

Indiana Jones

by PHILL TROMANS

From the kart tracks of Dubai to the Indianapolis 500, the UAE's Ed Jones has risen to the very top of the racing ladder



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ON 12 MARCH, 2017, ED JONES will take to the IndyCar grid for the first time at the Firestone Grand Prix of St Petersburg.

The streets of Florida, USA, where Ed was born, grew up and first found his talent for speed. The #19 Dale Coyne Racing-prepared Dallara DW12 is a world away from rental karts. But natural speed and a determination to compete and win have taken the 21-year-old to the top of the motorsport ladder.

Born in 1995 to Dubai-based British parents, Ed first sat in a kart at four years old. His father Russell, a former kart racer, introduced him to motorsport at the Jebel Ali kart track. For fun.

"At first I was in one of the rental karts and at that time there were no other kids doing it," Ed recalls. "But soon after that he bought me a kart and we started going really often."

Ed spent his early years getting faster, even though there was no racing series in which to prove himself. Eventually, a UAE cadet karting championship began, but the grids were tiny, and having had several years of

practice, Ed was considerably quicker than the competition. He proceeded to win multiple cadet and junior UAE karting championships.

It was in 2008 when, as the UAE Rotax champion, he was awarded a place in the world finals in Italy, and for the first time could measure himself against drivers from around the globe.

"I had no idea what the standard was elsewhere, so I went in completely blind," Ed says, "but it went really well. The first race was wet. I'd never driven in the wet in my life. By the third corner I was leading, led pretty much the whole race and finished second in the end. In the final I started 28th and finished eighth, with the fastest lap. That was our first experience outside Dubai and straight away we were competitive."

Encouraged, Ed travelled to Europe. "In 2010 I did the KF3 World Cup and finished second in the first final. I was racing [Max] Verstappen, [Esteban] Ocon, [Jake] Dennis, all these other guys that are now at the top as well, and I was the only driver in the top 35 that wasn't part of a factory team."

The success made it clear that Ed's results hadn't been flukes, and together with his

Left: Championship success in the US came with Carlin in the 2016 Indy Lights Series

'THE HARDEST THING ABOUT MOVING FROM KARTS TO CARS IS THAT IT'S A LOT HEAVIER AND A LOT EASIER TO SPIN'

Left: Formula 3 success did not come without problems. In only his third F3 race in Europe, Ed Jones broke his back



family, he decided to move from karts to cars. At the age of 15, he sat in his first racing car – a Formula Renault – at the Kirkistown track in Northern Ireland. Suddenly he had wings, gears and a lot more machine to deal with. “I was just learning, trying to get up to speed but it went really well, Ed remembers. “It was difficult, but the hardest thing about moving from karts to cars is that it’s a lot heavier and a lot easier to spin.”

A season in Interstep Formula BMW taught Ed the ropes. “We realised it was important to have a good foundation before going into the top-level series,” he explains. “So we did one year of that in the UK and then moved over to Formula Renault and Formula 3.”

Despite his natural speed, growing up in the UAE meant Ed had missed years of vital

racecraft practice against drivers of the same level. To compete with the best, he had a lot to learn.

“One thing I always had from the beginning was the pace; it always came pretty easy to me. It was everything else that I needed to work on. Getting it right for qualifying, tyre preparation, race craft and stuff like that. In Formula Renault I struggled a lot with qualifying, and if you didn’t qualify well it’s hard to overtake, so you struggle to get good results.”

Visits to a sports psychologist during 2012 proved a turning point, and in 2013 everything clicked. Ed won the European Formula 3 Open Championship and for 2014 moved to the FIA European Formula 3 Championship, with eyes firmly set on Formula 1.

But in the third race of the season, at the Pau street circuit in France, an accident during qualifying left Ed with a broken back, and he missed much of the year. While recuperating, he came to the conclusion that F1 was an unrealistic dream. “We realised that unless you have unlimited funds, F1, at this time anyway, is not very attainable. It’s more of a money game than anything else. But in America, with the ladder system and the scholarships that they have, if you perform well you’re guaranteed to move up.”

By serendipity, Ed’s Formula 3 team, Carlin, was planning an assault on America’s Indy Lights series, and Ed went with them in 2015. Despite a lack of familiarity with US tracks, both he and Carlin shone immediately, winning the first three races of the season.





He ended the year third in the championship, and in 2016 scored eight podiums to become Indy Lights champion. Ed was courted by IndyCar team Dale Coyne Racing before the season had even finished. Next year, he'll be a rookie teammate to former F1 driver and four-time Champ Car champion, Sébastien Bourdais. The prospect of racing in America's biggest single seater series is a daunting one, but Ed feels he's ready.

"There's a lot more to do," he admits. "The races are a lot longer, you have pit stops and there's a lot more downforce, as well as tyre management and strategy. It's a bit more complex from what I'm used to, but my teammate is very experienced and I'll learn a lot from him."

Ed's goal in 2017 is to establish himself among the IndyCar ranks and secure a seat for 2018. He's also keeping one eye on other series.

"I want to be racing at the top level in open-wheel racing and I have an opportunity to do that. It would be nice to do F1 but I'd rather do well in IndyCar at the moment. You can't predict what the future will hold, and who knows – if I have a really good year maybe doors will open [to F1] as well."

'IT WOULD BE NICE TO DO FORMULA 1, BUT I'D RATHER DO WELL IN INDYCAR BEFORE THAT'

"I'd love to do NASCAR too. It's so extreme, the atmosphere and the whole style of it looks very different and a lot of fun."

That he's the first Middle Eastern racing driver to win a championship stateside is a fact not lost on Ed either.

"It's nice to be the first one from the Middle

East to do this and hopefully it encourages more young drivers to take on the same thing," he says. "There are a lot more of them now and it would be nice if I can help and guide them along the same path, to help them make better decisions than I did."

"The UAE scene has changed a lot. It's a lot more professional than when I was racing. The grids are bigger and it's a better learning place. There are a lot more circuits and the whole sport is growing."

That said, the Middle East is a young place when it comes to motorsport, and a national culture of racing is something Ed believes can't be artificially created.

"We have all the facilities needed – better than anywhere else in the world, I think," he says. "But it's hard to force a racing culture on people; it'll take time. And if I can play a part in it, even better." ❧



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INDYLIGHTS, THIRD IN ROOKIE SEASON WITH CARLIN
- >> **2014**
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- >> **2013**
YOUNGEST WINNER OF THE F3 EUROPEAN OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP WITH WESTTEC
- >> **2012/13**
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- >> **2009**
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UAE CADET CHAMPION