

In southern Florida, Carlin builds an IndyCar home away from home



By Alison Sneag (/author/alison-sneag/) Mar 12, 2020



DELRAY BEACH, Fla. — Tucked in an office park adjacent to I-95, Carlin’s U.S. base of operations has occasional visitors. But in mid-February, account executive Kim Jackson stumbled upon an unauthorized entrant: a snake.

The “little guy” carried some speed around the shop floor. Fortunately, it was surrounded by people who move fast for a living.

“I almost trod on it when it was just going across the workshop,” said Adam “Ty” Farrer, crew chief for the No. 59 Carlin Chevy. “I don’t know if it was venomous or not, but it was pretty angry. I just got a jug, trapped it on top of it, put a bit of metal underneath it, tipped it up and took him out the back to the grass.”

The critters and the scenery are different from Indianapolis — Carlin’s shop is surrounded by palm trees and a small pond, which holds two decoy birds standing guard to ward off other wildlife. And that’s by design. So why would Carlin, which entered the U.S. racing scene in Indy Lights in 2015, pick Delray Beach as its U.S. home?

The answer is a mix of happy accident, deliberate planning ... and because that wasn’t the organization’s first stop. Chris Dyson, whose Advanced Engine Research Ltd became the engine supplier for Indy Lights starting in 2015, offered Carlin use of his workshop when it began its Lights program.

In Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

“We understood coming over here and trying to find a location to start from initially and take on entering into a new series; at that point, it was with a new car as well,” said team manager Colin Hale, who led the team’s U.S. move in 2015. “That wasn’t particularly our choice for us as far as our location, although it worked very well for our first year, because it gave us a foothold into coming here to race and not have to worry about trying to find a location and trying to go racing.

“It was a stopgap; at that point, we didn’t really have any idea where we wanted to be located.”

The move “was a bit of a shock for the boys in winter!” said Capsicum Motorsport Ltd./Carlin commercial manager Steph Carlin, wife of team principal Trevor Carlin. “Trevor went to see the factory, went to see the workshop in the summer, and came back telling us all how beautiful it was, and then the boys moved out in winter and it was like, several feet of snow, what have you done to us?”

The team moved over two dozen, mostly young employees from Carlin’s base in Farnham, Surrey, which houses Carlin’s multiple single-seater teams from BRDC British Formula 3 and Formula 4, FIA F2 and F3, F4 British Championship, Euroformula Open, its now-two-year-old LMP2 program and its 2020 24 Hours of Le Mans effort. The decision to uproot and move stateside was an easy one for many of them — even though they didn’t know where their long-term home might be.

“It’s a bigger team. So in an F1 team, there’s hundreds of people, whereas in IndyCar, it’s still actually quite a small team for what you do, and I quite like that aspect of it,” said Farrer, who liked the idea of broadening his horizons and trying an opportunity abroad.

“I’d been in the process of trying to get out here for years and years and years,” engineer Steve Barker said. “For me, I actually applied to Carlin because I knew they were coming out. So for me, it was just a no-brainer. As soon I found out they were doing Indy Lights five or six years ago, I just applied, and luckily and thankfully I got accepted.

“We knew we were going to be based out of the (Dyson) shop, so we knew that we were going to be based in Poughkeepsie. It wasn’t anything that was a negative. It was just, ‘OK, this is where we’re going; let’s jump on board and get going with it.’”

Carlin burst onto the Lights scene in 2015, with Ed Jones winning the first three races and continuing on to win the 2016 Indy Lights Championship. At the end of Carlin’s first Lights season, Hale and Carlin began scouting for a new home for what would eventually be its transition to an IndyCar program and had a few places in mind, including Charlotte and Florida, when an associate pointed Carlin toward a race shop in Delray Beach, about an hour north of Miami.

“I came down and had a look and said to Trevor, ‘Yeah, it’s perfect,’” Hale recounted. “Trevor came down, had a look ’round here, drove to the beach and said, ‘Yeah, this is where we want to be.’”

Aesthetically, though, the shop — some kind of Mustang auto house — needed work. “The walls were bright red, there was a running machine and a pool table in the corner, strange things hanging from the ceiling, all of his tables and chairs from his houses he’d sold,” Hale said with a laugh.

“You had to come in with quite a vision to see through it, but it actually worked out really well.”

Trevor Carlin deliberately chose to house his U.S. team away from Indianapolis.

