

Israel

SPEEDING TOWARD THE BIG TIME

Israel's Roy Nissany is on the verge of breaking into motor racing's elite **By Paul Alster**



Driving for Team Lotus, Roy Nissany rounds the track under wet conditions



Standing alongside race car driver Roy Nissany on the terrace of a luxury penthouse apartment in a smart district of Herzliya, just north of Tel Aviv, we survey a stunning nighttime vista. The glistening lights below stretch as far as the eye can see. Looking east, you see a very long way toward the Jerusalem Hills and beyond and, to the west, over the Mediterranean in the direction of mainland Europe. You feel like you're on top of the world.

Thanks to a privileged background, the 21-year-old Nissany has grown up in relative luxury, but all the money in the world can't buy talent. Sure, it can often open doors and smooth the path to some degree, but at the end of the day when it comes to the world of sports, if you don't have what it takes to compete and defeat your peers when it comes to the crunch, you will not make it.

Increasingly, the signs in the dog-eat-dog, glamorous, cutting edge and often dangerous world of high-level international motor racing are that the rapidly progressing Israeli driver has that special something that has put him on the verge of entry into the highest echelon of the sport – Formula 1.

At the time of writing, Nissany, driving for Team Lotus in the 2016 Formula V8 3.5 world championship – the tier just below Formula 1 and broadly equivalent to Formula 2 – is in fourth place, 57 points behind Frenchman Tom Dillman. With 25 points for a win and six races still to be contested over the final three weekends of racing culminating the season-ending finale at Circuit de Catalunya in Spain on November 6, hopes are high that he still has an outside chance of landing the title. Prior to the summer break he won two races at the famous Silverstone circuit in England – his first victories at this level – indicating that both he and his car were in top form, but he endured a disappointing weekend at the Red Bull Ring, Austria (September 10-11), where he finished fourth in the first race before failing to score in the following day's event after a rival ran into him and damaged his car.

Granted "exceptional sportsman" status by the Israeli military, Nissany has been able to concentrate completely on his pursuit of the Formula V8 3.5 title. I suggested it surely would be a dream come true if he

were to line up in the next season or two on the Formula 1 grid alongside the likes of Lewis Hamilton, Nico Rosberg and Sebastian Vettel, and following in the footsteps of so many more legends of the sport.

"I wouldn't call it a dream," Nissany tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "Since the age of 12 it has been my objective, a goal, and we have never been closer to achieving it. A 'dream' is too far away a description."

In motor sports, I believe that the earlier you start, the deeper it is in your soul

His single-mindedness and self-belief is immediately impressive. They appear born not of bravado and arrogance, but of genuine conviction that after more than 15 years behind the wheel – he started driving before the age of five – he understands that, courtesy of a combination of hard work and the support of a big team around him, he is on the verge of being catapulted into the big time.

What are the chances then that the phone will ring at the end of the season and an offer to drive in Formula 1 will be forthcoming, and do he and his team have the necessary finances to support his talent at that level in this hugely expensive sport?

"I guess they're high. We do need financial support – everyone needs it to survive – but that's not my job. It's not even my concern. I fully trust my management team to do their best, and it's obviously in their interest to get it. But, as far as I am concerned, if I am on top of the [Formula V8 3.5] championship list, I will have a good place next year, whether it's Formula 1 or even moving to the parallel Formula 2 championship as another preparation. I'd happily accept that."

We chat in his private apartment, adjacent to the family home that gives him his privacy but allows the stability of being part of the family unit that seems to provide a solid foundation in a life that has him dashing around the racetracks and testing centers of Europe. A large picture of him driving the Lotus hangs behind us on the slate gray

walls. A chess board sits on the coffee table. A large plasma TV screen hangs on the wall opposite. Everything is immaculately tidy and ordered. This is no post-teenage den; this is the private space of a young man who likes everything in its place, likes to be in control of his surroundings and knows exactly what he wants.

His father, Chanoch, a successful businessman, became the first Israeli test driver in the history of Formula 1 when driving for the Minardi team in Hungary in 2005. I assumed Roy had followed in his dad's footsteps.

