



NATIONAL AUTOGRASS SPORT ASSOCIATION LTD.

30 November 2009

To all NASA Club and League Chairmen

A note for discussion at local level

After a year in the position as technical director, I thought it might be useful to sum up where we are with various projects and also to raise a few issues that I would ask you debate with members within your club and league. Some items are for info only, others I would genuinely like feedback from the grass roots membership.

First part is going through our classes where changes are not necessarily being proposed but where options are being considered:-

Class 1 – We must plan for the eventual replacement of the Mini. I make no proposal that we phase it out. In fact as the backbone of our sport for at least 40 years such a thing couldn't be envisaged! However pressures are on the class, not particularly from shortages of cars - which members continue to turn up, but for other reasons we must take account of.

Competitive minis are very expensive. I know from daily personal experience that the cost of parts continues to escalate and that situation will only get worse. Given that they haven't made a 998 mini for 27 years, it is unrealistic to think that members will be able to run cars "as found" and so expensive rebuild work is necessary for those who wish to run them. There is also the issue of tyres to consider. There is only one manufacturer of a 10" mini tyre in the world – Falcon Tyres of Japan. Tyres continue to be available but we are continually alerted to the fact that the supply could dry up and/or tyres only be available at ridiculous premiums. 12" tyres are even worse and 13" require serious bodywork modifications to fit so nearly overnight we could be faced with a situation of having no rubber for over 500 of our cars!

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I'm not convinced that we have found the alternative car to the mini yet. The AX/Saxo/106 in 1 litre form is barely up to the job. It's a decent car at club level but found wanting at National level (see results). The power unit is OK but the package as a whole is barely there. For 2010 we are permitting the 5 speed gearbox to be fitted and I'm sure it will help. However the other problem with this car is its availability. It is probably easier to find a 998 mini than a one litre Peugeot! The Chief Scrutineer has asked that the Fiat Chink be discontinued because of stability problems so, as of today we are effectively left with the Mini and one other vehicle only. – Given that the AX/106/Saxo are much the same thing.

You will be aware that for the 2010 season (and maybe beyond) we are permitting members to build alternative "trial" cars for Class 1. We are not dictating what these should be and give no guarantee that at the end of their trial year they will be adopted. They will however be allowed to run at any NASA authorised meeting, bar the Nationals, throughout the year. (Places in finals and the award of trophies etc will be at the discretion of the organising club). These cars will sport NASA numbers. It is envisaged that the more popular cars will be tried, ie the much more readily available 1100cc version of the AX/Saxo/106 and the 1000cc "Bubble Micra" for example.

At the end of the trial period (which will be a minimum of one season but may be extended beyond that), we have a number of options – delete the trialed model as an option, permit it with restrictions, accept as it is. We could also, if the new car types threatened the competitiveness of the mini – allow some minor mods to the mini – electronic ignition, free air filter, free exhaust manifold? Just ideas so don't get carried away and misinterpret what I am saying.

Class 2 – Retains its popularity with the numbers of cars only just behind Class 1 and at this time there are no proposals for change. If they were ever considered necessary – and people glibly talk about "1400" then we would have to consider what actual cars that would bring into the class and how such cars would need to be regulated. Again, as with Class 1 we must ensure that we maintain strength in the class without killing what is already there.

Class 3 – Has been under the public spotlight a great deal this year as we have been stimulating discussion as to how we can take the class forward. It is a class popular with spectators, is an excellent advert for autograss and deserves our efforts to ensure its survival. It has been reliant on either utilising long obsolete, albeit often attractive, RWD shells, notably the Starlet or converting a FWD shell to operate in successfully in RWD mode – something that few have achieved at the highest level. Today there is no car as good as a Starlet in Class 3, despite the fact that the newest Toyota RWD bodyshell you see will be over 25 years old.

We've given enough notice that change will come to the point that we are now guilty of stalling development of the class – nobody wishes to do anything because what they do may be obsolete overnight following a rule re-draft. To this end I intend that we publish new the DRAFT rules for the class

that John Shorter has been working on within the next few weeks. We have been engaged in a long consultation process and now consider we have a fair understanding of where the Class members would like us to go.

Following the publication of Draft rules, we would ask that these to be formally discussed at club level by you, the recipients of these notes and for feedback to come to Walsall early in the new season. From there I anticipate finalising the rules and inviting "trial" cars to be built and compete for the rest of 2010 and that they go "live" in 2011.

In drafting the rules our objectives will include: to find competitively alternate shells to the Starlet, to put more modern bodyshells onto the autograss field and to permit modifications (principally by axle relocation) that will improve the performance of the "front engined RWD car".

