

# AUTOWEEK

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RETURNS!**  
WITH 2012  
TOYOTA  
CAMRY

**DRIVES:** Mercedes-Benz ML63 AMG,  
Volkswagen Golf R, Ford Edge EcoBoost



◀ On track to excel (clockwise from top left in the No. 67 dirt car): Kyle Larson, Courtney Force, Zach Veach, Cooper MacNeil, Sage Karam (in the No. 88) and Conor Daly. Below: Jessica Brunelli.

# TALENT & TENACITY

Meet 10 rising stars aiming to make it to the top ranks of professional racing

**W**HILE CASUAL and hard-core fans alike prepare to follow their favorite veterans for another season of well-publicized, top-level motorsports, there is—as always—a large crop of young up-and-comers who will look to advance their careers. Say hello to 10 bud-

ding hot shoes to keep your eyes on in 2012 at various levels of the sport. They might soon become very familiar names in race-fan households.

**NAME:** Jessica Brunelli

**AGE:** 18

**SERIES:** NASCAR K&N West

■ Just shy of her 19th birthday, Jessica Brunelli has a solid résumé. By age 13, the San Francisco Bay Area native had won multiple IKF karting titles and became the youngest

person to date to earn a Skip Barber road-racing license. She was Barber's western region rookie of the year at 14, when she first tasted oval racing in a



modified car at All-American Speedway in Roseville, Calif. At 15, Brunelli finished sixth in USAC's Ford Focus Midget standings.

She moved east just after her 17th birthday to compete in NASCAR's Drive for Diversity program and surprised everyone, including herself, by earning a seat at Revolution Racing.

That year she was rookie of the year in NASCAR late models at two North Carolina short tracks, Tri-County and Hickory, which launched the careers of such NASCAR luminaries as Junior Johnson, Ned Jarrett and Ralph Earnhardt.

Brunelli says that in 2012, she hopes to compete full-time in NASCAR's K&N West series with Naake-Klauer Motorsports. It will be a huge step toward determining whether she has

what it takes to become the first woman to win a Sprint Cup race.

She was impressive in her two previous K&N starts, says team owner Mike Naake, who was Cup driver David Gilliland's crew chief while he earned his Cup cred in the K&N series.

"She qualified 15th at Phoenix on her first track bigger than 3/8-mile, and she ran top-10 at Sonoma with Boris Said breathing down her neck," Naake said.

"Jessica is a top-five runner. If she makes a mistake, she cleans it up the next lap. You only need to tell her once. She's totally calm when most people are in panic mode. It almost makes me nervous. She just needs more wheel time."

—J. P. VETTRAINO



NAME: Conor Daly

AGE: 20

SERIES: GP3

Conor Daly has demonstrated the potential speed and maturity mandatory to reach his goal of becoming a Formula One driver. Now, as his father, Derek, says, "he needs to deliver" to take the next step.

Daly, a former Star Mazda champion, returns this year to GP3 for a second season; he was finalizing his deal as of *Autoweek's* deadline. Daly hopes to move up into GP2 in 2013 and then, maybe, F1. But his former pro racer father, who serves as his manager, won't rush him.

"This year, he's 20 years

old, in 2013 he's 21, and if he did a second GP2 season in 2014, he'd be 22," says Derek Daly, an F1 and CART veteran. "At 22, he'd be ahead of everyone other than [Sebastian] Vettel in terms of career path, so he's on the right pace. The key is that he doesn't jump too fast and fall back."

Daly, who lives in Noblesville, Ind., has found success at everything he's raced. His second Star Mazda season, in 2010, included records for wins (seven), poles (nine), podium finishes (12) and most laps led. He won last year's Firestone Indy Lights race at Long Beach and finished second in St. Petersburg. In GP3, he scored a best finish of fifth at Spa-Francorchamps and finished 17th in the standings for Carlin Motorsport.

—CURT CAVIN

NAME: Courtney Force

AGE: 23

SERIES: NHRA Full Throttle Funny Car

Full Throttle Series drivers rarely have the combination of pedigree, equipment, crew support and sponsorship that Courtney Force will boast in her rookie season driving the Traxxas Ford Mustang Funny Car. With that mountain of



CONOR DALY >

help comes a heap of expectations, all part of the territory when you are the child of the most prolific drag racer in history, John Force.

But what will set 23-year-old Courtney apart from the other Force sisters is that driving a race car has been her single passion for as long as she can remember. Despite earning a degree in communications from Cal State-Fullerton, she's never thought much of dabbling in any other pursuit.

"I've known since I was five years old that I want to be a professional race-car driver," Courtney said. "I'd draw pictures in crayon of me racing my dad; I was always in the lead, of course. I can't wait to start beating up on the boys—especially my dad."

After winning her first race—in 2009, in Top Alcohol Dragster at the Northwest Nationals in Seattle—and after earning runner-up honors the same year in the Auto Club Finals at Pomona, Calif., she ran a limited schedule in 2010. Now, her first pro season could be one of the most successful rookie efforts by a nitro driver in a long time. She's spent a lot of time testing, and her crew chief, Ron Douglas, will be backed up by John Force Racing's tuning brain trust.

—ROB GEIGER

NAME: Michael Johnson

AGE: 19

SERIES: U.S. F2000

After a change in plans, Michael Johnson is working toward his dream of driving in the Indianapolis 500.

Johnson started racing motorcycles at age four, and he was a standout, collecting 14 regional and national titles by age 12—when he crashed during a 250-cc race in Sarnia, Ontario, in 2005.

Johnson suffered fractures to his T5 and T6 vertebrae,



leaving him paralyzed from the chest down. He also broke his collarbone, right ribs, left ankle and left leg flying over the handlebars. His recovery has included an 11-hour surgery in Detroit to insert four rods and 15 screws, experimental stem-cell-transplant surgery in Portugal in 2009 and about 1,000 hours of rehabilitation.

In a bid to continue racing, Johnson turned first to karts. Last year, he finished third