"Actually," laughs Nissany, "my motor-sport career began before his. I guess he just followed me and fell in love with it. He got involved and made his way up to Formula 1. The age was a bit of a challenge for him in his late 30s, but he still achieved a lot.

"I was a little kid who would watch television and play motor-sport games. I started with go-karts when I was four or five in Hungary, where my father worked and we had an apartment. I barely remember, but a year later I competed in Israel at Nahshonim, near Rosh Ha'ayin. I started to drive seriously from the age of six, and, at the age of eight, won that big trophy."

HE GESTURES toward a large golden trophy near me. That first of many trophies he has accumulated still has pride of place on a shelf beside us as we chat. He won it for finishing fourth overall in the European Karting Championships.

"In motor sports, I believe that the earlier you start, the deeper it is in your soul. In Spain, in Cartagena, I have seen videos of three-year-olds driving motor bikes in the parking lot. I saw them take off their helmets and then put a pacifier in their mouth! You see this and rub your eyes and wonder how they can control the bike! Then you see that Spain is top of the list of the riders in the world and that's literally because they have been doing it from as soon as they can walk."

Israel, however, is not Spain. Despite having ideal weather for motor racing and

Nissany celebrates a victory at the Silverstone circuit in England, his first in the Formula V8 3.5 world championship



theoretically being in a position to offer sunny racetrack facilities during the winter when the world championship drivers from Europe are grounded due to bad weather, there is no racetrack and no testing grounds. There are three go-karting tracks, all of which are pricey, limiting their clientele to those well-heeled enough to let their kids have a crack at driving. I'm told they charge around NIS150 (\$40) for 10 minutes, a price far beyond the pocket of most cash-strapped Israeli families.

THE 2013 Hollywood movie "Rush," based on the dramatic duel for the 1976 Formula 1 world championship between Britain's James Hunt and Austrian Niki Lauda, presented a compelling view of the trials, tribulations and danger involved in this high-octane sport. Lauda's dreadful crash and consequent disfigurement is a central theme of the story. I was interested to understand how much safer the sport might be now, some 40 years later. Nissany suggests that Formula racing is actually far safer than go-karting these days. Pointing to the picture of him driving the Lotus, he explains:

"I'm sitting inside a monocoque [the inner core of the racing car], which is approximately the size of a bath made of carbon fiber. I'm fastened inside with a six-point belt – really, really tight. It doesn't matter what happens, even if the whole car around me is completely broken, I will be OK. Yesterday, there was a race in Spa, Belgium, and the Danish driver Kevin Magnussen, from Renault, was in a huge crash. The whole car was completely broken, but the monocoque was not even cracked and the driver got out unhurt.

"Three months ago, I had a crash at the same Eau Rouge corner at Spa. The car of another driver piled into mine and we crashed really hard. My whole car was completely broken as we hit the wall at 240 kph [149 mph]. I got up and walked away. It was in heavy rain and the other guy was only focused on himself."

After hitting a wall at such speed, I reasoned, surely something must have been hurting?

"Only the result," he smiles. "I was theoretically leading the race at that time. We are trained for this and we have been having these crashes for years. I once had a guy

crash into me in a go-karting race and his car was sitting half on my shoulder. I kept on going, driving half a track with his car on my shoulder because I didn't want to lose the race! Later, when the adrenaline drops, the pain might come, but in the moment you will never give up."

The young Israeli's self-belief is once again clearly evident in our conversation. It's refreshing to see someone who appears to have not only the physical attributes to be a top sportsman – he's clearly in great physical shape and looks after himself as a professional athlete should – but he has the kind of positive, focused mental attitude that even the best of sports psychologists cannot easily achieve in their subjects. My experience, reporting on sports over the years, is simply that you either got it, or you don't.

This is my reason for living. To hear 'Hatikva,' to smell my overalls stinking from a mixture of sweat and champagne. It's amazing

But, Nissany admits that it hasn't always been smooth sailing. Before he proved himself a genuine candidate for Formula 1 by test driving for the Sauber team in October 2014, his self-belief was often severely tested by adverse results and frustrating engineering issues.

