

Private Raceway Set to Boost Motorsport

By [Lena Smirnova](#)

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Deutsche Tourenwagen Masters (DTM) came to Russia for the first time over the weekend. The Moscow Raceway has a three-year contract with the prestigious series. **Vlad Keeko**

VOLOKOLAMSKY DISTRICT, Moscow region — It's a sight that few will experience. Blazing through a Russian racetrack at more than 270 kilometers per hour, a local world-class driver comes to a pit stop with the cool poise of a veteran commuter parking a Volvo by a suburban mall.

And the flashing speed is actually the least remarkable feature in this scenario.

Roman Rusinov's "casual" turn around the Moscow Raceway on Saturday came just minutes before it hosted the Russian debut of the Deutsche Tourenwagen Masters (DTM) series — a milestone for a country where motorsport has virtually disappeared in the last two decades.

Despite the arrival of this championship to Russia's first and so far only internationally certified raceway, ambitious plans to build more tracks across the country and the ongoing preparations to host a leg of Formula One in Sochi in October 2014, motorsport remains

a challenging sphere for business, still running mostly on enthusiasm and with few financial rewards.

The Moscow Raceway opened in July 2012 with the World Series by Renault, for which it welcomed 85,000 visitors over one weekend. This season it has already hosted the World Touring Car Championship (WTCC), FIM Superbike World Championship, another World Series by Renault and now the DTM.

DTM drivers have credited the Moscow Raceway for shaking them out of their comfort zones. Very used now to the European tracks, the drivers were called on to navigate a new, difficult route that they previously experienced mostly through computer simulations.

"This is the first time I've been to Russia during a race. I was so impressed when I did my first laps on the track," said driver Mattias Ekstrom, who posted the second-best result in Sunday's race. "It's just a pleasure to drive, especially when everything is new."

And while the drivers ventured onto the track in anticipation of enjoying a brand new thrill, there was a similar sense of wonder among the people who had worked for years to make this project a reality.

The Impossible Track

Rustem Teregulov, the co-owner of Strategia Bank, a large landowner and Russian racer, built the Moscow Raceway to satisfy his own passion for the high-octane sport. He was tired of having to go to Europe to train and so decided to set aside one of his land plots, 77 kilometers from Moscow along the Novorizhsky Shosse, to build a world-class facility in Russia.

Teregulov had planned to limit investments to \$30 million but the track ultimately cost him \$153 million. And this investment is not expected to pay off for another 30 to 50 years.

The Moscow Raceway gets profits for displaying sponsors' advertisements, renting out the track for corporate events, selling tickets for international competitions if the organizers themselves act as the promoters for the series, or funding from event organizers, such as from Renault, which has a policy of making its World Series free for visitors.

Although the raceway has multiple revenue sources, a lot of these revenues are eaten up by high operational costs, said Yekaterina Beltsevich, the raceway's director.

A key expense is the land and property taxes on the raceway's 263-hectare territory.

Hosting international championships also has high costs — often surpassing any financial benefits of these events. To host the weekend's DTM championship, the Moscow Raceway's managers had to rent out additional evacuation equipment and emergency medical transport, including a medical helicopter, and take on 200 track marshals.

"Large international championships are not the main avenue for generating profits," Beltsevich said. "The raceway needs them more for maintaining a certain level and image."

However, while DTM did not bring the raceway profits in the first year of its three-year

contract with the venue, Beltsevich said she hoped that the series would become profitable as its exposure and popularity grew in Russia.

The hard capitalization of international series makes Beltsevich reserved about the possibility of hosting Formula One on the Moscow Raceway.

This world championship is particularly expensive because of the money that the host has to pay into the Formula One Management fund. The Russian Automobile Association will pay \$60 million for each year of hosting the legs of Formula One in Sochi — this on top of the 7.9 billion rubles (\$240 million) from the federal and regional budgets that will go towards building a suitable racing track.

Beltsevich said such costs cannot be compensated through ticket sales, so the government always has to financially support the local Formula One host.

"We can't bring Formula One here ourselves because it requires a long-term contract of at least five years. If we have to pay \$60 million per year, the sum of a five-year contract is \$300 million and for the racetrack this payment is simply insurmountable," Beltsevich said, adding that the Moscow Raceway meets almost all the technical requirements for hosting the prestigious championship.

Moscow authorities last month voiced their desire to build a Formula One-ready racetrack on 80 hectares near Vnukovo Airport by 2016.

But Beltsevich doubts whether these plans will go through. She said that she has heard so many announcements about the construction of world-class raceways in Russia since joining the Moscow Raceway team in 2007 that she has lost count of them.

"There is a long way to go between the announcement of the wish to build a track and the materialization of that idea," she said. "We have overcome it and I know how hard it is. I wish luck to every enthusiast who wants to repeat that journey, but I am completely confident that it is extremely hard to do this."

U-Turning from the 1990s

Russian-born Roman Rusinov did not compete in the DTM, and this lack of national heroes in world racing championships is regrettable for fans as well as the series' organizers. If there are national heroes, there will be fans and, if there are fans, there will be sponsors and extra profits to make the events pay off, Beltsevich said.

But there are no Russian racers in the DTM and few of them in the other international series.

Russian racing champion and current sports director at the Moscow Raceway, Mikhail Ukhov, said that this is the legacy of a broken sports system during the 1990s and the consistently high barriers for getting into the sport.

Pilots need to train from an early age, as young as 10 or 12 years old, to get the skills necessary for participation in high-class competitions like DTM. Ukhov started kart racing when he was 12 years old and was incorporated into the free Soviet sports system. Now rookie athletes have to pay for their training themselves, and it is not a cheap hobby.

Car racing remains one of the most expensive sports. Participation in the lower levels of Russian championships — including training, car parts and transportation tickets — costs 25,000 to 30,000 euros (\$33,000 to \$40,000) per year.

Russia is now seeing a growing popularity of kart racing, but it will be a while yet before these children reach the level of the tougher championships, Ukhov said.

"The appearance of Russian pilots is just a matter of time," Ukhov said. "The only thing is — we started too late to have our racers here today."

It must be a priority for Russia to build more racetracks if the country wants to develop the sport, Ukhov said. The few racetracks that exist now have insufficient quality and safety standards, he added.

"You can build ten more world-class racing tracks in Russia and the market still wouldn't be filled," Beltsevich said. "We would be thrilled if more professional world-class tracks appeared on our market. This would raise the prestige of motorsport and help the development of this industry. There is plenty of room for everyone."

The Moscow Raceway has helped to promote Russian motorsport by letting the Russian Automobile Association hold the Russian Racing Championship there for free last August. The track has also hosted the national competitions Lada Granta Cup and Formula Russia and regularly schedules test and track days when Russian amateur and professional racers can train on a world-class track.

Just seeing the cars and hearing the roar of the engines at DTM will help make racing more popular in Russia, Ukhov said.

"[Russian fans can now see] real battles, big names, the burning desire to become the winner, the sound and the technical supremacy of those automobiles. All this increases the interest in the sport," he said.

And already the foreign athletes found something to smile about in the reception they got in Russia even if there were fewer viewers than they are used to on the European circuits.

"For the formation lap and the lap after the finish for sure it's nice when you have a lot of people waving at you and screaming, but I saw good interest from the Russian people here at DTM, especially the ladies," said German racer Timo Scheider. "The girls are really interested in the sport — or in the drivers. I have no idea, but that's certainly different from all the other countries."

Contact the author at e.smirnova@imedia.ru

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