



s a young driver, you want everything possible to be on your side, because the only thing that exceptional talent can't provide is experience. So if the people in your corner happen to include a former grand prix driver, a former world champion and the FIA Institute, you're off to a strong start.

The FIA Institute Young Driver Excellence Academy was created in 2010 to provide talented youngsters with opportunities to rise to the top of their game and promote the FIA Academy's mission of ensuring safe driving on both road and track. These two concepts are entirely complementary because the skills that make a driver quick in competition – such as smoothness, anticipation and an in-depth understanding of vehicle dynamics – are the same as those needed to make a driver safe.

To ensure such chances are spread evenly and globally, the FIA Institute invited 28 drivers from 25 countries to compete for 18 places on this year's Academy. Their backgrounds were as diverse as their nationalities, and their talents were backed by an impressive list of achievements. Scotsman Lewis Williamson, for example, arrived fresh off the back of a McLaren Formula One test, his prize for winning the prestigious McLaren-*Autosport* Award. Italy's Andrea Caldarelli has also already tested F1 cars for Toyota and Ferrari while still just 21, and Irishman Craig Breen, 21, recently wrapped up the inaugural WRC Academy.

Naturally, there is strong competition for such prized places, and to determine who gets the nod the Institute hosts a selection process in Melk, Austria.

Directing the programme are performance managers Alex Wurz – a former F1 driver and two-time Le Mans winner – and Robert Reid, who was World Rally Champion co-driver in 2001. Backed by the FIA Institute and a team of coaches, their job is to help select the fortunate few who will join each new Academy. It's an awesome responsibility, made harder by the spread of talent across the board.

Fortunately, they collect a huge amount of data over the four days of the selection event, allowing them to combine scientific method with their personal analysis. They also assess how the drivers react in a competitive environment, which is why the format stretches over four days culminating in a Race of Champions-style

shoot-out. But the drivers are appraised on more than just the exercises. They're watched at every moment, and how they handle such constant scrutiny forms an important part of the final judgement.

The pressure is progressively ramped up over the four days prior to the climactic competition. Inevitably, some drivers will go home disappointed, but the education they've received stays with them, and learning to absorb setbacks is an important part of forging a driver's mentality.

Melk is a quiet, understated town about 100 kilometres from Vienna, most famous for its monastery. But it wasn't chosen to help foster the drivers' spiritual wellbeing. Instead it's the location of the Wachauring, a well-known road safety and motor sport training centre, which is equipped with a number of facilities such as a skid pan and vehicle kick-plate (designed to suddenly throw a car off course) which tests car control.

While the driving element forms a key part of the selection process, it was by no means the only decider. The drivers' physical fitness was assessed and the classroom sessions involved interviews, media training and psychology. For the first three days they were subjected to a trio of three-hour sessions in a variety of activities, and so were kept busy from sunrise to sunset.

Their first contact with the driving element was in normal road cars, so the coaches could judge such basics as how they coped with the skid pan and kick plate; and in another exercise the rear wheels of the car were placed on castors, giving it the handling characteristics of a supermarket trolley.

Speed wasn't of the essence – yet. It was more a question of safe and smooth driving, allowing the coaches to see who truly understood the dynamics of a vehicle, and who preferred to rely purely on instinct.

"There's a big difference between drivers who think they know how a car works and those who properly understand and anticipate it," said Alex Wurz, a podium finisher in three F1 grands prix. "With just a few simple exercises, it's quite easy to tell that difference."

The initial fitness exercises were equally revealing. The drivers were asked to take part in the infamous 'beep' test, in which they run between two points before a beep sounds. The catch is that the time between ►

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