

Nick Neri Might Just Be the Fastest Kid in America

There's that video image of the fast Brazilian kid (there's always a fast Brazilian kid in these stories)- the one that won one of the Big Deal scholarships and competed in the National Championship last year.

Road Atlanta, last lap, hair on fire, chin strap between his teeth, trying an outside pass at 10A. Next frame he's bouncing across the sand and grass like a damn dune buggy.

With that, Nick Neri, a then-15 year-old from Palmetto, FL, won the first car race he'd ever entered. In the entire history of auto racing, I can't even name another driver that won their first race against legitimate competition in equal cars. (Clubbing baby seals at an SCCA Regional or winning anything with less than a 10 car field doesn't count).

"Well, he's just basically the fastest karter we've ever seen." Todd Kovi, president of the Florida Kart Championship Series, summed it up when asked how he'd characterize Nick.

It would be one thing if the president of, say, karting in Delaware had that to say, but we're talking about Florida. Florida has more kart tracks, clinically delusional parents, Brazilianaires, and general kart nuts than the rest of the East Coast put together. If a karter stands out in Florida, it's like a weirdo standing out in Florida; they *must* be exceptional.

I first heard about Nick at the opening round of the FKCS series in Homestead last year. There was a kid in Rotax Junior who couldn't race because he'd gotten shelled at the Winter Tour event the week before and Kovi figured that seeing straight was pretty much mandatory. Good kid, fine driver, but not a podium threat up to that point.

Kid's dad is a lifer so he goes looking for a stand-in superhero, and Nick's just hanging around the pits. Nick puts the kid's gear on and tells the appropriate official that's he's a sub, which he knows means he has to start from the back.

The appropriate official forgets to tell the announcer about any of this. You can see where this is going.

Three laps into the final and Nick's up to seventh or something, in a 25 kart field.

The announcer starts losing his *mind*.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Bobby Smith is having the RACE OF HIS LIFE! He's up to sixth- he's passing people EVERYWHERE- this is UNBELIEVABLE!"

People start dropping their tools and heading to the fence to watch- it's like a goddamn flying saucer just landed in the infield; people are *drawn*.

The announcer continues screeching, almost hoarse; "Bobby Smith is up to THIRD, now wait... now SECOND! OH MY GOD ladies and gentleman, Bobby Smith is absolutely ON FIRE!"

About this time I noticed a small contingent of guys from Ocala Gran Prix in the stands, all wearing the obligatory green Tony Kart shirts, and all trying to keep the tears out of their eyes from laughing so hard.

"BOBBY SMITH FOR THE LEAD!!!" The announcer screams before falling so silent that it's possible he's passed out. He comes back on a few minutes later with *that voice*. You know the voice. The voice TV cops use when they've made a *terrible mistake*.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we’ve just been informed that it’s actually Nick Neri driving Bobby Smith’s kart... um, good race Nick.” The disappointment in his voice was palpable.

Thing is, he wasn’t disappointed because Nick won, but because while winning the race from the rear was the most surprising thing Bobby could do, it was the least surprising thing Nick could do.

In karts, Nick Neri wins more often than a slot machine. It’s only news when he doesn’t win, and then there’s usually a pretty good story. Like the Winter Tour event where he was leading one of the most competitive fields in the world when his throttle cable snapped. Nick pulled off the track, diagnosed the problem, re-fired his TaG kart with one hand on the wheel and the other on the carb *butterfly* before pulling back on the track. Most people would be happy to get back to the pits like this. Nick rejoins the race and starts *passing* people, eventually finishing mid-pack.

Jorge Arellano, owner of Ocala Gran Prix, and the regional Patron Saint of Karting, got down on his hands and knees when Nick pulled in. Jorge is a 6’2”, 300 pounds and an heir to something ridiculous. Jorge doesn’t do this very often.

“We got tired of him beating our drivers,” Jorge explains, when asked how Nick came to be OGP’s factory driver and de facto poster child.

