also sweet for Ross Brawn, an F1 veteran whose firm built Mr Button’s car.

With six out of the ten F1 teams based in Britain and many of the rest using British services, motorsport is a flourishing industry. Some 4,500 firms—with an estimated annual turnover of around £6 billion (\$10 billion)—build or restore cars, make engines and components, and provide technical and management services. Almost everything a racing team needs can be found without leaving Oxfordshire or Northamptonshire.

It was not always thus. British motor racing used to be a gentlemanly affair, just part of the sporting season. In the 1920s and 1930s the idle rich would blast Bentleys around the Brooklands circuit in Weybridge. Some might venture down to the 24 Heures of Le Mans or Italy’s Mille Miglia, where the continentals were better organised.

By the 1950s motor racing had begun to be dominated by Italian firms such as Ferrari, Lancia, Alfa Romeo and Maserati. Britain’s many amateurs and garage-tinkerers were forced to become more professional. They competed and co-operated with each other, but their relationship with domestic mass carmakers remained loose—unlike the Italians, whose teams and cars came from vertically integrated companies.

In raising their game, says Rick Delbridge of the Cardiff Business School, Britain’s open and individualistic network of companies proved more innovative. What emerged was a cluster of expertise, much like the cluster of software companies in Silicon Valley. One famous improvement came when Cooper, which began as a family-run garage in Surbiton, put the engines in its racing cars right behind the driver. This greatly improved handling, and by the early 1960s all F1 cars were built this way.

Today, new regulations and limits on development threaten to blunt that innovative edge. F1 had planned a £40m spending cap on teams to make competition among them more even. This was abandoned in June when some teams threatened to set up a rival race series.

But the idea is not dead and other restraints on R&D spending could emerge. One way to ensure future inventiveness, suggests Mr Delbridge, is to diversify. Helping to make cars greener is one possibility: Lotus, an engineering and sports-car firm, and Zytek, which builds racing engines, are both involved in developing electric cars. Some may see motor racing as politically incorrect, but if it can encourage clean transport for those who don't drive as fast as Mr Button, that image could change.

CLUSTER champs. **The Economist**, New York, Oct. 22nd 2009. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 28 out. 2009.

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