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St. Catharines teenaged friends chase racing glory together

Pair are focused on their goal of winning F-BMW series for Canadian team

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NORRIS MCDONALD
MOTORSPORT WRITER

It's not my style to start a column with a quote. But this one pretty much wraps up everything this story's about:

"We're the only two Canadian drivers in Formula BMW-Americas and we come from the same town and live in the same neighbourhood and drive for the same team. It's just a crazy coincidence."

So spoke 18-year-old Gianmarco Raimondo a few weeks ago at an open house held by Team Autotecnica at its racing headquarters near the corner of Keele St. and Hwy. 7, Vaughan.

Raimondo, the F-BMW-Americas rookie of the year in 2008, explained that his new teammate in the international series, 17-year-old Alex Ellis, has been a neighbour and schoolyard chum in St. Catharines since the two were kids.

"We went to the same schools and everything. Now we're teammates and we're racing against each other and it's pretty cool."

For his part, Ellis is as thrilled as Raimondo.

"It seems like I'm in the middle of a dream," he said. "If someone had told me two years ago that I would be here on this team, running with Gianmarco, I wouldn't have believed them."

Family money and BMW scholarship cash has enabled both St. Kitts kids to contract with Team Autotecnica, which was incorporated seven years ago by Enrico Diano and several other U of T engineering graduates who discovered the joys of motorsport through the university's Formula SAE (Society of Automotive Engineers) race-car design and construction project.

The team (whose philosophy is simple: in it to win) has had amazing success. Within nine months of starting the business, Team Autotecnica won the 2003 Fran-Am & Formula Renault World Championship Winter Series.

They've since gone on to win the Formula-BMW championship in 2005 (Richard Philippe of France driving), the 2007 rookie championship (Esteban Gutierrez of Mexico aboard) and the '08 rookie title with Raimondo, also in F-BMW.

Oh – not to forget Robert Wickens, the Toronto racer who won the first two rounds of the '09 Formula 2 championship last weekend in Spain.

"He had a short, but fruitful run with us at the (BMW) world finals in Bahrain in 2005," said Diano. "He did so well that he attracted the sponsorship support from Red Bull that's carried him through racing to where he is today.

"It's nice to have people like that as alumni."

For all concerned, the 2009 season has been so-so to date. Raimondo is third in the standings after seven races as the result of four podiums – a second-place finish at Puebla, Mexico, and



PHOTO SUPPLIED

Gianmarco Raimondo, 18, left and Alex Ellis, 17, were schoolyard chums and now are part of Team Autotecnica in Vaughan.

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three thirds.

Ellis is fourth in the standings – and top rookie – on the basis of two third-place finishes.

But things have got to get better, said Corrado Italiano, a partner and director of business development. "We have to start winning," he said. "We owe this to our sponsors, our partners." he said.

Italiano is not a fan of the words "sponsor" and "sponsorship."

"Sponsorship is a very loose term," he said. "It's not, 'Give us a little bit of money and let us go race.' We look for partnerships.

"If you support us, we want to come and work for you. The on-track component, in itself, is very small. The rest of the time we go out and work for the companies that invest in us to provide them with a branding service that takes their marketing programs to a totally different level."

And does this determination mean the team is ambitious?

"Yes," said Diano. "For us, the sky's the limit."

He sees potential in his drivers.

"They both have raw talent. G-Mo (Raimondo) is a very smooth driver, highly sensitive. He sometimes finds this troublesome because he can feel the car moving a certain way and he thinks it's not handling properly and as a result he doesn't perform to his fullest.

"I really hope that he gets the proper support to continue because I think he could be very quick and get great results in any kind of racing but specifically a series like ALMS Prototype racing.

"Alex's raw talent needs to be controlled and shaped. He was in Vees (F1200) last year and did very well (second in the championship and he won the rookie title). He has talent, he has the drive, he's hungry and now he just needs refinement."

Raimondo said his plan for this season is to stay consistent and to get as many points as possible.

"Last year, I was kind of new and didn't know what to expect. Now, it's a little bit easier to read people and to race with people. I can actually race better because I have more confidence in my abilities."

Raimondo said he's thinking of taking his talent to Europe next season — Formula 3, perhaps — but will look at a regional series before going for the gusto.

"I might do something like the Italian F3 series before going into the F3 Euro championship," he said. "It's a totally different philosophy over there. You want to get used to it in the first year in Italy and then if you have the experience you can go into the Euro series the next.

"One year to learn, one year to win."

Ellis said the move from karts to cars was the best thing that ever happened for him.

"I always felt I was a bit behind the 8-ball in karts," he said, "but as soon as I got in a real race car last year I felt at home.

"Me in an open wheel car just clicks. The faster the car is, the more power the car has, the better I feel and the more comfortable I am. I have a very aggressive driving style, so the more power I feel, the more I feel 'one' with the car."

Unlike Raimondo, who graduated high school but has put his education on hold to concentrate on racing, Ellis is staying in school.

"I'm going to study civil engineering at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay next year," he said. "My mom works for Air Canada, so school is only going to be two hours away.

"Although I would love a career in racing, the chances of that are pretty remote. So I need a fallback plan and I'll be going down two roads at the same time."

You'll be able to see these boys in action at Mosport the weekend of Aug. 28-30.

The F-BMW-Americas season ends at the Grand Prix of Brazil at Interlagos in October.

Norris McDonald wraps up motorsport every Monday at Wheels.ca. nmcdonald@thestar.ca

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