

WILL PALMER INTERVIEW

Photos: LAT and Jakob Ebray

The youngest racing Palmer has stepped into the limelight in 2015. By **Kevin Turner**

“NOW PEOPLE WILL TAKE ME SERIOUSLY”



Ginetta Junior was tough but taught Palmer (1) a lot



Palmer won the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award

Before 2015, Will Palmer was usually described as 'son of ex-F1 racer Jonathan' or 'brother of GP2 title winner, Jolyon'. Now he is BRDC Formula 4 champion and McLaren Autosport BRDC Award winner Will Palmer.

Palmer dominated BRDC F4 in his second season of single-seaters, winning half the races and securing the crown a meeting early.

It's a far cry from his first steps in Ginetta Junior, which he entered full-time in 2012 after a few outings the year before. And, unlike many of his peers, he didn't have much karting experience before joining the British Touring Car support bill.

"Unlike most people would think, I started karting quite late, at 13, after I watched Jolyon's races," says Palmer. "As soon as I started racing I loved it, but I never got off novice plates in karting!"

The first Ginetta season proved difficult, Palmer finishing 12th with HHC Motorsport and scoring no podiums.

HHC boss and driver coach Charlie Kemp, who spent many hours sat with—or alongside—Palmer

nevertheless believes Will made the year count.

"He had a very hard first season in Ginetta Junior," says Kemp. "It was a really steep learning curve, but he knuckled down and worked hard. He was better in the second year, but never really gelled with the car."

Palmer was a race winner in 2013 and third in the standings, albeit well behind runaway champion Harry Woodhead. But the 18-year-old still believes time in the G40 was invaluable.

"Ginetta Junior is a great thing to do to get used to a car, although it's a different beast to drive as it's on road tyres and moves around a lot," he says. "As soon as I got into a single-seater I felt more at home."

"What Ginettas teaches you is car control. You can't put the car on the limit until you have that and the Ginetta moving around a lot helps. Then the single-seater seems planted."

"I don't think anyone, no matter how much potential they have, will be quickest in a kart straight away. It's tough to judge a driver in their first season of cars, which form was also my first season of racing."

"The other thing is the racecraft. Most of the grid had done lots of karting, so I was thrown in at the

deep end. I learnt where to position my car and where not to put it."

He also developed his analytical approach, working with HHC to improve, and started catching up with his contemporaries, many of whom did their learning away from the TOCA package TV cameras.

"He did a lot of the work in Ginettas, with me sat alongside, and he got better and better thanks to his intelligence," confirms Kemp. "I remember sitting in the passenger seat at a wet Thruxton as he was trying to take Church flat and I was terrified, but he kept it on the road."

"He's incredibly clever and uses that to his advantage. He understands the car. He's very demanding—not in a bad way."

Palmer immediately looked a better prospect as he entered the BRDC F4 series, run by his father, in 2014. "I had a really good start," he says. "You had a strong field, which made it intense at the front, and I was in the top three."

After a couple of wins, Palmer headed to Silverstone in the hunt, but suffered a disaster. Fuel pump failure while leading early on in race one put him at the back for race two, which was wet, meaning he started near the rear in the third encounter. He fell to fourth in the standings and lost momentum.

"From there I should have done better, but I probably tried too hard to make up the lost ground," he admits. "I got involved in a few incidents I shouldn't have."

Palmer ended the season in sixth, but dominated the Winter Championship and went in to 2015 as one of the favourites. "I knew I was a definite contender and was well aware of where I had lost out in 2014."

Kemp believes it was Palmer's attitude towards the campaign that was the big step for 2015. "The big breakthrough wasn't his pace—in 2014 when he showed his speed against the other drivers we had I could see he could be a championship

contender," he says. "It was knowing when he needed to push and when he needed not to take risks. He's come from being incredibly green to the complete article in four years."

After a middling start—Palmer was third after six races—the number three machine started to dominate. Pole at Silverstone GP by almost a second set Palmer on his way. He won 11 of the final 18 races and only narrowly missed out on a triple at Donington Park.

That got him selected for the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award, alongside Formula Renault frontrunners Jack Aitken, Ben Barnicoat and Jake Hughes, MSA Formula runner-up Ricky Collard and MRF Challenge champion Toby Sowery. A contender straight away, Palmer's pace on fresh rubber was a cornerstone for him taking the £100,000 prize and McLaren F1 test drive.

"I thought I would be on the shortlist because of how my season had gone, but it was still a relief to get the call," says Palmer.

"On the night of the first day I went back to my hotel room and made track notes for every corner so I knew what I had to do. I thought I had a chance. I didn't think I was favourite, but I knew I'd done well on new tyres in the F2."

"I massively enjoy putting on new tyres, with all the grip and being under pressure. I think all drivers love that adrenaline rush. It's always been one of my strong points, but it's something I've worked on too. It's easy to under drive and you need the confidence to be aggressive."

Winning the Award has given him added momentum after a great season. "It's definitely given me a boost," agrees Palmer. "To go up against those quality drivers and come out on top is huge and makes you more attractive to teams."

So where for 2016? He's already tested GP3 and F3 cars for several

CV Will Palmer

Age 18
2015 BRDC F4 champion with HHC Motorsport (12 wins); McLaren Autosport BRDC Award winner
2014 BRDC F4 with HHC, 6th (2 wins); BRDC F4 Winter champion with HHC (4 wins)
2013 Ginetta Junior with HHC, 3rd (1 win); BRDC F4 Winter Championship with HHC, 5th
2012 Ginetta Junior with HHC, 12th; Ginetta Junior Winter Series with HHC, 3rd

squads and will certainly be on a bigger stage next season.

"The GP3 test showed it might be too big a step—the tyres are really so different to what I am used to," reckons Palmer. "And as a rookie in F3 you get more seat time."

It's a sensible, well-considered approach, one that is typical of the man.

Kemp believes Palmer has the attributes to progress further. "I see no reason why not," he says.

"He's quick, he can race, has a good understanding of the car, and now he knows how to put the building blocks together for a championship campaign."

"I know he hasn't had an advantage because he's Jonathan's son and I know he deserves his success."

"Will's the best advert for the team we've had. He has a huge amount of mental capacity and that's why he can go a long way." ■



Palmer dominated during 2015



Kemp (middle) and HHC have been crucial to success