

Driven to succeed: Isla Mackenzie's tools to keep her wellbeing on the right tracks

Lessons learnt growing up on an Outer Hebrides farm put Isla Mackenzie in pole position for a career in Formula 1 Motorsport. Here, she speaks about her incredible journey to the starting grid and the lessons learnt that continue to keep her firing on all cylinders...

ONE of Isla Mackenzie's earliest memories is "tinkering with grandpa" on some broken piece of machinery on the family's dairy farm on the Isle of Lewis.

She started off driving a child's size quad bike and soon graduated to the real thing, along with tractors. At a young age she was whizzing around the fields in a pick-up.

"All farm kids are resilient, hardy and hardworking," says Isla, adding how lucky she was to have such an outdoorsy upbringing.

As she got older the tinkering notched up a level to swapping engines around, always with the aim of producing as much power as possible. Although she eventually went on to study Motorsport Design Engineering in Glasgow, Isla followed a more traditional pathway to start with.

"Because I was from a farm and knew about animals, I started out doing zoology at Aberdeen but I only lasted three months," recalls Isla.

"Expectations back then, with me coming from a rural area, were traditional. In some ways it was a great relief to finally say that it wasn't for me and I went to the local college to do

engineering, which is what my brother had done. I was the only girl in the class and switched in the second year to the motorsport course at Glasgow."

While at university Isla continued to swap her spanners for high-octane stints behind the steering wheel, racing drift cars.

She secured her first job in Formula 1 with Williams in 2017 and worked in their Research & Development department, testing and developing the cars and their individual components.

She then moved to Mercedes High Performance Powertrains where she tested and developed the Formula 1 power units before moving to the main Mercedes-AMG PETRONAS Formula 1 team in Brackley, Northamptonshire.

She now works perfecting parts for the cars that Lewis Hamilton and George Russell drive at Grand Prix races around the world.

Last year Isla's dream to be a professional racing driver was followed in a BBC documentary called Fast Track to Glory, which showed her moving through the ranks from karts to single seaters with IMC Motorsports.

There have been - and continue to be - plenty of barriers along the way and 30-year-old Isla is convinced the seeds of her drive to succeed were sown back at home on the farm.

"There is no mollycoddling on a farm, whatever goes wrong you have to get up and get on with the jobs,"

recalls Isla. "100% that farming background has helped me on difficult days.

Grandpa would be in the house to wake us up if we missed getting up for our turn to do the 4am start for the milk run."

However, Isla is the first to admit that there are occasions when hard work and determination simply aren't enough which is why she took her foot off the throttle long enough to be interviewed for the Farmstrong Scotland podcast Blether Together.

In it, she confides in Sarah Stephen - host of the series of interviews in support of the Farmstrong wellbeing movement where people from the agricultural community share their stories- that worries about the financial side of her dream to race cars has got her feeling down in the past.





"I really admire the work that Farmstrong is doing, and it was a pleasure to speak to Sarah for the podcast," says Isla.

"Interestingly enough, I was on holiday with my mum in Anglesey when we did the interview and it was during the mandatory two-week summer break that all Formula One teams must observe.

"The whole industry shuts down and there are no work emails or telephone calls and when you return there isn't all that catching up that most people have after holidays - everything has stopped so you start refreshed and without a huge backlog to catch up on.

I've learnt that it's really important to completely disconnect - it's a huge help for everyone's mental health."

A recent work promotion has helped Isla have a new determination and mindset about the money worries that have plagued her driving ambition.

"I've recently made a conscious decision to not let the stress of the financial side of racing take over the fun," explains Isla. "Money is a huge barrier, but I can't change it.

I've just got to do my best with the situation I'm in and not waste time worrying about it."

When she was racing carts, Isla was often the only woman on the grid and she was one of only two females on her course at university. She was the first woman in her work section at Williams.

Also, being so far from home - over 11 hours by car followed by a two-and-a-half-hour ferry crossing - has, on occasion, left her feeling isolated.

"Any sport brings lows as well as highs and as I have got older I've found ways to cope."

On a basic level, Isla lists cornerstones of these coping mechanisms as having a "non-negotiable" seven or eight hours sleep and eating three nutritious meals a day.

Exercising alone, either walking her two dogs or hitting the gym, had been Isla's regime until she put her name down for a charity football match at work.

"I'm no good at football," she laughs. "But it helped me meet new people and in particular I met some girls who also work at Mercedes, in different departments, that I didn't know and we've become friends.

I would definitely say to other people try and find a hobby that's separate to the industry that you work in."

However busy her day has been, Isla makes a point of writing a "positives list" at the end of each day.

"Every night I pick out ten positives from the day and write them down. It's a great way of finishing the day thinking about all the good things and nothing negative."

Isla hints that there are parallels between Formula One and farming in that they are both more of a way of life than a more straightforward job and can be hard to switch off from.

"Formula One is a bit of a bubble, like farming," she says. "For me, getting out on the track is forever in my mind. Which is very much like a farmer who never stops thinking about their animals or crops."

Apart from the strip of tartan, her helmet is adorned with her motto "just keep going." "One area I'm keen to get involved in is historic motor racing such as the one that takes place in Monaco," she explains.

"If I keep knocking on the door it just takes that one person, or brand or business to hear me ..."

To listen to Farmstrong's podcast series - Blether Together - head to <https://www.farmstrongscotland.org.uk/wellbeing-hub/blether-together-the-farmstrong-scotland-podcast>

TAKE NOTICE

CONNECT

BE ACTIVE

KEEP LEARNING

TRIO & TESTED: Three things Isla Mackenzie does to improve her wellbeing

- Getting a good night's sleep - "this is non-negotiable"
- Eating three meals a day and exercising, along with making time to switch off from work
- Keeping positive. Every night, writing down ten positive things that have happened during the day

Farmstrong Scotland Supporters



FARM STRONG
Scotland
www.farmstrongscotland.co.uk