

School of racing drivers

Budding stars of the future can now combine their racing career with a college course dedicated to making them better drivers. Jack Phillips joins them in the classroom

Sporting excellence runs deep in Loughborough. Consider the fact that no fewer than 32 athletes from the college competed at the Olympics and Paralympics in Rio last year winning 14 medals – six of them gold. If Loughborough College was a country, it would have been placed 17th in the Olympic medals table. In the Paralympics, it would have been inside the top 10.

But it's not just athletics where Loughborough College is training the next generation of champions. It is doing the same in motor sport. The three-year MSA Academy AASE programme based at Loughborough College is helping to develop the UK's future racing stars.

It gives young drivers the chance to hone skills that will help them succeed in one of the toughest sporting environments, as well as rub shoulders with inspirational sporting stars from different disciplines. "Before she graduated, multiple gold medallist Ellie Simmonds was a regular sight on campus," says MSA Academy manager

Loughborough College, a centre of sporting excellence, has opened its doors to young racing drivers

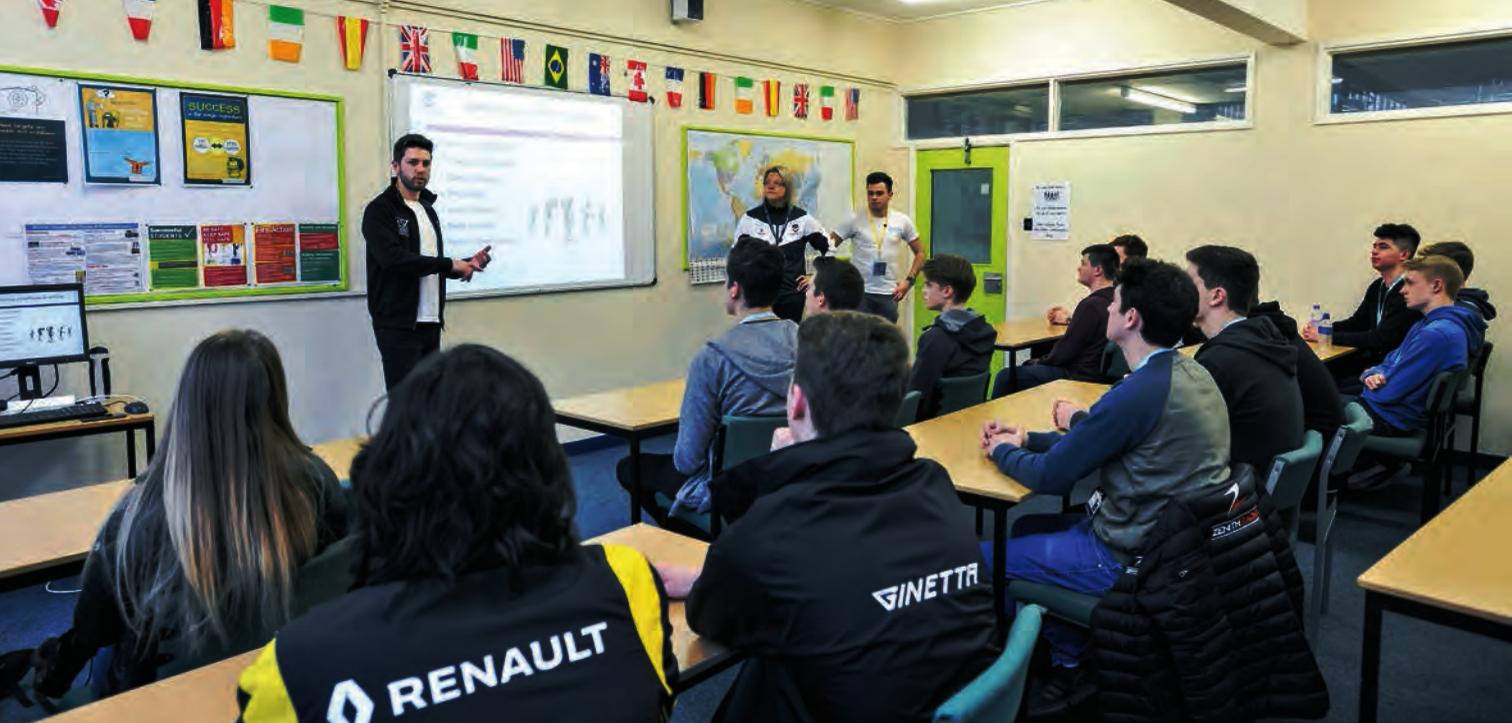
Greg Symes, who oversees the AASE course. "That's pretty inspirational for the young drivers."

The course's *raison d'être* is to give the next generation the best possible footing not only in motor racing but as individuals. Visit any race circuit on any given weekday and there's sure to be a junior driver learning his craft instead of his GCSE or A-level syllabus. And that puts a lot of pressure on young shoulders to make a living from driving, as there's no safety net to save any fall from the ladder. The days of going from spannering in the pits to a racing career and back again are dim and distant.

