



READY SET GO



DREAM DRIFTER:


Tyler McQuarrie

ERIC JOHNSON

For as long as he can remember Tyler McQuarrie of Danville has been fascinated with auto racing. As a young boy it wasn't G.I. Joe or *Star Wars* that captured his imagination, it was Hot Wheels. Whenever anyone asked Tyler what he wanted to be "when he grew up" the answer was always the same; "I want to be a race car driver." So as soon as Tyler was "mature" enough to get behind the wheel (in Tyler's case, fourteen) he did. He started racing go karts.

The sport of go kart racing—"karting" in race vernacular—fueled Tyler's dream of becoming a professional race car driver for two years. Then, on his sixteenth birthday Tyler was standing in line at the DMV to get his driver's license, taking his next big step toward the fulfillment of that dream. His next step was to take a three day racing course at the *Jim Russell Racing School* at Infineon Raceway in Sonoma. Learning to race "for real" at Infineon confirmed what Tyler had believed all along—racing would be his life.

With a burning desire to be behind the wheel, Tyler wanted to do nothing else but race. But time on the track was expensive, so money became Tyler's main challenge. Tyler, now 18, came up with a solution to his financial situation—he offered to work for free during the entire summer, in exchange for an open pass to race the following year. Obviously, the instructors at Infineon saw potential in Tyler, because they agreed to his proposal.



Tyler raced a full season at Infineon that year (1998) and ended up winning the track championship. His prize was a trip to England to compete in the World Scholarship against 40 other drivers from 13 different countries. Tyler McQuarrie won and is only the third American racer to win the World Scholarship in England, along with Danny Sullivan and Jon Beakus. The scholarship win paid him to race Formula Vauxhall in England for a season, gaining a wealth of experience that served to further solidify Tyler's passion for racing.

Upon returning to the United States Tyler went on to compete in a variety of different types of auto racing. He raced in the American LeMans Series, the USF 2000, NASCAR Grand National West and U.S.A.C. Sprint Car races. Raising the money needed to race full time still proved to be a challenge for McQuarrie at this stage of his career, as he had not yet attracted enough commercial sponsors. But all of that began to change when Tyler was introduced to drifting.

The *Yokohama Tire Company* was one of Tyler's sponsors in the 2001 American LeMans series. The company had a team that was testing a car in drift racing, and they asked Tyler to try it. McQuarrie got behind the wheel and gave drifting a try. "It felt totally natural to me," says Tyler. "It felt natural because of the type of driver that I am. I'm always pushing. In regular racing I have to hold myself back. But that's what drifting is. It's pushing the car past its limits."

