



“I REALLY NEED TO DOMINATE TO STAKE MY F1 CLAIM”

With four rounds of the GP2 season remaining, Jolyon Palmer is in a commanding points lead with DAMS. He reflects on the campaign, and looks ahead to F1, with **CHARLES BRADLEY**

You can tell a lot about someone when they've just been beaten. AUTOSPORT sits down with Jolyon Palmer just an hour after Mitch Evans has defeated him by pulling off a tidy alternate-strategy victory in Silverstone's GP2 feature race. No matter that Palmer finished a close second and extended his healthy points lead, he's "gutted" and "annoyed". We remind him it's only actually cost seven points. He retorts: "It's more than that – it's nice to have another win, especially at Silverstone." It clearly matters a lot.

When we'd last spoken at length, ahead of the season, Palmer couldn't wait to get started with the DAMS team that's won two of the last three GP2 drivers' titles (Romain Grosjean in 2011 and Davide Valsecchi in '12). He knew the opposition was going to be tough, with a brace of highly rated Formula 1-affiliated rookies – Stoffel Vandoorne and Raffaele Marciello – as well as rivals he'd been up against for a while: Felipe Nasr, Stefano Coletti and Johnny Cecotto. He also knew, in year four of his GP2 career, it genuinely was make or break time for his F1 ambitions.

"I was confident I would be fighting for the title because I had a really good test with DAMS at the end of last year," he says. "Over the winter the team and I were really, really hungry to do well together. From the first day of pre-season testing I was feeling good with the team, but even from that point I would never have predicted we would be doing this well."



Bahrain victory was first of two wins...



...with the second coming in Monaco

And what a season so far: two wins, three poles, eight podiums, a worst finish of seventh (the reversed-grid race at Monaco, so even that's skewed) and a 100 per cent front-row qualifying record until last weekend at the Hungaroring.

What's made the difference? "The main thing is the qualifying, which is the basis for the whole weekend," he says. "That way if we have a bad race – we finished fifth in Austria – then you're still in the hunt for the points on Sunday. There's no pressure to salvage a top eight or work hard to get on the podium if you start at the front." (Note that a 'poor race' is fifth!)

Just like his grand prix driver father Jonathan was, Jolyon is very analytical when it comes to his racing. When you push him on why qualifying was a weakness previously, boy do you get a comprehensive answer. Imagine what his feedback to engineers is like...

"At the end of last year [with Carlin] I was qualifying really well – I was in the top three in the last three rounds – and what not many people know about was that we changed the chassis after the Nurburgring, because I'd started the year terribly. I couldn't qualify at all – Monaco was my only top 10 [in the first six events]."

"I was actually qualifying pretty reasonably in 2012 with iSport, so we couldn't work it out and there were some differences in the set-up between the two cars [his team-mate was current title rival Nasr], differences in the feedback. And after scratching our heads for half a year we decided that there was nothing to lose, let's try this."

"No one likes to blame a dodgy chassis because you can't quantify how much – it's a bit of a lame excuse... We did change it and I won in Budapest from seventh on the grid. Then I qualified 7, 3, 1, 3 [he shows great recall there] when I couldn't get in the top 10 before, and was fighting for the podium in every feature race and won two – nearly three. Although it can't be proven, it looks like that was holding me back in the first half of last year."

Does it help that his closest rival, Nasr, was his team-mate last year, giving him some insider knowledge of how Carlin ticks?

"A little bit," he allows. "Sometimes it feels like I can predict what they will do. I kind of think occasionally that I can see his mindset, but then they do something completely the opposite!"

"I guess there is some element in that, but he's not been that quick [in qualifying] until now: one third place, apart from that he's been fifth and sixth in qualifying [Nasr confounded him by taking pole in Hungary last Friday and they fell out with each other in the races, see next pages]."

He's raced well and he's picked up some good points and he's taken three wins, which has given him a lot more confidence as well.

"But in terms of pure pace I think Racing Engineering are probably a bigger threat. I definitely don't see it as just me against Nasr at the moment. Over the season so far he's been the one that has been collecting the points so that's why he's second. It's a competitive field and the threat could still come from anywhere."

But if he manages all those threats, with the lead he's held for the majority of the season, then F1 is the clear target for 2015.

"Basically the aim is to be on the grid next year, that's clear," he says. "We're speaking to some teams about a link, or a progression to that. But it's still early stages and my main focus is to win GP2. That's something that's

happening in the background really. With the season that I've had so far, we're in quite a strong position for it."

And beating some F1 junior and reserve drivers week in, week out doesn't do any harm either: "It's good having them there because it means [the teams] are all watching GP2, but FP1 runs and a lot of those opportunities are taken by those guys who were signed up at the start of the year, and that's something I've not done."

"We'll have to see how it pans out at the end of the year. I'm feeling confident that if I win the championship I can be on the grid. How I see it is that at the end of the year some spaces will open up, and I've got to be in the best position to make myself appealing to teams."

He's also smart enough to realise that he won't make the F1 grid on talent alone, and aware of the 'Davide Valsecchi/Fabio Leimer syndrome' if the opportunity/money isn't there to progress.

"I think it's a given at the moment that you need to bring something; we're working on the commercial side," he confirms. "There are people that are interested, but it's early days from that point of view as well."

"That's how it works nowadays. Everyone's bringing something. I can do a good job on track and I'm feeling reasonably confident we can get the package together, and if there's a space at the end of the year, that's the goal."

As last weekend's Hungarian races showed, Palmer isn't about to back off as the series enters its second half, and is targeting more wins to avoid falling into a trap that he's already identified from previous seasons.

"I'm not looking too much at the championship, because I've seen that the last two champions didn't make F1," he says. "I rate Leimer really highly, but he was a little bit Mr Consistent – especially in the second half – picking up points, and he didn't really stand out. I think that was a problem for him."

"What I can learn from that is that you can win the championship like that but it's not necessarily guaranteeing you a drive [in F1]. My aim is to win as many races or get as many podiums as I can. I recognise that it's my fourth year and I really need to dominate to stake my claim."

If he finishes the job he will become the first British GP2 champion since Lewis Hamilton (spooky fact: Palmer was just eight days older than Hamilton was when each of them took their first GP2 wins). Now 23, Palmer may not graduate with equal fanfare as Hamilton in 2007, but he clearly deserves his F1 opportunity just the same. ☘



Palmer Jr plans to get to F1 like his father

PALMER IN GP2

76	4	TEAMS:
STARTS	POLES	● ARDEN
LAPS LED	SEASONS CONTESTED	● ISPORT
143	2011 2012	● CARLIN
5	2013 2014	● DAMS
FASTEST LAPS		
10	389	
RACES LED	POINTS	
5		
WINS		