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Alex Ellis going from video auto racing to doing the real thing in Spain in 2009

Posted By **BERNIE PUCHALSKI, STANDARD STAFF**

Posted 4 hours ago

At the age when most kids were still playing with toy cars, Alex Ellis already knew he wanted to be a race car driver.

"When I was seven, my dad (Brian) asked me if I wanted to race," the 17-year-old St. Catharines native said. "He told me if I wanted to, he would find me a place to do it.

"But I didn't end up doing it until I was 13."

He watched Formula One racing on TV and spent thousands of hours playing EA Sports F1 2002, but didn't get behind an actual steering wheel until he started driving go-karts at Cameron Motorsports in Hamilton.

This spring, the Grade 12 student made a quantum leap in his racing career by competing in the historic Formula 1200 series at Ontario tracks such as Shannonville, Mosport and Calabogie. The 70-horsepower cars, with a steel tube framework covered in fiberglass, have a top speed of about 200 km/h.

"Because they are so undersized, they teach good smooth driving because you can't make a single mistake," Ellis said.

He experienced remarkable success, winning his first race by 18 seconds in the rain.

"I was completely blind going into the season. Coming into the first race, I had never even driven a shift car."

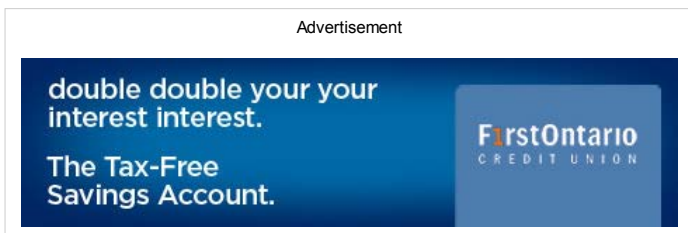
In 15 Formula 1200 starts, he won five times. In all probability, he would have become the first driver in 45 years to win the rookie title and overall series points crown if he hadn't missed the final three races.

"I think growing up watching so much racing and being interested in the technical side of it, too, made me successful. And I spent a lot of time on racing simulators, so I knew the basics of the car and what it wanted me to do."

Ellis' reason for missing the end of the series was his desire to once again take his racing to the next level. He decided to follow in the tire tracks of his best friend, Gianmarco Raimondo, by going to the Formula BMW Racing Centre in Valencia, Spain, and trying to earn a scholarship on the Formula BMW series.

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Before he left, he raced 1,000 times on the Spanish track on an R Factor race simulator, and it paid off. He was the fastest driver at the testing and was one of three drivers awarded an \$80,000 scholarship and automatic enrolment in the series' education and coaching program.

Starting next March, he'll join Raimondo, the 2008 rookie points champion on the Formula BMW Americas series, on the starting line.

"I've been following everything about the series and what he has been doing really, really, closely," Ellis said.

The two spent plenty of time together practising on R Factor and pointing out each other's mistakes on the race simulator.

"We'll see how it plays out next year, but it's going to be really tough if we're neck and neck against each other next

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year," Ellis said.

Even with the \$80,000 scholarship, Ellis needs to raise \$220,000 to compete on the series for one season. And that's with his father Brian, a civil engineer, helping to cut costs.

The Ellis family bought a 2006 Formula BMW car used for \$45,000 US and joined an Australian racing team, OS Racing, that keeps costs down by hiring crews, mechanics and other necessary support staff only when needed. The Ellis family will be beating the bushes for corporate support for the upcoming season.

"It will be very tough," Brian said. "We're talking with my accountant to make it an investment-type deal -- where people buy shares in Alex and there will be a return if he makes it in racing."

Alex's ultimate goal is to be a Formula One driver.

"I'd settle for Le Mans, but I really, really, really would do anything to get into F1 -- the glamour, the cars, everything."

Next up on the road towards that goal is testing this month in Australia. Then he will have 2 1/2 months to prepare for the season-opening Formula BMW races March 21 and 22 in Puebla, Mexico.

"In the last three days (last week), I've already done a 100 laps on the simulator on the Mexican track," Alex said. "By the time I get there, I will have upwards of 3,000 laps on the track."

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