

MOVE over Shaoh Akhtar, there is a new speedster in town. And he's now just chucking balls at fearless batsmen; he's grabbing speed by the guts and whizzing past amazed onlookers. He is Nur Ali, Pakistan's first A1 driver and he is set to blaze the trail on the international circuit, this coming September.

Recently, this speedster was in the country and we got a chance to hook up him. Brought up in the US, Nur is now enjoying cult status throughout Pakistan following his announcement. "I was approached with the offer (to drive a Pakistani race-car) sometime last year, when the two principals of the car, Arif Husain and Salik Hussain (both car enthusiasts) contacted me and offered me to lead their team in the competition. How could I have refused?"

Born in Karachi, Nur's family initially moved to Germany from where they later shifted to the US. It was finally in America that the Alis settled and Nur got an opportunity to pursue his dreams. Eventually that turned out to be car racing. But the question is, why car racing? Why not baseball, ice hockey or American football or even cricket for that matter?

"For as long as I can remember, I had always wanted to be a race-car driver. I had always dreamt of it since I was a kid — since I was eight really." Nur says adding, "I didn't just get up one day and thought 'oh my gosh I want to be a race-car driver', no. It has always been there. I knew I wanted to do it." By the way, Nur is not without formal education. He has a BA in International Relations and has also attended a car-racing school.

But unlike what many would expect of a father's reaction to his son's car-racing ambitions, Nur says that his father wasn't upset to hear of his dream at all. The elder Ali's reaction was go ahead. But of course, education should come first and then he could do whatever he wanted to. So, it

The fastest Pakistani in town

By Ahmed Ali



THE MAN, THE CAR: Nur Ali with his driving ambition

was after taking care of his formal education that in August 1998, Nur joined the Skip Barber Racing School, in Ohio, where he attended training to be a race-car driver for a week. But that was no ordinary week.

"Driving is a very dangerous thing. But the people there have taken some of the best trainers in the world, that include former F1 drivers and they've turned this school into a one week deal. You can come there, of course you have to pay and then after a week of strenuous racing, you learn everything about racing." Still Nur, one week only?

"See, if you cannot learn how to drive a racing car in one week, then you shouldn't be driving racing cars at all. The pressure is so much, it is very dangerous. I wouldn't want anyone to drive with me at 200mph if that person cannot handle the pressure. You can kill yourself and anyone of the fellow competitors. So that's why this one week is so sensitive. They want you to know what the hell you're doing. They want you to come in with some idea what you're doing," Ali stresses hoping that the one week question won't pop up again. It didn't!

Coming back to the racing track, Ali has so far participated in 75 races and has won close to 10 of them. His biggest achievements came in 2001 and 2002 when he won, back to back, the Formula Mazda South-West Region championships.

Currently, he is the member of the A1 Team Pakistan. In the coming months he will be competing against 25 drivers from different countries in no less than 14 races. The eventual winner will be adjudged on the number of points he makes from all the races.

Trying to clear the confusion between A1 and F1, Nur says that while the former is a battle between

cars with similar engines and chassis, the latter is a game of war between different manufacturers from around the world.

With more than 200mph under his seat, Ali says he can feel the pressure of representing Pakistan. "I can feel the pressure to do well at the competition but I still want to give the race my best shot," he says. At the same time he adds that this is a team game. "A team effort is required for me to win. So if, at any point anything goes wrong during the race, it shouldn't be me that bears the burnt alone," Ali says, almost making sure that he isn't singled out for any follies. Nevertheless, Nur defends his sport against any criticism.

"It's a sport like boxing, hockey, cricket. Yes it's not part of our culture, but no sport can have a bad impact on the people," he says.

Fitness, he says is a very important factor in race-car driving. He says that the driver of a racing car has to be super fit because of the varying pulls of the G-force. So much so that it can actually break the driver's neck. "The turns and the speed all play their role," he adds.

It's not only a mental game but also a physical game. You have to be fully fit. I go to the gym and spend hours there, also I eat only nutritious food and I have never touched tea in my life," Nur says, almost sounding like a coach! He is a hearty eater, though and never lets go of a good chicken!

By the way, there's sad news for all damsels who are running after this hunk in the hot seat; Nur Ali is also a devoted husband. Talk to him about his wife, and Nur puts on an affectionate smile. "She is the source of my inspiration during the races. Parah (of course his wife) and I met in college. She is always at my races and I can hear over the radio while I am driving, encouraging me to give my best. My parents have also been very helpful and they are also very supportive. "Wish me luck," he rounds off with his request to the people. ■