

# STILL "THE FASTEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD"



WORDS YOHANN J SETNA

27 years since he first donned a race helmet, Narain Karthikeyan continues to blaze a trail. We take a look back at the life and times of the fastest Indian race car driver



**I VIVIDLY  
REMEMBER HIM  
SAYING, "NO TIME  
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STRAIGHT TO  
THE TRACK"**

**From top to bottom:** Competing in the cut-throat Formula Ford UK series; winning the Formula Asia race at MMRT and Shah Alam; with dad G R Karthikeyan and Winfield school instructor Roland Reiss



finest youngsters that Europe had to offer. So he took his son to the Elf Winfield Racing School in France, where the 15-year-old stunned everyone by qualifying as a semi-finalist in the Pilote Elf Competition for Formula Renault Cars. It was then that the school instructors told NK's dad that there was something truly special about his son's skills on a racetrack. From then on, there was no looking back. Narain's will to succeed and his desire to achieve the goals he sets for himself hasn't diminished one single bit from the day I first met him, till today.

The goalposts keep changing, but there are always goals to achieve. His motivation is unshakeable. I always remember an incident when we travelled together to his first ever AIGP race in Taupo, New Zealand. We took long flights from Bombay to Singapore and then onwards to Auckland, with a layover in Singapore. By the time we reached Auckland and drove down the four odd hours to Taupo in the rental car, it was around 5 o'clock in the evening. I was driving the rental car while NK was catching a few winks in the passenger seat. I asked him if we should stop at the hotel, check-in, and freshen-up. But he would have none of that. It was straight off to the track to make his new race seat for the car. I vividly remember him saying, "no time to dick around, man. Let's go straight to the track." In my mind, that incident always sums up his attitude to not just his career, but also his life.

1993 was the year in which Narain really began his mission. 1992 was just a year of exploration, of finding out what was the meaning of his life. By 1993, at the age of 16, he knew. An age at which other kids are still fumbling around, wondering what to do next, this young lad from Coimbatore was on a mission to become India's first Formula 1 driver. He raced at home in the Formula Maruti Championship, and in the UK's Formula Vauxhall Junior Championship. Racing in the UK was critical. He knew that if he was to really develop as a driver,



**Top:** Narain making his racing debut in Kari's FISSME at the MMRT in 1992. **Above:** In the McDowell two-seater at the MMRT

**W**HEN THE 15-YEAR-OLD son of a National Rally Champion from Coimbatore arrived at the Sriperumbudur track in 1992 for a Formula Maruti (FISSME) race, I think there was only one person there who knew he was about to witness the racing debut of India's first ever Formula 1 driver. The person was that same 15-year-old kid from Coimbatore, Kumar Ram Narain Karthikeyan. He shone on his racing debut, finishing on the podium, ahead of many more experienced and well-known Indian racing drivers. It was a day to remember!

Unfortunately I wasn't one of those lucky people. However, in the years that have followed, I have been truly fortunate to work with NK (the only nickname I have for him that I am willing to share on these pages). I have accompanied him to races in diverse racing series all over the planet, in Formula 1, AIGP, NASCAR, LMS, the Le Mans 24 Hour race, Superleague Formula, AutoGP and Japanese Super Formula. It has been a journey that started together in 2006, and it continues to this day.

After that career-beginning Formula Maruti race in Sriperumbudur, NK's dad (a truly wise, knowledgeable, engaging and thorough gentleman) decided that if his son was to pursue a career as a racing driver, he should test his mettle against the

he needed to pit himself against the best the sport had to offer, and the UK junior racing series was the place to be at that time. He never wanted to hide in a lesser series where he could be assured of good results, lulling into a false sense of achievement. He wanted it to be difficult, he sought out the struggle. He knew it would pay off, someday.

He returned to the UK in 1994 to race in the Formula Ford Zetec series, his season highlight being a podium finish in the support race held at the Portuguese F1 Grand Prix in Estoril, and then finished off the year by winning the British Formula Ford Winter Series. He was the first Indian to win any racing championship in Europe. This trend of being the first Indian to achieve milestones in motorsport has become his signature, and he keeps adding to the list even today.

His next target was the newly formed Formula Asia Championship in 1995. He did just four races during the 1995 season and managed a podium finish in the race in Shah Alam in Malaysia. 1996 was a concerted effort to win the championship by participating in the full season, which he duly won, becoming the first Indian and first Asian to win that championship. Winning in Asia was all very well, but Narain knew that he had to be back in Europe if he was going to challenge the best. So it was back to the UK in 1997 for the British Formula Opel Championship. He finished sixth in the championship taking a pole and a win at Donington Park along the way.

