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ELLIS



Burning Up the Track

ALEX ELLIS

■ Niagara isn't the first geographic locale most think of when they hear the words 'Formula One Racing' but BMW thought differently when they met racer and St. Catharines resident Alex Ellis.

Every year, BMW Motorsports invites eleven promising racecar drivers to participate in qualifying, shoot-out style auditions held at Valencia, Spain at the company's racing centre. The three finalists get a Formula BMW Americans Junior Scholarship, which comes with \$80,000 and automatic enrollment in Formula BMW's Education and Coaching program, followed by a year of racing in Mexico, Brazil and South Central USA. This year, for the second time in the scholarship's recent history, a Canadian was among the three lucky recipients of BMW Motorsports' bounty. Niagara's Alex Ellis will head to the Formula BMW Americas Series as a junior, with aspirations of moving up to the prestigious Formula One series.

At the age of seventeen, he climbed behind the wheel three years earlier than most his age – starting with go-kart racing when he was 14. But he was years older than many other racing enthusiasts.

"I started late," Alex says, adding that some parents enroll their kids in go-kart racing at the age of six.

Racing really is an activity of obsession and one you either commit yourself to, or don't. During Alex's first year driving a four-stroke Honda Kart, he won eleven races, and in 2007, was invited to join the Canadian National Racing team. But after signing to run Formula Vee with TLM Racing in 2008, he set his sights on bigger, faster cars of

the graduated Formula Series, with bigger, fatter potential payouts!

Unlike NASCAR, Formula One style racing involves complicated track maneuvers and open cars, into which the drivers are securely strapped. Even the helmets are attached to the seat to prevent the driver's head from jolting forward with a force intense enough to snap necks during a crash.

Alex's mother, Maris, is surprisingly relaxed about her son as he races around a track at speeds over 200 km per hour. "There's so much safety equipment," she says, "and they're all trained drivers. It's a very controlled event."

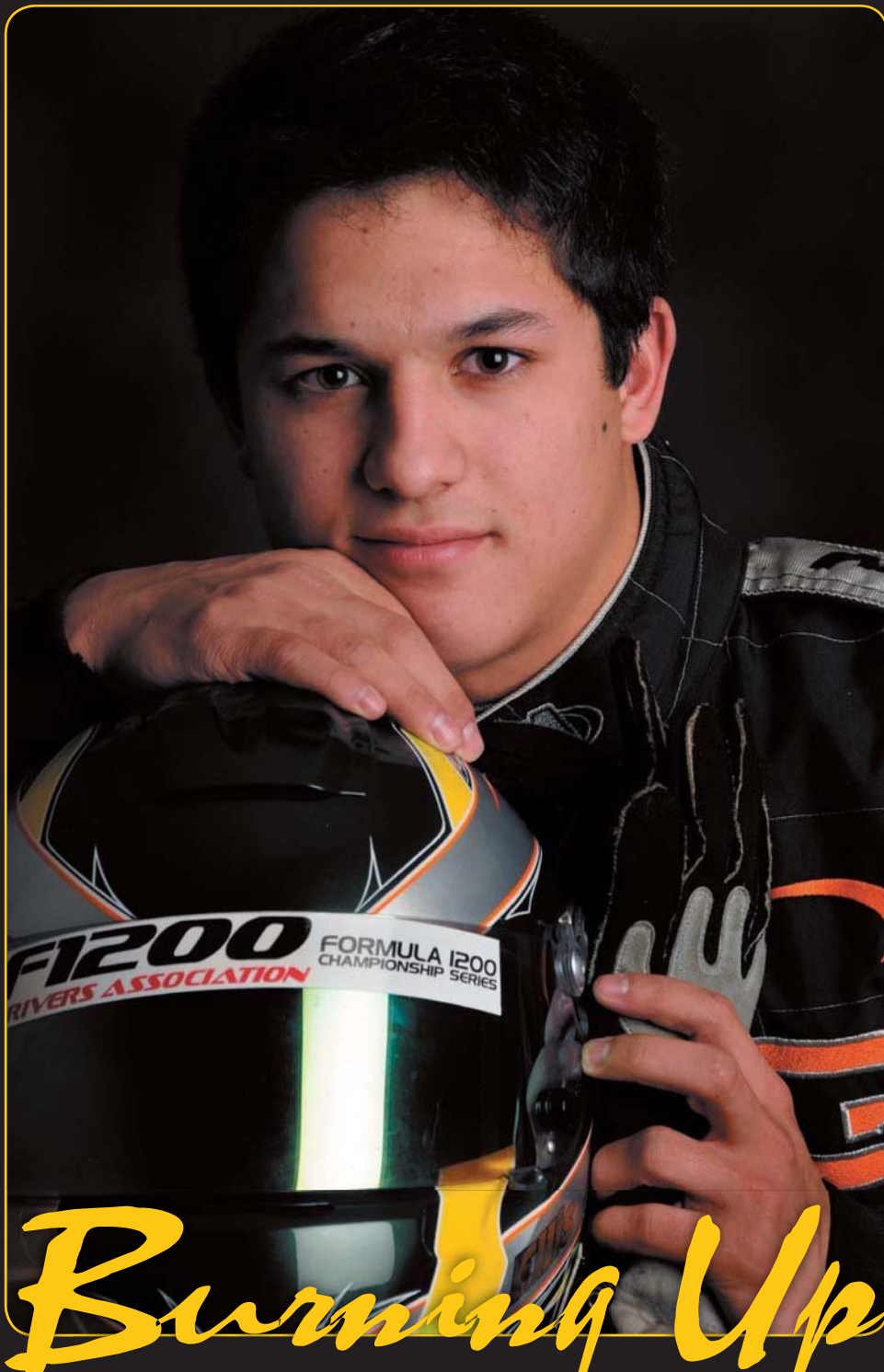
What she won't give in to, however, is Alex's request to take the family van on a ski trip to New York State for the weekend. "I said no to that," she says. "There are too many crazy drivers and so much road rage!"