Each season, OGP ‘hires’ the fastest kids in the region to go to war for them. Nick is the fastest of them all. Jorge focuses on Rotax machinery, where Nick has won the national championship.

In three different classes.

Jorge’s ultimate goal is to have an American win the world championship. Nick came within a whisker of doing this by winning a heat race and setting pole before getting taken out from behind in the first corner of the final in Italy last year.

Locally though, Jorge focuses heavily on the Florida Winter Tour, a three-race series that typically draws the best karters in the world to compete. You know, guys like Rubens Barrichello. This isn’t WKA use-your-turn-signals stuff; it’s European style full contact karting, and the level of commitment required to win is nothing short of astonishing.

“For each class, you need four frames, three motors, and good health insurance,” one father explained.

The paddock at the Winter Tour has almost as many semis as the Indycar paddock, and most of it’s karting talent; Alex Tagliani and Jay Howard participated last year, as did the late Dan Wheldon who was Nick’s team-mate on the OGP squad.

I had the opportunity to speak to Dan about Nick this Summer as he was testing the new Dallara Indycar that would come to be named after him. He was gracious and open as always when talking about Nick’s greatest strength.

“He’s just flat out fast, you know. Sometimes it’s not harder to answer than that,” Dan answered with a laugh,” adding that, “Even when the kart is not right he can produce a lap time.”

In fact, at Dan’s Indy 500 victory party in St. Petersburg, FL this year, he personally introduced Nick as a future Indy 500 winner. Wheldon’s death at Las Vegas last year hit

the Neri family very hard, but it ultimately didn't change Nick's perspective. He wants to race, and win.

Dan had done exceptionally well at the Winter Tour, but Nick finished ahead of him in every race except one he didn't finish at all.

The Winter Tour is arguably the hardest championship in to win in U.S. karting. Nick's won it four times.

Fast Forward to November of last year and the other hardest trophy to grab in karting, SKUSA SuperNationals.

The sanctioning body wouldn't let Nick race in the full Pro S1 class because he hadn't raced in a SKUSA event before, had limited shifter experience, and possibly because they don't get highlight reels on the West Coast. In any event, the organizers placed him in the Semi-Pro S2 class.

There were 53 karts entered in S2. Only one saw the top of the timesheet... the entire week. Fastest in every warm up, practice, qualifying, and winning every heat, Nick put in a jaw-dropping performance, winning the feature by over five seconds and taking fastest lap.

I saw the helmet video from the karter that finished second. Nick wasn't in it.

"Nick Neri, long gone, checked out," was all the announcer had to say about Nick the entire second half of the race.

Nick's middle name is Rayce. His dad, Marty, a former racer who's got the disease as bad as anyone (if you have to ask what the disease is, you should be reading Sports Illustrated, not this), used to tell him racing stories night after night when he was little. Womb and crib little.

Their story is like any other where a father with a love of the sport takes his son karting, except, where most dads work feverishly for their kids to deliver good, but not great results, Nick just started winning everything in sight.

It's what every kart dad dreams of, but rarely ever gets. For various reasons, this never happens to rich dads. It's actually impossible. Against the laws of physics. Which means, of course, Marty isn't rich.

They say to be careful what you wish for, but that doesn't begin to cover it. It's easier to pay for racing with Krugerands than dollars because it takes so damn many of them that it's a nuisance. Marty doesn't have any Krugerands. Nick is going to have to get there on talent and merit.

The landscape is wall-to-wall with the shredded dreams of kids who tried to make it in racing on merit. You know who they are, but you've forgotten their names. You see them on Facebook now and then; many went to college, others are instructing at a racing school, selling real estate, or possibly even asking what sauce you want with your nuggets. But they're not racing.

It will only take most of them twenty years to get over it.

Nick though, might be the one. The one to prove that it can be done. That talent in racing does matter. That people are paying attention and winning still counts. Nick Neri might just be the fastest kid in America.