

A Girl Has No License to Drive, but Permission to Speed



Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

When Julia Landauer, who is entering her sophomore in high school, is not racing in a Ferrari, she is matching wits with her brother and sister racing go-karts.

By DAVE CALDWELL
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NEWTON, N.J., July 17 — Seven years after Steve Landauer bought a five-horsepower go-kart for his two daughters to maneuver up and down their driveway, racing trophies pack the front windowsill of their house, with more parked in rows on the floor of the living room.

The Landauers vow they are not done adding to the family collection. His older daughter, Julia, a 15-year-old entering her sophomore year of high school, has joined the Formula BMW USA Series this year, driven by an aspiration of making it to Formula One.

She is the smallest and youngest driver in the four-year-old Formula BMW USA Series, not to mention one of only two female drivers. Although she has not finished higher than 12th place in the first eight races of the 14-race schedule, Julia is undeterred.

“It’s definitely character building,” she said Tuesday at her home, a soft smile spreading across her face.

Her boss, Jon Lewis, the co-owner of Team KMA Racing, which has four drivers in the series, is still optimistic.

“It’s been a struggle for Julia this year,” he said, “but she’s got the perseverance and the ability to do it. I know it’s been disappointing for Julia, and I know it’s been disappointing for her family, but we’re not worried about it. She’s doing quite well.”

Landauer has big plans: to continue her career in Europe, perhaps even before she

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graduates from high school, then to surge through the ranks to Formula One. Her favorite driver is not Danica Patrick, but [Michael Schumacher](#), the seven-time world Formula One champion.

“As good as American drivers are, European drivers are better, more competitive,” Julia said.

She has been bitten by the bug, as have her 13-year-old sister, Emma, and their 10-year-old brother, Aidan, both go-kart racers. Already this year, Julia has raced in Montreal and at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where she hit 137 miles an hour.

Six years after racing a go-kart for the first time at Oakland Valley Race Park in Cuddebackville, N.Y., and a year after rolling to the prestigious Skip Barber Eastern Regional Series Sportsman championship, Landauer is tackling a much tougher learning curve.

Landauer, who has her own Web site, julialandauer.com, must keep up with a pack of talented young drivers from all over North America as she learns how to market herself to potential corporate sponsors. The foyer of her home is a way station for her suitcases, and she frowns when she says she missed 47 days of school at [Stuyvesant High School](#) in Manhattan last year.

Landauer, whose family also has a home on the Upper West Side, sandwiched three final exams at Stuyvesant last month around a testing session. When she is not driving in the Formula BMW USA Series, she is racing go-karts with her siblings.

“It’s a very rewarding sport, in that littlest bit of improvement can help your times,” said her father, who set aside his racing aspirations as a young man, in part, to become an anesthesiologist.

Julia is planning to return next year to the Formula BMW USA Series, continuing to race an open-wheel car that looks like a Formula One car.

She is already hard-boiled by the grim side of racing. In June, she stood outside the turn at the Formula One race in Montreal, where Robert Kubica, a BMW driver from Poland, wrecked spectacularly but somehow escaped serious injury.

“I was glad I didn’t have to get on the track after that,” she said. “But you won’t drive as well if you’re thinking about that. You have to accept that it might happen, and I don’t think about it.”

Landauer was also at the Champ Car World Series race last year in Elkhart Lake, Wis., where Katherine Legge, a 27-year-old driver, hit a wall but walked away.

That Legge was unhurt was a testament, at least to Julia, that the drivers were as safe as they could be. After winning all 12 races in the Skip Barber series last year, she contacted Team KMA Racing last fall and tried out for its Formula BMW USA team.

She made it, and there have been fringe benefits besides a seat in a fast car. She recently flew with other drivers in the series to BMW headquarters in Germany for tours of the racing museum and the famous automobile plant.

“One of the benefits of the whole program is that these kids learn as much about life off the track as they do about racing on the track,” said Wayne Schulte, the program manager for Formula BMW USA. “When you take kids who have been racing go-karts, you can’t expect to put them right into the Indy Racing League or the Champ Car series tomorrow.”

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Some of the program's graduates have moved on, most notably Graham Rahal, the 18-year-old son of the 1986 Indianapolis 500 champion, Bobby Rahal. Graham Rahal raced a Formula BMW in 2004 and is now a rookie in the Champ Car series.

For someone who will not celebrate her 16th birthday until November (when she will be eligible to drive a passenger car), Landauer knows she has a dream ride. But that only goes so far. She wants better results, and soon.

"I have to prove more that I'm worth paying attention to," she said.

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