“We were very aware that there’s so many teams based in Indianapolis, it’s very difficult to keep hold of good people because it’s so easy for them to go from one team to another,” Hale said. “That works in another way — that it is very easy to get people because you can then have a bigger pool of potential people you can take. But we were very much of the mind that when we came into specifically IndyCar, we wanted to do it our way, which has maybe a

European slant on it in lots of different ways, and we didn't want to just create an IndyCar team based on employing a lot of IndyCar people because then we're just following the same route as everybody else.”



A pair of decoy birds keeps watch over the pond next to Carlin's Florida shop. (Alison Sneag / *The Athletic*)

The East Coast made more sense for Carlin, both as a way to connect its U.S. base with Europe and its time zones and because it felt comfortable.

“We are what we are,” Steph Carlin said. “One of the great things about Carlin is that we operate all of our teams the same, whether it's our F4 team or our F2 team, the IndyCar team and the European Asian Le Mans team. We have this ethos, we have a way of communicating with each other, and it's what we know and it's what works for us. It wasn't that we came to America wanting to come in with a different approach in an arrogant way because we thought

it was a better approach, but I think it's always good to tackle a new project in a way that you're familiar and comfortable with. So it was really about kind of taking the best bits of what we've learned in Europe and bringing it over to IndyCar rather than trying to transform ourselves into a team that we're not.

“We wanted the guys to enjoy living where they were. They all kind of picked up everything, completely transported their whole lives to the US from the UK, and for a young bunch of guys to do that in Florida was quite an attractive option, so that kind of helped keep the team morale good and happy and we were able to find a really nice base.”

It also created a bond between the young corps of personnel who made the move.

“Because a lot of the guys came over and either started together in Indy Lights or maybe they even worked on cars together in Europe, you came over here and you didn't have family here, you didn't have friends here,” said Jackson, who moved from Indianapolis. “You kind of had a built-in family once you got here.”

“The climate here just allows you to do whatever you want any time of year,” Barker said. “So in our offseason, the weather is still 75, 80 degrees. You can just walk down to the beach. You can go and do normal things that most people do in their summer; we do it in our winter.”

“I don't see it as a challenge living here,” Farrer said. “Even relocating from England is fairly seamless; it's nice that you're immediately surrounded by people you've worked with before or other British people who are all in the same situation as you, which certainly made it all a lot easier.”

Not entirely seamless.

“I've given up sending Colin care packages,” Steph Carlin said. “When we first started, I used to send stuff out to him — custard and gravy granules and his favorite brand of chocolate biscuits — but unfortunately, after a pretty shocking experience where all of his multipack, huge bumper pack of biscuits melted in the Floridian heat and then resolidified into one giant tube of biscuits, we've given up on that now. So we only bring them out when we're traveling to races; Max (Chilton) looks after Colin with the chocolate.”

Hale first worked with Trevor Carlin in 1993 when Carlin was his team manager. Hale departed for Formula One and spent 15 years there before returning to join Carlin's GP2 program in 2010. He's run the U.S. operation from Day 1 and is like the "mother hen," said Barker.

"He takes a watch over everybody, makes sure everyone's OK," Barker said. "Every day, he notices people that are maybe having a bad day, and he just goes to put his arm around and him and says, 'Hey, come and have a chat, what's up?' Could be anything, even if someone just feels under the weather; he'll just grab you, put his arm 'round you and say, 'Is there anything I can do?' It just makes everything seem better by talking about it. He'll help out if he can, and it's just brilliant."

The 12,000-square-foot shop is equipped with, among other things, a simulator, a dyno, its machine shop and access to most of what the team needs. Certain items are manufactured and sent over from Farnham; the challenge is less in communication (there's Skype) than the time difference. Almost all of the original group of employees that moved from the UK is still with the team, which numbers about 25 personnel in Delray Beach, an engineer based in England, an engineer in Charlotte and a few weekend crewmembers for race weekends.

Some of the biggest names in racing have found seat time in a Carlin car, including Will Power, Sebastian Vettel, Daniel Ricciardo, Takuma Sato, Josef Newgarden and Pato O'Ward. While Carlin's first IndyCar season in 2018 saw remarkable stability, with Chilton and Charlie Kimball qualifying for the Indianapolis 500 and registering only three total DNFs, 2019 featured six different drivers behind the wheel: Chilton (12 starts), Conor Daly (4), Kimball and O'Ward (7), Sage Karam (2) and RC Enerson (1). Top-10s were earned by Kimball (10th at Pocono and Portland), O'Ward (eighth at Circuit of The Americas) and Daly (sixth at Gateway). In May, O'Ward was signed to the Red Bull Junior program and placed in Japan's Super Formula category, while Chilton announced in June that he would not participate in the remaining oval races on the calendar.