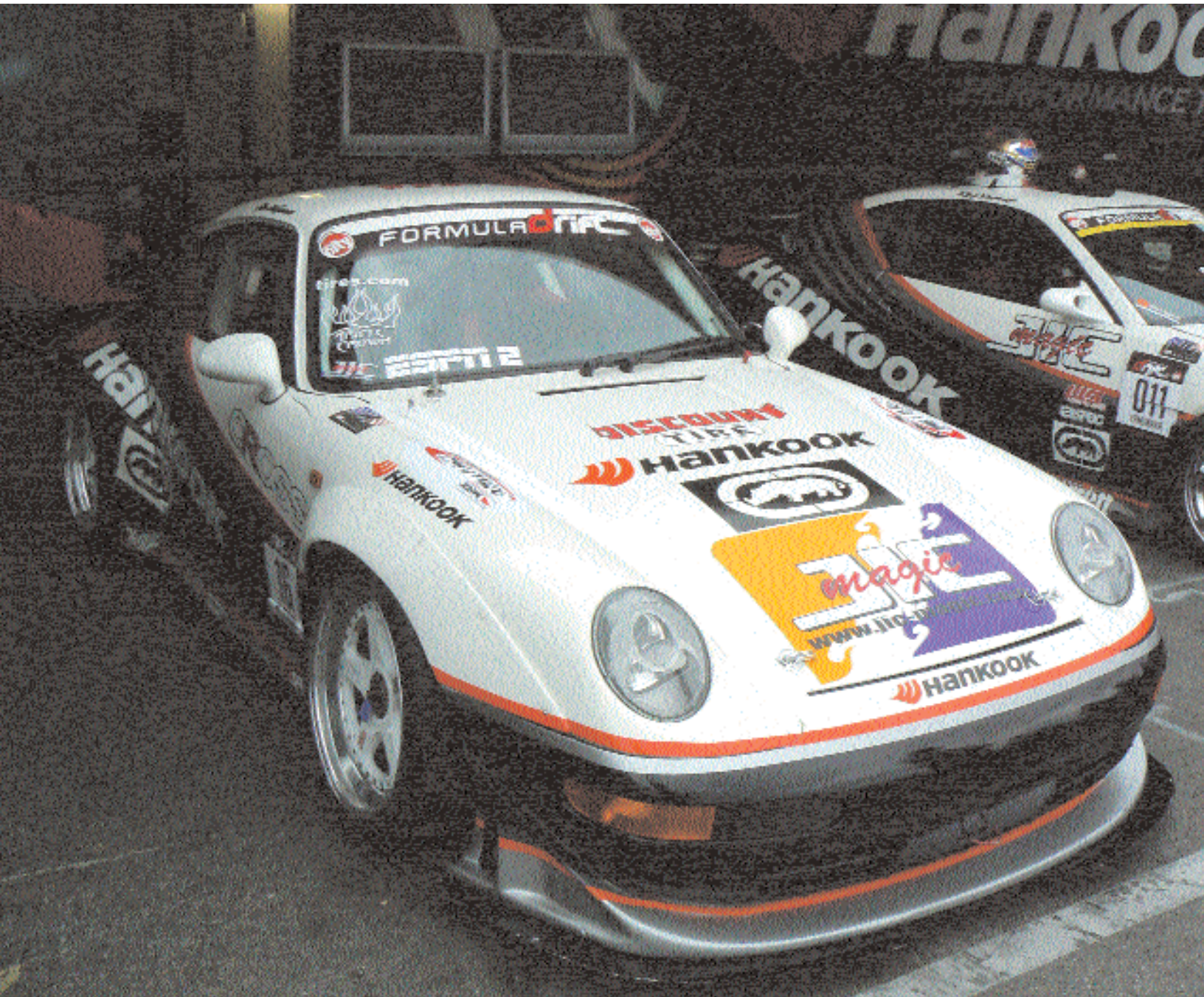
As Tyler explained it, "When you're racing you're always running the car at the car's limit—a little above or below it. You're trying to be as close to that limit as possible, yet still be in control, so you're always kind of riding that line. In drifting, you want to stay above that line." Tyler loves to drive in all types of races, but he has a real passion for drifting. "Drifting is totally different," he says, "The crowd is involved. Drifting events are fun. But the feeling you get winning a race or 'nailing a drift run' is the same kind of high."

Drifting is different from conventional racing in that in racing, whoever gets the checkered flag first, wins, whereas in drifting, winning is subjective, based upon the ruling of a three-judge panel. As Tyler explained, "It can all depend upon the mood of the judges."

The judges consider several criteria when judging a drift competition. First, they look at speed; the faster, the better. Next, cars must be sliding sideways at all times; they can never be traveling straight, except during the starting section of a course, prior to the first turn. Judges then look at the slip angle; the greater the angle, the higher the score. Next, drivers can earn "clipping points," which are earned when a car comes closest to the apex of a corner. Drift courses are laid out to include "s" turns and inside corners, so cars can earn both inside and outside clipping points. If a driver can graze an outside wall without crashing his car, he is awarded bonus points. Finally, judges consider the amount of smoke a car produces and crowd involvement.



