



**STAR DRIVER**

## **JON WILLIAMS**

Edinburgh is stuck in the grip of its second winter in a week. This is no place for a native South African. Except Jon Williams has found himself a home from home inside the Scottish capital. The Pirelli Star Driver shuts his eyes. He's pedalling along the South Atlantic coast on the beach at Camps Bay in a Cape Town summer.

At least the heat's right. It's bang on 40 degrees. And he is on a bike; an exercise bike, in a heat chamber. Eyes open. Reality bites. The rest of the Pirelli Star Drivers and their co-drivers have moved on, gratefully accepting the chance to get out of the furnace-like heat and sweat-induced maximum humidity. Williams has gone back for another go. It's not some sort of macho show of strength. He just likes riding bikes. And the temperature.

That's his story. But you do get the feeling that there could be just the tiniest smidge of psychology in there. Driving-wise, Williams is definitely on the back foot. If he can score a point on the fitness front, it's worth doing.

Journey complete. He wipes a barely moist brow and pulls on his new, bright yellow fleece. Accepting a glass of water with a grin, he shakes his head.

"I still can't believe it, you know," says the 26-year-old. "A year ago, I was sat with my brothers watching the World Rally Championship on television. I kept saying to them, shush, if I could just get a shot and show those guys what I can do. And now, here I am. Before I came, I had to keep going over to the computer and logging on to wrc.com just to make sure this thing was real. Even when I got off the plane in Scotland, I was still pinching myself – particularly when I walked into the room and saw Robert Reid standing there ready to teach me. But I'm here. And now I want to stay here."

Not Scotland, although why wouldn't he? It's planet World Rally Championship he wants as his home.

Winning the chance to drive alongside Jarkko Nikara, Martin Semerád, Mark Tapper and Nicos Thomas for six rounds of this year's WRC is only half the battle for any of these drivers – but for Williams it's more like a third. Williams is candid enough to admit that his chances of success on next week's Pirelli Star Driver opening event, the Vodafone Rally de Portugal, are limited. He's only spent 45 minutes in the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X he'll be driving in Faro and only about an hour in the car with his new co-driver George Gwynn. See, back foot.

Williams says: "After I'd done the training and the testing in Edinburgh, I had intended to stay in Britain until the rally in Portugal. I was going back with my new co-driver George and we were going to practise making notes in a road car and then find a Lancer to do some testing in."

His voice trails away. That he's facing a 14-hour flight back to the northern side of the Equator tells its own story.

"I couldn't find the money to stay or to test," he explains. "I own a share in the family print firm. I had to go back to pull my weight and do my share. It's not ideal, but it's the way it is. I've got to make this year work. It's my last shot at the sport and, believe me, I intend to make it stick."

He's not been short on commitment so far. He ditched a family background in racing in favour of rallying, realising quickly that his hopes of becoming an international professional competition driver were more likely to be fulfilled on the stage than track. He soon tasted success in the South African Championship, but realised he would have to venture further afield if he wanted to bag the Pirelli Star drive. He set off on the drive to trailer his rally car thousands of miles out of Cape Town to places like Uganda. Quite literally, a continent away from his own backyard. And comfort zone.

"You grow up quickly when you're travelling around Africa," he says. "I can't remember how many times I wondered what I was doing when we were stopped at the side of the road changing a puncture on the trailer." But it was worth it.

"Are you kidding?" he grins. "This is awesome. I've sold everything to get here: my house, my car, I've borrowed money to make the flights, but I'm here. I've got the chance. And that's all I wanted. Now it's up to me to make the most of it. You know, some of the guys are worrying about the step from a Lancer Evolution IX to an Evo X. I'm worried because I've never even competed in an N4 car! I've never made proper pace notes; I've never competed with my co-driver before and I've never competed in a left-hand-drive car. It's going to be a steep learning curve in Portugal. But they're just corners aren't they? And you can get around all of those corners. And that's what I'm going to do. I've got six chances to make my dream stick."

Getting into the WRC is a dream he's harboured for all seven years he's been in rallying. But it was a meeting with a certain Scot six years ago that really fired his imagination.

He tells the tale: "Colin McRae came to South Africa on holiday and a guy that was rallying with me kind of knew him, so he and some friends came jet-skiing and quad biking for the day. I'll never forget it. One of the jet-skis had broken down, so I was lying underneath it trying to figure out what had gone wrong; I looked to my left and Colin was down there with me trying to help sort it out. What a guy! He was incredible. He was an inspiration for me."

Williams is going to need all of that inspiration as he sets out on what's certain to be the biggest year of his life.