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Why rising star Callum Ilott could be Britain's best-kept secret. By Rob Ladbrook



Ilott has moved to Prema this season



Ilott led the line for Van Amersfoort team

ILOTT - TIME TO MAKE MY MARK

While Lando Norris has followed the FIA's single-seater ladder in his career progression, Callum Ilott has truly trodden his own path.

One of the headline facts of Ilott's racing career so far is that he's only ever done one car racing event on British soil – hence why he's probably the best home-grown hope in F3 that most know almost nothing about.

Almost all of Ilott's racing career has been played out in Europe, with campaigns in German and world-level karting paying dividends before a move directly to Formula 3. That's not the FIA's chosen career step, but it's also not a unique one.

Max Verstappen made a similar career vault, and was even one of Ilott's karting rivals at world level. And there are more similarities between Ilott and the rapid, headline-making Dutchman too, such as a Red Bull link.

Ilott made the move to European F3 on the advice of Dr Helmut Marko, and gained backing from its Junior Team programme to do so for 2015. However, unlike Verstappen, it didn't quite work out for Ilott.

There's been no rapid rise to Formula 1 for the 18-year-old from Cambridge, but what there is on the table for Ilott is a

shining chance to win this year's Euro F3 crown and make himself a household name. This year he will race for series dominator Prema Powerteam, and will be a favourite for the championship.

"I have to win it this year, if not it's a massive opportunity missed," says Ilott.

"You always have to go into each year thinking things will be bigger and better; that's got to be the aim. Last year I had the speed to win races regularly, but the car let me down a few times and the luck wasn't there. This year really is a huge opportunity for me."

Ilott properly began to establish himself in world motorsport last year when, in his second season of F3, he finished sixth in the European Championship, winning two races with the Van Amersfoort team. He also took a podium in the qualifying race for the Macau GP.

Considering his lack of car racing experience prior, that was a huge achievement. Ilott only set foot into a car for the first time in late 2014, with a Formula Renault test, before he signed to do Euro F3 in 2015 with Carlin. A warm-up in the Toyota Racing Series helped, but he still went into a hugely competitive series as a total rookie.

Ilott acknowledges his career path hasn't been conventional, but argues he wouldn't have it any other way. "I didn't do a lot of karting in the UK because we always saw Europe as a better option," he explains. "At the time UK grids in KF3 weren't great, but the formula was huge around Europe, so we did the German championship and then moved into WSK [World Series Karting]."

"The plan changed when I had a meeting with Dr Marko at the 2014 British Grand Prix, and he wanted me to go for a test with Carlin. It was only my second-ever go in a car, and it was in a

Formula 3, but I was quick straight away so the deal was done and Red Bull supported me.

"I had no idea what I was stepping in to at the time. I just thought 'a car's a car, let's get on with it'. Whether it's F3, F4 or Formula Renault, the gaps between them aren't that big. It's about getting the miles in and learning how to get the best from each one."

"People say I've missed out by not doing things like F4 and FRenault, but I don't agree. This year will be interesting as I'm racing against people like Lando and Mick Schumacher [German F4 graduate and son of F1 legend Michael] who have followed the FIA ladder, so we can see first-hand which route works best."

"Obviously I've had two years in F3, so I feel I have the edge. F3 teaches you so much, and it's a form of racing where it's also a lot about the car and you learn how much tiny changes can affect the entire performance. I've also been up against the best drivers for the last two years, and I've learned from them. I was constantly being pushed as I was chasing times and building up my experience."

"In F3 experience is huge. It's relatively easy to be within a second of someone, but finding those last few tenths is so tough. You have to learn when to trust the car, when it's going to step out and when it's actually sliding or when it's just the feeling of suspension movement. If I could do it all again I'd still choose that over winning F4 titles, the only thing I've missed out on are the FIA's Superlicence points."

Ilott feels ready for this year, and to put the lessons he's learnt into good use. During his first year at Carlin he took tips from drivers like Antonio Giovinazzi and Jake Dennis. Last year he led the line for Van Amersfoort, finishing over 60 points clear of the team's next-best driver.

"I was happy with my performance last year, but I had two engine failures at key rounds and the team had as many problems with my car alone as any other team would have across four!" adds Ilott.

"Over the first half of the year I had more points than all of my team-mates combined, so I was setting the benchmark a lot of the time. Without the problems I could have finished third in the championship quite easily, and I have to build on that this year."

The next step is winning European F3, even with a raft of talented newcomers coming in. But where then?

Ilott's fracture from Red Bull's Junior Team programme at the end of 2015 raised eyebrows, but he never questioned his own ability.

"The Red Bull deal made me put pressure on myself," he adds. "I was always thinking 'am I doing well enough?' at every event and not knowing exactly where I stood with things. You really think about it a lot when you have a brand like that behind you. In a way it's clever as it pushes you on, but I relaxed a lot more last year with Van Amersfoort [without Red Bull backing] and that made a difference."

"Realistically, I'm not funded for F1. With Red Bull behind me I might have been, but I know my chances of making it there are incredibly slim, so I have to look at other options. Winning F3 would hopefully open a lot of doors in that respect."

"It's funny when you see drivers like Max [Verstappen] move up like he has. When I raced against him in karting he was that bit older and more experienced, but even then everybody knew he was going to make it. He's won in pretty much every championship he's done, so it's not like he doesn't deserve it. It's just up to me to make my own way and see what opportunities I can make for myself." ■

CV

Callum Ilott

Age: 18 **From:** Cambridge

2017: FIA F3 European Championship with Prema Powerteam

2016: FIA F3 European Championship with Van Amersfoort Racing – sixth, two wins

2015: FIA F3 European Championship with Carlin, 12th, one podium

2014: CIK-FIA European KF Championship, champion; WSK Super Masters Series KF, champion; WSK Champions Cup, third

2013: WSK Final Cup, champion

2012: CIK-FIA KF3 World Cup, second; WSK Euro Series KF3, second; WSK Masters Series KF3, champion; WSK Final Cup KF3, champion

2011: German Junior Kart Championship, third; Formula Kart Stars KF3, champion

2010: Copa Campeones Trophy Cadet, third; Super One Cadets



Ilott cleaned up in KF3



Macau podium (left) was a highlight