They said it couldn't be done! Tyler McQuarrie is drifting's "maverick," winning in his rear-engine Hankook Porsche GT-2



In a drift race, cars race in pairs. Each car makes two runs, each alternating as the leader. Every event includes a maximum of 60 cars with the top 16 qualifying to compete in round-robin pairings. During each run, the second car tries to "mirror" the leader in both actions and speed. If the first car makes a mistake, the second car can pass the leader. "Basically, the car that has the cleanest run—the one that makes the fewest mistakes, wins," explains Tyler. Cars run in round robin elimination cycles from 16 cars down to eight cars, then to four, then to the final two.

In each Formula Drift series, there are a total of seven races. The final race was held at the Irwindale Speedway in Southern California on Saturday, October 13th. Prior to that race, Tyler McQuarrie was in running in ninth place overall in the series. During that morning's qualifying run, Tyler had the fastest time and highest score. Unfortunately, Tyler's Porsche GT-2 engine failed near the end of the qualifying runs that day, so he was disqualified. There would be no Formula Drift trophy for Tyler in 2007.

As the popularity of drifting increases in the United States, it is attracting more sponsors and more money, thereby creating more opportunities for everyone involved. The sport has begun to attract major commercial sponsors, particularly tire companies. As you might imagine, tire companies are major contributors to the sport, as each car uses a full set of tires after only two laps. During a typical event, a team with two cars will easily go through more than 60 tires.

Drifting is growing steadily, and is poised to become a major part of the motor sports world. One of the reason drifting has such tremendous potential is because of the cars used in drifting. There is a real commercial incentive for aftermarket parts and accessory companies to support drifting. As Tyler explains, "The fans can relate to the cars that we're using. They have to be production-based cars and pretty much the parts that we use on these cars are the parts that they (the fans) can go buy. So the aftermarket companies are really big into drifting. Our tires have to be DOT tires, so it's the same stuff you can buy off the shelf."

This difference in how drift cars are equipped is also a major factor influencing crowd and fan participation support. The "off the shelf" character of the cars used in drifting makes it possible for fans to be more than fans—many are "wanna-be" drifters themselves, driving personal vehicles that are equipped with many of the same accessories you'll find on cars at the track. "The parts and accessory manufacturers love drifting because it's a way to showcase their products," says Tyler.

Drifting may even eclipse other types of auto racing in popularity because of its "relate-ability" factor. In other types of racing, like NASCAR and Formula for example, fans can only be spectators; they cannot drive cars like those that the racers drive. "When you watch a NASCAR race, the cars are nothing like what you can buy at a dealership. The tires aren't the same. Everything they use on the car is all custom," explains Tyler.

The growing popularity of drifting has been realized and is being fueled even further by increase media attention. Drift events were featured on *G4* and *Tech TV*, and have now progressed to larger cable stations, like the *Speed Channel* and *ESPN*. *ESPN2* showcased the entire Formula Drift series this past November and will be covering more races in the future.

Hollywood has noticed drifting as well, with movies like *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift*, as have game manufacturers like *PlayStation*. In fact, Tyler McQuarrie is even featured in two different *PlayStation* games: *T1 Grand Prix* and *Fast and Furious Tokyo Drift*. "It's kind of weird," says Tyler, "When they recognize me, little kids will come up to me and say 'I kicked your butt on my PS in my *Tokyo Drift* game.'"

Of course the real cars used in drifting have little in common with their Hollywood counterparts. For example, in the movies, they regularly show the cars being equipped with Nitrous Oxide (NOS) for a power boost, but in real drifting, there is nothing of the sort. The fact is, horsepower is not the major factor in drifting, so although a car needs to be quick, it doesn't need to be overly powerful.

Tyler feels that a major factor that is helping drifting to grow in popularity is the race/fan/racer dynamic. The fans can relate to the cars and drivers. The excitement of every race is fueled by fan participation. "In normal racing, like NASCAR, you never hear the crowd. In drifting, you can hear the fans as you pass the stands." And just like in other sports, some drift fans are... well... "fanatical." "The die-hards live, eat and breathe drifting," says Tyler. "A Handful of our fans attended every single race and event. It's almost cult-like."

