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Lotus tester **Jolyon Palmer** is armed with a business degree and a GP2 Series title – and he hopes that latter qualification can secure him an F1 race seat

WORDS JAMES ATTWOOD  
PORTRAIT MALCOLM GRIFFITHS

There's no such thing as a definitive route into Formula 1. But since the GP2 Series was launched in 2005, winning that championship has regularly paved the way for greater things for up-and-coming young racers.

The first seven GP2 champions have competed in the sport's top flight – including double F1 world champion Lewis Hamilton. But in recent years, that stellar graduation rate has slipped: Davide Valsecchi and Fabio Leimer, champions in 2012 and '13 respectively, both spent last season competing in sportscars. The tenth GP2 champion, Jolyon Palmer, isn't racing in F1 this year, either. But as development driver for the Lotus F1 team, he's doing the next best thing.

"I wanted to be racing in F1 after winning the championship last year," says Palmer, 24. "It was good to get the third driver deal, but initially I was disappointed not to be racing. Now I'm here, I'm really very happy with my role for this year.

"I'm in the simulator a lot, and that's very important in terms of development parts. Driving the real thing is good, because for the team it's another viewpoint from a driver. It

lets me contribute a lot more to the meetings and understand what's going on. I'm happy with what I'm doing, the team are happy with what I'm doing, and out of the car I'm happy with what the team are doing in terms of performance."

Palmer's opportunities this year will include a number of outings in first practice. As well as gaining experience of F1 machinery, it will let him adjust to the sheer scale of an F1 operation.

"In terms of the car, I don't think it's that big a step," he says. "It's only a few seconds difference in lap time, and that's mainly on the straights. The corner speeds are similar. The biggest step is the scale of everything. The GP2 car is crude compared with a modern F1 car. And in an F1 team you have 70-odd people working at a race weekend, and a few hundred people at the factory. In GP2 you've got 13, and you're dealing with two people on your car; here there are eight on each car, and that's just engineers. It takes a while to get used to working with everyone."

When Palmer first moved into the GP2 Series in 2011, dealing with a team of 13 people was a major adjustment. He'd spent his first four

seasons in single-seaters in Formula Palmer Audi and FIA Formula Two. Both were based around centrally run operations (superintended by his father Jonathan's Palmer Sport team), which made adjusting to running with Arden International in his first GP2 season a challenge.

"I came to GP2 not knowing a huge amount," he admits. "I'd never run in a team, it was all centrally run with very little engineering. My first year in GP2 was such a big step; it was also the first year with Pirelli tyres, and half-hour practice sessions on tracks I didn't know. It was difficult, but I learnt a lot and I improved the next year. My third year in GP2 was very strong, but I had a chassis problem that we didn't find until halfway through the year, which meant the fourth year became the title push instead of the third."

He spent the 2014 season driving for DAMS, his fourth different team in as many years. The pressure was on: arguably part of the reason his title-winning predecessors Valsecchi and Leimer failed to break into F1 was the perceived stigma that it took them until their fifth and fourth seasons respectively to claim the crown.

"I didn't have to win the title, I had to dominate," says Palmer, who won seven races during his four GP2 seasons. "Valsecchi won it in his fifth year and didn't go anywhere. Leimer won it in his fourth year and didn't go anywhere. If I was going to do a fourth year I knew I had to *dominate*. I won the title with three races to go, and with a record points tally."

Palmer's GP2 win emulated the success of his father Jonathan, who won the European F2 crown in 1983, going on to a grand prix career spanning 88 races across seven seasons. While Palmer Sr was heavily involved in his son's early career, running the championships Jolyon competed in, he has now stepped back.

"It's a help having someone to talk to about behind-the-scenes things. He used to be more hands on, but every year in GP2 he took more of a step back; last year he really just came to races for the enjoyment. That's how I wanted it to be."

Palmer Sr is also one of British motorsport's top businessmen, running championships, managing drivers and owning the Motor Sport Vision group of circuits that includes Brands Hatch. "He's a clever man," says Jolyon. "He managed Justin Wilson into F1, so he knows how it works, he understands the politics of it all."

Reflecting his dad's broad skillset, Palmer combined his early years in GP2 with a business degree at the University of Nottingham. He describes it as "something to fall back on", and his focus now is on getting into an F1 race seat.

He says: "It's an active role. The main thing is I've got a chance to show what I can do, because I don't want to be a third driver for long." 🏎️