

# Palmer\* makes his Formula 1 mark





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Jonathan Palmer (right) was on hand to watch Will's first F1 run

GRIFFITHS/LAT



# \*Yes, another one!

A first Formula 1 test is always going to be something to remember – especially when you’re the third in your family to experience it

By Scott Mitchell, Features Editor

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It's late in the year, on a chilly day at Silverstone. Palmer straps himself into the McLaren and a grin spreads across his face, the smile beaming out from behind his visor. This really is one hell of a prize. He fires up the engine and, for the first time, drives out in a Formula 1 car. When everything's finished, McLaren expresses a great deal of satisfaction. "Quicker than we expected and no mistakes at all," is the word from the team.

"It's such a genuinely excitedly and exhilarating experience to be able to do it, particularly in a car like a McLaren," says Jonathan.

Jonathan? Fire up the DeLorean! We've gone back 35 years by mistake – this is supposed to be a piece about Will: the 19-year-old son of former grand prix driver Jonathan. But you'll excuse the error, for the similarities are astonishing. So let's try again.

It's October 26, 2016. Overnight rain and a chilly start have left the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit covered in damp patches. Will Palmer is nervous, but excited – the smile is testimony to that – and he's not even gone on track yet. Intermediate tyres are used for a quick installation run, but the main event will take place with slick Pirelli tyres.

Now, 35 years after his father was gifted his first F1 test – in a McLaren, as a prize for winning the 1981 British Formula 3 title – it's Will's turn.

A McLaren Formula 1 test has awaited the winner of the McLaren Autosport BRDC

Award since David Coulthard picked up the first gong back in 1989. Every year it's the same, but the impact never diminishes. For Will, on the same track and with the same team as his father so many years ago, the chance to get behind the wheel of Jensen Button's 2011 Canadian Grand Prix-winning McLaren MP4-26 is obviously a special moment. And not because it means he's already driven a more competitive F1 car than his dad or his brother, current Renault driver Jolyon.

"The nerves were pretty high," Will admits. "There was a bit of a worry over whether the track would be fully dry, but luckily it was bone dry."

There's a popular Award story from 2011 winner Oliver Rowland's test, when he lit up the rear tyres exiting the garage for the first time. Will isn't quite so dramatic, and trundles down the pitlane tentatively. But when the limiter comes off, there's nothing tentative about it.

"I wasted no time," he jokes afterwards. "I thought I'd better make the most of it!"

A trio of five-lap runs on Pirelli show tyres is not quite a full day at Jerez, but there is still plenty to be judged on – and plenty to get wrong. Drive a Formula 1 car under the limit and under the limit you will stay. Achieving the right brake and tyre temperatures is key, and comes from following instructions – then pushing properly on track. And the feedback from McLaren is good.

"You want to see them start pushing on their first run," explains simulator engineer Alice Rowlands, who is on hand to help the Indy Lall-run McLaren F1 team and also provides data analysis throughout the remainder of the Award process. "He was definitely going for it on his first run!"

"He was making the car move. It's nice when you can see them taking sensible lines and being disciplined with the brakes – driving it like an F1 car. And, looking at the data, it was definitely someone driving an F1 car, not on a little Sunday afternoon drive."

Chairman of the judges Derek Warwick leads the throng of supporters on the sidelines, backed up by his judging panel

(including cameraman Jason Plato, who later tweets "How lush is that?" along with a trackside video), Will's family and friends, and the four watching 2016 finalists: Ricky Collard, Sennan Fielding, Lando Norris and Toby Sowery.

Stood atop a small viewing gantry at the end of the pitlane, there's a collective 'ooh!' as Will gets a big wriggle exiting Club on his first run. And with each passing lap, the message the onlookers try to channel through to the driver is "Take Abbey flat!"

"I was trying to," admits Will later. "But it was just a small feather... It was absolutely incredible, like nothing I've ever done before. The power, the brakes, the downforce... just how together the car seemed."

"It's unbelievable how much of a step it is. I had a bit of a problem with blistering the tyres, they were in pieces a bit!"

