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HAMILTON'S BID TO MATCH SENNA

**What a third title would
mean for Lewis**



PLUS

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a world rally car



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POLE POSITION

Mercedes dominance won't tarnish F1 season

SHORTLY AFTER WRITING THESE WORDS, I'LL HAVE THE privilege of heading off to Melbourne for the first race of the 2015 Formula 1 season. All the indications are that Mercedes has comfortably the strongest car... cue groans from the gallery.

But there are reasons to be very optimistic about the season ahead, even if the outcome may prove to be very similar to last year's. McLaren-Honda seems to have packed a whole season's worth of storylines into a few weeks of testing thanks to its trials, tribulations and Fernando Alonso's crash. Ferrari has clearly upped its game, and there are high hopes for both Sebastian Vettel and Kimi Raikkonen. And at Williams, there is every indication that it can pick up where it left off last year.

Remember last season, when Red Bull headed to Australia with everyone expecting finishing, let alone going quickly, to be beyond it? Well, pre-season has gone better, but exactly where the Renault engine package stands this year remains to be seen. In many ways, Daniel Ricciardo is the real wild card heading into the weekend.

So for those anticipating a dull season... prepare to be disappointed. And enthralled.



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COVER STORY

"The third title is not what gives me the motivation. I just love driving the car"

Lewis Hamilton, p14



XPB IMAGES

FIND US ON



Cover images: XPB Images; McKlein

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MCKLEIN



THE BIG PICTURE

Ott Tanak and co-driver Raigo Molder head for dry land after their Ford Fiesta plunges into a reservoir during Rally Mexico. Tanak writes about the experience on page 13

Photographer www.wrc.com



This week in F1

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VAN DER GARDE IN SAUBER DISPUTE

The Australian courts were due to rule yesterday (Wednesday), after AUTOSPORT closed for press, on a legal dispute between Giedo van der Garde and Sauber over a 2015 contract.

Van der Garde has taken legal action against the Swiss squad, claiming that it must allow him to drive one of its cars in the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

But Sauber has argued that a contract it had with him was not valid. It also suggested at a hearing earlier this week that

allowing him to race with no testing would be dangerous.

Local media quoted the team's lawyer Rodney Garratt QC as saying: "Sauber could not allow him to race... it would be reckless and dangerous to do otherwise. It would result in an unacceptable risk of physical harm or even death."

The Supreme Court of Victoria listened to the arguments of both sides and said that it would rule on the matter at 10am on Wednesday, just two days before first practice for the race.

FOR THE LATEST ON THE VAN DER GARDE SITUATION SEE AUTOSPORT.COM

Pirelli announces tyre choices

Pirelli has allocated the same tyre compounds for the opening four grands prix as it did last year. F1's tyre supplier will take the soft and

medium tyres to the Australian, Chinese and Bahrain Grands Prix, while the medium and hards will be used in Malaysia.



King does not want to rule F1

Former Sainsbury's CEO Justin King, who is interim chairman of the revived Manor F1 team, has ruled out any role in the running of grand prix racing for now.

"I have always been clear, I have never applied for a job where there isn't a vacancy – and there isn't a vacancy," said King. "I intend to do something a bit different from what I have in the past.

"I am working on a few things – my interest in the sport is now because I am involved in Manor. I understand why people made a connection [with F1] but that is because of my son."



For all the breaking news, visit **AUTOSPORT.COM**



New helmet rules clarified

The FIA has established the phrasing of new Formula 1 regulations this year that will prevent drivers from changing their helmet liveries during the season.

As part of an effort to make it easier for fans to recognise drivers in their cars, the sport's chiefs have banned F1's stars from regularly tweaking their helmet colours.

A revised Article 21.1 of F1's sporting regulations for 2015 states: "In order for drivers to be easily distinguished from one another whilst they are on the track, the crash helmet of each driver must be presented in substantially the same livery at every event during a championship season."

