

FULL THROTTLE

Nelson Piquet Jr.'s indefatigable drive and astute maneuvers, on and off the racetrack, are yielding the NASCAR driver some serious offers

Words by Vanessa Pascale

The name Nelson Piquet has carried racecar driver prestige since the 70s when it received international acclaim for his exceptional driving skills and three-time win of the Formula One World Championship in the 80s. Passed on to his son, the appellation has remained on racetracks around the world. You may remember Nelson Jr. from the 2008 scandal—deemed the most significant in sport's history—in which he allegedly crashed his car on purpose under the instruction of a senior team member at the Singapore Grand Prix to help teammate, Fernando Alonso, win. While we didn't get into that during our interview at the Gansevoort Park Avenue Hotel, I did find that nothing comes before his career. [He missed his brother's wedding, he tells me, because of racing.]

Dressed in a gray cable knit turtleneck, tailored beige pants and a rich chocolate brown jacket, Nelson Jr. looks as if he has stepped out of a page in a fashion magazine. The handsome 28-year-old Brazilian racecar driver is in Manhattan to take in Tommy Hilfiger's fashion show (its Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week)—how else?—from the front row. Since his arrival, he's been fitted for bespoke garb by the renowned designer, enjoyed some good food and had some time to relax with his girlfriend. He categorizes this respite as one of leisure, but we are meeting for business, which just goes to show his dedication.

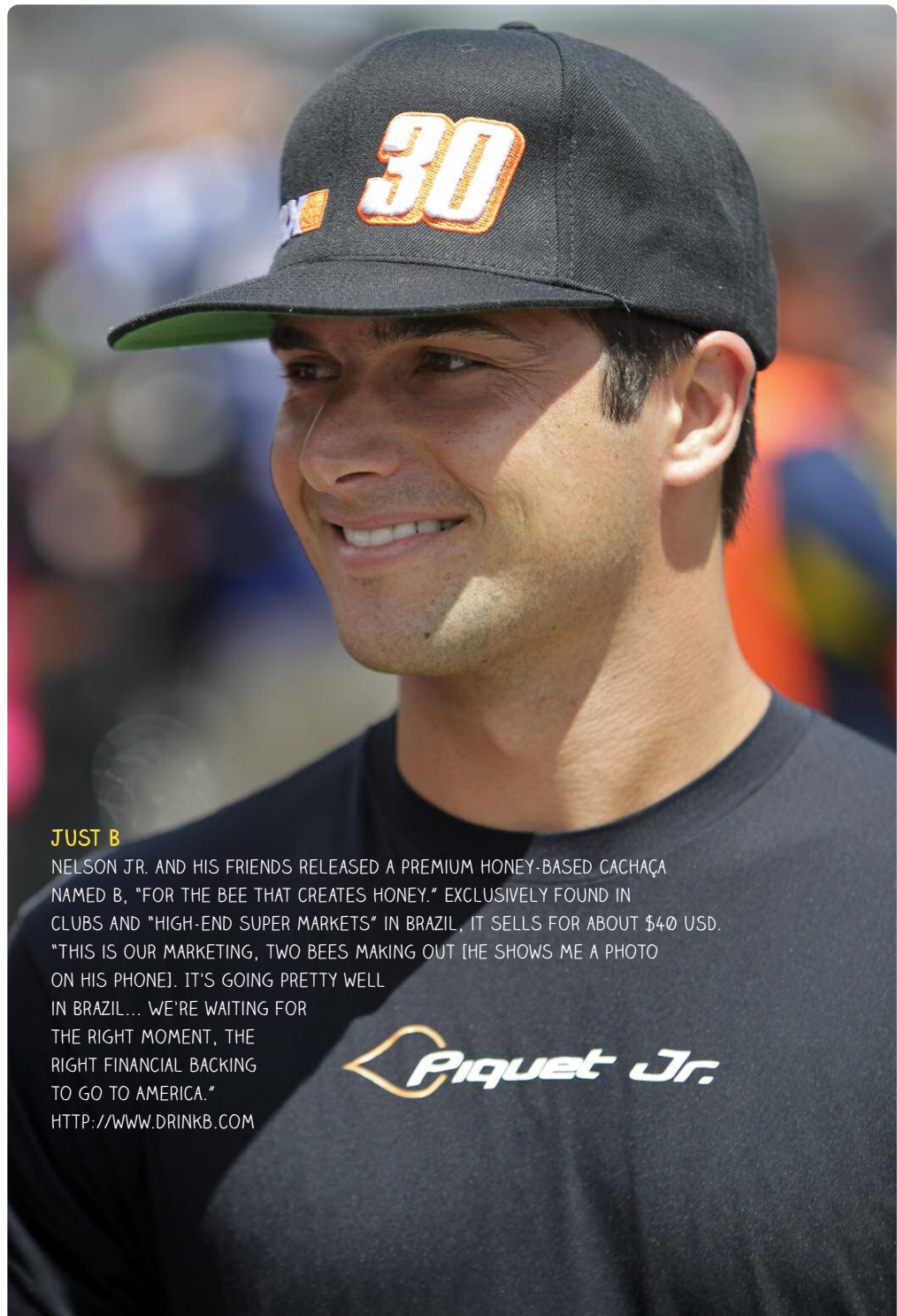
More than just a racecar driver, Nelson is a savvy businessman who is very aware that the sport demands more from him than simply being the fastest. "You need to work in all areas. It's very different from the 80s when my father raced. It was purely racing—nothing else. Nowadays, there's a bit more involvement of fans, the lifestyle is more public. It's an area where a lot of professionals may not be as good as they should be in their profession—as a racecar driver, as a football player—but they're very good at the media part—the other part of the job. Sometimes that helps you so much. You have some athletes that are more successful than others by just being a bit smarter."

