

# ● The Great Santino

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The most dominant young racer in America is an undersized 11-year-old with epic hair, a head full of Formula One dreams, and a name that just *sounds* fast. How good is **Santino Ferrucci**? If he's even half as good as he thinks he is, he's still pretty awesome



J O S H D E A N



B R I A N F I N K E



**AMERICA'S MOST** promising young driver is in repose, his elfin form curled into a recliner in a dim room lit by a muted television.

Do you think you're the best? I ask him.

"Yep," Santino Ferrucci says, stroking a tiny kitten as it slinks past. Normally, he'd be in school right now—it's barely after noon on a spring Friday—but the 11-year-old is such a frequent (and excused) truant that his education schedule has become flexible. After a race-related absence, the principal's only question is, "How'd you do?" So instead of diagramming sentences or doing → →

long division, Santino is taking a break from go-kart practice to fork at a plastic bowl of take-out penne.

I ask him to clarify: Does he mean that he's the best in his age group or the best of any young go-kart driver?

"Any young driver."

He says this matter-of-factly, with an implied "duh." It doesn't come across as obnoxious or boastful, all precocious and off-putting in the manner of a child actor, unless you're thinking of a child actor in a Wes Anderson movie, in which case it's not a bad way to imagine an unusually small kid in a shiny one-piece race suit being interviewed in a rec room of the house next to his family's go-kart track in upstate New York. Santino is a confident fellow. He's prone to statements that, coming from most people, would seem a bit swollen. The thing is, in his smiley, cheery chirp of a voice, they just don't. And anyway, his results back up the swagger.

Without question, this Connecticut native is America's best young driver in one of his age groups (10-to-13-year-olds), even though many of his opponents are two years older and nearly twice his size. Lately, he's begun to dabble in an even more advanced class (for 13-to-16s), especially here at Oakland Valley Race Park, his home track. He has even begun racing in Europe, testing his mettle against the best go-karters in the sport's hotbed.

If all goes according to plan, Santino expects to be racing in Formula One by the time he's 18 or 20. The Great Santino will be 12 on May 31, and there are already many excellent things about him. His name, for instance. His hair, which is curly and blond and voluminous—a style element so distinctive that if its owner's personality weren't gigantic in its own right, he could easily disappear in its shadow. And of course, his driving. More than anything, the kid can drive go-karts.

It has been more than two years since Santino lost a race here at Oakland Valley—or, for that matter, in the entire northeast region. Last year—due to the grumbling of parents tired of watching this wee person lap their kids in all the regional events and to Santino's own boredom at lapping them so easily—the race director of one major series gave him a pass straight to nationals.

I ask if he has a racing idol.

"Michael Schumacher," he says, referencing the legendarily demanding German who won seven Formula One championships before retiring in 2006. "Because I tell my mechanics what to do, and usually they listen. If they don't, they're fired."

I point out that, as far as I've seen, it's his dad who's tightening bolts. And you can't fire your dad, I say.

"Yes, you can. You say, 'Dad, you're no good. Hire a mechanic.'"



Santino is not yet financially independent and is thus subject to budgets and bedtimes. He might theoretically have the power to fire his dad, but then he'd need to find someone else to drive him to the track. At any rate, he's building quite a little nest egg for a grade schooler. He estimates he has earned between \$20,000 and \$30,000, not counting his \$5 weekly allowance (often withheld due to failed chores) or the \$2 an hour his dad gives him for teaching kids to drive karts. To win on the Formula One circuit, though, pays "like \$27 million—that's what I heard."

But a great driver can get rich here in the U.S.A. just as easily, not to mention famous. Why, I wonder, would he go to Europe, what with all the foreign languages and weird food? Why not pursue a future in NASCAR, America's favorite race series?

Santino looks at me a long second.

"In NASCAR, you just go around in a boring circle. I like making right turns. That's part of life."

**RARE IS THE** prodigy story in which our hero does not just happen onto his gift "by accident." This is no exception. In one version of the legend, told by Santino's father, Mike Ferrucci, the boy rode around on model cars as a toddler before moving on to one of those kid-sized electric Jeeps from Toys "R" Us that he drove until the wheels cracked. "He lived in that thing," Mike says. For his fifth birthday, Mike bought his son a go-kart, the tiniest one he could find, and Santino "used to run it out of gas—in thirty-degree weather," racing up and down the family's 700-foot-long driveway. "Then he learned to do a figure eight; then he learned doughnuts. By the time we got to the track, he knew how to drive."

► Santino Ferrucci in his speed machine, which weighs more than 260 pounds. (He weighs 60.)

Here is how Santino remembers it: "It all started when I was turning 5 years old and my dad didn't get me a present, so he came into my room late at night when everyone was sleeping and said, 'Do you want to drive go-karts?' And I'm like, 'Yes.' So that's how that got started."

Mike is small, neatly goateed, and beyond friendly. He does not seem at all sports dad-y, except that he is extraordinarily supportive, to the extent that he bought his son a racetrack: the aforementioned Oakland Valley Race Park in Cuddebackville, New York. It was the closest track to their home, about two hours away with no traffic. "When I saw how expensive [this sport] was, I said, 'We may as well buy a track.' It's funny how things just happen."