"It would be irresponsible if we told the drivers that they will all make it," says Symes. "We don't sugar-coat it. Chelsea Football Club, who we've worked with, has a target of one player per age group to make the first team. One player, from its worldwide academies. We don't have a final place to put drivers, we can't promote the drivers to anything, so the onus is fully on them to make the most of what we provide."

The drivers and co-drivers occupy the impressive and recently refurbished surroundings of Loughborough College for three days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday) on two weeks each month. That leaves Monday to recover from the weekend's racing and travelling, and Friday for pre-event testing and travel. There is time off in August, mirroring the Formula 1 calendar, while Porsche's human performance team also visits every few months to pass on its specialist advice. »





“We want to make being a racing driver a career choice rather than a pipe dream”

Loughborough’s Olympic-standard facilities are at the drivers’ disposal, including the ‘classroom gym’, so too the expertise of the many sports specialists across the campus. The college has such close ties to the university across the road that they share facilities and even a students’ union.

For British GT-bound Will Tregurtha, who like many of the students shares a flat in Loughborough when he’s in town, the benefits of enrolling on the MSA Academy AASE programme were obvious. “It has given me the time to prepare for racing,” he explains. “When I was doing my GCSEs I had to take time off and it was impacting on both. Now, just coming in for three days in the middle two weeks of the month, it gives you more time. And you’re learning things that are relevant to what you want to do so you’re more motivated to do it.”

“We’re away from home,” says junior tin-top racer Katie Milner, who is one of seven young women on the programme. “So we have to do everything ourselves and that makes you more independent and confident with better people skills.”

It also puts the drivers among teenagers who have the same priorities and lifestyle.

Filling the programme should be simple, given how many youngsters dream of being a professional racing driver. But that isn’t the case, says Symes. “They need to be 16 years old. And the pool soon shrinks when you remove drivers in education or similar schemes.”

The drivers come from across the whole spectrum, too, not just the better known series. If a driver is serious enough and has a plan, they’re considered for the course regardless of experience.

Rally driver and MSA coach Adam Gould believes that’s another benefit for the students. “There’s a really good mix of karters, GT and saloon racers, rally drivers, rallycross; it’s great for them to meet drivers from other disciplines. They can learn from each other and the contacts they establish now can be really strong links in the future.”

Once chosen, the list of participants is given to the college’s Matt O’Dowd, himself an Olympian having competed in the marathon in Athens in 2004. “I look at the list of names and then check the qualifications are enough to gain a college place,” he says. “Numbers are increasing year on year since it moved here eight years ago.”

O’Dowd and his elite sports team is in charge on Tuesday and Wednesday, teaching the various BTEC certificates you’d find on a standard sports science course with added motor vehicle studies. Thursday is for guest lectures, talks

and workshops that are more geared towards racing and are managed by the MSA Academy. Combined, it results in three A-levels and enough UCAS points to go into further education if they choose to.

“It’s done in single-year chunks,” explains O’Dowd. “Some cash them in and go to university midway through. When you factor in those that go on to a different career in motor sport, the progression is higher than we’d see in other programmes due to the diversity of progression available.”

Chris McCarthy is one of those to have progressed. He now runs *Karting Magazine* and passes on his experience with a talk about communications. His workshop with level one students is startling – so few have the website, social media profiles and PR skills that are now vital. The aim isn’t to create PR robots though, says Symes.

In a classroom upstairs, the year twos are working with 2010 RSF MSA Young Driver of the Year Jake Cook on how to improve their commercial presence, neatly showing how the course progresses. Second-year student Ben Green thinks returning graduates only help to improve the course. “They come in and tell us what worked and what didn’t, so you leapfrog the process and learn quicker from their experience,” he says. “It’s definitely helped me, it aids your learning and racing.”

The package is impressive, but everything in motor sport is judged on results. With alumni including Chris Ingram, Matt Parry, Seb Morris, Tom Ingram and Jake Dennis, its success speaks for itself.

“We want to make being a racing driver a legitimate career choice rather than a pipe dream,” says Symes. And leveraging Loughborough College and the MSA’s combined experience, the MSA Academy AASE programme is a firm starting base. ■

Great for the CV...

The MSA Academy AASE programme comprises the following qualifications, all of which are awarded UCAS points:

Year 1

BTEC Level 3 Certificate in
Achieving Excellence in Sports Performance
BTEC Level 3 Certificate in
Understanding Excellence in Sports Performance
BTEC Level 3 Certificate in Sport
BTEC Level 3 Certificate in Business

Year 2

BTEC Level 3 Subsidiary in Sport
BTEC Level 3 Subsidiary in Vehicle Technology

Year 3

BTEC Level 3 90 Credit Diploma in Sport
BTEC Level 3 Subsidiary in Vehicle Technology

The college’s sports specialists as well as guest speakers provided by the MSA help guide the students, and there are vehicle technology courses too