"There have been some lows. In Formula 3, we had some struggles with the car and there were times when it was difficult. From being what we thought was low, we got even lower. At those times, I imagined myself as a spring. I'm going down and down and getting stronger and stronger, and there is a limit when you can't push me anymore. Then I spring back up and go to the top. And this is what happened. I did it."

For an insider's view on how it really feels to be a race car driver (something so many kids and grown adults around the globe dream about), I ask Nissany to talk

me through his feelings during a race.

"The races are around 40 minutes and my pulse will rise to between 140 and 170 beats per minute. I'm in contact with my team and I get information given to me, but I have the power to decide everything with the exception of going in to change tires, in which case the team has the call. But, in all other aspects, I decide what to do. In addition to the radio, there is a board where the mechanic shows me the gap to the car in front, the gap to the car behind, how many laps there are to go, etc. These are usual information things.

"In qualifying, you are focused on each and every corner and each and every millimeter in the driving because braking a centimeter too early could cost me a pole position. In my last race, I lost pole position by 0.001 of a second – one-thousandth of a second. This could have been because of braking just a few centimeters too late. We are talking about all this happening at 270 kph."

I'm informed that the technique and discipline of driving in qualifying is very different to the skills required to succeed in the race itself.

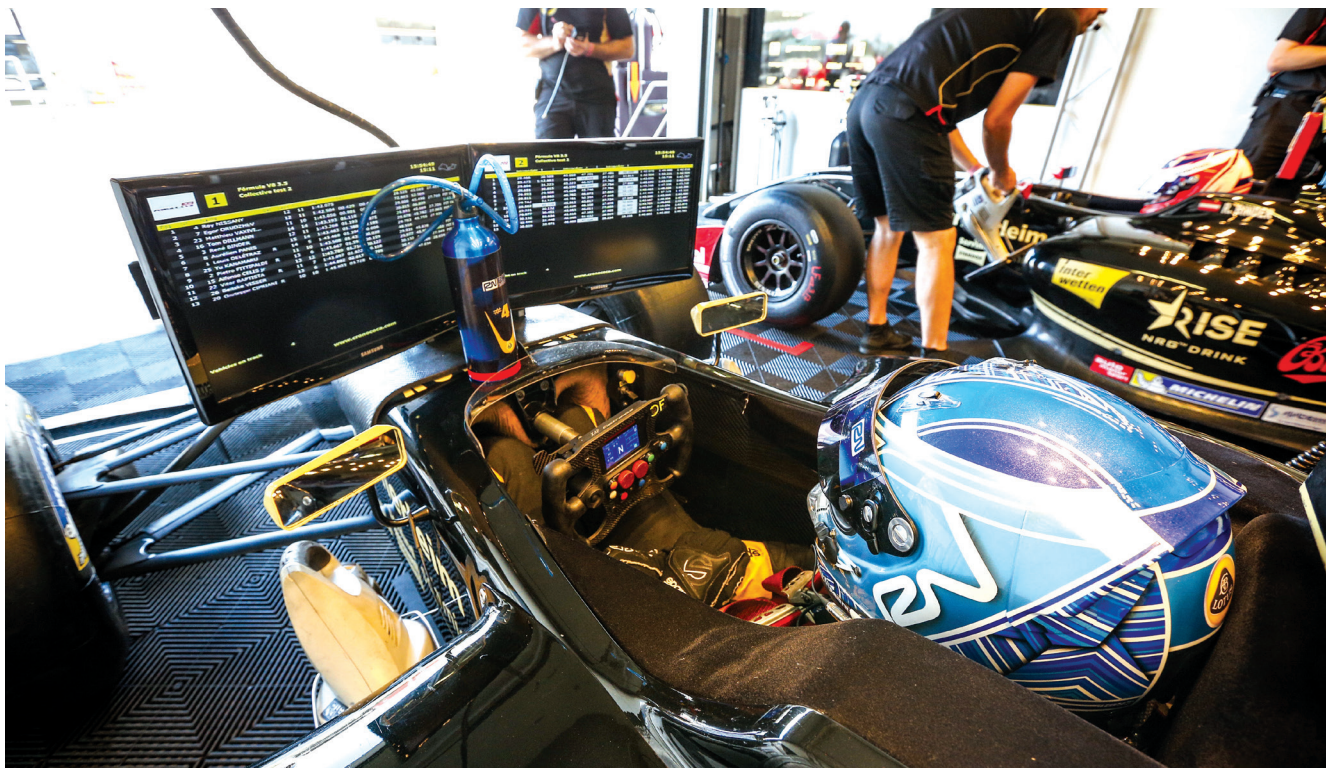
"In qualifying, if during the lap you think about what others do, I guarantee you will be last. First, you must concentrate only on doing your best. Don't think about anything else."