It didn't take long for Santino to start dominating races. "He got very good very, very fast," Mike says. In the region, "He was beating kids who were 12 and 13 when he was 7." Since then, well, you could get lost in the kid's accumulated accomplishments over the various circuits in which he competes, but suffice it to say he has dominated every level, setting benchmark after benchmark along the way.

His professional role model (which is different from an idol) is Lewis Hamilton, the 25-year-old British driver who won the 2008 Formula One championship. Hamilton is a bone fide sensation, in part because he is black (in a sport that's whiter than golf) and in part because he wins so often. Hamilton, like most of his Formula One peers, got his start in karting. He was 8. He won his first national race when he was 10.





► From left, Ferrucci with his father, Mike; taking laps at his home track in upstate New York.

"I beat his record," Santino told me. "I won my first at 8. So I kicked his butt."

One afternoon, I was hanging around the family track while Santino was breaking in a new kart. The compound was originally an old Mafia hangout; viewed from overhead, the track is in the shape of a handgun. ("I haven't dredged the pond," Mike jokes.)

This new kart weighs 262 pounds, much bigger and heavier than what Santino's used to. He needs to get accustomed to the physicality of pushing it around the track. (Currently, he weighs 60 pounds and needs pedal blocks to reach the brake and accelerator with his size 3 feet.) He's got a new fitness program—some running, some pull-ups, some Little League, all of it fueled by chocolate PowerBars and Frosted Flakes. Having taken some laps myself, I can tell you that even for a 180-pound man, steering a race-quality go-kart is very physical; my arms were sore for a full day afterward.

Santino pulls in to the pit, climbs out, and shakes his arms like they're wet.

Mike asks how the car felt, and Santino mumbles unintelligibly. He is impossible to understand when his helmet is on. ("That's because I chew on my head sock," he explains later. "Write that down.") He pulls off his helmet and head sock to reveal red splotches where he scrubbed off the temporary butterfly tattoo his younger sister had applied the previous night.

"How close are we to this go-kart being good?" his dad asks.

Santino holds his finger and thumb an inch apart.

"What's the problem?"

"It's hard to steer. It has a lot of transfer, but it doesn't have as much grip as my

other kart. I like the harder chassis. But this definitely has more feel."

I am not omitting "ums" and "uhs" and "wells"—when it is time to talk racing, Santino may as well be his father's age.

**IT'S A CHILLY MARCH SATURDAY**, and Santino Ferrucci finds himself in Ocala, Florida, home to the final race of the Florida Winter Tour (FWT). This is the opening series of the national go-kart racing season, and thus a magnet for top drivers across the age spectrum.

The whole Ferrucci family has come from their home in Woodbury, Connecticut: Mike and Val, Santino's parents, as well as his younger sister, Alessandra, also small, also spunky, also spectacularly coiffed. It's not typical for all four to attend a race—Alessandra thinks they're boring; she'd rather be riding horses—but this is a special weekend. Her brother could become the first person ever to win back-to-back FWT titles in the same class.

In this case, that class is cadet, for kids up to 13. He won in 2008, when he was 9. Now, with three years of eligibility remaining, a repeat is all but certain. He doesn't even need to win this race, necessarily; he just needs to avoid catastrophe and to not cede too much ground to the only kid with a (faint) statistical chance of catching him: Jimmy Cabrera, a 9-year-old from the Dominican Republic whose black suit and tinted visor conveniently fates him into the role of villain.

Santino's race suit is bright red and satiny, with his name printed on each shin. His helmet is iridescent and speckled with tiny yellow Superman logos, only in this case the *S* stands for Santino, at least until he

gets famous enough that DC Comics takes issue, at which point, Mike says, "We'll have to work something out."

The Ocala Gran Prix grounds aren't exactly glamorous. The track has been shoehorned into a patch of flatland next to a gigantic indoor-outdoor flea market and a prefab aluminum barn that sells snakes and parrots. Inside a large white tent in the paddock area, Mike Ferrucci helps his son into the chest and neck protectors and tells him to "be careful and not do anything stupid" as they head toward the starting grid for qualifying. Santino is remarkably relaxed considering that there is more at stake here than history. "If I win the championship" he tells me, "I get Grand Theft Auto."

Transcendent ability is difficult to assess during a race, even to the knowledgeable observer. I defy you to watch Jimmie Johnson or Helio Castroneves and explain precisely why they win more than others. They just do. That said, no one who's witnessed Santino Ferrucci's racing would debate his skill, his preternatural poise, or his almost metaphysical awareness of what's around him on the track. Santino thinks it is probably "hand talent," which he defines as "knowing when to turn," that sets him apart.

Does he mean hand-eye coordination?

"My eye, no. My hand, yes," he told me earlier. "Because my eyes are blurry. I'm getting glasses in the seventh grade."

Blurred vision does not explain an uncharacteristically poor showing in the morning qualifier; that was the fault of a loose throttle wire discovered by an off-duty cop and amateur adult kart racer who helps Mike wrench at races. For a normal driver, this could have spelled doom. In Santino's case, it merely meant he finished sixth instead of first.

