

FROM KARTS TO F1

Anthony Davidson and Lewis Hamilton reach the top

Two new Formula 1 drivers will reach the hallowed ranks of a full-time Grand Prix race seat this year to bring British driver total to four. Anthony Davidson and Lewis Hamilton, both past multiple karting champions, were confirmed recently by the Super Aguri and McLaren-Mercedes teams as race partners for Takuma Sato and Fernando Alonso respectively. They will become part of the strongest nationality in Formula 1 when the new recruits join forces with Jenson Button and David Coulthard for the opening race in Australia on March 18th.

It is immensely satisfying to find that both drivers have made it to Formula 1, but the way they reached the pinnacle of motorsport could not serve as a greater contrast. Davidson reached his goal by hard work and sticking to his principles, while Hamilton, also with hard work, but with the added benefit of McLaren MD Ron Dennis as a major backer throughout the last 10 years or so of his career. The fact that both have finally succeeded in achieving their F1 dream is a bonus, both for each other and the British public.

"Do you know" Zip Kart guru Martin Hines

said just before Christmas, "that the original four 'Young Guns' were Anthony, Gary Paffett, Westley Barber and Luke (Hines). Lewis joined the 'Young Guns' a few years later and I feel very proud when I see what all the former 'Young Guns' have achieved in motorsport."

Of the two 'Young Guns' Zip kart racers now in Formula 1, Davidson's route was undoubtedly the harder way. Quite shy as a youngster, but with a professional, steely determination, Davidson fought his way through Cadets, Junior TKM, Junior Britain,



Hamilton was centre stage at a McLaren event back in 1996 at the launch of the McLaren Mercedes Champions of the Future series (later to become Stars of Tomorrow)



Davidson will renew his rivalry with Jenson Button from their karting days

Photo: Mike Hayden

and JICA in the UK. He took 3rd place in the Junior TKM Super One, having already narrowly missed out on a Cadet title due to a technicality, before achieving outstanding championship success with Tim Gillard when he dominated 1994 and 1995 in Junior Britain and JICA, taking three British titles in those two years. He then made a successful move into European karting, first with Fullerton where he was European Championship runner-up in Formula A, the same year he 'lost' the World Championship with ignition failure, and then with Biesse.

Hamilton initially took a similar route from Cadets (as British Champion), Junior Yamaha (Champion) and JICA, before moving into Europe with CRG/DC One, taking with him a friendly, open and approachable personality in the process. On the way Hamilton had been the 1995 British Cadet Champion, as well as winning the STP title, in addition to winning

Cadet titles in Champions of the Future, the TV Masters and Five Nations. Once into 100cc he then won the top Junior Yamaha prizes in Champions' and Super One in 1997, with a runner-up spot in the Champions' JICA class in 1998.

Davidson's final year as a professional kart racer ended in 1999 when he went on to win his first five single-seater Formula Ford races from pole position before spending one year in Formula Ford in 2000, with an "against the odds" end of year victory in the Brands Hatch Formula Ford Festival. This was then topped off shortly afterwards with the McLaren/Autosport Award and then he was quickly signed up for a testing role with British American Racing (BAR) in Formula 1. Ironically this stopped him from receiving his McLaren-Mercedes F1 test drive prize. The following year was spent in Formula 3, with Takuma Sato as his teammate, where he finished runner-up to the more experienced Japanese driver.

Davidson's progress up to this point had been rapid, not unlike Jenson Button a few years earlier, but he was always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Think Jacques Villeneuve, Olivier Panis, Jenson Button, Rubens Barrichello... The BAR team were desperate for a Grand Prix win, and whilst a good testing role performance suggested that Davidson could have filled the race seat quite comfortably, the feeling was that there was a lack of courage by the management to choose un-raced but quick new blood over race experience.

Hamilton meanwhile was making waves. It was in 1998 when Hamilton, as part of the Mercedes-Benz Young Driver Support Programme, became an important part of the Dennis/McLaren long-term strategy. After completing his UK karting career, Hamilton moved into Europe in 1999 just as Davidson left, although he had by then had a European taster when he had finished 4th in the 1998 Italian Open on a Zip kart.

We last spoke in 2001 at the World Championship karting event at St-Roch De L'Achigan in Canada when Lewis had been Nico Rosberg's teammate (or was it the other way round, because Hamilton always seemed to have the edge over Rosberg that year, despite the latter reaching F1 sooner). At the time Hamilton was struggling on a kart that did not want to work, but his professionalism was always to the fore and he steadfastly refused to condemn the kart, although many drivers would have done. "It will come right



Both made the cover of Karting magazine in 1996

eventually" he would say with a smile when pushed on the issue. "We will just keep working on it until we get it right. It might not look it now but it is getting better."

