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Jim Russell: Ellis & Carlton Win 2010 Future Driver Search

Alex Ellis of Canada and Gary Carlton from the USA have been chosen from an international field as the winners of the Jim Russell Future Driver 2010 selection. Ellis and Carlton each receives a fully-funded season in the 2010 Jim Russell Championship Series plus coaching and testing opportunities.

Almost 40 drivers, representing 10 different countries and with an average age of 20 (the youngest being 14), participated in the four-day (December 19-22) selection process at the Infineon Raceway in Sonoma, Calif., which features the impressive Jim Russell Racing Drivers School complex.

A total of 20 drivers were then selected to continue in to the final two-days, with six progressing into the last day of Jim Russell's new worldwide driver search program which was launched this year to find the best young talent from the worlds of karting and "junior" formula car racing.



Alex Ellis of Canada was selected as the best 'all-rounder' in the inaugural 2010 Jim Russell Future Driver Search (Photo: Emotive)

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Speed, precision and car control were evaluated when driving karts, Mitsubishi Evolution X sedans and the school's purpose-built FJR-50 single-seater race cars. They were appraised on their application of "feedback", technical understanding of each of the vehicles while media awareness, racecraft and fitness were also observed and evaluated in the latter stages.

In addition to Ellis and Carlton, Germany's Bastien Graber (18), James Kovacic (16), from Australia, Brazilian Felipe Polehito (20), and American Jeffrey Westphal (23) were involved in the final day, six-driver shoot-out.

Britain's ex-F1 and double Le Mans 24 Hour race winner Allan McNish and his fellow panel members chose the 18 year-old Ellis because he was considered the best "all-rounder", while the 23 year-old Carlton effectively chose himself by setting the fastest lap time in the turbocharged two-liter formula 3 equivalent FJR-50 car on the final day.

"I was pleasantly surprised by the high standard of all of the drivers," commented McNish. "Even the ones that didn't progress through at the halfway stage were all of a good standard. It was a very closely fought competition not made any easier by the changeable weather conditions we experienced at times – but that's motor racing.

A native of St. Catharines, Ont., Ellis finished fifth in the 2006 Sunoco Ron Fellows Karting Championship (F1K), eighth in the 2007 SKUSA SuperNationals (Rotax Senior), 15th in the 2007 BTK/Arrows Karts (Rotax Junior), second in the 2008 Ontario F1200 Championship as the the Rookie of the Year (five wins, 11 podiums, 15 races), and sixth in the 2009 Formula BMW Americas (one pole, three podiums, two fastest laps).

"Winning this means absolutely everything to me, having dedicated my life, mine and my family's money, in to succeeding in motorsport so you can understand I'm absolutely elated – it's more than a dream coming true, it's a massive turning point in my life," stated Ellis. "I know that I can excel in motorsport and am already looking forward to the opening races of the Jim Russell Championship Series. I learned more in the last four days than I have done from the past two years of racing. The Jim Russell instructors have a wealth of knowledge and are just great guys. It was non-stop action both on and off the track and superbly organized throughout at what is a mind blowing facility."

"For someone with such limited karting and racecar experience at a high level, he really impressed me," added McNish. "He bounced back from any problems and issues very quickly, and importantly, strongly. He has a positive personality. He suffered badly with the weather conditions but nevertheless performed outstandingly."



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Gary Carlton earned a funded ride in the Jim Russell Championship Series as the fastest driver in the FJR-50 during the Future Driver Search (Photo: Emotive)

A native of Marysville, Calif., Carlton's career to date is almost entirely in karts. He placed second 2005 SKUSA SuperNationals (SuperPro), was the 2006 National Stars of Karting champion (ICC), SKUSA SuperNationals (SuperPro) winner and eKartingNews.com Driver of the Year, the 2007 National Stars of Karting champion (ICC) and eKartingNews.com Driver of the Year, the 2007 PRI All-Stars Karting Classic champion (Karters class), second in the 2007 SKUSA SuperNationals (SuperPro) and All-Stars Karting Classic (Masters class), second in the 2008 Stars of Karting (National & West ICC) and third in the SKUSA SuperNationals (SuperPro). Carlton added his third national karting championship with the KZ2 title in the Championship Karting International program in '09. He had brief tests in a Formula Mazda in 2008 and an Indy Lights car this year.

"Winning this initiative will literally change my life," said Carlton. "I know what I'll be doing in 2010, I can focus and prepare fully for the months ahead which are certainly going to be exciting as well as challenging. I've had a great time over the past four days and have learned a great deal in terms of on and off the track. The Jim Russell organization has been incredible. They've somehow made it a lot of fun despite it being an intensive and informative program with the stresses that go with a driver shootout."

"Considering the lack of time Gary has spent in a single-seater, especially one [the FJR-50] at such a high technical level, he was very impressive," continued McNish. He didn't make a single mistake throughout the event and was always running towards the front. In his 'home' habitat of karting, he was extremely quick and very good in traffic."

Meanwhile karting's S3 champion Tyler Bennett (Farmington, Utah) and TaG senior runner-up Gustavo Menezes (Coto de Caza, Calif.), who were awarded Future Driver Search scholarships following last month's Superkarts USA! SuperNationals, both made it through to the final 20 driver phase, as did Cody Hodgson (Escalon, Calif.), who finished third in World Rotax championships recently.

"The Future Driver 2010 selection has exceeded our expectations on a number of fronts, while the quality of drivers that have taken part has been truly impressive," Chip Pankow, President of the Jim Russell Racing Drivers School, who was also on the judging panel, reflected.

The 16-race 2010 Jim Russell Championship Series gets underway in April and features two, 30-minute races staged on consecutive days over eight weekends utilizing a variety of configurations on the world famous Infineon Raceway road course in Sonoma, Calif.

The outright 2010 JRCS champion gets a fully-funded prize drive in the 2011 FIA Formula Two Championship. The European-based F2 series was launched this year and features a Williams F1 developed single-seater. The F2 champion is awarded a test with the Williams Formula One team while the top-three finishers in the FIA F2 Championship qualify for an FIA Superlicence and thus are eligible to compete in F1.

"We're now looking forward to building the Future Driver Search winners' progress next season when they will be fighting to win themselves a place on the 2011 FIA Formula 2 Championship grid," concluded Pankow.

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