

Press Release:

Alex called up for last minute F3000 Italia series drive at Imola

It really was a last minute call-up. A few hours to sort out flights and arrangements on Thursday to get to Imola on Thursday night.

It came about because GP Racing, who competed in Euro F3000 last year, and Del Monte (the driver who has perhaps had more repetitive and un-funny jokes about his name than any other) parted company in a hurry, which suddenly left a seat free in the Italia F3000 Championship, a series which now uses last year's International Formula 3000 cars.

GP Racing had seen Alex race last year in Euro F3000, hence the call.

Although the Euro F3000 and International F3000 cars are very similar, they appear to differ in two main ways - aerodynamics, and tyres. The aerodynamics of these newer F3000 cars are more efficient and the tyres are stickier. Most of the teams in this Italia F3000 championship ran in the International F3000 series over the last 3 years, but GP Racing (an Italian team) hadn't got any experience with this car.

After three rounds of the Italia F3000 Championship, GP Racing's Uruguayan driver, Juan Caceres, Alex's team mate for the weekend, was lying 3rd in the standings.

Neither Alex nor Caceres had been to Imola before, and Alex had not driven the International F3000 car before, save for a few laps at a rainy Brands Hatch a month ago, during the A1GP shootout. There was one test session on Friday, then straight to qualifying on Saturday - two half-hour sessions. Another baptism of fire!

Unfortunately the initial car setup was deeply disappointing. The GP Racing drivers were miles off the pace in Friday's first and only test session - Alex was some 2.3 seconds off the fastest time, and Caceres about 7/10ths slower than Alex. Although Alex's engineer, Georgio Breda, is very experienced, they knew then that there was an impossible mountain to climb - not knowing this car and starting so far off the pace - it was always likely to be too much to claw back, when they had to go straight into qualifying.

In the first qualifying session on Saturday morning (9 laps), Alex and his engineer agreed some changes, but went the wrong way in setup, ending up 11th, 2 secs off the pace. His team mate, Caceres, fared no better, and remained about 7/10ths behind Alex.

For 2nd qualifying (8 laps), having learned from the first qualifying, they went a different way on setup, which was better, and Alex ended up 5th, "just" 8/10ths off. However, this session was far hotter and slower overall, so the cumulative best time put Alex on grid 10 for the race. Juan Caceres was 1.2 seconds slower.

There were a maximum of 4 laps on Sunday morning warm-up, and Alex moved further in the right direction, down to 5/10ths off, his team mate remaining about 1.2 seconds slower than him.



Another step in the same direction for the race itself, but unfortunately Alex had what would prove to be a terminal problem from the beginning. He got a really good start (the first in this car – starting techniques can vary), but one of the cars in front stalled as Alex shot round the car in front. He avoided it without contact (as did everyone, luckily) but in so doing, lost 3 places. He got one back at the outside of the first chicane, but already there was smoke from the back of his car (from the gearbox), and no traction at all out of the corners. The stalled car, driven by Ciompi from Fisichella Motor Sport, was now directly behind him. It was better under braking and traction was a world apart exiting the tight corners (caused by the gearbox problem), so Alex defended the first few laps energetically, hoping Ciompi would make a mistake. Which is what eventually happened - Ciompi got so frustrated that he tried just a little too hard to get past, hit the kerbs and spun off.

All the time, the gearbox smoke was getting worse out of the back of Alex's car, the dashboard display had vanished, and the gears were either not engaging or jumping around wildly. In constant radio contact with the team, and with 7 laps to go, the gearbox gave up the ghost, and Alex had no choice but to cruise back to the pits and retire.

So on paper, it looks like a poor weekend. Qualified 10th, retired from the race.

But it was actually a pretty good weekend. Juan Caceres, always behind Alex in every session and throughout the race, finished 8th, bringing himself up to 2nd in the championship. Alex gelled well and quickly with the



team, and made huge improvements in the car, but the trouble with comparatively cheap championships that use expensive powerful cars, is that, in order to minimise costs, there is almost no testing and few races. At Imola, the car started too far off the pace to be able to get into contention in the few laps available. Alex's race setup was still not right, ignoring the constant gearbox problem, but it was closer, and he can now pinpoint where the car's problems lie. He learned a lot about the car.

Yes it was disappointing, and bad luck again, both for Alex and for GP Racing. But if you look below the surface, Alex made a really good impression, showed speed and the ability to feel, understand and improve the car, worked well with the team to achieve it, and despite the result, they all came away feeling like they'd had a positive weekend. The lack of permissible testing time is the bugger in this championship, particularly when other teams have had 3 years experience with the cars, but if Alex and GP Racing can sort out a few more races – and the will certainly appears to be there on both sides - there could just be fireworks.

In addition to this possibility, Alex also has the promise of funding for a further race in the Renault World Series championship at Donington later this year, if an available seat can be found.

If you wish to contact him personally, Alex can be reached directly by email at the address below.

