

Tragic mixture blurs a vision

By Motoring Editor WAYNE WEBSTER

IT WAS supposed to be one of the world's last great motoring adventures, the chance for enthusiasts to push their big-dollar exotics to the limit in safety.

Yet, as Japan's Akihiro Kabe, his co-driver Takeshi Okano and race officials Tim Linklater and Keith Pritchard tragically found on Tuesday, nothing in motorsport — especially safety — can ever be guaranteed.

The accident that saw Kabe's Ferrari F-40 fly out of control at more than 200km/h, killing its occupants and the two marshalls almost instantly, was a sickening reminder that speed and safety just don't mix.

The crash has taken the fun out of the event which promised to be the



Adventure turns to tragedy... scene of the Cannonball Run crash south of Alice Springs

ultimate fix for speed freaks. That promise attracted 140 entries.

Only 139 will leave Ayers Rock today for the 2000km dash to Darwin.

According to Sydney's Paul Gover, driving a Toyota Landcruiser, the organisers left no stone unturned to make the event as safe as possible.

Although supposed to be a fun event, it has a strict schedule.

Competitors line up daily for the "flying mile" where the cars are unleashed over 1.6km of

closed highway.

The best effort was the ill-fated Ferrari F-40, which reached 285km/h down the bitumen.

In Cannonball Stages, the competitors have to maintain a set average speed and face time penalties if they arrive at checkpoints early or late.

It was on a Cannonball Stage where Mr Kabe had his fatal accident.

The rest are Touring Stages which are nothing more than transport sections between the competitive charges.

The highway between Darwin and Ayers Rock was upgraded before the event, with whole sections ressealed and lane markings repainted.

The organisers have also placed marshalls on some of the more difficult corners with yellow flags to help warn drivers of any potential dangers.

And, each day, both sides of the road are

cleared of dead animals.

There has been no lack of police presence.

Everyone agrees that what happened with the Ferrari F-40 was just a tragic accident.

According to the man directly behind Kabe at the time, Porsche 911 Turbo wheelman Johnny Kahlbetzer, it was a simple case of driver error.

The distraught driver, now leading the event, said yesterday that he believed Kabe may still be alive if he hadn't tried to fight the Ferrari.

Most competitors agree that the organisation has been beyond reproach.

With touring car legend Allan Moffat organising, it was designed from day one to be as safe as possible for the competitors.

No-one, not even four times Bathurst victor Moffat, could have foreseen the tragedy.



Akihiro Kabe

Speed trapped novice driver

THE driver whose Ferrari crashed in the world's first legal Cannonball Run, killing himself and three others, was too inexperienced to handle high speeds, a spokesman for the Japanese entrants said yesterday.

Millionaire dentist Akihiro Kabe's \$750,000 Ferrari F40 lost control and slammed into an official checkpoint vehicle on Tuesday.

He was on a straight section of the Stuart Highway, 95km south of Alice Springs.

Mr Kabe, navigator Takeshi Okano and race officials Tim Linklater, 22, and Keith Pritchard, 31, of Darwin, were killed.

Mr Hori, a spokesman for the two dead men, said Mr Kabe was an inexperienced driver.

"I knew he really couldn't drive the car in excess of 200km/h," Mr Hori said.

"He probably panicked when he saw the check point where he had to stop."

"He did not have enough experience to cope with the speed and hitting the brakes."

It was probably the first race Mr Kabe thought he would win and may not have been taking enough care, he said.

A strict 180km/h speed limit was imposed for the rest of the Cannonball Run, from Uluru to Dar-

By CATHARINE MUNRO and GORDON FEENEY

win, for all but the daily "flying mile" sections.

After intensive talks yesterday, the rest day, organisers said the event would continue.

Although Northern Territory police were satisfied with race procedures and the Confederation of Australian Motor Sport issued a permit for the event, the speed limit would apply, they said.

It would be rigidly enforced, they said.

NT open roads are not subject to a speed limit. This is the reason the high-speed event, styled on a hit movie of the same name, was held in the NT.