The next three years were probably the most important ones in the development of the Narain



Karthikeyan we know today. He spent 1998, 1999 and 2000 racing in the legendary British Formula 3 Championship, against drivers like Jenson Button and Takuma Sato, beating them on occasion, but always fighting up there for the top steps of the podium. He won races, got pole positions, fastest laps and even lap records. He scored the first ever win for the fledgling Carlin Motorsport team in 1999 at Brands Hatch, a circuit which has become his hunting ground ever since, winning the A1GP in 2008 and Superleague Formula in 2010 there.

To this day, a photograph of him winning the British F3 race in Brands Hatch in 1999 adorns a wall of the reception area at Carlin Motorsports Headquarters in the UK. The first of 396 wins for that team to date. In 2000 he dominated the field at the Macau GP, taking pole position and fastest lap, but crashed out of the race while leading comfortably. It's still something he's not comfortable talking about. He fought back two weeks later to dominate and win the Korea Super

**Right:** NK took multiple wins in the World Series by Nissan. **Bottom:** Testing the Jaguar F1 car in 2005. **Middle:** Victory at the Korea Super Prix in 2000

Prix, but I know that it was Macau he really wanted. He went back twice to Macau in later years while racing in other championships, to finish what he considered was unfinished business, but never quite had the machinery to repeat his dominance of 2000.

It was around this time that Autosport Magazine, the oldest and most respected motorsport magazine nicknamed him "The Fastest Indian in the World". It's a moniker that's stuck with him throughout his career, and it's as true today as it was on the day the catchphrase was coined.

2001 was a year of major change for NK. He left what was now his comfort zone of the UK, for another unknown – Japan, and the Formula Nippon F3000 Championship. He finished the year in the top ten in that championship, but for all of us Indians, 2001 will always be remembered as the year in which NK became the first Indian ever to test a Formula 1 car. It was the Jaguar R1 and the place was Silverstone, the home of British motor racing. Impressed with his performance, he was invited to test drive the Jordan Honda EJ11. Both test drives were at Silverstone. Awed by his performance in the first test, Narain was asked to test for the second time with Jordan, this time at the Mugello circuit in Italy.

First time around, Narain didn't like Japan. He found the culture very different to what he was used to in Europe and back home in India. The language was a barrier, and he hated the food. 15 years down the road and how things have changed. He now loves Japan, loves their culture, rattles off full sentences in Japanese, and revels in the spirit of the Japanese motorsport "Super-Fans". He even enjoys the food. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd put a plate of sashimi in front of him and his eyes would light up. I guess it's amazing what age and experience can do to a man.

So after an uncomfortable season in 2001, Narain headed back to Europe and a three-year stint in



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**Above:** 2000 British F3 championship at Snetterton. **Middle:** Taking Carlin Motorsport's first win in 1999, at Brands Hatch. **Top:** Pole at Macau GP in 2000 but he crashed out in the race. Won Korea F3 two weeks later



the World Series, the GP2/F2 of its day. Here again he won races, amassed podium finishes, pole positions and fastest laps. He was on the threshold of achieving his dream. It was more a 'when' rather than an 'if' that was going to happen. It finally did, and in 2005 Narain Karthikeyan became the first Indian to ever race in Formula 1. It was Team Jordan, with whom he had tested twice before, who gave him the chance. And it was Trevor Carlin, who was then the Sporting Manager of the Jordan F1 Team who showed his belief in Narain's talent by offering him the drive for the 2005 F1 season.

I remember the Press Conference at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai. It was the first of February 2005, and this time I can say that "I was there". He left



**TESTING NEVER GOT HIS ADRENALINE GOING, AND THE DESIRE TO RACE WAS ALWAYS THERE**



for UK the next day to do the 300km of testing he needed to do to qualify for his Superlicence. It was the start of a crazy year of travel, fitness training, racing, and PR engagements – a veritable roller coaster of life. In fact, it was the fitness regimen which was the biggest change of all. Formula 1 cars are so brutally fast, they require the drivers to maintain an incredible level of fitness. They need to have the stamina of a marathon runner, but with tremendous emphasis on lower back, leg and arm strength. Yes, the cars do have power-assisted steering and braking systems, but the power-assist systems are fairly small due to weight constraints, and with the downforce they generate, and the carbon brakes, it requires a unique balance of brute strength and finesse to get the most out of these beasts. Up until this point in his career, Narain used to workout regularly, but the intensity of the demands of an F1 car made him step up his fitness game. In fact, now into his forties, Narain is probably as fit, if not fitter than he was when he made his F1 debut at the age of 28.