(Thomas J. Russo / USA Today)

Carlin's 2020 plans became clearer this week. Chilton is back to run the 59 car in the Indy 500 and the remaining street and road course schedule. His primary sponsor is Gallagher, an international brokerage house for which his dad, Grahame, is the CEO. The team announced Tuesday that Daly will run the 59 car on the non-Indy 500 ovals (Texas, Richmond, Iowa and Gateway); 2018 IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship Prototype champion Felipe Nasr, who drove a Carlin car to the 2011 British Formula 3 title, has been announced as the driver of the No. 31 car at the season opener in St. Petersburg. (Sergio Sette Camara, who split testing of the 31 with Nasr at Circuit of The Americas, has been named a test and reserve driver for Formula One's Red Bull/AlphaTauri and the Dragon Formula E team.)

Regardless of the driver roster, the team continues its growth process as it begins its third season in IndyCar.

“The first season, we were pretty much catching up everywhere through the year, just trying to get on top of where we were with the cars, with the team, just trying to make sure that we were confident, as good as we could be,” Hale said. “There’s other areas that you want to be doing away from the track, particular testing (rig testing or gearbox testing), so we’ve done more of that this year, and obviously developing the dampers, which are a big area that everybody focuses on because they’re open, so it’s just given us more opportunity to do that side of it.

“I don’t think we’re comfortably competitive yet. We’re moving in the right direction, but it is a huge task to come into the series and consistently be competitive, in there’s a lot of boxes you have to tick in order to do that.”

“We’re really aware of the kind of long slog that this is and very respectful to the teams that have been in it for years,” Steph Carlin said. “We’re not putting a timeline on when we expect to get XYZ results. It’s just we have to improve every year, and we can look internally and see improvements and know that we’re learning year by year and know that we’re getting commercially strong, so that’s the focus rather than any kind of codified aims.”

The other hurdle will be moving past the disappointment of last year’s Indy 500. Amid an expanded three-car effort, Kimball qualified 20th and finished 25th, but Chilton and O’Ward, who had a practice crash, failed to qualify.

“Apart from being obviously scarred from the experience of May,” Steph Carlin said, “what we’ve learned from that is the danger of taking your eye off the ball in such a competitive field in terms of not just working on race pace. Possibly we focused a little bit too much on getting the cars stable and comfortable over long distances rather than focusing just on the qualifying pace, and I think that really hurt us.

“While there were definite improvements to make and lessons learned and things that we’ve already put into action for this year, I think also the circumstances of Pato crashing — what did that do to his confidence? Even if they don’t want it to have any impact or effects, it is really hard to come back from a big crash at Indy in qualifying. Circumstances didn’t help us, but I think we definitely have been focusing more on qualifying pace rather than race pace because you just cannot underestimate the importance of, first of all just getting yourself in the race, and I think that’s where we’re focusing more on this year.”



(Spacesuit Media)

After weather limited COTA testing in February, Nasr and Chilton each spent a day atop the time charts in a two-day test at Sebring earlier this month, with the duo finishing 1-2 on Day 2. Hale said the team was able to work through “a massive amount of items on our test list.”

The team is now headed up I-95 and over to its “home race” in St. Petersburg. Winter’s over, and there’s work to be done.

“When we came from New York to here with Lights, we had our cars and trucks and equipment. In November 2017, I can honestly tell you, going into IndyCar we had nothing, not a thing,” Hale said. “Then three months later, or two and a half months later, we were at Homestead testing with our first IndyCar. What these guys did in order to make that happen was an unbelievable achievement, and I probably wouldn’t want to do it again, but if you’re asking me what I’m most proud of, that’s probably what I’m most proud of, just the fact of I never had any problems with anybody with our work they were doing, and they were doing

18-, 19-hour days for probably three or four months and were here most nights, and pizza and ribs were on the menu, and I never had any problem with them, so I think that's our biggest achievement.”

(Top photo of Max Chilton: Spacesuit Media)

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AWESOME

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6 COMMENTS

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Joe S. Mar 12

This is great. Seeing behind the scenes with a growing team was fascinating!



1



Tim R. Mar 12

Great story! I knew very little about Carlin's move to Indycar. I did know they had great success with driver development in Europe. I hope they can solidify their place in Indycar this year. Would love to see more of this kind of team profiles during the year.