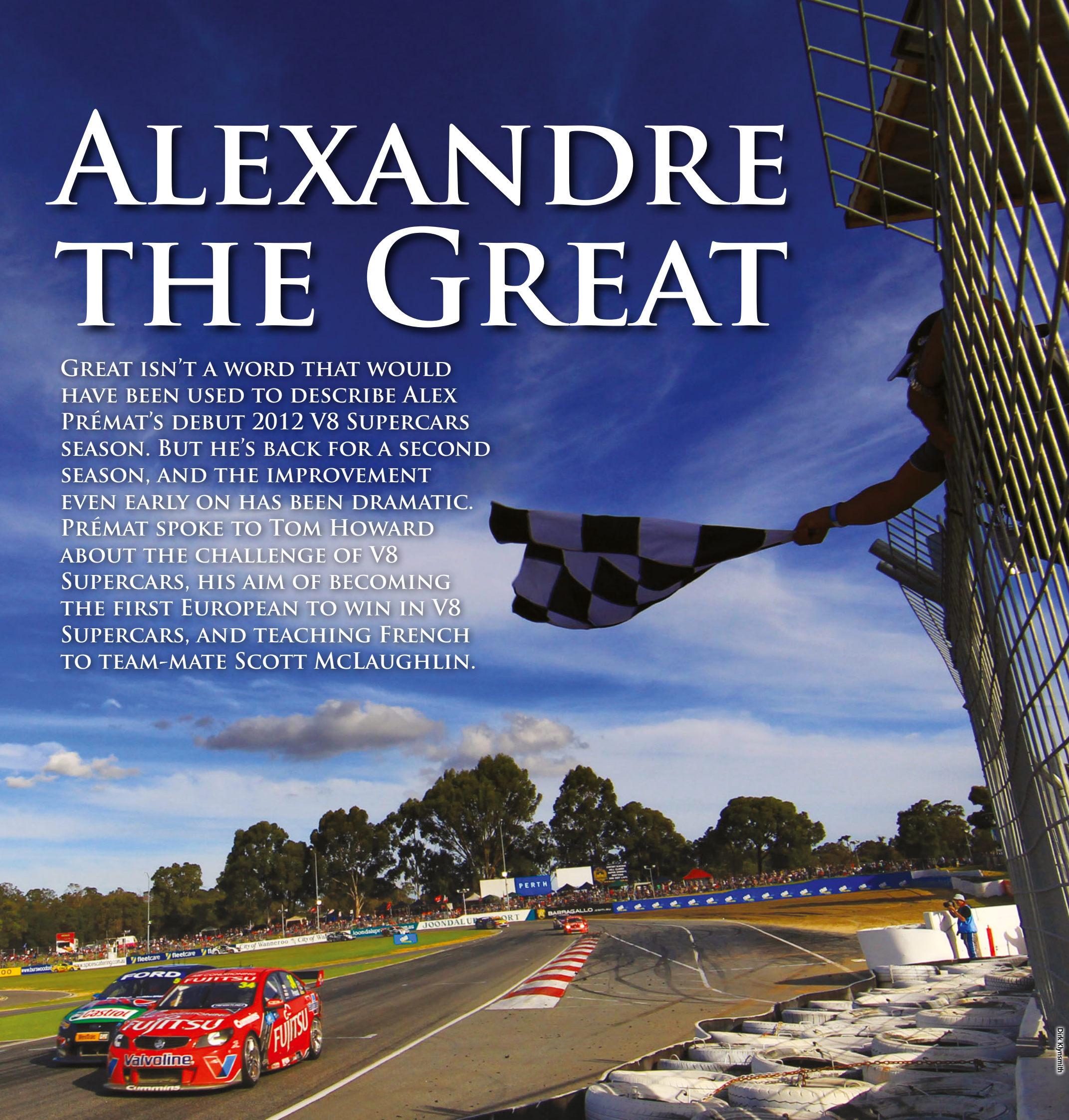


ALEXANDRE THE GREAT

GREAT ISN'T A WORD THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE ALEX PRÉMAT'S DEBUT 2012 V8 SUPERCARS SEASON. BUT HE'S BACK FOR A SECOND SEASON, AND THE IMPROVEMENT EVEN EARLY ON HAS BEEN DRAMATIC. PRÉMAT SPOKE TO TOM HOWARD ABOUT THE CHALLENGE OF V8 SUPERCARS, HIS AIM OF BECOMING THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO WIN IN V8 SUPERCARS, AND TEACHING FRENCH TO TEAM-MATE SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN.



