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Neil's Corner



This game, V8 Supercar racing, can change so quickly.

Heading into the 5th event last weekend at Queensland Raceway, Jamie Whincup enjoyed a 204 point lead over James Courtney.

Two races on and now James is just 24 points behind Jamie! Let the battle begin.

Races 9 and 10 were really exciting and may well prove to be pivotal events in this year's Championship story telling.

The Dunlop Sprint tyre was used all weekend for the first time ever. The tyre is a lot softer than the standard Control tyre and really spiced up the racing.

Tyre degradation was the big story. Some drivers and teams did a great job of maximizing tyre performance - others struggled. We loved the disparity.

The result was more passing in one weekend than we've seen for a long time.

The other big story was the breakthrough wins for Ford! James Courtney and his guys at Jim Beam Racing really did a brilliant job and the blue blokes smiled once more.

I was really impressed by the way James put his weekend together. He drove extremely well in both races and never looked in doubt.

I've known James since he was a little kid. Through a mutual friend, James and his Dad came to me after he'd earned two World Karting Championships. They wanted some advice about what comes next?

I wasn't really qualified to help - but tried to assist.

James faced that same horrible question everyone in motor sport faces sometime. How the hell do I get a break and how do I pay for this obsession?

It was the late 90's. I was still deeply involved in driving and all I did was open my own book of contacts to do a bit of old fashioned hustling.

One name, Alan Gow, was worth a second thought. Alan was my Team Manager when I was with Peter Brock in the late '80's.

Gow had successfully pursued the expansion of his own business career in the UK, initially with Andy Rouse (driver and engineer) and then became the key man behind the big years of the British Touring Car Championship.

Alan also helped a few young drivers along the way. Expat Kiwi and twice World Touring Car Champion Paul Radisich was one bloke that Alan kicked along.

Long story short. I threw some shoulder under James and badgered Gow to support him. He did. To the tune of quite lot of money to get him into the UK and through Formula Ford, Formula 3 and even into a testing role at Jaguar F1.

His European sojourn eventually turned sour. You either make it or you don't. It's harsh. James was quick but stuff went wrong at the wrong times.

In the middle of endless political turmoil that was swamping the Jaguar (Ford) F1 Team, (now Red Bull) James had an accident at Monza while testing. It nearly killed him. At 335 km/h the rear wing fell off the bloody thing. It pitched him into a wall and his recovery cost him the British F3 Championship that year.

There's very few places to make a living driving racing cars in Europe. Most pay for their drives. So Alan found rides for James in Japan.

Getting passport stamps earned James 2 World Karting Championships. A British Formula Ford Championship and a Japanese F3 Championship.

James presence in my world sort of ebbed and flowed a bit like the tide. Only a few years ago, in 2005, a Melbourne businessman was looking to help James to either get back into the main game in Europe or maybe break into America.

In the middle of the meetings and in a defining moment over a soft drink and sandwich in a cafe in Port Melbourne, James decided he wanted to race here and leave his international suitcase parked. He was tired, emotionally destroyed and almost ready to go back to the family business in Sydney selling or laying carpet with his Dad Jim.

I doubled checked his thoughts and then made a call to Mark Skaife. Skaife took a punt and took on James for an enduro ride with HRT. Away he went in the business of V8 Supercar racing.

All this fluff has a point. I don't want you to think this is a self-serving story. It's just that my observation of this JC journey has been done at unusually close quarters.

I don't mind telling you I could have choked him a few times too. And he might say the same? I'm 20 years older so we're not always on the same page.

Now he's not a kid anymore. James is 29. Has a lovely wife, Carys, and two cute little kids, Zara and Cadel. He's his own man now. Good luck to him. Life is bright and shiny.

Alan's investment slowly is making its way back...

For the record I have no formal business tie with James. I'm not involved in his day-to-day business or racing activities.

The point is - last weekend I reckon I saw James emphatically conquer the V8 task. It's 6 years on from the HRT break and finally now he looks convincing.

And while James and the Jim Beam Racing boys were pumping the air at QR, one old boy in the commentary box paused to privately smile. It's a nice story - an overnight success 20 years in the making and it nearly ended before it even got started...

Next stop. V8 Supercar Races 11 & 12, Winton Motor Raceway, Benalla, (Vic.) May 15 & 16.



Straight advice, specialists you understand and... No Bull

