

Full

SPEED

ahead

ILYA EMELYANOV '26 shifts from simulated racing to the real speedway, and begins to pursue his passion as a career.



Ilya Emelyanov qualified on pole position in his first K1 Speed race in March 2025.

At the green flag, he pulled away cleanly. By the halfway mark, he glanced back—P2 had just crossed the line.

Emelyanov took the win.

Most professional drivers start karting between the ages of five and ten. Emelyanov started his sophomore year of high school.

"The moment I fell in love with the racing part of cars is when my friend invited me to watch the finale in Abu Dhabi between Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton in 2021. That's the really controversial race where

Max won because of a little technicality. Ever since then, I've been watching F1 and it's been a background thing."

Emelyanov started racing

virtually when his friend invited him to play F1 24 after it came out. He played for three days before he realized that he needed a sim racing wheel instead of a controller. Ilya later signed up for go-karting at K1 in Santa Clara and kept at it.

"The biggest challenge to start out is to get up to speed, because there's a massive difference between putting my hands on a controller for the first time and driving a lap versus getting into my first league race where I'm actually trying to set a competitive time. The amount of learning that you do between the first point and the league race is probably more than I did that whole school year," Emelyanov said.

Emelyanov has both a French racing

license and a SCCA racing license, which he needs in order to race in some places. However, when he first started, he just had his normal California Drivers License.

"When you're just driving home from school or to practice or something, you're focusing mainly on just keeping it in the lane, what speed you're going, red lights, pedestrians, stuff like that. While in a race car, you're focused on everything. All at once, you're focused on where the car is on track, where you're gonna start braking, how many gears you're going down," Emelyanov said. "It's really overwhelming when you first try it, and I honestly had a really hard time adjusting to it. But when I did, it was so much so much fun."

Though he's had a steep learning curve, Emelyanov's improvement has encouraged him to continue racing. His first time in a race car, he was the slowest on the track. By the second time, he was the second fastest in his group.

"In my opinion, that was a huge win career wise, just being able to even just drive," Emelyanov said. "I would love to do it professionally. I mean, there's a lot of money in it. A lot of money to be made at the top, but it's also a lot of money to be put in at the bottom. And unfortunately, I'm at the bottom right now."

Emelyanov has been working to raise money to enter a formula series. He has to decide when to save and when to put his money in and enter. Although he has been raising money himself, his parents have been great supporters financially. They helped him through school, racing school and through a team GP. Emelyanov has also received considerable emotional support from his friends despite how big his dream is.

"Byron, my good friend, he's been there from the very start. He's been supporting me like crazy in my DMs. You know, we've hung out a lot. He's just been a really great person to be around, very positive-minded," Emelyanov said. "I'd say all my school friends are very supportive of my dream and trying to get me there. I haven't faced any sort of backlash for dreaming to do something as big as Formula One or racing cars professionally." *photo by claire hautefaye*

