

Rising Star

By David Johnson
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THE NO. 43 CAR WAS STILL. Andre DesMarais sat inside it, at the start line of the Sebring International Raceway in March with all the nervousness you'd expect from a high school senior about to begin his first professional race. DesMarais had started racing shifter karts in 1999, so



he had more than four years' experience, but this was faster, nearing 150 mph; and this was... professional. When he got the signal, it was time to start the Pro Formula Mazda series race. He tried to start the ignition. The engine didn't turn over. Other drivers had the same problem, but DesMarais' Mazda was the last to start before taking a practice lap, then



beginning the race. His pro racing career started a little later than he would have liked, but the Bishop Kenny senior finished a lot quicker than he began, 15th out of 33 racers, the majority of whom are in their 20s or early 30s. That's not bad for an 18-year-old who still hasn't picked up his diploma, but not enough for DesMarais, who passed three cars at the end and thought he could have made the top 10 if a separate engine problem hadn't slowed him down. The finish should have been enough to excite the students walking Bishop Kenny's halls. But then, they'd have to know about their classmate's racing.

He keeps that to himself. "I feel like I'm lucky to be able to have the chance to do it," he said.

"It makes me happy, I don't need to tell everyone." His fellow Crusaders



are much more likely to know him as the No. 1 player on the tennis team. His sister Danielle, the No. 1 girls tennis player at Bishop Kenny, and girlfriend Kim Mathews agreed DesMarais' reluctance to share his racing passion comes from modesty. Tennis player and auto racer? Sounds like a strange combination. But not to DesMarais. He grew up in Wisconsin watching his father, Bob, race regionally in 1950s and 60s-style production

cars, then began playing tennis in first or second grade after he moved to Jacksonville. DesMarais has excelled in shifter karts and tennis for years: He is the youngest driver ever to go directly from the junior division to Super Pro in karts. And he was on the 2003 Times-Union All-First Coast tennis first team. To DesMarais, the key to both sports is all in his head.





"Sports are so mental," he said. "If I get down on myself, I can't play right or drive right or anything."

Off the court and track, DesMarais describes himself as mellow. But in competition, he said he tries to strike a balance between aggressiveness and smarts. "You always want to push to the car's limit, but there's a real fine line," he said. "If you go over the line, it could result in a crash." DesMarais said the mental importance can also transfer between sports. When he's playing well in tennis and thinks his effort is at a high before a race, he feels like he's in a better frame of mind. It apparently applies to his studies, too. On March 19 at Bolles, he played what would be the last

tennis tournament of his high school career. But before play began, he went to first period, because he didn't want to miss a dissection lab. Then, while other players at the district meet joked about wanting long matches so they wouldn't have to return to class, the senior went back to Bishop Kenny to finish his school day. And DesMarais can't wait to get more time in the driver's seat during his next race on June 26 at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course in Lexington, Ohio.

While many race fans cheer for Dale Earnhardt Jr. or Jeff Gordon, DesMarais looks to the 1970s era of Formula One racing for inspiration. It was a time, he said, when the skill of the racing was at a high before the electronics of cars took away some of the art of driving. "You don't even shift the cars any more," he said. "Everything's a lot easier. [In] Formula One in the '70s, it's just you and the car." But he's reluctant

to call any one driver — past or present — a hero or a role model. Those titles go to people he's met through life, including his dad. As grounded as the wheels of his Formula Mazda car? You bet, but still with his eyes on a dream of racing. "I'd race anything for any amount of money. If it's not a reality, I understand. I'll face the facts."

But now he's trying to adjust to his first year of racing, while getting ready to attend UNF. His 110 mph tennis serve will take a back seat to driving and college classes. For DesMarais, his immediate competitive future will feel more like he's stuck inside one of his first-serve aces, driving at more than 140 mph. **RX**