When fate and two racing hearts meet

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16/08/2021 A homestory about Porsche works driver Neel Jani.

It's a peaceful morning in the Swiss village of Bellmund near Lake Biel. Birds are chirping and the 1,500 inhabitants in the pretty little town in the Canton of Bern are getting ready to start the day. Porsche works driver Neel Jani steps out of the front door of his partially restored farmhouse and shatters the idyllic silence. With a wide grin, the 37-year-old turns on the ignition of his almost 60-year-old 2.6-litre diesel tractor and it roars into life. "It's a very special kind of heirloom, so to speak," explains the Swiss national, who contests the 2021 FIA World Endurance Championship and Le Mans for Porsche in the Porsche 911 RSR.

"This Porsche 'Super Export Model' tractor belonged to the farm that I bought from a close school friend. It's a terrific historic toy and my son will soon have a lot of fun with it."

Jani lives on the expansive property just a stone's throw from his home town of Jens with his wife Lauren and their soon to be three-year-old son Maverick. Lake Biel is closeby, much of the area is used for agriculture and the nearby Swiss Alps offer a wide range of leisure activities. "I can do everything I love around here: cross country skiing, cycling, getting outdoors with the family. And my son will soon be able to have a go on the tractor or on a motocross bike in the paddock behind the barn," smiles the son of an Indian father and Swiss mother. Jani tried it all in his youth. Following in the footsteps of his father's family, who as worldly-wise travellers of Indian origin have now settled in the USA, New Zealand and Great Britain, young Jani ventured out into the big, wide world. As a Red Bull Junior, he lived in Britain for a short time before moving to America to live with his uncle in Manhattan Beach – the home of Porsche works driver Patrick Long – while pursuing his racing career there.

"Manhattan Beach is right next to Santa Monica and Malibu. For a young person, life there was very sweet. My fitness trainer Helmut Fink lived there too. We had a lot of fun – it was like a non-stop spring break! Okay, maybe not non-stop but it was heading in that direction," laughs the Swiss racer, before adding: "It was wonderful for a while, but at some point, I'd had enough and of course you have to focus on the races."

After just one year on the Pacific coast of America, Jani moved back to Switzerland. "I didn't need the bright lights of Los Angeles or Monaco. I'm perhaps the opposite of many other racing drivers who love such glitz and glamour. I much prefer the tranquillity of my small village," says Jani. His down-to-earth attitude is clearly reflected in his hometown. His house is inconspicuous, his Porsche company car is

hidden in the garage, and rather than expensive designer furniture, his home is furnished with unpretentious fittings from a Swedish furniture store. “That’s how Lauren and I like it. Not showy, just a normal life.”

The story of Neel and Lauren

The story of the empathetic and unfailingly friendly and polite couple from Bellmund is a very special one. Saturday, 1 July 2006: Neel Jani is just 22 years old. After several successes in the junior series, he arrives in Formula 1 as a test and reserve driver. The Swiss racer visits Indianapolis to take part in Friday’s practice session for Toro Rosso the day before the United States Grand Prix. “When the practice session was over, I still had to wait until the qualifying on Saturday. As soon as the two regular drivers had finished the quali, it was always obvious that I wouldn’t get a chance to drive in the race. So I was allowed to stay out on the track a little longer on Saturday evenings,” says the former driver from the Red Bull Junior squad. His employer was famous for putting on spectacular parties before race day. “They organised one in Indianapolis in 2006,” recalls Jani.

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“My ID was checked on entry to prove that I was 21 so I could even be allowed in. At the door, a pretty 19-year-old American named Lauren Boyd caught my eye. I was young, cheeky and naive – so I made a move. I can’t remember exactly what I said, but the ice was broken.” Lauren, who at the time was too young to accompany Neel Jani into the party, kept in touch with the sassy Swiss racing driver. “A relationship developed over the following year,” says the 2016 Le Mans winner. “I drove for the PKV team in what was, at the time, the ChampCar series. And who happened to come from there? Whose father was always at the races? Exactly: Lauren! That was fate,” describes the proud family man.

The story of the Jani couple’s relationship is symbolic of numerous events throughout the life of the experienced racing driver. Fate and karma play an important role. “I’m convinced that there is a connection between cause and effect in all of my actions,” says Jani. “I’m Swiss through and through in character, but of course I inherited certain traits from my father. My Indian roots give me a more philosophical perspective of life. I try to understand – like many other people probably do too – why we humans are the way we are. Why are we here? Why do we choose this or that path? I believe that such things are fate. I don’t follow any religion, but I’ve devised my own explanations for life. And karma plays a big role in this.”

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Career in motorsport

Jani also applies this approach to his motorsport career. Take Le Mans 2016, for example. "We had actually all but lost the race. But special circumstances right before the chequered flag dropped suddenly handed us the chance to win. That was like a kitschy, Hollywood-style gift," recounts Jani, who shared the cockpit of the winning Porsche 919 Hybrid with Marc Lieb and Romain Dumas that year.

That same year, the trio claimed the world championship title, the pinnacle of a career in endurance sport. "And what happens the year after? We're holding a convincing lead at Le Mans. All we have to do is roll over the finish line when all of a sudden the car comes to a standstill due to damage that had never occurred before in the previous four years. Somehow, the positive and the negative balance each other out. You always pay the price. Maybe not right away. Maybe in another life. I believe in that. It all may sound a bit strange, but why shouldn't that be the case?"

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