The FIA has also confirmed that drivers' numbers, which they keep for their entire career, will become available again once someone has been out of the sport for two full campaigns.

The rules state: "A driver's career in Formula 1 will be deemed to have ended if he does not participate in an event for two entire consecutive championship seasons."



MERHI GETS MANOR DRIVE FOR AUSTRALIAN OPENER

Roberto Merhi has landed the second seat at Manor for this weekend's Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne.

The 23-year-old Spaniard, who drove in three free practice sessions for Caterham last year, will race alongside Will Stevens.

"It is a big responsibility but I feel ready to make this step in my career and to show that I can make an important contribution to developing a team," said Merhi, who finished third in last year's

Formula Renault 3.5 Series and last week was announced as a driver with Pons Racing for his second season in the category.

Merhi hopes that a good performance in the early F1 races can open the door to secure backing that will allow him to take part in further grands prix later in the campaign.

Manor has also confirmed that GP2 rookie Jordan King, son of the team's interim chairman Justin, will be its development driver this year as he prepares for a full-time step up to F1.

REMEMBER WHEN

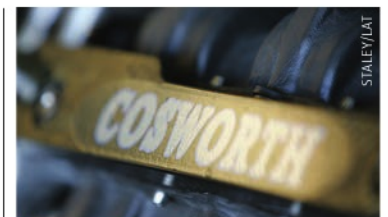
Roberto Merhi battled Daniel Ricciardo, Valtteri Bottas and Jean-Eric Vergne in a hotly contested Formula Renault Eurocup. Bottas came through to take the title.



When I think I'm not what you just said, 'sharp', then I would say to the people who own the company, 'I think the time has come, you have got to find somebody', or, 'I have found somebody for you'



Bernie Ecclestone shows no signs of being ready to step back from his role in running F1



Ecclestone eyes customer cars

Formula 1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone insists that grand prix racing's spending problems could be solved by making customer chassis available.

In a lengthy interview with the *Mail on Sunday*, Ecclestone said he wants smaller teams to be able to buy a chassis for £15 million and run a Cosworth or Renault engine. This is a step beyond the 'core-car' idea that has been under discussion recently.

Ecclestone said: "Some of the other teams are saying, 'Well, this isn't F1, this would be downgrading Formula 1.'"

"I can't see that. I'd call these four or five teams that we supplied chassis to the 'team championship'. They would all be in the team championship but they wouldn't be able to win the constructors' championship."

DTM PUSHING FOR SUPERLICENCE POINTS

The manufacturers competing in the DTM – Audi, Mercedes and BMW – are lobbying for the FIA to reconsider its new superlicence system, which

awards points to drivers that are tallied up to determine whether they are eligible to race in F1. The three manufacturers have jointly written

to the FIA requesting that the rules, which currently award no points for success in the German-based touring car series, be revised.