Dick Kopsman

Dan Kalliz



He's held his own in some of Europe's toughest championships and enjoyed success on the global stage, but Alexandre Prémat now firmly believes he can be the first European to taste glory and dominate the uncharted waters of V8 Supercars.

He may yet to have stood on a V8 Supercar podium but on paper the versatile Frenchman is arguably one of the best credentialled drivers on the V8 grid. He is a winner of the Macau Grand Prix, and was third in the GP2 Series (in 2006, the year Lewis Hamilton won before making his McLaren Formula One debut the next season). Prémat has done the DTM, Le Mans and A1GP – so he's not only an openwheeler driver who went close to making it to F1, he's had topline experience in touring cars and sportscars as well. He's about as well rounded as they come.

But taking on a new car and championship in a foreign country thousands of kilometres from home was never going to be easy. So it proved, with the rookie describing his debut 2012 season as a "steep learning curve". A best result of 13th place, at Symmons Plains, was on paper a dismal performance, but then nor did his team-mate ever trouble the

leaders in what was not one of Garry Rogers Motorsport's most competitive seasons.

But as 2012 drew to a close it looked like Prémat's days in the championship were numbered after Garry Rogers dropped him for the Gold Coast 600, in favour of Greg Ritter.

However, fast forward eight months, and now behind the wheel of the new GRM 2013 'Car of the Future', a rejuvenated Prémat has started to show Australian audiences why he is regarded as one of Europe's elite by racking up several top 10 finishes. Matching the championship's top order for pace has prompted the 31-year-old to believe he is close to rewriting V8 Supercars history.

"I would really like to be the first European driver to win a race in V8 Supercars," Prémat says. "It would be so cool for me and maybe it will open the door to more European drivers to come over and join the championship. I'm very pleased and very happy with how we have started the season with GRM. The mechanics, engineers and Garry have done some great work during the winter to give us a really good car.

"We have had some bad luck, which has cost me some points, like the first race in Pukekohe where I was in P2 before I retired.

It's a good start, but we need to just keep pushing and if we can get the two cars in the top eight at every round then that would be perfect. I just have to keep moving and the target is to win races this year.

"Last year was very hard as I had to start from zero on everything. It was a huge move from Europe to Australia. I had to learn the car, the tracks and the championship and I didn't know the drivers. It was really tough.

"I had heard of Jamie Whincup and Craig Lowndes but I didn't know the others at all. The V8 Supercar is very different from what I had driven in Europe, the chassis; the tyres are completely the opposite of what I was used to. Then you have the situation of 20 of the 28 cars being covered by five or six-tenths of a second. It is extremely competitive.

"This year I have made more progress because I am confident with the team and understand the car, the tracks and how the championship works. I'm really happy and enjoying being in Australia and I think the decision and cost to bring me here was worth it."

While European drivers have triumphed in the majority of motorsport's elite championships, V8 Supercars remains one of

HE IS A WINNER OF THE MACAU GRAND PRIX, AND WAS THIRD IN THE GP2 SERIES (IN 2006, THE YEAR LEWIS HAMILTON WON BEFORE MAKING HIS MCLAREN FORMULA ONE DEBUT THE NEXT SEASON).

the few yet to crown a champion hailing from that continent. Many illustrious names including three-time world touring car champion Andy Priaulx and touring car superstar Alain Menu have taken up the challenge by competing in the odd enduro race, but neither shone in the powerful V8 monsters.

In fact in V8 Supercars' 16 year history, the only fleeting success for Europeans has come when they have partnered experienced campaigners in the famous Gold Coast 600 and Sandown 500 endurance races. Multiple touring car champion Yvan Muller secured the first victory at Sandown in 2005 partnering Craig Lowndes and since then fellow

compatriot Sébastien Bourdais has earned two victories alongside Jamie Whincup at Surfers Paradise. Northern Irishman Richard Lyons and ex-F1 star Mika Salo have followed in the footsteps with Ford Performance Racing duo Mark Winterbottom and Will Davison in 2011 and 2012 respectively. But that's about it.

