Soap box racer launched career for Hanover man

By TED McCANNEL
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HANOVER — Fred Wilken was 12 when he designed his first car back in 1955.

The Hanover native's entry in a soap box derby that year creamed the rest of the area competition and for the next few years, Wilken's designed cars either won or finished in the top three in the derby races.

It was natural that when he reached driving age he would graduate to working on and racing sports cars and when he became 21 he built his first Canada Class Formula car which served him well at Mosport and Green Acres.

It was dubbed the Ferret, the name that is now affixed to cars produced here by Ferret Industries, the only Canadian company to design and build a car that has won a major Bulova Formula Ford race.

Fred is president of the Ferret firm which operates on the first floor of B and W Motors Ltd., a garage and car dealership he owns. Three other men make up Ferret Industries.

Alec Purdy of Hanover is chief engineer and designer for the Formula Ford program. A graduate of the University of British Columbia in mechanical engineering, he developed a deep interest in formula racing when he finished first in class in his novice race.

He redesigned his Lotus and won the national championship in 1972 which got him to England and the World Championship Formula Ford race.

John Scratch, a Goderich teacher, started racing in 1968. He became a team driver in the Ferret in 1972, winning the Ontario Formula Libre title in that year. He also drove the Ferret in its first Bulova win in October 1972. This year he will drive his Castrol Ferret MK4.

Go-cart racing was the way British-born Bill Hirst got into the field. He was a member of the British team in match races against Italy and Ireland in 1965. He advanced to sports car racing in England and Europe and in 1969 came to Canada where, as a mechanical engineer instructor, he is employed by Ontario Hydro at Douglas Point.

A sometimes driver, his duties with Ferret Industries include pre-track maintenance and team manager at the tracks.

The four-man team believe they have a good one in the Ferret MK 4, a car of functional and efficient design and most important, one that will be easy to maintain.

For example, the roll bar, usually just extra weight, is utilized as a structural member. All restrictive tubes at the rear have been removed by triangulating the tubes over the full height and width of the car. This will give unobstructed access to all engine accessories.

Removal of engine and gear box can be accomplished in minutes instead of hours.

Scale models of the chassis have proven its stiffness to be 50 per cent greater than other current designs and the weight distribution gives slightly more bias on the front wheels for better balance.

No fluids are carried through the chassis tubes, making for a safer car in event of an accident.

The driver sits in a protective cocoon instead of a single tube roll bar which gives impact protection from both front and side. A unique feature is the fixed seat. Pedals and steering wheel are adjustable to suit the individual drivers.

The body is fibreglass with the low frontal area providing a downforce.

A 1600 cc Ford Pinto engine is used but, by fine tuning, the horsepower is raised from 90 to about 105. The work on the engine raises its cost from an initial $200 to more than $1,500.

Minimum weight for a Formula Ford is 882 pounds as it comes off the track and without a driver. It runs on 13-inch wheels with a 5½-inch rim width. The maximum body width of the Ferret MK 4 is 37.4 inches and it has a height of 31½ inches.