During a lull between morning and afternoon races, I note Santino's quite obvious obsession with a beautiful young driver from Switzerland who tends to wear her race suit unzipped to the waist (with a

tank top underneath) and who is at least twice Santino's age. "You hear the nickname Smooth yet?" Mike asks me. "That's not for his racing." One night, Mike says, the two of them were dining with some friends at a Florida Hooters when Santino wandered off and was spotted chatting up a gaggle of waitresses. A good while later, he came back and said, "Dad, I'm going to the movies with them at nine. Don't worry—it's right across the street."

It's a cute story, but also relevant. Success in racing isn't just a matter of ability. Hundreds of kids emerge every year with the skill to race, but only a handful are chosen by sponsors or deep-pocketed benefactors. Bill Wright, owner of the Florida Winter Tour, told me that manufacturers are dipping into the talent pool earlier and earlier to fish out kids with potential and that Santino clearly stands out. "I don't have any doubt that the kid"—Santino—"has everything you"—a potential benefactor—"need. He's the total package."

Last summer, Mike and Val settled on a manager to help accelerate the process. Plus, Mike says, it's time to step back and just be a dad. ("I want to spend some time with my daughter," he says.) The manager is a former British racer named Simon Kirkby, who used to head up the Formula BMW race program in North America. His job is to raise money, primarily, and also to oversee Santino's development "once we get to the point where he's in cars," Kirkby says. "Hopefully by the time he's 12." (Only a handful of kids have received dispensation to race cars so young. Your typical driver, Kirkby says, is at least 14 before he's racing cars.) Another advocate for this move is Santino's mom. Karts have no seat belts, and Santino's flipped his over on at least five occasions. No serious injuries so far.

Around the paddock in Florida, there seems to be no one Santino *doesn't* know—not that this is a precondition of his willingness (or ability) to spark up conversation. He flits in and out of trailers and tents and is so small that he sometimes just seems to appear out of thin air. At times, he seems fully adult—I often find myself talking to him like I'm talking to a friend—and at times he seems to be very much his age.

Earlier in the day, I met him in the lobby of our hotel, where he'd arrived in an Under Armour shirt and sandals and with his wild mane still wet from the shower. It seemed an opportune time to ask about his styling regimen. "I just shower and throw gel in my hair," he told me. "But I couldn't bring [my gel], because it's six ounces and you're only allowed three ounces on the plane. They'll take it, and it's like \$10."

He asked me what I thought of "Barack," but before I could answer he blurted, "I wanted McCain to win. Barack just made people think McCain would keep us fighting



wars. But as soon as Barack took over, the economy fell apart."

I told him that I like Barack and think he's both a good man and a good president.

He pursed his lips and considered this.

"He might be okay," he said, and then spent five minutes explaining a dream he'd just had about Superman.

**AS THE FINAL** day of the final weekend of the Florida Winter Tour dawns, Jimmy Cabrera is out of the running, having been penalized for various infractions, including spinning out Santino in the first turn of one race and causing a girl racer to crash. But Santino starts near the back due to that loose throttle wire.

His closest friend over the weekend has been the number five driver, a mop-headed Carolinian named Derek Sobel, who wears a black T-shirt with a logo that reads *no. 5* and features the signature of Derek Sobel. Derek is now within striking distance of finishing second for the season. Before the final, Santino told his mom he was going to Derek's pit to "draw up a game plan" that would help his pal get the points he needed. They also played some Xbox.

It takes just a lap for the two to skip through the field to the front. By the fourth lap, they break away from the pack.

"Wow, are they fast!" Mike yells, glancing at a stopwatch. "No mistakes time. Nothing crazy, Derek!"

The two karts buzz around the back section and whip into the final corner, at which time the alliance frays, as you'd expect when two boys are racing at sixty miles per hour. Derek's kart (running on a motor borrowed from the Ferruccis, by the way) seems to have a little more oomph,

► Ferrucci with his hardware. He hasn't lost a regional race in more than two years.

and he's inches off Santino's back tire as he veers wide to attempt the pass. Santino swerves slightly to upset Derek's momentum, but Number Five is undeterred. Then it's back into the straightaway and flat-out for the finish as...

...Santino hangs on, barely, to win by hundredths of a second. He thrusts his right arm out triumphantly, then gives Derek a thumbs-up as they shoot around turn one and ease into their cool-down lap. Derek responds in kind.

Pretty soon, races like this will start to seem Podunk. By summer's end, Santino will be racing in England and Belgium against some of the world's best adolescent drivers. He'll take meetings with some possible sponsors and begin receiving coaching from an elite British team director. He'll quarrel with his sister and enjoy his time with the family kitten before she is unfortunately, and tragically, mauled and half-eaten by a coyote. He'll win a few more major races in the U.S., just for kicks.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Santino Ferrucci has an award ceremony to attend. (The unofficial prize, Grand Theft Auto, will come later.) He sheds his head and neck protectors and his gloves and hands them in a pile to his mother, then shakes hands and receives pats from the many assembled teenagers and adults as he ambles up to the podium to accept his second straight season championship. If it weren't for the hair, the trophy would be taller than he is. 🏆

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