



*“Racing really does unlock something inside you
that you can’t match with anything else”*

Driving force

Bexhill-based racing driver Ben Stiles has his eye on pole position after winning a national championship last year. Simone Hellyer finds out what it takes to make it in motorsport

At 24 years old, Bexhill-on-Sea racing driver Ben Stiles is by no means old, but in a sport where most professionals start driving before they can walk, his relatively late start is somewhat of a rarity.

Ben first got behind the wheel of a racing car after finishing his degree and paying a visit to his father Trevor, a former Formula Ford driver, in New Zealand. "I only got into it about three years ago after finishing university in Bath, where I did motorsport engineering. It was my absolute life's dream to get into the seat of one of these cars, but these opportunities don't come up very often," he explains, adding: "My dad was a professional racer back in his day, but had stopped and started his racing career quite a few times. He was just in the process of stopping for good when he went on a tour of New Zealand in the back of a Ford Mondeo. He was living a bit of a cowboy lifestyle and heard the noise of a race circuit one day. He went over and saw that they were doing Formula Ford, which is what he used to race. Being the friendly type that they are in New Zealand, one of them said he could come back and have a drive. He ended up doing that for three years before I went over there to join him. Luckily, I was quite boring at university and stayed in to work rather than party, which meant that I managed to save a few pennies to get myself over there."

Despite his late start, Ben has been going full throttle since first taking to the wheel. He jumped straight into New Zealand's national championships before coming back to race in the UK. And last year he won his first UK national championship in the Universal Racing Series Classic Formula Ford 2000.

"I've always said that my dream

would be to win a championship and last year we achieved that. But some of my proudest achievements have come from individual races where I have pushed really hard, had a real battle with the other drivers and come out feeling that I have done something incredible. Those are the times that I get the biggest buzz."

Success often comes at a cost, and in motor racing the price tag is a pretty hefty one. Together Ben and his father set up their own racing team, Ben Stiles Racing, and bought their own car, an 84 Van Diemen. On going it alone, Ben says: "There are a lack of opportunities for someone my age coming into the sport; it's difficult to get picked up by a serious team that will put money into you as they are looking for 13-year-olds that they can sculpt into the next Formula 1 star."

"I am self-financed, so I don't have any financial sponsors helping me with costs. It's a serious, serious bill to pick up for someone my age and I've had to make a lot of sacrifices, but you have to if you want to race. The downside of doing it ourselves is a lack of equipment like tyres, but I use that as motivation to push forward."

Another big motivation has been working with his father, but Ben admits he was concerned that his dad would resent not being behind the wheel himself. "I did worry about how he was going to feel about stepping away and not having the adrenaline of driving, but from seeing him on the sidelines I can tell that he gets just as much of a buzz from watching." Ben's mother also helps out by organising promotional events and days out in collaboration with West Sussex children's hospice Chestnut Tree House.

The "family atmosphere" of the racing community has been

LEFT:
Ben Stiles with his
84 Van Diemen
racing car

another driving force for Ben, as he explains: "You get this great camaraderie because we all have the same mentality. There's a great atmosphere in the pits and you always see the same 100 faces wherever you go in the world."

On what makes a good racing driver, Ben says: "You've got to have a real want for it and that's what separates drivers. Racing has always appealed to me as the pinnacle of competition because you really are gambling on everything out there. You only get out as much as you're willing to gamble and the ones who are willing to risk more are more successful."

"There's no feeling like it in the world. I've been very fortunate to do a lot of things in my life and stepping in a car gives me the biggest buzz I've ever felt. Racing really does unlock something inside you that you can't match with anything else. That's what keeps bringing me back to it."

Ben is keen to see how far he can go in racing, with a move up to Formula 3 the next big step. But for now, he plans to continue racing in New Zealand, where it costs less to practice, as well as in this year's Universal Racing Series. ♦

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Ben had a late
start to racing

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