This year Prémat certainly has the tools required to win and create history – as his young team-mate Scott McLaughlin proved by recording a sensational victory at Pukekohe in April. The talent in opposite corner of the GRM garage has not gone unnoticed, Prémat is convinced the Kiwi – now the youngest ever V8 Supercar race winner – is set to become household name.

"I think Scott is one of the future champions in V8 Supercars," Prémat says. "He is really mature for his age, enthusiastic, but he still has a lot to learn. He is very talented and is very friendly and not interested in the politics of the sport. We have

French connection: *Prémat is yet to set the V8 Supercar world on fire, above, but his record in Europe suggests that it mightn't be long. (From far left) On the GP2 podium in 2005 with Nico Rosberg and Heikki Kovalainen; Monaco GP2 race, 2006; celebrating third place in the 2006 GP2 Series with winner Lewis Hamilton and runner up Nelson Piquet Jr; leading (and beating) Lewis Hamilton at Barcelona.*





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Andrew Hill



Sutton Images

a good relationship and he makes me laugh. At the moment I am trying to teach him French so we have some really good times. I'm talking a lot to him so I'm giving him some advice from time to time as he is very young. I think he has taken on some of what I have been saying from the experiences I've had as a driver."

While Alex's focus remains resolute on becoming Europe's first success story in V8 Supercars, it could so easily have been a different tale currently playing out on our screens. If you turn the clock back to 2007, had things gone a little differently Prémat could well have become a global superstar in F1. Team-mate to Lewis Hamilton in 2006, he finished third in the F1 feeder series, GP2, having beaten Hamilton, a young Robert Kubica and Nico Rosberg on several occasions during the year. At that point he was on the verge of an F1 breakthrough. However, like so many promising drivers, Alex was unable to find the funds necessary to snare a seat. But he will always have the memory of making an impressive official F1 appearance with the unfancied Spyker team at the 2006 Chinese Grand Prix. For what it was worth, in Friday's first practice session Prémat was sixth fastest, one spot ahead of Sebastian Vettel, driving a BMW-Sauber.

"I was really close to breaking into Formula One," Prémat says. "In China I finished

F1 star: Not quite, but Premat did Friday practice for Spyker in China in 2006 – and was sixth fastest in P1, above, ahead of Sebastian Vettel. With experience also in A1 GP, sportscar racing and the DTM, right, Premat must be the most versatile driver on the V8 Supercar grid.

sixth just behind Michael Schumacher in Friday practice with Spyker so the potential was there. There are a lot of drivers close to reaching Formula One but they cannot go there because of a lack of money or the politics at the time. I'm really happy with my career but sometimes I do get upset that I was unable to make it into Formula One and show what I could do. However, that is motor racing."

F1's loss has been V8 Supercars' gain, however, with Prémat opening up a once-unconsidered route for Europe's best exports. And this year he has since been joined on the grid by fellow German DTM refugee Maro Engel, in the Erebus Motorsport squad.

The full time presence of Euro aces such as Prémat and Engel in V8 Supercars is unprecedented. The arrival downunder in V8 Supercars of European drivers is something Ross Stone predicted some time ago, and with the comparative strength of our series and the Australian economy, and the economic basket case that is Europe right now, V8 Supercars is now more than ever before being seriously considered as a



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Dik Klynsmit

worthwhile career path by European drivers. "I believe there is a lot of interest from international drivers but Australia is very far away from Europe," Prémat says. "I think the championship wants to become more global so having European drivers competing helps that. With myself and Maro Engel this year, it should open up the market and maybe within one or two years we will see more European drivers."

If that happens, he plans on beating them, because if Prémat has his way he will be racing V8 Supercars for some time yet.

"I would like to stay in Australia and V8 Supercars for the next five or six years, and I think I have the talent to stay here. I need to have a really good year and win races and secure podiums so I can achieve my target of finishing in the top 12 in the championship."

Scott McLaughlin might have made the early headlines but keep an eye on Alexandre Prémat as the season unfolds. If nothing else, with a full season now under his belt, Prémat goes into each event not with the handicap of having to learn a new circuit every time. More than that, the Car of the Future package is dynamically a much more 'Euro' style of racecar, making it more Prémat-friendly, and, more importantly, the GRM version of it clearly appears to be a much better package than what the team served up in 2012.

The Australian Touring Car Championship has never been won by a Frenchman before...



Andrew Hall



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