

Wheeler's driving ambition is leading to the World Rally Championships

MOTORSPORT

JACK WILMOT

TORQUAY'S young rally driving sensation, Chris Wheeler, is going all out to land a place in the World Rally Championship within five years. After that, the 20-year-old says, he will be too old.

Wheeler is one of the up-and-coming stars in the British motorsport world and certainly one to look out for in the future as he strives to make the step up into the World Rally Championships.

Having learned to drive at the age of 11, Wheeler began racing rally cars at 15 following in his father Steve Wheeler's tracks – and last year he won one of British rallying's Stars of the Future awards.

Now he believes the time is right to move up a gear.

"I've been around motorsport all my life, ever since I was little," he said. "My dad has competed in all sorts of motorsport events and he began rallying in 2004, which is really what inspired me to take up the sport."

"I feel I'm getting better and better every year. I want to be the next Colin McCrae."

There is an added pressure on Wheeler's young shoulders however as he only has a limited time frame in which to realise his dream and take part in events on the WRC calendar – such as the Monte Carlo Rally and the gruelling Rally of Germany.

He said: "My target over the next few years is to make the World Rally Championships by the age of 25. Travelling all over the world and racing against the world's best would be a dream come true."

"It has to be before I'm 25 otherwise it's too late. They always want the young fast drivers, which hopefully I'm proving to be."

Wheeler, a former Westlands and South Devon College student, has been making huge impressions in the United Kingdom and is currently taking part in the British Rally Championships, which is the highest rally category in Britain.

His performances have seen him collect one of the Stars of the Future awards after he became one of the youngest ever racers to compete at the pinnacle of the sport in Britain. It's all going to plan for the young driver.

Wheeler, a vehicle technician by trade, currently drives an M-Sport Ford Fiesta MSI and is being watched closely by the M-Sport Ford World Rally team who are on the lookout for the next big thing.

This season has really been his breakthrough year and he stands the chance of finishing second overall this season if he continues his good form going into the next events.

"So far I believe I am on target to reach the World Rally Championships," he said. "This season the car has been great and we have the pace



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to challenge. There are always scouts watching for the big teams on the WRC and you have to impress them to make it as well as having the determination."

His team is a bit of a family affair with dad Steve acting as his manager and mechanic and mum Dawn his advisor. Alex Woodmore and Mike Yates are his mechanics, his PA is Kirsty Jarrett and his co-driver is Yan Griffiths.

The next race will be around the streets of the Isle of Man in the International Ranks Rally on the weekend of September 11-13.

"The first stage is a night stage around the streets of the Isle of Man which will be a challenge," he said.

"I can't wait to race through the crowds, it's awesome to drive through all the people supporting you and with this rally being televised on Sky Sports it brings in more people to our sport which is great. That's one of the things that I can't get over – the support that I get and have got over the years has been fantastic."

"If I do well on the Isle of Man I can place a highest of second overall but there won't be a British Rally Championship next year as the Motorsport Association UK are restructuring so I have to do the best I can this year."

The restructuring of the sport in Britain means Wheeler will be looking for other opportunities in Europe as he tries to make the next step into



RACE ACE: Chris Wheeler, a vehicle technician from Torquay, is currently making a name for himself on the British rally circuit

TORQUIL MACLEOD

European rallying. He said: "I've got a lot of options for 2015, one being maybe entering into the Belgian Rally Championships – but there will still be a few events in the UK for our sponsors so hopefully I can impress them when I get the chance."

"This season hasn't gone too bad. We started with a crash in Carlisle but since then I've been scoring good points."

"It's fantastic to see all my support and hopefully they stick with me as I move to where I want to be, racing in the WRC."

"I know I'm only 20 but what I would say to any budding rally driver is you have to put your name out there as much as possible, make sure you work really hard and be very determined to succeed."

"There's plenty of long nights spent working on the car, hours for interviews and PR stuff, but it's all part of the job of being a driver."

"If you want to go to the top you have to be eager to do everything not just jump behind the wheel."