

# King of Spain

While the constitutional crisis rumbled on in 2017, one of Spain's favourite sons was plotting his assault on the 'Triple Crown' of motorsport. McLaren have switched to a Renault engine and Alonso is back in pole position – but another F1 World Championship is just the start. **Tom Pountney** reports from Melbourne ahead of the 2018 season

**F**ernando Alonso Díaz was born in the northwest of Spain – in Oviedo – capital city of the rugged Principality of Asturias.

It was there, in 1984, that his father José Luis – an amateur kart racer and explosives factory mechanic – built his daughter (Fernando's sister) a kart.

Eight-year-old Lorena showed no interest in the kart but her little brother, Fernando, jumped straight behind the wheel and was on the grid for his first race, aged three.

"I believe things happen because they have to happen," Alonso told Autosport after the 2017 Singapore Grand Prix.

"All the things that happen in a race or in a [Formula 1] Championship – or in your life – there is maybe a reason behind.

"And that reason is because better times are coming, and I prefer to think that way."

Alonso's positivity is a trait that has led him on an onerous, yet rewarding, path through his motorsport career.

The child prodigy accelerated through an apprenticeship from the moment he stepped into that kart. Four consecutive Spanish Championships and the Junior World Cup in 1996 – Spanish and Italian Inter-A titles and a second place in the European Championship in 1997 – sponsorship offers started to support the family.

"I was racing in go-karts in many different conditions, in many different categories. I was always four or five years younger than any of my competitors," said Alonso.

**Pictured: Alonso competed for Honda McLaren in 2017 but will be back in a Renault this year**

"So you have to find your way or adapt your way – you can't reach the pedals, you can't reach the steering wheel, you don't have strength to turn the steering wheel, things like that probably put you in a way that defines your future career.

"My mother worked in a shopping mall, my father in an explosive company, and we didn't have money to pay for wet tyres for go-karts. So every time it was raining, I raced with the dry tyres while all the others were racing with the wet tyres.

"So even if you are last, they switch on the engine and you race. It has been probably

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a continuous evolution of my style; adapting."

In 1999, Flavio Briatore's company, Supertec, was supplying engines for Benetton where the Italian businessman first met with Alonso and later agreed to be his manager. After Renault purchased Benetton and Briatore became Managing Director, his decision to sack race driver Jenson Button for Alonso was met with great acrimony.

"Time will tell if I am wrong," Briatore told those baying for blood. And time did tell.

Alonso – who had driven for Minardi in 2001 but won no points – soon became the youngest driver to win pole position in Malaysia, and then the youngest driver to win a Formula 1 race in Hungary in 2003. ➤





Sixth-place that year was elevated to fourth place the year after as Alonso charted a meteoric rise.

In 2005, aged 24 years and 59 days, he broke Michael Schumacher's five-year dominance and became the youngest Formula 1 Champion. A year later 'El Nano' backed it up with a second consecutive record-breaking championship.

The decade that followed – with moves to McLaren and Ferrari, and a return to Renault – culminated in three top-three championship finishes, but Alonso rarely looked comfortable.

"When I went [to McLaren the first time] people said, 'You should never have left Renault' in 2006.

"They never won any more times. Probably you say this because I saw some covers of magazines; 'A wasted talent'.

"I'm super happy with my career, I was always in a competitive car, thank god, and I had an opportunity to reach things."

Today, aged 36, and still universally respected as one of the best drivers in motorsport, Alonso has renewed optimism in Formula 1 and beyond.

"[2018] will be the year that we will be back at the top," said Alonso "[But] my plans for motorsport are much greater than anyone can think.

"I want to be the best driver in the world. To do that you need to

**Above: Signing autographs in Montreal as a Honda McLaren driver Below: Alonso aged 24 in his 2005 R25 – racing for Mild Seven Renault F1 Team – on the way to his first of two World Championships**

win in different series, compete in different cars and... go out of this small world of F1. Motorsport is more than F1."



McLaren are switching from Honda to Renault power for 2018 and Alonso will be behind the wheel. The stars are aligning and Alonso is planning to make history this year.

At the 101st Indianapolis 500 last year, the Spaniard made his IndyCar bow, as the first active Formula One World Championship driver to contest the race since Teo Fabi in 1984. Alonso won Rookie of the Year after qualifying on the second row and leading for 27 laps before retiring due to engine failure. "It was a pretty big surprise what we were doing," he said, after a standing ovation.

"But in the end, we couldn't complete it. It was probably one of the best races I've had."

It has since been confirmed that Alonso will race in the 2018 Daytona 24 Hours – his first-ever endurance event – after racking up 113 laps during the World Endurance Championship's rookie test in Bahrain.

The ultimate goal is Le Mans 24 Hours which, alongside ➤

Right: Alonso was awarded official honorary Real Madrid C.F. membership last year Below: In the pit lane with Ferrari in 2010 – Sepang, Malaysia Bottom: Back at Sepang in a Honda last year – before McLaren switched to Renault



the Monaco Grand Prix (or the Formula 1 World Championship) and Indianapolis 500, completes motorsport's elusive 'Triple Crown'.

"I've won the Monaco Grand Prix twice, and it's one of my ambitions to win the Triple Crown, which has been achieved by only one driver in the history of motorsport: Graham Hill. It's a tough challenge, but I'm up for it."

It is not the first time Alonso has dabbled outside of Formula 1. In 2001, he hinted at running a cycling team in the 2011 Tour de France, with friend and compatriot

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Alberto Contador leading the team. Since then other attempts to take his passion for cycling to the next level have transpired, but the Fernando Alonso Cycling Team (FACT) has yet to materialise.

Whichever direction Alonso chooses to take his life when he finally hangs up the racing boots, he can look back on a long and successful career in Motorsport. The World Champion will always have a sense of adventure in his heart. "I am still young – even if not any more," he said.

"But at least I do feel that way,

so I want to see all these place [in the world]. You have to take chances whenever they come your way as you never know when they dry up!

"I have been living in Spain, in England, in Switzerland, in Dubai – and that is okay as I had my apartments in these places, where I have my clothes and all my toys – but it's not home. I think not until I have retired and have spent six months in one bed will I call anything home.

"Right now I am living in Dubai. It is in the centre of the

world, it is convenient – the airport is one of the biggest hubs that takes me pretty much anywhere. What more do you want as a 'frequent traveller'?"

Away from the heat of professional motorsport, Alonso opened a museum and karting circuit in his home town of Oviedo, where his foundation for child road safety continues to change lives.

Most importantly, his love for motorsport still burns strong.

"I would race every weekend in any car in any country," he said. ■

