

Mr Nicholas Lee with the car that won him second place at the recent Thailand International Touring Car Championship. He avoids colours like red on the car's body shell as the eyes may be strained from tracking it during a race. The body shell, made of polycarbonate, cannot weigh less than 1.350g, according to race standards.



A racer, by radio control



Mr Lee's accreditation and medal have pride of place on the 25-year-old's noticeboard above his work desk. He took ninth place in last year's Ifmar 1/10 Touring Car World Championships held in Beijing. Ifmar, or the International Federation of Model Auto Racing, is the global sanctioning body for radio-controlled car racing.



A car body, toolkit and fuel at the workstation of a racer at the Radio Control Modellers' Club (RCMC) GP National Series 1 Race at the Marine Parade Radio Control Modellers Club race circuit in East Coast Park in February.



Racers manoeuvring their cars from the drivers' stand, which is a container perched atop two others, during the 2017 RCMC GP National Series 1 Race at the 1.3km-long Marine Parade Radio Control Modellers Club race circuit in East Coast Park on Feb 26. Mechanics line the pit lane on the ground to help with refuelling and troubleshooting for the respective drivers. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

Semi-professional racer Nicholas Lee is the first Singaporean to make it into the world's top 10



Kevin Lim
Executive photojournalist

His friends call him RC Schooling, or the Joseph Schooling of radio-controlled (RC) car racing, after a top 10 finish in a world race.

But Mr Nicholas Lee, or Nico as he is commonly known to his peers, shies away from the comparison.

"I'm nothing, compared with Joseph Schooling. He's an Olympic gold medalist, but I am just me," said Mr Lee, a semi-professional RC car racer who is also a sales manager in a hobby shop that sells RC cars and electric scooters.

The 25-year-old is the first Singaporean to make it into the world's top 10, finishing ninth in last year's International Federation of Model Auto Racing (Ifmar) 1/10 Touring Car World Championships held in Beijing.

Ifmar is the global sanctioning body for RC car racing. The world championship, a biennial event, is held on different continents each time. South Africa is host in 2018.

If he is not competing overseas, Mr Lee practises every Sunday at the 100m x 60m Marine Parade Radio Control Modellers Club's East Coast track, built in 1998.

The 1.3km-long circuit, which is about the size of a football field, comes alive every weekend in a cacophony of screeching tyres and buzzing RC car engines at speeds of up to 100kmh. A local race is held every two months, attracting top racers from Europe and Japan.

There is no prize money, with winning all about honour and glory.

Mr Tan Seng Kiat, chairman of the Marine Parade club, said of Mr Lee's performance in Beijing: "Being in the top 10 can be likened to being in the Olympics final."

The club, which has about 150

members, was started in November 1980 as a special interest group under the Marine Parade Community Club.

The 50-year-old businessman said RC car racing runs on a format similar to Formula One. Participants go through three qualifying sessions, from which 10 racers with the fastest lap times will vie for the title in the final.

There are categories for electric-powered cars, which run for five minutes, and gas-powered cars, which run up to 45 minutes. Mr Lee races mostly with the electric-powered cars. Race cars commonly come in scales of 1/5, 1/6, 1/8, 1/10 and 1/12 the size of an actual car.

Mr Lee was four years old when he received his first radio-controlled car from his father, a 54-year-old electrician.

"Back then, my dad was flying remote-controlled planes but I was more interested in racing cars," said Mr Lee.

When he was nine, Mr Lee's father accompanied him to his first overseas race in Jakarta, Indonesia. Five years later, he received his first sponsorship deal from the late Mike Reedy, an American founder of RC manufacturer Reedy.

The Nanyang Polytechnic graduate in business IT turned semi-professional two years ago after completing his national service. He is sponsored by companies like Japanese RC car maker Yokomo and Chinese manufacturer Hobbywing. Mr Lee has clocked about 1,000 races to date.

Two months ago, Mr Lee finished second, a spot ahead of reigning world champion Ronald Volker of Germany, in the Thailand International Touring Car Championship.

He now has his sights set on winning in the world championship next year. "But to win a race, my package has to be perfect. I'm working hard towards that goal and hopefully I have an edge over my competitors," said Mr Lee, who devotes all his free time to the track.

cplim@sph.com.sg



Mr Lee checks the balance of his electric-powered race car in his room which is decorated with trophies he has won since he started racing at the age of four. He constantly practises with and modifies his cars to ensure they are fitted with the best components to perform optimally on the track.



Racers from Singapore, Japan and Europe controlling their cars from the drivers' stand during the race. Some drivers prefer to race from a particular position, while others have adapted to racing from any spot within the container.



Marine Parade's club chairman, Mr Tan Seng Kiat, checking the results at the RCMC race in February. A local race is held every two months, attracting enthusiasts from around the world who race for honour and glory.



Mr Nelson Lee, 41, refuelling his gas-powered car during the race. The Temasek Polytechnic lecturer finished the competition as the top local racer and ranked seventh overall against the likes of world-class drivers like nine-time world champion Lamberto Collari, and Dario Balestri from Italy in the 1/8 gas-powered car category.

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