

2009 PIRELLI STAR DRIVER

The FIA and Pirelli have joined forces to usher in a new era of World Rally Championship-based young driver competition, with the arrival of the inaugural Pirelli Star Driver programme. The season-long scheme starts with its first official engagement in Scotland this week.

A year ago, the FIA and Pirelli announced an initiative to search for the next generation of World Rally Champions. After an exhaustive season of selection processes, the time has arrived for those would-be superstars from around the world to take centre stage.

Five of the world's most talented and promising rally talents have arrived in Edinburgh for chapter one of what is certain to be the most exciting season of their young lives. The five drivers, selected last year for the scheme, will start their first competition (Rally de Portugal) next month, but it is in the Scottish capital where the hard work really starts for Jarkko Nikara (23, Finland); Martin Semera'd (18, Czech Republic); Mark Tapper (28, New Zealand); Nicos Thomas (21, Cyprus) and Jon Williams (26, South Africa). The first element of the Pirelli Star Driver programme is all about training and testing.

The week ahead

The drivers arrived in Edinburgh on Monday 2 March, having travelled to Scotland from four continents to take part in the first element of this ground-breaking programme. After a brief welcome and introduction, the drivers got straight to work on physical fitness. Wednesday means more fitness and conditioning work before sessions on dealing with the media and career management. Thursday (5 March) is focused on the commercial side of the sport and the importance of nutrition.

The training programme, based at Edinburgh University, is managed by 2001 World Rally Champion co-driver Robert Reid and his company Elite Sports Performance.

With the training complete, the drivers - together with their co-drivers - will then fly to Pisa in Italy, where they will start testing the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution Xs they will drive on six rounds of this season's FIA World Rally Championship.

The year ahead

The WRC events have been carefully selected by the FIA and Pirelli. They offer the perfect blend of fast and technical gravel rallies, along with one of the most challenging asphalt rallies anywhere on the planet. By the end of these six rallies, the five Pirelli Star Drivers will have an exceptional insight into what it takes to make it to the top of the sport.

In between those rallies, there will be further driver development and training programmes as well as promotional activities undertaken for both the FIA and Pirelli.

The Pirelli Star Driver World Rally Championship events:

Rally de Portugal (2-5 April)
Rally d' Italia-Sardegna (21-24 May)
Acropolis Rally of Greece (11-14 June)
Rally Finland (30 July - 2 August)
Rally de Espan~a (1-4 October)
Wales Rally GB (22-25 October)

The drivers

Jarkko Nikara (23, Finland)

FIA European Pirelli Star Driver, Jarkko started competing in 2004. Finnish Junior Champion in 2006, he was runner-up in the Finnish Group N Championship a year later.

Martin Semera'd (18, Czech Republic)

FIA European Pirelli Star Driver, Martin started competing in 2007. Martin won a round of the Czech Junior Cup in 2007 and two rounds the following year, when he was runner-up in the series.

Mark Tapper (28, New Zealand)

FIA Asia Pacific Pirelli Star Driver, Mark started competing in 2001. New Zealand two-wheel-drive champion in 2007, Mark won five from six rallies to take the title.



STAR DRIVER

Nicos Thomas (21, Cyprus)

FIA Middle East Pirelli Star Driver, Nicos started competing in 2006. He contested the Cyprus Rally Championship the following year and won the Cyprus Rally in 2008.

Jon Williams (26, South Africa)

FIA African Pirelli Star Driver, Jon started competing in 2003. Jon collected his first outright rally win in the second season of his rally career, he has topped the podium four times since.

The car

The five drivers will be handed the keys to identical Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution Xs for the six rallies. This Group N car is a state-of-the-art turbocharged, four-wheel-drive rally car. It is the evolution of the machine used to win last season's FIA Production Car World Rally Championship. The cars will be built and maintained by Ralliart Italia - with each car arriving at the start of every rally indistinguishable from the four other Pirelli-liveried Lancers.

The Pirelli Star Driver programme - background

When the FIA awarded Pirelli the tender to run the World Rally Championship's control tyre for 2008, 2009 and 2010, one of the key areas the FIA wanted to work in association with Pirelli on was a global young driver development programme. In its 31-year history, the Drivers' World Rally Championship has never been won by anybody from outside of Europe. In instigating the Pirelli Star Driver scheme, the FIA is seeking to offer young drivers from across the world an equal opportunity to make it to the top of the sport.

The five Pirelli Star Drivers were selected from four FIA Regional Rally Championships: Africa (Williams), Asia Pacific (Tapper), two from Europe (Nikara and Semera'd) and the Middle East (Thomas). The selection process was conducted by each individual FIA region. Included in the FIA European selection process were drivers from the North and Central America (NACAM and Codasur) regions.

FIA World Rally Championship Commission President Morrie Chandler said:

"The Pirelli Star Driver scheme offers a fantastic opportunity for young drivers around the world; on a global basis, it is unprecedented. It will also add another dimension to each of the rallies and I see it as being one of the most eagerly anticipated elements of a fascinating season ahead."

Paul Hembery, Pirelli Motorsport Director said:

"Pirelli has always firmly believed in rallying and in motor sport in general, as it gives us a life-sized outdoor test bench. It is our commitment to put something back into the sport even when economic conditions are hard, so naturally we are delighted to wholeheartedly support this initiative to promote deserving young drivers."

Note to editors

The Pirelli Star Drivers are supporting the FIA's EveryRace campaign (www.everyrace.net), an initiative endorsed by the Formula One and World Rally Championship communities. Launched in 2008, the campaign helps to promote the message that discrimination and prejudice can have no place in sport or society. In 2009, the FIA intends to broaden the messages of the campaign to establish an EveryRace Code, highlighting the values of sportsmanship, fair play, equality, social responsibility, safety and environmental responsibility in motor sport.