STUDENT PROFILE

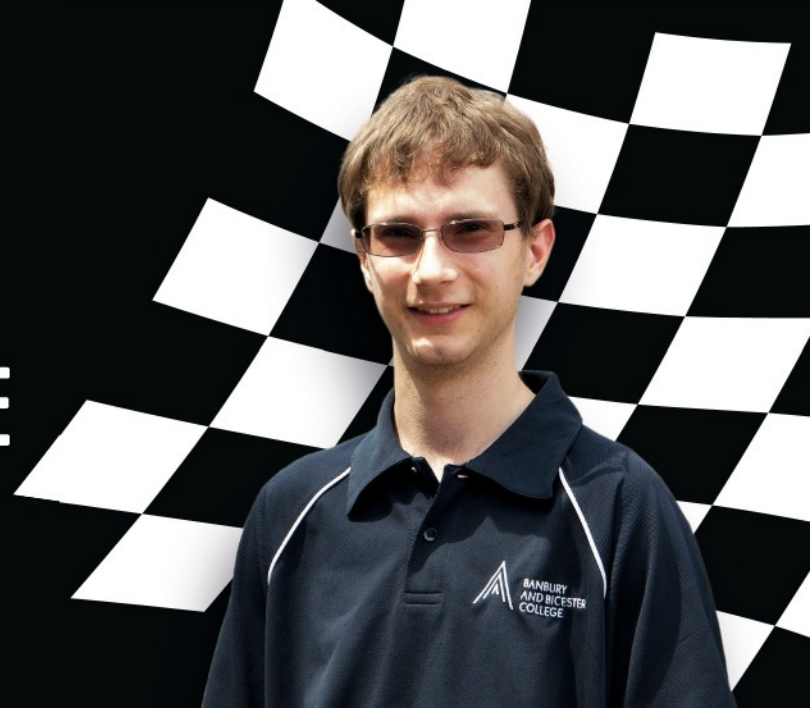
FACTFILE

Student's name: Dan East

Course: Foundation Degree (Engineering) in
Motorsports: Performance and Automotive Technology

Location: Banbury and Bicester College
- Bicester campus

Year: Second



» What are your career plans for when you have completed your study at college?

I plan to do the BEng course at Oxford Brookes to achieve the full honours degree. I then want to do an MSc before going on to work with a firm such as Williams as a race engineer. I want to be able to work in a hands-on role, but then use my qualifications to make the move into management later on.

» How has being at college changed your life?

The course is helping to make my dreams come true – it is making everything I have planned for possible. It is also giving me the knowledge and excuse to build my own rally car, which forms part of the course assessment.

» What made you choose to study at an Activate Learning college, rather than somewhere else?

I had completed part of my GCSEs at Banbury and Bicester College, taking part in a day release scheme from school to achieve a Level 1 Diploma in Engineering. While I was at the college I got to know the staff and students and made up my mind that I wanted to come back and do the foundation degree.

» Why did you select this programme of study?

I have known that I wanted a career in the motorsports industry since the age of about eight and I have carefully planned my route through. I have been part of Thame Motorsports Club for the last three years and want to progress to become an F1 race engineer. This programme suits my style of learning, because it is very practical, and combines my skills in engineering with my love of motorsports.

» What do you enjoy about studying for this particular programme?

You do 150 hours of work experience during the programme and my first placement has been with Williams F1. Prior to the work experience placement I completed a one-week composites course (one of the course modules) which meant I could work in their composites department and be trusted to get on with the job. I felt part of the team and the experience has confirmed that this is the right career path for me. The college has excellent links with employers – it seems like they know everyone in the industry – so that really helps when it comes to building real experience.

» What skills do you seek that will help you in your chosen career?

The Level 1 engineering course taught me about basic brakes and suspension systems on road cars, but this course is preparing me to work with F1 cars. We cover race preparation and aerodynamics and you can develop your composite skills using the on-campus facilities. The skills are completely aligned to working in the industry.



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Jonathan Noble

F1's newshound

Testing is done; the season opener is imminent. Mercedes has held on to its advantage, but we don't know what to expect long term

Formula 1 is notorious for its teams rarely finding anything to agree upon. But, as the garage doors came down at Barcelona at the end of testing, there was pretty much universal consensus about one thing: the best has got better this year, which means that Mercedes is everyone's out-and-out favourite for early glory.

Barring an unexpected incident or disastrous reliability, no one in F1 is expecting anything other than a front-low lockout for Nico Rosberg and Lewis Hamilton in this weekend's opening round in Australia.

A stunning soft-tyre run from Rosberg on the Friday afternoon of the last test that was 1.2 seconds faster than the next-quickest runner – Williams driver Valtteri Bottas – made everyone sit up and take notice of Mercedes' potential advantage. And Bottas was on the same compound of Pirelli tyres...

When Jenson Button was told that Rosberg was unhappy with the feel of his car on that quick lap, all he could do was smile. "I think he might be a bit spoilt, that one," said the 2009 world champion. "Mercedes is miles in front of anyone."