His debut race in Australia threw up some mixed weather conditions during qualifying, but Narain excelled and muscled his Jordan into 12th place on the grid. He was consistently quicker than his teammate all year long and scored points for a fourth place finish at the United States Grand Prix. Sadly for him, Jordan was on a steep decline, and the shortcomings of the car never allowed him to show what he was really capable of. At the end of



**Above:** Becoming the first Indian to race in Formula 1 with Jordan in 2005. **Top:** At the controversial US GP where he finished fourth. **Left:** Testing with Williams F1 in 2006

**Above:** Taking victory for Team India in 2007 at Zuhai, in season 3 of the A1 Grand Prix

the season, rather than continue with a team on the downward spiral, he chose to accept an offer from the Williams F1 team as a test driver for the 2006 season. He was amazed at the differences between a top-flight F1 car (as the Williams was at that time) and his 2005 Jordan. He did 14 days and over 3,600km of testing that year, a fantastic learning experience. However, testing never got his adrenaline going, and the desire to race was always there.

It was around this time that I started having conversations with Narain about the possibility of him moving across to A1GP and racing for A1 Team India. The team's previous franchise holder had withdrawn and the team was up for sale. He agreed and we made a joint effort to take over the team, which happened midway through 2006, just before the start of the A1GP racing season in September. However, he had Williams testing commitments which did not allow him to race in the first few races of the season. So his first race for the team was in January 2008 in Taupo, New Zealand. He finished tenth in the race, scoring A1 Team India's first

ever points in the championship. It was onwards and upwards from then on. Narain revelled in the atmosphere of the A1GP. The team was built around him, and he relished the thought that with equal machinery up and down the pit-lane, he had as good a chance as anyone else to win races. He had some good finishes that season, culminating in a fourth place at his favourite track, Brands Hatch.

His breakthrough came in Zhuhai, China, in 2008, where he scored the team's first win. It was the first time ever that the Indian National Anthem was played during the podium ceremony of a World Championship motor race. When I got back from China, my wife was thrilled and upset. Thrilled that we had won our first race, but upset that she was not there to share it with the team. She had been there at the previous round in Sepang, but missed this one. I remember telling her that since she was planning to come to the season finale race at Brands Hatch, she would definitely be witnessing Narain win a race. She didn't believe me. So I wrote down on a post-it, "We will win at Brands", and with great flourish (and foolishness) handed it to her saying, "Here you go. It's in writing." Narain went on to clinch pole position at his favourite track, and the win, in glorious fashion. While the podium ceremony was going on, my wife, who was standing next to me, handed me that post-it saying, "How did you know?". I really don't know. Somehow, I just did. He loves that track, and has such a feeling of invincibility when he's there. It was the perfect end to a great build-up season.

The next season of A1GP started badly. We lost our primary sponsor as that company went bust just a week before the first race. It took a superhuman effort from Narain and myself to get the funds together to be able to start the season, which we did after missing the first round. We were always playing catch-up after that. There were some good results again, with another podium finish at Brands Hatch, but the series was in financial trouble after the 2008 New York Stock Exchange crash, and that Brands Hatch race in May 2009 was the final race of the series. A great series, great people and great memories. Narain still maintains that it holds some of the best racing memories in his career so far.

2009 brought on new challenges, as he raced in the Le Mans Series (which has now become the World Endurance Championship) in an Audi R10 Turbo Diesel prototype. His foray at the Le Mans 24 hour race was ill-fated though. After qualifying well, he was slated to do the opening stint in the race. Just before the race was due to start, the call of nature beckoned, and he climbed over the pit wall to answer it. As he did so, his hand slipped and he fell, dislocating his shoulder. He was out of the race before it really began. It was devastating, and not just on that day. The injury was so severe,



it took over two years and multiple treatments for him to recover 100 per cent. Although, that didn't stop him. Nothing stops Narain. His motivation and drive to succeed are like a freight train. The inertia is just phenomenal, and it's infectious. It envelops everyone around him, and pushes them to be the best they can be as well. I know, I can speak from personal experience.

Towards the end of 2009, a unique opportunity presented itself. NK was approached by a fledgling NASCAR team in the USA to race for them in the Camping World Truck Series (a step on the ladder towards the premier NASCAR series, the Sprint



Cup) in 2010. It was a new challenge and something that NK grabbed with both hands. He did however, want to continue racing single-seaters, so we hunted around and found a seat in the Superleague Formula Championship, a unique racing series, where each team represented a European Football club. Narain raced under the PSV Eindhoven colours. It was a year of vast differences. Racing in a NASCAR truck on oval tracks on one side of the Atlantic, and a V12-engined screaming single-seater on traditional road-course circuits on the other side. He won again in the Superleague Formula, at Brands Hatch, where else. We celebrated together again on our way out of the circuit in what has become a bit of a tradition for us – him with a soft serve ice-cream cone, and me with a Magnum bar. It's just one of those crazy things.