Johnny Kahlbetzer, of Sydney, who witnessed the tragedy from his Porsche just a couple of hundred metres behind the Ferrari, suggested signposting could have been a problem.

"From back where we were, the other car obviously didn't know exactly where they were," Mr Kahlbetzer said.

Asked whether more prominent signs indicating the check point could have averted the tragedy, Mr Kahlbetzer said:

"Correct." Mr Kahlbetzer said he and co-driver Bruce Wallis were almost certain to pull out of the event, after the trauma of pulling the bodies from the vehicle.

Mr Kabe's widow will arrive in Alice Springs today accompanied by the wife of Takeshi Okano.

Dead official feared accident

From Page 1

Takeshi Okano died before they could be freed from the wreckage.

Mr Pritchard's mother and father, Carol and Terry Pritchard, said their son would have liked the run to continue.

But they admitted he feared the drivers were not qualified to drive at unrestricted speeds on an open road.

"He told us the Japanese guy was absolutely crazy and was going to kill somebody," Mrs Pritchard said. "That's exactly what he said to us."

Keith Pritchard drove last year in a support race at the Bathurst 1000. He was the only racing car driver in the Northern Territory accredited by the Confederation of

Australian Motor Sports.

Mrs Pritchard said after watching the time trials her son told her a number of drivers needed further training.

"Everyone agreed they were just people off the streets. They did not have any training," Mrs Pritchard said.

Mrs Pritchard said her son agreed to officiate in the Cannonball Run because he could not raise the sponsorship to enter his own car.

"We were glad he was an official because we thought he would be safe. We thought this race was too dangerous," she said.

"But he liked the principle of the Cannonball Run because it gave the ordinary man a chance to race. "It's so hard to get into Bathurst."

Ironically, Keith Pritchard was in the process of setting up a driving school to train those interested in racing.

Mrs Pritchard said she felt no ill feelings towards the Japanese drivers and sent her sympathies to the families.

"I'm sure Kabe was doing the best he could," Mrs Pritchard said.

Johnny Kahlbetzer, the driver of a Porsche overtaken by the Ferrari just minutes before the fatal accident, said the F40 Italian supercar overtook him at more than 200km/h.

"He swerved off to the right hand lane then went into the marshalling area. I don't know if he was braking or what happened," Mr Kahlbetzer said on Darwin radio yesterday.

Beast with bite for serious drivers only

By WAYNE WEBSTER

THERE is nothing even remotely subtle about a Ferrari F-40.

It is not, at least according to the manufacturer, a car intended for those intent on cruising along the narrow, winding streets of Monaco.

The Ferrari F-40 is a machine designed for serious drivers.

Ferrari has always shunned half-hearted amateurs and posers, preferring to deal with those who could drive the cars the way the maker intended — hard and extremely fast.

But, handling a Ferrari is not easy. Just before last year's



A machine designed for serious drivers, the Ferrari F-40 reaches 325km/h

Australian Formula One Grand Prix in Adelaide, I had the chance to spend two laps of Sydney's Eastern Creek circuit alongside Ferrari Formula One star Gerhard Berger who was in charge of a snarling F-40.

It was an eye-popping demonstration of supreme driving skill by a man who has won eight Grand Prix races during his career.

Berger fought the F-40, a rear engined beast that wanted to spear off the

track backwards at every opportunity, all the way around the circuit.

And, at the end of two frantic, arm waving laps, we entered the pits and he smiled.

"These cars are very hard to drive. But they

are a lot of fun," he said.

For a professional driver such as Berger, who reportedly earns more than \$15 million a year to lead the Ferrari Formula One team, taming an F-40 is entertainment.

For mere mortals the effort to tame a car such as the F-40 is something else again.

The Ferrari F-40 is an unforgiving 325km/h beast only too willing to bite the hand that fails to dominate it.

Make one mistake in a Ferrari F-40 and, as Akihiro Kabe so tragically discovered, it will turn and bite you.

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4 THE DAILY TELEGRAPH MIRROR, Thursday, May 26, 1994 — 4