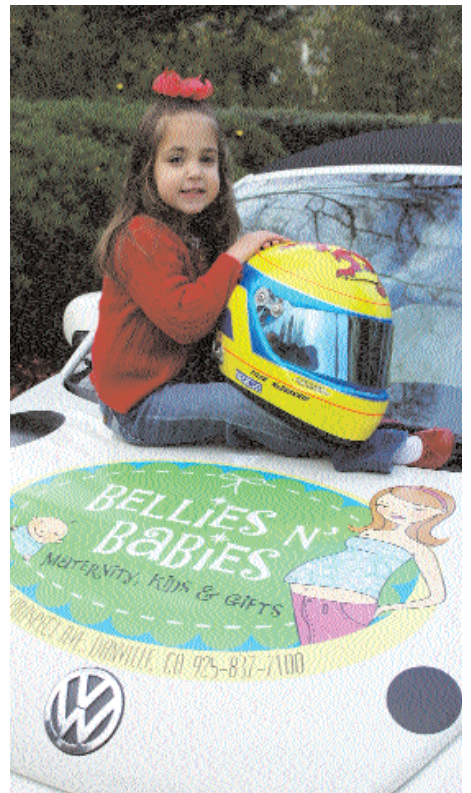
While drifting is on the rise, it is still a young enough sport that the drivers are approachable at the races. And event organizers have wisely included autograph sessions at the races—another thing helping to build interest in the sport. Some of the top drivers are rapidly becoming celebrities, as fans will often wait over an hour in line just to be able to meet their favorite driver and get an autograph.

Ranking in the top five of all professional drift drivers, Tyler is among this elite group of "celebrity" drivers, although in talking to him you'd never know it. In fact, Tyler is one of the friendliest, humble, easy-going people I have ever had the pleasure of interviewing. "It's kind of neat but it's really still weird. Someone will recognize me at an airport or something, or on a street in L.A. and ask me for my autograph. It's fun but it feels kind of strange," comments Tyler. Tyler has a down-to-earth, next-door neighbor quality about him that makes him very easy to talk with. It's easy to see why he has such a huge fan base—he treats everyone like a close friend. The media has definitely picked-up on Tyler's affable nature, as the *Speed Channel*, *ESPN2* and others have all been turning their cameras in his direction.

When he's not racing in a professional event, Tyler is either practicing or teaching racing at Infineon. At age 29, he has been teaching for 11 years (since he was 18). Tyler loves seeing people's reactions when



Drifting...
NASCAR...
Formula...
LeMans...
Tyler
McQuarrie
loves to race...
and he races
to win



Tyler & Nicole McQuarrie
Tyler reminds autograph-seeking fans and drift "babes" that he is now a married man.
"Daddy" McQuarrie's #1 Fan: Hailey

they first step out of a car after their first run around the track. For most people, it really is the first time they will ever drive a car anywhere near what racers consider "fast."

"You can't really drive a car fast on the street. People think they do, but they're nowhere close to the car's limit. I know what a car's limit is, so driving around town is not fun for me. And even finding a winding road—again, not fun. You just can't push it," explains Tyler. Even though there are no straight-aways at Infineon, cars still get up to 125 mph or so, so it is real eye-opener for most racing students.

Tyler's "celebrity" status as a drifter is enhanced by the fact that of all the professionals, he was the first and is the only driver racing a Porsche. "All other drift cars are front engine, rear wheel drive cars. My Porsche is the first rear engine car to be used successfully in drifting," explains Tyler. Many in the sport felt that a Porsche's weight ratio characteristics would make it impossible to drift with, but Tyler has proven everyone wrong by consistently placing near the top in most of his races. He is considered a bit of a "maverick" in the sport, but because of Tyler's groundbreaking Porsche drifting, we'll no doubt be seeing more rear-engine cars drifting in the future.