Ron Howard shone some light on the world of racing with his film *Rush* last year, highlighting the rivalry between drivers James Hunt (played by Chris Hemsworth) and Niki Lauda (played by Daniel Brühl) during the 1976 Formula One racing season. The trailer projected a montage fraught with champagne showers and fast cars set to Flux Pavilion's song, "I Can't Stop"—which was enough to pique my interest.

I ask Nelson Jr. if he feels that the movie has brought more attention to racing. "I think it reminds a lot of people about the old days, of how it was fun, how it was different... There was so much passion involved and now it's a bit different. It's a bit cold, much more corporate less of a sport, more of a business. Hopefully it reminds people of what this sport really is. What the drivers would love it to

really be: pure racing. Unfortunately, like everything, even soccer, everything's become more of a business than it was twenty-thirty years ago."

From Formula One to the NASCAR Nationwide series, where Nelson Jr. presently drives the #30 Qualcomm/Autotrac Chevrolet Camaro for Turner Scott Motorsports (he has won both the Nationwide Series and Camping World Truck Series), and is



JUST B

NELSON JR. AND HIS FRIENDS RELEASED A PREMIUM HONEY-BASED CACHAÇA NAMED B, "FOR THE BEE THAT CREATES HONEY." EXCLUSIVELY FOUND IN CLUBS AND "HIGH-END SUPER MARKETS" IN BRAZIL, IT SELLS FOR ABOUT \$40 USD. "THIS IS OUR MARKETING, TWO BEES MAKING OUT [HE SHOWS ME A PHOTO ON HIS PHONE]. IT'S GOING PRETTY WELL IN BRAZIL... WE'RE WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT, THE RIGHT FINANCIAL BACKING TO GO TO AMERICA."
[HTTP://WWW.DRINKB.COM](http://www.drinkb.com)

beginning to focus on the rapidly growing racing series: Global RallyCross and Formula E. Global RallyCross' sprint-style race -- a cross between rally and supercross, according to their website-- features 10-15 minute heats. "It's more in the extreme sports of racecars. They'll go downtown; build a track with jumps, with all kinds of cars that will have to jump over high obstacles and do a race that is very quick, very emotional, very dynamic."

Unlike NASCAR's 3-hour-long race, Global RallyCross appeals to the younger generations' waning attention spans by hosting a succession of short races. "NASCAR is keeping their older fans, but they're not building up new fans because the races are very long. From a perspective of a person that doesn't really follow it, you could call it a bit boring if you don't know the driver or the history.... You have bigger names, like Travis Pastrana, Tanner Foust, Ken Block, who have a much larger following than a lot of the NASCAR drivers," says Nelson Jr.

Prompted to enter into Global RallyCross because of a great offer he received, Nelson Jr. will continue to compete in NASCAR, as well as will be participating in the

network, he offers a select 10-15 affluent executives from all over the world an authentic racecar experience at Homestead-Miami Speedway. "It's an ongoing thing. You have to work all around: practicing, meeting people, working media --it's nonstop," says Nelson Jr.

