

## 'Bad-boy papa' puts kids on track to fame, glory

By ANGELA JEFFS

The doors to Seisaku Watanabe's workshop cum salesroom cum clubhouse in west Tokyo's Inagi stand open to all. Waving from inside, he motions passersby to drop in, take a look, have a chat.

It's a wild space, stacked and hung with colorful go-karts in all shapes and sizes. There's even a tiny motorbike — say for 2-to-3 year old?

"I like kids to start early, when they are naturally super confident," Watanabe says, peppering his native Japanese with snippets of English. "Of course, danger is an issue, but that's why training is so important."



Seisaku Watanabe, who describes himself as something of a "Peter Pan," a man who "never grew up," has devoted his life to go-karting. His company, Chickenrun Recreation Motorsports puts children of all ages onto the racetracks for the rides of their lives.

Watanabe's company, Chickenrun Recreation Motorsports (CRM), puts children as young as 3 onto full-size racetracks to compete in go-karting. His own son, Yusaku, won a major exhibition race in Gotemba when he was 3 1/2, at a record speed for the circuit. "I've been struggling to get this recognized by the Guinness Book of Records for the last seven years. Unfortunately, an important official document has been lost, but I won't stop trying."

As a teenager, Watanabe was more a bad boy than tenacious.

"But I was only a little bit *bosozoku*, racing bikes and cars, making a lot of noise. In one of James Dean's movies, he raced and the winner was the chicken.

Well, that was me, playing chicken." He'd been influenced from junior-high school days, he believes, by growing up near to a big American base. Now all that's left is Tama Hills, a recreational facility used by military personnel to let off steam.

"It's how I picked up my English. I only learned at school and around the base. I've never studied."

Leaving school he got involved in a different kind of mental challenge: becoming a stunt man. "Mostly I was around vehicles — jumping from boats, crashing cars — the kind of thing you see in movies and commercials."

Though best known, he believes, for his work on the TV series "Seibu Keisatsu." ("I was always the bad guy being chased.") He also test-raced cars for auto manufacturers.



Yusaku Watanabe, a record-breaker at 3 1/2 now has his heart set on turning pro.

After 16 years of pushing himself to the limit, Watanabe took stock and decided he needed a new challenge. As a result, CRM — and all that goes with it — became his life, his family, his baby.

Now his literal family lives upstairs. "I met my wife, Tomoko, while making a commercial. She was the art director."

For a long time, no children came along, and he admits that the shop and CRM were a substitute. Then along came kids, now aged 10, 6 and 4. "So now I have everything I've ever wanted."

He considers himself a lucky man to be able to spend so much time with his family. Every weekend, they are out and about, doing practice or full-out racing with other kids and families, on small circuits, such as the one on the nearby theme park Yomiuriland, or full-size professional tracks like Fuji Speedway (Shizuoka) and Nakai (in Kanagawa Prefecture).

"Weekdays, I'm here when my children go to school and I'm

here when they come home. I think I'm a good father, but I guess you could also call me a *furyo* papa — what's that in English? A bad-boy papa." (And here he laughs uproariously at his own joke.)

When he was a kid, his parents had little to lavish on their children: Survival was all about basics. As for the chance to participate in many sports, they were few to nonexistent.

Now children can race in three age groups: 3-8/9; 6-10; 10 upwards "to any age." Go-karts are not just for kids, Watanabe insists, though most adults prefer to move on to racing cars or hot rodders.

He knows full well that fathers are the adults most responsible for pushing their kids to race and win. But mothers must be fully in agreement and he would never force a child who was unwilling. "That would be child abuse."

For Yusaku, who was toddling around the shop in his infancy, karting was normal. Now he wants to be a pro, which is giving his father a real headache, especially in relation to his two younger children.

His daughter is desperate to race, but he has put everything into Yusaku, and there's little left. Go-karting is not cheap, with the car, uniforms, entry fees and so on. And now the younger boy is showing interest, wanting to do what his older brother is doing.

"It's a hard one. I want to be fair, but the alternative is going bust or having no free time at all. To be fair — to find a balance — is my latest challenge, and it's the toughest yet."

Families with children wanting to race come to Watanabe for advice. They then buy their karts (mostly imported from Europe and the U.S.) from CRM. The smallest is around 200,000 yen but can rise to near a million yen for larger. "For custom models, which I create here in the workshop, the sky's the limit."

How many does he sell in a month?

"Two or three. There's also the gear — suits and helmets. Plus the training. It can get pricey."

He organizes one-day workshops and seminars, teaching techniques for braking on corners and timing variables. No

one in Japan has ever done what Watanabe is doing. He's quite the pioneer, with a team of around 20 top notch go-kart racers, and more are signing up all the time. Ten years from now he hopes to see some of those kids racing as professionals, with CRM at least double its current size. He would also like it to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

"I'm very keen to hook up with any foreign guys or dads who have experience of carting in the States or in Europe, who are in Japan and would like to get involved. I want them to know that I am here, and that my door is open. I'd love to see families of all nationalities using CRM as a recreational base."

He then remembers something: "As long as they understand there's some danger involved, that they're willing to sign a waiver!"

If that sounds alarming, be assured he's very strict — runs a tight ship — with a precise set of rules that have to be followed to the letter. "It's true," he adds. "I'm always watching, intensely involved. There's no room for carelessness or misbehavior."

Funny then that he regards himself as Peter Pan, playing with go-karts because he doesn't want to grow up.

Not sure about this. Leaving him smiling and waving, a well-tended vegetable garden to one side and with paddy fields across the road, he looks pretty grown up to me.

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