McQuarrie's aggressive, "go for it" winning driving style and fan-friendly demeanor has brought him some very positive opportunities, as his appearance in several popular video games proves. And as for the "real nuts and bolts" of commercial race sponsorship, one of Tyler's main sponsors is Hankook Tires. Besides competing in drift events in a Porsche, McQuarrie also plans to drive on the Hankook Team in the American LeMans series.

The Porsche GT-2 that Tyler drives in drifts is fairly pricey (around \$200,000) compared to other drift cars, and crashes, which are somewhat common in drifting, can be more expensive in his Porsche. Just the exhaust system alone runs about \$10,000. But it's all worth it, as the major advantage to Tyler's Porsche is that it separates him from all of the other competitors in drifting.

While drifting is certainly a big part of Tyler McQuarrie's racing life, it is not the only part. In fact, Tyler has extensive experience in just about every other style of auto racing—from NASCAR to Formula, to endurance racing. In fact, this past October, Tyler broke the standing record at the



Redline Time Attack Race at Summit Point West Virginia. Tyler won in three different categories, including: the Overall Win with the fastest lap, the Unlimited Class 1st Place, and the Rear Wheel Drive Unlimited 1st Place. Now the current world record holder in that event, Tyler's record is what all the other drivers will be shooting for next year.

Tyler recently competed as part of a team in the Thunder Hill 25 Hour Race—a grueling marathon where three or four drivers switch off in order to complete the race. Unfortunately, the team Tyler drove with suffered a mechanical breakdown, and did not place.

Racing is McQuarrie's passion, for sure. But is it all fun, glamour and excitement? To be sure, Tyler McQuarrie is every bit a professional. In terms of both physical and mental condition, a racer has to be in top shape. "There's a lot more to it than most people realize," comments Tyler. On the physical side, he has to be sure he's in top condition at all times. "When I drive NASCAR for example, the temperature in the car reaches about 140°. I lose about seven pounds during a race, and can experience up to four lateral Gs."

As for the mental aspects of racing, a race car driver has to be 100% focused. "Your mind has to be totally on your driving. You can't be driving and thinking about something else, like, 'did I pay that bill?' or something," says Tyler.

Besides drifting and racing, Tyler has another major focus in his life—his family. When Tyler and the love of his life, Nicole, recently married, Tyler was excited to assume the role of "step dad" too, for Nicole's five year old daughter, Hailey. Nicole also happens to have roots in Danville, as owner of the retail shop Bellies N' Babies. And how does Nicole feel about being married to a race car driver? "Nicole's entire family was always into racing, so they are all totally supportive," explains Tyler.

In terms of his racing career, at only 29, Tyler has already scored some pretty significant wins. Winning the Formula Vauxhaul Racing Scholarship in 1998—something only two other Americans have done—is probably first on his list of major racing accomplishments. Tyler has won three different championships, qualified first place in the New Jersey race of the Formula D and is the current record holder in the Time Attack.

Drifting really looks like fun. When I asked Tyler if anyone can learn to do it, he said, "Drifting is 80% seat of your pants, and 20% understanding the theory behind it and understanding what the car is doing." Drifters use different techniques. "It's all gas and steering," says Tyler. "Drivers use techniques like 'clutch-kicking' and 'e-brake initiation' to get a car started into a drift."

"In drifting, you have to keep the car above the car's limit. If you've raced before, you know what it's like, so getting there is easy. If you don't race and you start to drift, it's a huge unknown and you don't know what to do. It can be very frustrating trying to teach someone to drift. Teaching someone who has never raced to drift is very difficult because they have to be above the car's limit."

Drifting is a lot of hard work, but it's also a lot fun. "I feel lucky to have a career in racing," says Tyler. "To be able to make a living by having fun is pretty rare."

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Image courtesy Floridaracing.org