And that's the reality for a teenage, up-and-coming racecar star who visualizes himself earning the kind of multi-million dollar salary common on the Formula One circuit. Until then, though, he must contend with his mother's rules, his father's proud enthusiasm for Alex's success to date and two equally competitive and athletic siblings who row, golf and snowboard.

When did this all start?

According to dad Brian Ellis, "When Alex was six, he'd sit in front of the television watching Formula One racing for hours." Brian emphasizes he didn't push Alex, but let him find his own interest: "I told him, 'if you find out where and when the local races are, I'll take you.' But I let him – eventually – do the research himself and find out how to get started."

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Niagara's Alex Ellis will head to the Formula BMW Americas Series as a junior, with aspirations of moving up to the prestigious Formula One series.

>> This year, it's all coming together and Brian has jumped into his son's potential career full throttle, providing as much moral and financial support as he can generate – and solicit. Sponsors and investors are an important part of this sport, even at the junior level.

Alex will spend 2009 as, essentially, a contract driver for BMW. The German car company affiliate will supply "loads of clothing," according to Alex, continuous driver training and of course that \$80,000 scholarship.

Now, eighty grand might sound like a lot of cash for a high school student with plans to attend Lakehead University to study Civil Engineering, until Brian explains that Alex's year of racing will cost approximately \$250,000. That includes the \$45,000 Dad has already laid out for Alex's second-hand racecar (stored in Indiana) and the \$150,000 fee to sign-up with the Australian-based racing team that invited Alex to join them on the circuit. "That's actually the most economical way of doing this," Brian says. "The team looks after the maintenance, transportation and storage of the car."

If Brian - who runs his own engineering company, Ellis Engineering and is Alex's biggest sponsor to date along with Dan Trabucco of ArtCraft Kitchens – is worried about the cost of this adventure, it's completely overshadowed by an optimistic excitement matched only by Alex's own focus and pragmatism.

"If I keep winning, I should be in a good position," Alex says. "But if I'm not in Formula One by the time I'm 20, I'll just do something else."

Formula One, after all, is a young man's sport. Retirement age is usually 35. **NL**