Part of the problem was Will's eagerness. Or perhaps, more fairly, it was his determination to just get on with it. "He built up quicker than I was expecting," admits Rowlands. That caused the blistering on the first run, but there was still plenty of performance to extract from the car, which had been driven in that trim on that track by Button not too much earlier in the year. >>

**"You could tell it was someone driving a Formula 1 car properly"**



## “You can see the smile through his helmet. He’ll remember it for the rest of his life”

“You can’t compare it to [the 2011] pole but he wasn’t far off, genuinely,” says Rowlands. “You’d be happy if that was his first proper F1 run at a test. He just shut up and listened. It’s not easy. He doesn’t know anyone, it’s a step up from before – five engineers instead of one. It’s quite different. He was happy to listen to what he was supposed to.”

And then put it into action. So, all smiles and a big thumbs-up. None more so than from Warwick. The purpose of the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award is to find the next British star, and making a positive impression in this short run is always a good sign.

“I want to see them make the most of the opportunity,” says Warwick. “I want to see them get sideways out of the garage! But I want four wheels to come back, obviously.”

“I remember every detail of my first test – everyone remembers it. You can see him smiling through his helmet. He’ll remember it for the rest of his life.”

Will agrees: “It’s an incredible thing to have done, a massive memory. A McLaren at Silverstone is an amazing combination.”

The prize test is always a family affair – Warwick talks with sincerity of how “incredible” and emotional it is “to see family and friends almost in tears and the excitement as their son or brother drive it out”. For Will’s father Jonathan, who has now watched both his sons sample F1 machinery, and follow in his wheeltracks in a grand prix car at Silverstone no less, it is particularly moving.

“I’ve never seen Will grin from ear to ear like this,” says Jonathan. “He was nervous this morning, but he’s loved it.”

“Will has won in F4, won a race in Eurocup and to have this opportunity and have done a good job, I’m very proud. There’s a lot of disappointment in motor racing and it’s very important when you get good times that you really enjoy it – that’s what fuels it.”

“On another level, any time you get in a car people are looking at how you get on and I’m absolutely delighted that he’s done a very professional job. He’s been quick, and not made any mistakes. It’s not been totally straightforward, but he’s demonstrated his intelligence. He’s come away from this having had a huge amount of fun and made a very professional impression.”

“It’s a fantastic contribution that McLaren makes as part of a great scheme. I can’t praise it enough. It’s a great opportunity.”



Warwick and 2016 finalists enjoy the spectacle

GRIFFITHS/LAT



## School of hard knocks

SOMETIMES THINGS just don’t go your way. That’s as applicable to one of the best young British drivers of the year as it is anyone else. So Will Palmer would have been forgiven for getting to the end of the 2016 season and feeling like things could have gone better.

Stepping into the Formula Renault Eurocup as the winner of the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award and BRDC Formula 4 champion meant much was expected from Palmer this year. But before the season finale at Estoril, he

was looking at a winless season for the first time since his first full campaign in car racing in 2012.

In the end, victory in the first race in Portugal boosted him to seventh in the points after a year in which his pace was not in question but his races were often compromised by incidents. His bit-part Formula Renault NEC campaign, which ran in parallel in the early part of the year, was more encouraging – including a double podium at Silverstone – but suffered from fundamentally the same issue.

But these are Palmer’s learning years, and it’s easier to make a fast driver reliable than it is a reliable driver fast. He went through a similar process in BRDC F4, when after a rapid but rough-edged rookie season he blossomed into an all-conquering 2015 champion.

A second year in two-litre Renault racing looks unlikely, with Formula 3 calling. Palmer, a bright young man with a deft touch behind the wheel, could find it suits him almost as well as the McLaren.





Palmer's pace impressed  
McLaren engineer  
Alice Rowlands

## HIGH-ACHIEVING AWARD WINNERS



### SETTING THE BAR HIGH

David Coulthard was the first recipient of the McLaren Autosport BRDC Award. The 13-time GP winner was chosen after impressing in Formula Ford in 1989.



### ANOTHER STELLAR SCOT

More than two decades after his 1992 Award triumph, one too many crashes forced Dario Franchitti to end his career after four IndyCar titles and three Indy 500 wins.



### THE POSTER BOY

More than 300 grand prix starts and the 2009 Formula 1 title make Jenson Button the *grande fromage*. His run in the Nissan Primera Super Tourer is Award legend.



### DTM KINGS

Gary Paffett was a McLaren test driver (and won the 2005 DTM title) after his 1999 triumph; 2004 winner Paul di Resta also has a DTM title (2010) and made it to F1.