I also think that in Class 3 – as in Classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 we should also consider shell modifications to enhance the appearance of the modern bodyshell that we will be inevitably using. By this we will be considering the permitted lowering of bodyshells – say by the elimination of sills, taking the bodyshell down to the point that the bottom of the doors sits level with the floor and thereby lowering the overall height of the vehicle and hopefully enhancing its appearance as a race car. Look at the Citroen C2 for example. Safeguards in the form of "minimum height" "maximum lowering" etc would of course be needed and guidelines will need drawing up. Don't forget that all modified saloon classes from 2010 may fit "bolt on" bodyshells.

The only other consideration I would ask you to think about in Class 3 is the use of Rotary engines, ie of the type fitted to the Mazda RX7 and 8. Cheap power in a simple package. What do you think?

Class 4 – Steadily diminishing numbers in the class would suggest that something needs be done if it is to retain its own identity in the longer term. In recent years a degree of flexibility has been given to the strict "original engine, sat on the original mountings in the original bodyshell" concept by way of full spaceframing, a degree of moving of engines – usually forward – and from next year "bolt on" bodyshells. On this one I'm going to wait and see but I know of at least one league that will be proposing retaining the "original shell/original engine" concept but will want that engine to be movable to a location anywhere within the silhouette. Purists may disagree but it may just save your class. (See also – Class 3 bodyshell modifications as they could also apply).

Class 5 – I see Class 5 as very strong at National level – plenty of cars, seriously quick cars and many very expensive cars. It may well be the most expensive saloon class we have although it'll be competing with class 3 for that dubious honour. I don't see it as strong at club level although numbers are reasonable,

I think we should stick with the 1400cc, 8 valve concept for the RWD cars – ie the winning cars of today but I ask you to consider the following as an option that may be attractive to the club racer: I propose that we trial/allow 1400cc, 16 valve Front Wheel Drive cars in the class – providing they utilise the right engine for the bodyshell – for example – 16v, K series Metro, 1400, 16v Corsa etc. Please discuss and let us know your thoughts. The 1400cc, 16v engine car is one of the most popular on the roads today and yet we have no home for it within Autograss.

(See also – Class 3 bodyshell modifications).

Class 6 – Propose no changes. A class that was weak 20 years ago and based up “big minis” has now come into its own. It can be as cheap or expensive as you want it to be. A very popular class that needs no changes. (See also – Class 3 bodyshell modifications).

Class 7 – the only thing I thought of here (as I have for Class 10) is the often recurring question about “turbo bike engines”. Having sought advice from a number of people – including one principal supplier of such things – I have decided to advise against them. Powertec tell me that a large capacity Hyabusa, normally aspirated and putting out about 270hp costs today, between 7 and 10k (with the customer supplying his own donor unit). In theory one could bolt on a turbo kit to a standard motor and have the same power (or more) for 4 to 5k. However – it won’t last and our Class 7/10 drivers won’t be happy with that level of power will they?!!! We could see the turbo motor evolving, if unchecked, to a 350+hp, £15k+ package and the divide between the haves and have not would become wider.

The counter argument that will arise is the Millington and Powertec V8 question. Given that Class 7 and 10 are our ONLY unlimited classes I see no problem with these engines in these classes. I further see no problem with any concoction of engine in these classes (or the use of two of them). I think we would be right, however to prohibit exhaust driven turbos on this type of engine in the way that I am with the bike engines.

(See also – Class 3 bodyshell modifications).

Class 8 – No changes really, a winning formula as is.

Class 9 – Not sure. Always seems a lot of money to go slower than a Class 8! I know the class has its supporters and there would be little benefit in scrapping the class. Its “car engine” only constraint seems to work well enough so let’s leave it alone. – Unless you have any other suggestions.

Class 10 – Ditto. No changes proposed. The engine considerations of Class 7 also apply equally in Class 10 of course. Suggestions have been made about combining 8 and 10 – the result of which would, in my opinion result in the immediate death of Class10. Leave it as it is.

Junior Specials – I think we are going to have to come up with a new name for these. The board have now sanctioned that these cars may be piloted by seniors at any meeting and they will effectively become a sub class (for seniors) like F600 and Stock Hatch. We will be issuing scrutineering guidelines from Walsall to ensure the suitability of any shared car (large father / small daughter scenario). It is suggested that they possibly be renamed “Standard Specials” Anyone a better suggestion? Coming back to the concept, the car is basically sound and component parts still relatively plentiful and cheap. A positive feature of these cars with their strict design limitations and minimum weight is that they never “date” and as such cars should retain their resale values better than with most other classes. No changes proposed.

