

Bunker prepares for Milwaukee

May 29, 2006. A change of pace is paying off for Rob Bunker. After a frustrating Star Mazda Championship race in Houston on May 13, the Bridgewater, N.J., teen stepped back and analyzed his race strategy. His detailed plans had been flawless, but they missed a crucial element – the pure pleasure of racing. As many veteran drivers will attest, having fun makes winning easier.

Bunker entered the May 20 race at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course with a new focus and immediately set the fastest pace in the opening practice session – in heavy rain. He enjoyed the same result in adverse conditions during his early karting years.

"When it comes to finding the limits of the car in the rain, we get up to speed so much quicker than anybody else. We haven't quite figured out how to do that in the dry yet, and that's setting us back. But when it comes to rain, cold, hot weather, anything that isn't perfect, that's when we're at our best," he said.

"It's a mindset thing: everyone is expected to spin or crash in bad weather. When it gets to that point, when people are afraid to really push the car, is when I seem to push the most. [In karting] there were times when people wouldn't practice in the rain, they wouldn't race, they'd try to close down the track, and we'd still be out there working hard."

The Mid-Ohio race didn't go as well as the practice, with another competitor knocking Bunker out early. But the strategy test was successful.

"We showed everyone that we're fast. Now we keep pushing and pushing for our own good," he said. "We're not working so much on coaching plans. For now, we're working on just trying to have a good time, trying to make racing as fun as we can, trying not to think of it so much as a job. When I'm out on the track and it's in my head that this is challenging myself and no one else, it's rewarding."

Bunker tested the No. 18 AIM Autosport Pro Formula Mazda on the Milwaukee Mile in preparation for his next race, on June 3. He was surprised by his first oval-track experience.

"I really thought the oval would be boring, it would be easy. It wasn't either of those, but it was a lot of fun. It's ridiculous how different all four corners of the track are – it's night and day on each one. There are a lot of tuning things that you would never think to do on a road course that work on an oval."

He found his goal, too: "The big challenge that appeals on ovals is that you can eventually do it 'flat' if you try hard enough."

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