

AutoWeek

Striker strikes the fancy of open-wheel racers



By ROB GEIGER

The future of road racing could reside in a non-descript building in the tiny north Texas town of Sanger. That's where a team of engineers and former racers are building and fine-tuning the next generation of driving simulators that could revolutionize the way future racers are selected and trained.

The elite Formula One set has been buzzing over Lewis Hamilton and the remarkable ability he displayed in his rookie season of 2007. While it's true that Hamilton has been racing since he was eight, the now-23-year-old superstar attributes his success to the exhaustive hours he spends in McLaren's simulators.

"Drivers at all levels are looking for a competitive advantage," said Mark Nixon, a Toyota Atlantic open-wheel racer who founded Motor-sport Simulators in 2006. "Nothing beats seat time, and with a simulator, there are no restrictions."

Nixon's latest machine is called Striker. It features the front half of a formula race car positioned in front of three 50-inch plasma displays that wrap around the driver. The entire assembly rides on a hardy platform with three-axis motion, which definitely provides the necessary motion to get that seat-of-the-pants feeling drivers require.

At \$59,000, the transportable mechanism is an advanced training tool that requires sophisticated tuneups, just like a real race car. Nixon has sold 40 units so far, to teams in six countries. His mostly confidential client list includes F1, NASCAR and former Champ Car teams.

"The idea is to allow the driver and the crew chiefs to make as many laps as necessary," Nixon said. "The driver learns all the nuances of the track, and the technicians can experiment with whatever new ideas they have. We're already working with some pro teams that require their people to spend time with the simulator."

Working with the best 3-D animators and graphic artists they could find, Dixon's programmers installed a huge list of racetracks in Striker's database that are perfect replicas of the real thing. It takes three full months to map a racecourse using GPS logging data, onboard cameras and lots of photographs.

The simulator's end users can manipulate the weather, choose numerous types of cars and race on an empty track or against full fields of opponents. But the main emphasis is on making the action in the cockpit as true as humanly possible.

"We were at the Champ Car race in Toronto last year with Alex Figge, Mario Dominguez and Ryan Dalziel of Pacific Coast Motorsports, and I noticed the guys were driving the same line, hitting their shift points and braking at the same time in real life as they were in the simulator," Nixon said. "And the lap times they posted were nearly identical. That's when I knew we were on to something. It was very satisfying."

Find more info at www.motorsportsimulators.com.

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