Other issues:

Ballast has been much in the news during 2009! I think that we should be facing up to the fact that ballast exists whether we like it or not. It is currently permitted as long as it is welded in, or at least some degree of weld has been applied to make it irremovable. This somewhat diminishes the potential benefits of using ballast, where varying the ballast load can assist where a car is shared between a heavy and lightweight driver or where track and weather conditions conspire against the “as built” setup. My personal view is that if it is properly constrained and we devise a rule to permit it based upon sound engineering then it can only benefit the performance and safety of many race cars. Safety is our number one priority, performance is secondary but there is no reason that both cannot be improved by utilising variable ballast. I have no problem with ballast in any class of car, other than 1 and 2 and have no problem with it in any position within the car, ie the rear of a Class 3 or the front of a Class 4 for example. I think we will specify a design of ballast plate(s) and a ballast plate fixing method. I see ballast permitted up to 15kg as OK (200mm sq x 50 thick steel) – maybe more?

Batteries: It is my wish that we encourage a move to dry cell type batteries. To this end I still eventually foresee the limitation of large/multiple/lead acid plant batteries where they are used for no other reason than as ballast. I think this could be tied in with ballast weight concessions and a relaxation of where you can fit a battery within the car. I also see no reason why we can't use the battery carrier sold by some dry cell battery manufacturers rather than a metal box wherever a dry cell battery is used. Similarly the use of a dry cell battery could permit the removal of the front bulkhead within a “special”. Feedback please.

Rule Books: I hope that the issue of updating the presentation of the rule books can begin in 2010. To that end it is my intention to produce a “Specials” rule book – Classes 8, 9, 10, and Junior Spec - during the winter break and have this properly printed into end user format early in the season. This will not supersede the books you will already have but be an example of an alternative for us to circulate amongst members and consider. If you are happy with the new style it can go into production for the 2011 season.

There is no reason why we can't amend this draft early in the year but I would hope to have it finalised fairly quickly.

My hope for rule books is to have initially 3 books:

Book 1 – Classes 1 and 2

Book 2 – Classes 3, 4,5,6,7

Book 3 – Classes 8, 9, 10, Junior Specials (Standard Specials?)

I envisage a considerable amount of rationalisation of text and we may eventually even decide to combine all into the one book – which of course we used to have!

I also intend that we arrive at a situation where a new issue of the Rule Book is only produced every 2 or even 3 years. It is for this reason we need to sort out any changes to classes now and get everything into shape in readiness for a period of stability. Certainly I hope the 2011 issue of the "Specials" Rule Book will hold good for at least 2 years. Also we should aim to be producing any revised rule books in about October, ie in good time for the following season. If there are interim issues that need addressing a rule changes, maybe safety, tyres etc then I see no reason why supplements can't be added to the books and given out in the form of flyers to members. Working with John Shorter we should also be able to get the new look rule books onto the NASA website.

Roll Cages / MIRA As the season drew towards a close a couple of our higher profile members – without reference to the governing body began a campaign to effect changes to our rules and more worryingly questioning the designs of our roll cages and general safety of our cars. This was considered by the board and discussed with the chairmen. Whilst there was a commonly held view that this was a cover for a marketing campaign by one of those members the allegations made, some personal, and the questions raised were taken seriously. Since then I have forwarded to our solicitor, Mr S Paris LLB, all the correspondence both as posted on the internet forum and that submitted by me to the chairmen, arguing that we have evolved safe cars and roll cages by a near 40 year process of continuing development. Along with these documents he has received a quantity of past scrutineers minutes that demonstrate our commitment to safety by continually questioning these designs. He already possesses current rule books. As I told the chairmen the plan was for him, as probably the country's foremost motorsports lawyer, to consider all and write to us with his opinion and advise us. Anyway in short he clearly supports our view, recognises the difficulties that would be posed by the myriad of varieties of car we have (this not being a one make race series!) but more so feels we are able to demonstrate that we are taking all reasonable steps to ensure driver safety. His response is lengthy and a full transcript will be available for Chairmen in January but I attach one extract from his letter –

“From what I have seen over the years and considered as a result of your instructions, I am satisfied that NASA manage the risk, keep up to date with technical developments, and take reasonable care in the regulations which they promulgate. I see no reason to change the system.”

Enough for now, but PLEASE give me your feedback on these various issues but note I shall be away from Christmas until Feb 10th – although will be contactable by e-mail during that period.

Thanks for your ongoing support, its not been easy at times!

Regards,

Dave Walker

Technical Director - NASA