His voice is getting higher, he's more animated and more intense.

"Just think about your own perfect braking point. When we are talking racing, it is a totally different story. Many guys are really good at racing and bad at qualifying, or good at qualifying and not so good at racing. If you really want to know what essential skills you need to be a racing driver, first is the self-discipline and the second is being brave."

I ASK for an example of what "being brave" and "self-discipline" entail in his sport?

"In qualifying, we have fast corners that can be taken at 250 kph, such as at Silverstone. If you go slower, the car won't take it because the down force won't be strong enough. Imagine, I'm telling you to apply full gas as you get to the corner, and if you brake the car will spin out. It's the kind of thing that first, you have to be brave and, second, have the mental strength to



train yourself to overcome [your instinct], which is to slow down at a corner. You must trust what you have been told and trust science.

“The bravery in racing? Well, you have a situation of cars trying to attack me on two sides and I have a car in front that is starting to block me. Your normal brain response is to panic and think ‘Oh, they’re coming at me. They will overtake me. He will brake. He won’t. I will have to go here.’ But, instead, your bravery [he’s now speaking deliberately, in a slow, controlled voice – P.A.] translates into calmness. I don’t care about these guys. I will look only in front, even if my team is shouting [in my headset], the car is at top revs, you’re at 270-280 kph. You have to be in your own peaceful way, looking for the slipstream, focus on the front and take the brave all-or-nothing and overtake. It’s all about keeping cool.”

Before every race, Nissany goes to his team base in Prague, Czech Republic, where he has two or three days of intensive work on simulators with the team en-

gineers and computers, working on what could happen during the coming weekend. He tries many different set-ups and scenarios; racing, qualifying, in the rain, snow, extreme heat, getting to know the track in the finest details. This preparation also includes practicing reaction times at the essential start of a race, and tactical race scenarios from the front, middle or back of the starting grid. When he finally gets to the race itself the hope is that everything that happens is already familiar.

Being Israeli and Jewish, Nissany assures me, has never been an issue in the world of motor racing. He says he has never been confronted with any anti-Israeli sentiment and notes that the opposite is often true among his peers.

“It’s a clean sport. I actually get a lot of interest from people wanting to visit Israel having heard good things about it, so from this aspect everything has been very positive and still is. Formula 1 driver Daniil Kvyat is Russian-Jewish. He’s a friend of mine. We drove together in karting. With this aspect [of being Israeli and Jewish], you look at the flag and

Nissany reads a board attached to his car that relays information about the race

hear the anthem and it makes you proud, but it stops there. I feel like I’m representing my country, but this is an individual sport.”

So how did it feel standing on top of the podium twice in one weekend at Silverstone this summer seeing the Israeli flag flying for him?

“It’s a feeling you cannot describe in words?” he sighs.

I ask him to try – “for the sake of the readers” – and he bursts out laughing.

“OK. It means everything. It means all your hard work, all your efforts have made it. I am the best, and I have beaten everyone. I led the way to victory and to the checkered flag. This is my reason for living. To hear ‘Hatikva,’ to smell my overalls stinking from a mixture of sweat and champagne. It’s amazing.” ■

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