Entering into several different series allows Nelson Jr. to spend more time on the track, which can be limited due to a number of factors. Unlike soccer, a sports comparison Nelson Jr. likes to use, you can't go to the racetrack and practice everyday, because of regulations, budget and time constraints. "You have to rent out the track, pay for all the personnel to go, the engine, the car --it's a big expense. Nowadays, computers are getting more developed, so you can rely more on the computer. Drivers everyday are starting to rely a bit more on the computer... Obviously, it depends series to series --some championships you can test five days a year, some of them you cannot test any. Some you can do whatever you want, or the team has a budget where they cannot go everyday and are limited by how many sponsors they have," he explains.

Being the son of a man ranked among the greatest Formula One drivers, Nelson Jr. had the supreme advantage of learning from a master of the sport. Is there any pressure to live up to his father's legacy? "I feel more pressure, because I want to do well. I've had my records that I've done, but you always want more. It's never enough. You always want to be better," says Nelson Jr. As a Brazilian driver, he has been the first from his country to accomplish a number of things in America: the first to score the most points in the first F1 season, the first to ever win a NASCAR race and "a hundred starts of NASCAR, which is by far, more than any other NASCAR driver," he tells me.

When he's in the driver's seat speeding down the track and hugging the curves, is he ever afraid? "No." What is going through your mind? "Every race you're as concentrated as you can be. I don't know if that's the right

word. The more concentrated you can be, the better it is. Like every human being, you always have problems: personal, family, financial. When you get to the race-track, you need to be able to forget about everything, which is a very difficult task... When you win a race, when you're better than everybody, it's a feeling --you cannot describe how accomplished you feel."

Follow Nelson Jr. on Twitter @NelsonPiquet. **ML**



WHAT WOULD FANS BE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT ABOUT YOU?

"THAT I'M PROBABLY HOME (HOME IS BRASÍLIA AND CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA) ONCE EVERY TWO WEEKS FOR ONE DAY." HE LAUGHS. "IF I COULD BE AT THE TRACK EVERY DAY, I WOULD. I ALWAYS PUT MY RACING FIRST PLACE, REGARDING FRIENDS, FAMILY. THAT'S MY PASSION --WHAT I DEDICATE 100% OF MY TIME TO."

new worldwide series: FIA Formula E Championship. "The calendars don't really clash. It's only 10 races. Its 10 races with RallyCross, and then NASCAR would be 5-10 races --I'm trying to be a little bit more diverse."

In the coming months, Nelson Jr. has the Go-Kart Championship in Florida, Stock Car Brasil (for the first time), and in an effort to bolster sponsorship and build his

MOST MEMORABLE RACE

"MY FIRST WIN IN EUROPE WHEN I WAS 17; I THINK I WAS THE YOUNGEST DRIVER TO WIN A RACE IN ENGLAND. THE BRITISH CHAMPIONSHIP, WHICH IS THE PATH TO GO TO FORMULA ONE, I DID THE RECORD, WHICH NOBODY BEAT UNTIL TODAY. I LED EVERY PRACTICE, I GOT POLE POSITION, I WON BOTH RACES, I HAD BEST LAP IN BOTH RACES. THAT WAS BACK IN 2006, NOBODY HAD MANAGED TO BEAT THE RECORD. IT WAS ONE OF THE ONLY WEEKENDS MY FATHER WAS THERE, SO IT WAS VERY EMOTIONAL TO HAVE HIM OVER THERE

WITH ME WATCHING ALL THIS." DO YOU THINK THAT PUSHED YOU TO WIN?

"NO, I JUST THINK IT JUST WORKED OUT FOR HIM TO BE THERE. WHEN YOU'RE INSIDE THE CAR, YOU'RE NOT THINKING OF ANYTHING ELSE. JUST TRYING TO FEEL THE CAR AS MUCH AS YOU CAN, YOU PROBABLY DON'T EVEN BLINK YOUR EYE FOR AN HOUR. MY FIRST PODIUM IN FORMULA ONE, THAT WAS ALSO, WOW! MY FIRST WIN IN NASCAR WAS AMAZING AS WELL. IT'S FEELINGS YOU WISH YOU COULD PUT INTO WORDS."