

USA

Euro ladder series are a tough nut to crack, but American talents may have a new lever...

In the same 1980 season in which the "original" Lotus brought a young Briton named Nigel Mansell to F1, it continued to showcase Mario Andretti as team leader. Fellow countryman Eddie Cheever (31) was just getting established with Osella.



Americans have always had a tough time breaking into grand prix racing. Not counting the years when the Indianapolis 500 counted as one, 55 U.S. citizens have raced in Formula 1 events, compared with 158 from the UK alone. And just one – Scott Speed – has done so in the past two decades. The reasons for this have been discussed many times, but one that often gets overlooked is the lack of consistent American participation in Europe's open-wheel ladder series. That, at least, appears to be changing, as several Americans are poised to play significant roles there this year.

Conor Daly made his GP3 series debut last year, splitting time with Indy Lights. As he related in our January issue and in his regular blogs for RACER.com last year, that two-way approach provided for some very complicated travel schedules as well as a steep learning curve. For 2012, Conor plans to focus his efforts on GP3 and, now that he has secured a race seat on the Lotus squad with which he tested promisingly in February, he is likely to be a prime contender.

The same is true of compatriot Alexander Rossi, who has signed up to run the World Series by Renault, for Formula Renault 3.5 cars, for Caterham Racing. Confusingly, that's the team that used to go by the name of Lotus in F1 and its affiliated programs, but has now adopted the brand of another iconic British sports car marque.

Unlike Daly, Rossi has been focusing on European racing for several years, splitting time between GP3, GP2 and now FR3.5. While the latter might sound like a step down the "official" ladder, his new team's association with an F1 squad puts him a step closer to a grand prix career. Similarly, Lotus affiliation is obviously a big step forward for Daly toward emulating his father Derek's path into F1.

Direct associations between F1 teams and sponsors with steppingstone series is relatively new. It has parallels, however, to a time when entry into F1 by new teams was easier. Eddie Cheever made a handful of F1 starts in 1978, but by stepping back to Formula 2 with the Osella team – which then brought him

along when it graduated to F1 in 1980 – he was able to land a regular place on the grand prix grid, and attract the attention of more prominent teams.

It can be a double-edged sword, of course, as in the case of Scott Speed and the abrupt termination of his Red Bull patronage. Yet in an era of tightly restricted opportunities, linking up with established F1 franchises is a clear advantage for young talents. How exciting it would be for the drivers and the fans cheering them on if Lotus and Caterham F1 cars had Americans in the cockpit when grand prix racing returns to America in Austin this fall. **F**

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Alexander Rossi's Lotus/Caterham connections paid off at F1's Young Driver Test. Will there be more to follow this year?