The two other highlights of that year were both off-track. Narain became the first ever Indian in motorsport to receive an official honour from the Government of India, when he was awarded with the Padma Shri. He was also voted NASCAR's most popular driver of the year by a fan vote, becoming the first ever non-American to win that award. A promising NASCAR career seemed like a guarantee, but then came along an offer from the newly formed HRT Formula 1 team, for NK to return to his true love, Formula 1. He just couldn't resist the pull of F1, and raced for that team in 2011 and 2012. The team was always struggling financially, and it showed in the car. He never got the chance to really show what he was made of. The highlight of this phase of his career was that he got to be the only Indian driver on the grid for the first ever Indian Grand Prix held in 2011. It was an

**Above left:** Narain would have been the first Indian at Le Mans but he slipped and injured his shoulder just before the race start. **Below:** Narain took part in the Camping World Truck Series, one rung below the Sprint Cup and was voted NASCAR's most popular driver

**BY THE END OF 2012, NARAIN HAD HAD ENOUGH OF RACING JUST TO FINISH RACES, FINALLY SETTLING ON THE 2013 AUTOGP CHAMPIONSHIP IN EUROPE**



emotional moment for him, one that he remembers fondly to this day.

In December of 2012, the Race of Champions was held in Bangkok, the first time ever this prestigious 'invitees only' end of season coming together of the best-of-the-best in the motorsport world was being hosted in Asia. Also for the first time, there was going to be a Race of Champions Asia title. Narain and Karun Chandhok were invited to represent India in this one-of-a-kind event. They duly won the RoC Asia title, defeating Thailand, China and Japan along the way.

By the end of 2012, Narain had had enough of racing just to finish races, and with the finances required to secure a spot in a mid-field F1 team becoming more and more absurd, he looked elsewhere, finally settling on the 2013 AutoGP Championship in Europe, who were racing a modified version of the old A1GP cars. It was a car which NK knew well. He started the season with the Zele Racing team, but after three races in which he was unable to perform due to circumstances beyond his control, he switched teams to Super Nova Racing, and his season came alive. He won five races, got four poles and had it not been for the three races lost with the wrong team, would have been series champion that year. His appetite for single-seaters was back with a vengeance.

2014 started what was to become his return to Japan, and perhaps the final chapter in this

**Top left:** With friend and rival Karun Chandhok, winning the 2010 Race of Champions Asia title. **Top:** NK went to Japan in 2014 to race in the Super Formula series till 2018

extraordinary career, although with Narain Karthikeyan, I've learnt one must 'never say never'. He always defies the odds, it's his 'thing'. And it's surely one of the trademarks of a true champion – they never ever give up. He raced in the Japanese Super Formula from 2014 to 2018, with three different teams. Narain has fallen in love with Japan and the Japanese have fallen in love with him. He has a huge fan following there. His humility, honesty and mild-mannered temperament has really won over the racing community in Japan. He started the 2019 season as his third season being a Honda factory driver. This year though, he races in the premier Japanese racing series, SuperGT, in the premier GT500 class, driving the Modulo Nakajima Racing Honda NSX. It's the same kind of car in which Jenson Button won the championship in 2018, but NK will be on Dunlop tyres as opposed to Jenson whose car will be shod with Bridgestone rubber.

The Japanese SuperGT cars are super quick, probably the fastest 'tin-top' racing cars in the world. At the first race weekend in Okayama, the pole-sitting car did a lap time that would have qualified it in 15th place on the grid the last time Formula 1 raced at that track. The cars have mega-downforce and develop over 700bhp in qualifying trim from their 2-litre 4-cylinder turbo engines. It's a year of big changes for NK. It will be his first full season not racing a single-seater since he started his career over 25 years ago. He will definitely miss the sharp

**Below:** With teammate Tadasuke Makino. His speed and popularity in Japan mean the Modulo Nakajima Racing team have invited and are paying for NK to drive the Honda NSX-GT in the SuperGT series

## JAPANESE SUPERGT CARS ARE SUPER QUICK, PROBABLY THE FASTEST TIN-TOP RACING CARS IN THE WORLD

edginess of the single-seater beast, but the challenge of the unknown is what he loves the most. He just loves to drive, and drive fast.

Last year he broke the production car lap record at the Buddh International Circuit in his own Porsche 911 GT3, eclipsing the previous record by over two seconds. It was another feather in his cap, but he wasn't done yet. He wanted to go even faster. So he got a friend to loan him his Porsche 911 GT2RS, and in March 2019 promptly broke his own lap record by a staggering seven seconds. His speed and desire to go faster and faster just never diminishes, and that's why I've titled this piece Still The Fastest Indian in the World! [MSI](#)

