

He's won in GP2 and been a frontrunner in Champ Cars. But now, A1 GP star Neel Jani wants to use the series to help him reach F1. By RICHARD ASHER

Neel Jani said something significant the other day. He declared he was forfeiting any 'summer' commitments in his quest to give Team Switzerland this season's A1 GP title. Huh?

Drivers have generally come and gone from A1 GP only as other campaigns allowed. Unless their best days were behind them (Alex Yoong, Jos Verstappen) or they weren't good enough to appear in a traditional championship but happened to come from a land with a franchise.

Jani is a different case. He's a top-drawer driver from a country with some fine young talent. And he'd very much like to think he's on his way to Formula 1. But while that's not happening, A1 GP is now priority number one. He's seeing it as a respectable alternative. Could this be the very first sign of a shift in perception?

"I don't see A1 GP as a feeder series," says Jani. "It's on its own because it's so different. Right now I've decided that I'll concentrate on A1 GP. I really want that championship. But even if I win it, I'd be interested in driving longer in A1 if possible. Right now there are only two championships that interest me: A1 GP and F1."

For a man who has already won races in GP2 and raced at the front of the field in Champ Car, you can see where he's coming from. There aren't many levels at which he hasn't won already, so where else could he go? But still, Jani's genuinely excited about this campaign. Having raced and won in all three A1 GP seasons so far (despite missing most of season two) he's got a real passion for it now.

"A1 GP shouldn't be underestimated," says the 24-year-old. "If you don't have money it's definitely one of the best things to do outside F1. I mean, why should I go back to GP2? I've won races there!"

"Look how far from Europe we go in A1 GP. And yet the quality of the organisation is always at a very high standard everywhere. I mean the television, the hospitality and all the infrastructure. I really admire that."

"The other thing is that a lot of single-make championships have huge differences in engines and so on. In A1 it's very equal. It's an unbelievably fair championship – which you don't find in many places."

He said all of these kind words the day before his disaster in Taupo, a weekend during which his healthy championship lead turned into a two-point deficit, thanks largely to a jump-start penalty he didn't agree with. You'd think he'd have started railing the next day, but Jani has a way of keeping things in perspective – most curious in a racing driver.

"All my school friends have to go to into an office early in the morning and work there until 5pm," he says. "And they only get four weeks off in a year. So why should I complain about my life? I have the opportunity to do something I like and I'm one of the few who can make a living out of it. I'm fortunate."

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NEEL JANI



Swiss Neel Jani wants to further his career in A1 GP...



...a series in which he has run at the front since it started



Jani's focus remains F1 and he wants a race deal for '09



"A1 is an unbelievably fair championship," Jani admits



James Robinson has helped improve Team Switzerland

done a fastest lap a whole second quicker than anybody else," he said of the only good bit from the Taupo meeting. "I've got no fear of not being at the front. It's when you're not the quickest that you've got to worry."

And Jani has been quite good at being the quickest this season, since the first two races at least. He was the fastest at Sepang – he always is. But after winning there he was also fastest at Zhuhai only to be robbed of victory by a pitstop disaster. And despite the mistakes and misfortune at Taupo, he did indeed register the fastest lap of the weekend by a massive margin.

Given that these performances came at three very different tracks and in wildly varying conditions, there's every reason to agree with his optimism and expect him to put things right at Eastern Creek this weekend. There was a time when it seemed Jani was only quick at Sepang, a track perfect for his style. But now he's starting to take that speed everywhere – and much of the credit goes to new Team Switzerland engineer James Robinson.

"You have to be pretty aggressive with the A1 car," explains Jani. "It's not a smooth car. You have to really take it by the neck to go quick. I'm more of a smooth driver in my movements. This helps me in the rain – I've always been quick in the wet. Or Malaysia. Why can't anybody beat me in Malaysia? It's because Sepang is such a quick, flowing track that you need to be smooth even in an A1 GP car. I'm good at just letting the car go."

"But even on a track like Taupo, which is completely the opposite of Sepang, James knows how to give me that feeling. He's been the most important change in the team this year. We had to get to know each other in the first two races at Zandvoort and Brno. But he's learned what I like and want and we've been working better and better since then. Taupo was a great example. We were struggling in sprint qualifying, and I made a mistake on top of that. But we got it fixed for feature qualifying and I think that's the perfect example of us understanding each other."

If things are starting to come together for Jani and Team Switzerland, you really can't begrudge him that. He's now an A1 GP old-timer and he's lived through some notoriously bad luck, especially in that first season when the team was run by DAMS and kept getting hit by ill fortune instead of sister squad Team France.

Jani has never been the luckiest of drivers. Having won at least one race in each season of car racing since 2002 you'd think he might have won a title by now. But in both Formula Renault Eurocup (against a mighty field in 2002) and Formula Renault V6 (in 2003) he missed out on championships by four points. And in that inaugural A1 GP season he was also the bridesmaid – thanks in part to things like a last-lap breakdown while leading in Durban and daylight robbery by the safety car in the Dubai feature.

Let's say, though, that this will be his year and he wins that crown. What then?

"The perfect year for me would be like this. Win A1 GP. Get an F1 test drive in the summer and then arrange an F1 race seat for 2009."

If that sounds a bit like something the Red Bull-backed driver has done before, that's because it is. Jani, of course, is no stranger to F1 testing. He tested for Sauber as long ago as 2004, for Red Bull in '05 and was Scuderia Toro Rosso's full-time third driver in '06. Last time around, though, it didn't really get him anywhere near a race seat.

Which is as good a reason as any for the fresh approach. Ever since those victories in the inaugural GP2 season in 2005, Jani has been floating about on the rung of the ladder just below F1. If the GP2 wins, the F1 testing and last year's Champ Car foray haven't helped, maybe glory in A1 GP; the world cup of motorsport, will make amends. ■

LONG WAY ROUND

Champ Car (top) didn't work for Jani, but he's found success in A1 GP (above)