

LIFE & TIMES FAMILY

Whizzing ahead

Only 16 and he's already a multiple winner on the race track. **Aneeta Sundararaj** hears about Rahul Mayer's hopes and dreams

TODAY, most financial advisors will factor in the cost of an annual holiday when preparing a budget for middle-class families. This is not the case for the Mayer family of Bandar Kinrara, Selangor.

"All our money," says Rajinder Mohan Mayer, 51, "goes into helping our son realise his dream."

Mahinder Kaur, his wife, nods. "Yes, we spend every moment together planning for Rahul's career." They are referring to the dream of their only child, 16-year-old Rahul Raj Mayer, to be a professional race driver.

Rahul, a student of Sri Kuala Lumpur International School, however, sees things differently. "Since my father is working, during the holidays I get to spend a lot of time with my mother," says Rahul, fresh from his win in Round Seven of the Formula Gulf 1000 Championship at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi. As his story unfolds, it's clear he chooses to focus and capitalise on the positive aspects of situations.

Rajinder, whose job as the senior vice president in an insurance company, was born in Petaling Jaya. Echoing the words of many men, he says: "To me, a car is trying to say something. I talk to my cars."

The cars he owns are shiny, powerful and beautiful, but none new. In fact, they're restored classic cars which make them at least 25 years old. No doubt, Rahul shares Rajinder's love for cars. "But," Rajinder insists, "Rahul is interested in speed."

Mahinder, also in the insurance business, admits she was not always interested in cars. Like any devoted mother, though, Mahinder now has an in-depth knowledge of her child's



Rahul aspires to be a professional race driver.

interests and channels her resources to helping him achieve his dreams.

She explains: "I came from a poor family. There were eight of us and very limited funds. I had one new dress a year. It's not that my parents didn't give us things. They did their best. So, when I had a child, I was determined to give him whatever

he wanted."

Surprisingly, she is not afraid for Rahul's safety. "Karting is all open. In a racing car, he's belted in a safe machine. And he's surrounded by good drivers. Unless there's a freak accident, he'll be fine."

Neither the passion for, nor the knowledge about this industry, is enough. An aspiring champion driver needs track exposure. Careful about their finances, Rahul's parents have come up with a few novel ways to help him gain such exposure.

First, Rajinder insisted Rahul compete in a classic car challenge.

Surely, a classic car is nowhere near a racing car in terms of speed. However, Rajinder explains that when restoring a car, everything but the shell is changed.

"In the end, you're left with a high performance machine with a classic frame." Proudly, he adds: "Rahul finished second in the MSS Asian Classic Car Challenge last year."

Next were night races in the Sepang Circuit. "That was such an eye opener and I was scared," says

Rahul. "The only way I can explain it is to say that it's like racing with the Mat Rempit of the track. They don't know racing etiquette and most drivers have no respect for the other person's track space." The lesson Rahul learnt here was that he had to be aware of his surroundings at all times.

Elaborating, Rajinder says: "In professional racing, each person will know where the other is at all times and there's etiquette to follow. When you know where the other driver is, you can predict what he's going to do. For instance, you'll know where he's going to stop. So, you can make sure you stop later."

To help their son achieve such precision driving, Rajinder is determined that Rahul start a programme at the Silverstone Circuit in Britain for Formula 4 in April. "There is no exposure like there is in Europe," he says. "The trainers are excellent and qualified to read the data from the car. You can't fool them." If you try to say something was wrong with the track or your car, they can read the



Rahul Raj Mayer at the Yas Marina Circuit, Abu Dhabi.

data and tell you 'don't lie.' Chips in Mahinder: "If you're wrong, they'll help you improve. They know how to motivate you. We want him to go."

What follows is a spell of silence. Mahinder breaks it by sharing that the costs in such an undertaking can be close to RM500,000. She is frustrated that efforts to seek sponsorship from various corporate bodies have been in vain.

"He's got over 60 trophies; he's talented and has calibre. Yet, ..." Rajinder adds, his voice trailing away.

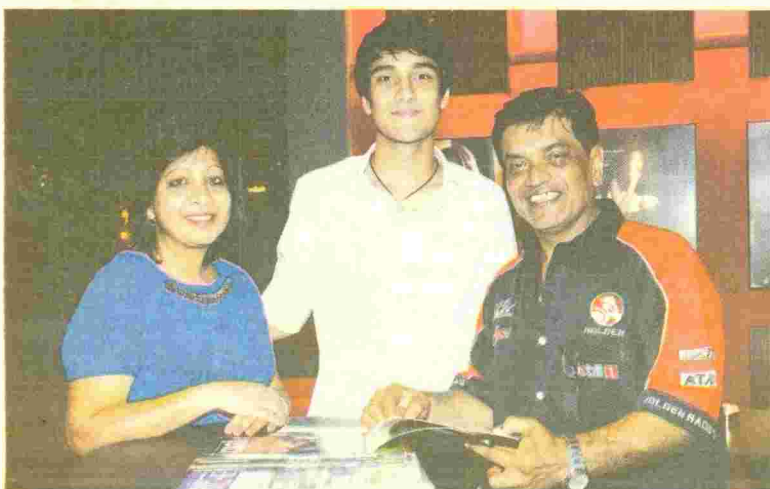
Then, sighing deeply and shaking his head, he says: "Never mind, the universe always gives in abundance. We've come this far. We didn't know what would happen when we went to Abu Dhabi. And see what happened? He won."

Rajinder tells of the family's strong faith. "I always insist that on New Year's Eve, we spend the night at a temple. I tell Rahul that for the other 364 days, he can party. This one night should be spent in quiet contemplation."

Despite admitting that their son is very opinionated and not much of a team player, neither parent wants to withdraw support in any way. In fact, they're doubly pleased when Rahul insists that, even if he's asked to, he will not leave school at this stage. "There is discipline there too," says Rahul. "Stopping is not an option, but delaying is. For example, I can delay going to college, but not school."

Without prompting, he adds: "I am very grateful to my parents for all they've given me. I know the financial burden on them. But, one thing I have is consistency. True, other drivers have lesser issues with money. They have sponsors and they don't need to worry if they do badly. They can afford to do well one year and not the next. Who cares if they do badly? I want to be consistent all the time. And if you look at my record, that's what I've done. Always second place or third. This time, in Abu Dhabi, I came first."

The discussion ends with a sincere wish and hope that Rahul achieves his dream. As Rajinder says: "He's just 16, you know. And he's so talented. It'll be such a waste if he can't pursue his dream just because we've run out of money."



(From left) Mahinder, Rahul and Rajinder.

PICTURE BY ROSDAN WAHID