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PERSONALITIES

Business skills keep him racing

Pakistan's only racecar driver blends tradition, passion for sport

By **MARK ZESKE**
Special Contributor

Nur Ali hasn't raced yet against superstars or legends, but the Irving driver can't wait to compete against the likes of an Andretti or a Foyt.

He figures that next step shouldn't be as difficult as the ones he's already taken. The two-time

Southwest Formula Mazda Series champion has beaten long odds twice already. Not only was the 29-year-old able to land a major sponsor to kick-start his racing career during a time of economic uncertainty, he also broke a major cultural barrier.

Mr. Ali is the only Pakistani professional racecar driver in the world, according to Pakistani officials.

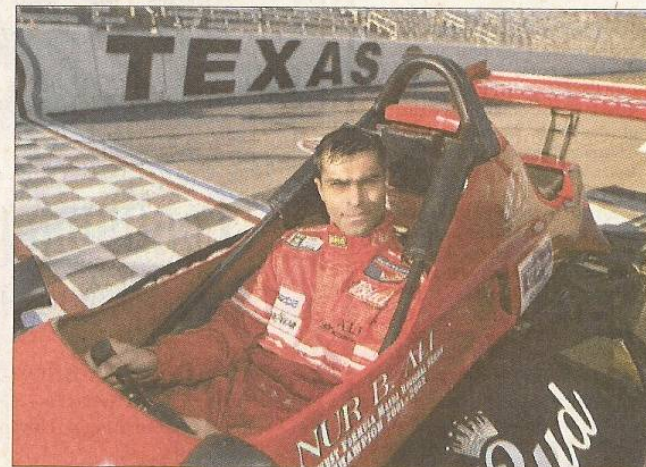
"Cars, cars, cars," Mr. Ali said. "That's all I talked about since I was a kid. Formula One racing is huge in Europe and Asia, so I grew

up wanting to race open-wheel cars. I've wanted to race for as long as I can remember."

Mr. Ali was born in Pakistan but has spent two decades in the United States. He grew up in Euless, attending Euless Junior High and Trinity High School. A couple of years ago, he moved to the Valley Ranch area of Irving.

His plans to race hit a roadblock after high school — Pakistani tradition. First-generation immigrants from Pakistan have

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JOHN F. RHODES/Staff Photographer

Nur Ali was born in Pakistan and has lived in the United States for two decades. "I've wanted to race for as long as I can remember." After college, he went straight to racing school.

Driver blends his family, business

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been successful in the United States in the convenience store business. They've built on that success by sending their children to college and having them become professionals such as lawyers, doctors and accountants.

Mr. Ali's generation has an obligation to its heritage, one that didn't include playing around with souped-up cars. So young Mr. Ali went to American University in Washington, D.C. He also spent a session as a college intern for U.S. Rep. Joe Barton, R-Ennis.

'Here's your degree'

Meanwhile, Mr. Ali worked out a deal with his family to try racing after graduation. "Right after I finished, I went up to my parents and said, 'Here's your degree; send me to racing school.' And they did," he said.

Mr. Ali enrolled in the Skip Barber Racing School, then started a family-owned race team. He raced for four seasons in Southwest Formula Mazda, winning the last two titles. The series is a minor-league form of open-wheel racing that competes at regional venues such as Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth and Texas World Speedway in College Station.

Mr. Ali was almost an instant success because he immediately understood the business side of racing. He has landed deals with the El Dorado Mazda dealership in McKinney and Budweiser, through the local Ben E. Keith distributorship.

"He's really good at getting sponsorship dollars," says Brad Pollard, a California driver who won the 2002 Southwest Formula Mazda title before moving on to the Indy Racing League. "That's about 80 percent of this sport. If you can't get the proper funding and the proper equipment, you can't go fast no matter how good your natural talent is."

Family business

Mr. Ali landed Ben E. Keith with the help of his father's 20 years of experience in the convenience store business. The family owns 52 independent stores in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

In doing so, Mr. Ali turned things around in the Pakistani community in Texas. Despite a culture in which offspring are supposed to get a "real" job, Mr. Ali found himself a local hero.

"My job is to help them sell beer to a minority group, a demographic that I'm part of," he said. "I make appearances for them with the race car, and they use images of me such as cut-outs near the beer in the convenience stores."

Robert Hallam Jr., vice president of marketing for Ben E. Keith Beers, gives Mr. Ali high marks for successful "meet and greet" appearances for Budweiser. He said Mr. Ali has made a great impact with a coalition of Pakistani convenience operators that includes 420 stores in North Texas and 3,300 around the United States.

International acclaim

Mr. Ali's success even got the attention of the Pakistani government, which did some research and announced that Mr. Ali was his country's only racecar driver. In June 2003, he was invited to Los Angeles for a dinner with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. He then met with Gen. Musharraf for almost 15 minutes, with the president congratulating Mr. Ali for being a role model for Pakistani youth.

Mr. Ali plans to move to the Infiniti Pro Series in 2004. The Infiniti circuit races in conjunction with Indy Racing League events and is a proving ground for IRL drivers. He has tested at Las Vegas Motor Speedway with Sam Schmidt, an IRL team owner, and has been working with Mo Nunn Racing in Indianapolis.

"He's a great guy and a super guy to race against," Mr. Pollard said.

Mo Nunn and Mr. Ali are working together to land sponsors to run the Infiniti circuit, which races at Texas Motor Speedway in the fall. Mr. Ali is hoping for a great homecoming.

"I wish I had more experience," Mr. Ali said. "I need more testing, more track time. ... I've still got a lot of work to do. ... Everybody expected me to quit, but I haven't and I'm not going to."