By the time Hamilton had dominated the Formula Renault class in his third year competing in the 2003 British Championship, when he won 10 out of the Championship's 15 races, Davidson was already proving to be a gifted F1 test driver. He had also made his Grand Prix debut, having competed in two GPs for Asiatech Minardi as a replacement for Alex Yoong, first in Hungary and Belgium one year earlier. He did a far better job than he was given full credit for at the time, lapping quicker than his more experienced teammate

Mark Webber in a car that Davidson admitted he was "not comfortable with".

In 2004 Hamilton competed in the Formula 3 Euro series with Yorkshire based Manor Motorsport, using Mercedes-Benz engines to finish 3rd in the championship, before dominating the series one year later in a Dallara Mercedes. By this time though, Davidson had already been confirmed as the official BAR-Honda third and reserve driver where he delivered a series of stunning Friday GP weekend performances,

mostly notably on his first visit to Monaco, when he had lapped 2nd fastest behind none other than Michael Schumacher's Ferrari. He then earned his one-off, jet-lagged, Honda F1 outing in Malaysia when Sato was ill in 2004, only for one of the cheapest parts on the car to fail after just two laps, moments after teammate Jenson Button had also retired with a similar problem. "Before it stopped" Anthony said at the time "the car was all over the place, it was then when I realised the car was sliding on the oil from Jenson's car."

Davidson though knew that he was doing a solid job, with a work ethic that the Japanese Honda people admired immensely. He was in F1 and the future did look good, but he



Davidson was champion in both Junior Britain and JICA in 1994 Photo: Chris Dixon



Formula A European Champion in 2000, Hamilton then raced in Super A in 2001 before moving into Formula Renault

Photo: Chris Walker

was sticking to a principle. Pay drivers Justin Wilson and Ralph Firman had come and gone. Davidson too had offers but he refused to pay for a race seat. The truth of the matter was that he did not have the money, lacking even a personal sponsor throughout his single-seater career. He had this belief though that if he was going to be in F1 then it had to be deserved and purely on merit.

A successful test for Jordan at Silverstone could have led to a GP seat but the team wanted "sponsorship" from him. Jaguar on

the other hand did want him, and he had a seat fitting, coming close to testing at Monza until a last minute change led to James Courtney testing the car instead. The Jaguar team then folded to become Red Bull who had different driver ideas, which left Davidson back with BAR-Honda as the reserve driver for 2005.

Davidson had made the right impression after a solid Champ Car test at Laguna Seca, and this subsequently led to an offer to take over what would have been a race-winning seat to replace an injured Bruno Junqueira,

except he turned it down. "If I had gone to America, then coming back to F1 would have been so much harder" he said at the time. He was prepared to test and wait, hoping that his time would come.

Hamilton's career too was making solid progress and by 2006 he had moved up into GP2 as part of the F1 support package. At Monza in Italy in September 2006 he won the championship with the ART Team. He had won five out of the 22 rounds and one week later had his first ever F1 test for McLaren-Mercedes at Silverstone. A 2007 F1 contract was subsequently signed for him to join twice World Champion Fernando Alonso in the team. Around the same time Davidson had also finally got his own wish when it was confirmed that he would re-new his partnership with Takuma Sato at the increasingly strong Super Aguri team.

Martin Hines never had any doubts that both Davidson and Hamilton would make it to Formula 1. Asked to define a moment when he believed he had

seen that 'spark' in both drivers, the former World Superkart Champion did not hesitate.

"Both of them are incredibly talented drivers, but for Anthony who I remember as being different, it was in Cadets at Kimbolton. I was out on the track at the time watching Luke. At Kimbolton there is a long straight that leads into a left-hander towards the end of the lap. It was one of Anthony's last Cadet races and it was obvious that he just was not quick enough on the straights. But it was significant that there was no way anyone was able to outbrake him at the end of that straight. He was so late on the brakes he was able to beat everybody. That race stands out to my mind as a young driver who was able to show quality. Anthony always showed what he wanted and it made him unbeatable.

For Lewis it was a race at Clay Pigeon. He was on grid three and made an OK start, sitting in 3rd place. Really there was no way he should have been able to lead by the time they got to Charlie's, but after running three abreast, he was in the lead. Before he did it I had thought 'no way', but like Anthony, Lewis can show that, when he wants something, he will have it! I have seen many good drivers over the years, but really Anthony and Lewis remain outstanding. It makes me feel so proud to see them go through to Formula 1"

Australia, 18 March 2007. This date, just two months away, will be the biggest day so far in the extensive and successful careers of two Young Gun' graduates. The exciting wait begins now.

Mike Hayden



A full time F1 race seat at last

Photo: Sutton Images



Hamilton has secured one of the top drives

Photo: Sutton Images