

Published January 10th, 2018

Campolindo high-schooler tracks toward Formula One career

By B. B. Kaye



Photos provided

Motor sports require a lot of space to play in, and enough distance from housing to soak up the ear-splitting roar of unmuffled big-bore engines. That much space in Lamorinda is impossible; but travel North along the two-lane freeway of Route 37 through the flat, coastal wetlands and nature preserves of San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Preserve, and at the junction with Route 121 you will find, nestled in hills overlooking the bay, a true motorhead sanctuary: historic Sonoma Raceway.

The track hosts nearly every kind of motor racing - NASCAR, IndyCar, SuperBike, Top Fuel, Funny Car and Pro Stock drag, Enduro, Truck, Drifting, and Go-Kart. Opened in 1968, the course has seen rubber laid down by racing greats whose names even those with the most fleeting of glances at sports news will recognize - Al Unser, Mario Andretti, Mark Donahue, and many more.

Aspiring to such greatness, Campolindo High School student Bryson Lew has been building his racing skills with Cameron Karting at Sonoma Raceway every week since the age of 8. Now 14 years old, and already with an impressive record of wins and podium placings, he is transitioning from the Karting class of racing into full-sized, FormulaSPEED race cars. Bryson is training to race this car, potent at 200 horsepower, with a six-speed transmission and weighing about 1,150 pounds, in the Goodyear Formula Car Challenge for which it was designed, a series created to cultivate motorsports teams of the future. Each individual car is made to fit a particular driver's body like a glove and, given the power-to-weight ratio and sophisticated engineering, is faster on a road course than any "exotic" street sports car in the world.

"I have loved cars since before I was 5 years old," Bryson said. "I grew up watching IndyCar and other races at Sonoma Raceway." His sights are set on racing as a full-time career path. "Hopefully we can make it happen, but the budget is a huge factor of whether you can move up the ranks or whether you have to stay down in the lower cost stuff. You have to reach out for sponsors."

Bryson trains at Sonoma Raceway with World Speed Motorsports, designers of the FormulaSPEED car and a comprehensive racing driver development program. He cross trains by playing basketball year-round, mountain biking, running, and possesses a black belt in Kung Fu. "These sports require upper and lower body strength as well as cardio conditioning, which is crucial for kart and auto racing," he said.

Any sport is a challenging profession to aspire to, and Bryson is not neglecting to build alternative skills: "Even though I spend a lot of time at the race track, I'm very focused on maintaining good grades. As a backup plan to professional auto racing, I hope to study mechanical engineering because it impacts many aspects of race cars."

There is difficulty for racers to attract sponsors at this level, because televising of entry-level events is practically nonexistent.

Telo Stewart, president of World Speed Motorsports, said, "Production costs are pretty high, as far as them putting out a real televised show. So a lot of the series - even if they have done it in the past - are backing off from that and going to online stuff. There are benefits - because it's easier to quantify viewership. It's also easier to have on-demand viewing, so even a series like this, that a lot of people never heard of, would (otherwise) end up on TV at a less-than-optimal time. It doesn't matter who the driver is: at some point, they're going to need external funding to keep the whole thing going. To be an ambassador for those partners is pretty important."

Less than one-sixth the expense of Pro Indy racing, the Formula Car Challenge was designed with cost containments to allow drivers to make the move from karts into cars without breaking the bank; but it is still an expensive sport to make headway in. "It's a nice step coming out of karting, although not less than some people spend on karting. It doesn't matter what racing it is, if you travel around the country it adds up. We designed these cars to be the perfect car to graduate people up into car racing," said Stewart.

Formula Car Challenge engines go 6,000-8,000 miles before being replaced, whereas full-on pro Indy cars only get between 1,000-2,000 miles between complete engine rebuilds. The total cost of running an entry-level FormulaSPEED car is about \$7 per mile, compared to a professional Indy car at \$20 per mile.

Bryson's father, Brad Lew, said, "I was at an event where there was an Indy Lights driver, retired, a local guy. He said his family had funded everything. He said his best advice is not to self-fund, because you don't really have a benchmark as to the quality of your driving. If you're getting outside funding, you have other eyes looking at you, assessing ... what's the prospect of this guy being successful?"

"There are very few families in the world who can self-fund an Indy Car. Some families can self-fund through Go Karts, some through this, some can self-fund through Pro Mazda or Indy Lights, but at some point you're going to need somebody's help," said Stewart. "And so, the sooner you start developing that skill off the track to couple with on-track skills, the better. Drivers who can fund up to Indy Lights are suddenly hit with a multimillion dollar budget to raise. Being able to keep somebody engaged and feeling

like they are getting a reasonable return on investment is just as important as learning how to drive this thing."

Bryson's years of kart racing came to some fruition in 2017. He took multiple wins and podium placings, and in October was selected to be one of seven drivers representing Team USA in Lonato, Italy, where 48 countries sent their best drivers to compete in the ROK Cup International Finals. "My six years of kart racing provided the skills to quickly learn new track layouts. This enabled me to race competitively against the local Italian drivers, even though I had only one day to learn their track."

Bryson enjoys mentoring younger kart racers. "To be successful in racing, one must have a passion for race cars, be competitive, willing to stay focused, have a technical mind to analyze your driving, and have the dedication to spend many hours practicing at the track," he said. Though enjoying every moment of racing now, his sights are firmly set on future goals: "In five years I hope to be racing Formula 2 or Indy Lights. In 10 years I hope to be successful in Formula One or IndyCar."

For updates to Bryson's growing career, you can visit www.brysonlewracing.com. Keep your eye on this young man.



Bryson Lew

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