

Day in the life

INTERVIEW MARK DIXON PORTRAIT DAVID JATIVA



AMBER BALCAEN

25-year-old racing driver who's aiming high in NASCAR

I LEARNED TO DRIVE when I was 12, in a farmer's field. My grandpa on my mother's side taught me; he's a racer too, like my dad. I come from a family of racers.

Growing up in Winnipeg, which is in the Canadian province of Manitoba, I was surrounded by dirt-track ovals and that's where I learned to race. When I was little, I begged and begged my dad to let me take up karting, and eventually he gave in and I started in karts when I was ten. I moved up to mini-sprints when I was 16, and from there to full-size sprint cars when I was 21. A sprint car is a lightweight open-wheeled dirt car with a big engine and a huge wing on top. My dad and I used to compete at the same oval on a Friday night, although in different classes.

Most recently I've been racing a 625bhp Toyota in the NASCAR Whelen All-American series, and I won Rookie of the Year in 2016, finishing in the top five in 12 out of 13 races. I'm also the first Canadian woman to win a NASCAR-sanctioned race in the United States.

The problem, as always, is sponsorship. In 2017, I wanted to move up to the NASCAR K&N Pro series, but to do that I need about \$750,000 a year. And that's why I'm spending most of my time at the moment trying to find the money to go racing. I had a sponsor come

on board earlier this year, but then they pulled out, which caused me to miss some races – and until I find another one, I'm unable to race. The frustrating thing is that I'm living in the USA on an athlete's visa, which means that the only way I can earn my living is by racing. I can't even wait tables in a diner to make ends meet!

Without wanting to sound at all arrogant, my looks are both a help and a hindrance. Obviously I stand out in a male-dominated sport, but it's also hard to get taken seriously. If I do well, people are quick to notice, but if I mess up, they're even quicker to criticise because they were already expecting me to fail.

I moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, last year because it's the heart of NASCAR – if you want to break into the movies you move to Hollywood; if you want to race in NASCAR then you up sticks to Charlotte. I'm doing everything I can to promote myself in the hope of finding sponsorship, via my website amberbalcaenracing.com, social media, and anything else I can think of. For example, this morning I was on a local TV news show, *News Rising* on WCCB Charlotte, which I participate in about once every two weeks, for one of those segments where they have four or five women discussing issues of the day. I enjoy it: while my

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main goal will always be to race cars, it's nice to do something different occasionally.

A few weeks ago I was lucky enough to be involved in some filming with AC/DC's Brian Johnson, for his *Cars That Rock* TV series. We were put into various cars and tried to beat each other's lap times around a circuit outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Brian is more experienced on a road circuit than I am, but our times were pretty similar – you'll have to watch the series to find out who was faster! [*Cars That Rock* airs in the UK from 28 September on Quest]. Brian is an awesome guy, so genuine and kind; he's one of the neatest people I've ever met.

If I have to, I can get up early in the morning – I rise at 4.30am if I'm going to the TV studio – but generally I'm not a morning person; I tend to surface about eight o'clock. Then I'll go to the gym for a couple of hours, before popping home again to prepare some meals for the day. I'm sponsored by a protein supplement company so I'll have a protein shake for breakfast, and I really like making protein muffins or waffles as well.

I'll then head out to a local coffee shop to catch up on emails; much of my day is spent on the computer, preparing pitches for potential sponsors. Lunch usually consists of something like a vegetable omelette, maybe with some turkey mixed in. Because I'm not racing right now, I'm trying to stay at the peak of fitness so that I'm ready to go when the call comes.

My dad was not at all keen on the idea of me becoming a professional race-car driver. I think he'd rather I had a 'normal' life, get married and have kids, and it's true that you do miss out on a lot of things when you're building a career in racing – friends' birthday parties, their weddings and so on. After 14 years of racing, I guess there are two sides to my character: Amber the racing driver, and 'girlie' Amber, who is much more feminine. In the evenings I like to hang out with friends, have a glass of wine, maybe catch a movie. Generally, though, I try to keep active. I'm about to join a volleyball team and I'm planning to take up tennis.

I haven't set a time limit on achieving my goals. I think that dreams generally take longer than expected to come true. A few weeks ago, I went to my first drag race, and thought it was so cool. I'd really like to try that...