Most worrying for the Silver Arrows' opposition is that Mercedes led the Barcelona times without ever trying the super-softs. Its winter-topping best lap was done on softs so, even if the car was running an ultra-low qualifying fuel load, there could easily be another six to eight tenths of a second in performance

manufacturer would have liked. Niggling reliability problems – not to mention Fernando Alonso's Barcelona crash – have hampered it hugely and it's heading into the season well behind schedule.

Nothing proved just how disrupted its winter has been than the fact that Force India managed a mere 31 miles fewer with its new VJM08 than McLaren did with the MP4-30 through all 12 days of pre-season testing, despite Force India having its freshly built contender ready only for the final two and a half days of running.

McLaren may well be facing some pretty tough times at the start of the campaign, but still there remains a feeling that it's a bit of a sleeping giant, that, when things kick in eventually, the results will be good.

On track we have seen very little of the full potential of the car and engine. But off track there are clues about why there remains this mood of quiet confidence at McLaren, despite the current headaches, about what can be achieved in the latter stages of the campaign.

Button and Alonso have both talked of promise in the package, but it was Kevin Magnussen who gave us some firmer insight at Barcelona about the team's positivity. Comparing the MP4-30 with its predecessor, he said: "It's not an evolution of last year's car, it feels completely different.

"It's very consistent, very predictable, and very

"The conviction of how Mercedes will perform is in contrast to the uncertainty over McLaren"

that we haven't yet seen from the W06.

While one-off stunning laps never tell the true story of testing, the longer-run data is just as promising for Merc. Race simulations from major rivals Williams, Red Bull and Ferrari all appeared quite close at times, but they were around 0.7 seconds per lap adrift of what Mercedes was capable of. That's not the sort of gap that's going to be closed in the short term.

Testing may have given us a firm answer about what's going to happen at the front of the grid in Melbourne, but it has also thrown up a huge question mark about how things are going to develop longer term. The conviction on how F1 is going to shape up for Mercedes at the start of the year is in complete contrast to the total uncertainty we have about what McLaren will be capable of by the end of the season.

The renewal of McLaren-Honda's relationship has not gone anywhere near as well as either team or engine

smooth in a way. Just driveable. Whereas last year's car probably had more downforce, it was much more sharp, on the limit and unpredictable.

"On many occasions that was a problem, because when you wear out your tyres and the rear starts to move around more, you want a predictable car."

It's the best confirmation yet that the influence of chief engineer Peter Prodromou – who was snaffled away from Red Bull last year – in abandoning McLaren's old mantra of chasing ultimate theoretical downforce could be ready to pay off in delivering a car its drivers can use at the limit.

There's a long way to go for the boys in Woking still, and even making the chequered flag is going to be an achievement in the early races.

Mercedes may be out of sight of everyone for now, but it's just a question of how long it's going to take the opposition – including McLaren – to close the gap over the course of the coming season. ❧

This week in motorsport

NEW AUDI'S MAJOR UPGRADE

The only carbon components of Audi's 2015 World Endurance Championship challenger retained from its predecessor are the monocoque and the gearbox casing, according to the marque's head of LMP1 Christopher Reinke.

The latest car to carry the R18 e-tron quattro name is an evolution of last year's Le Mans 24 Hours winner, but Audi, said Reinke, has "dug deep into areas of development that showed potential. The structural spine of the car is the same, so it is an evolutionary step that builds on

the potential that we saw last year."

Andre Lotterer described the new R18 as "a good step over last year's car". The first 2015-spec R18, running in a carbon test livery, undertook its second test last week at Sebring, completing almost 4000 miles over the course of five days.

DTM star Mike Rockenfeller, winner at Le Mans in 2010, will return to Audi's LMP1 squad after a two-year absence to be reserve driver for the 24 Hours. Audi has yet to reveal details of the car's hybrid system or the megajoule class in which it will run.



10

Honda unveils Indy aero kit

Honda has released the first renderings of the aero kit that it will use on road/street courses and short ovals in the 2015 IndyCar season.

The bodykit, which is scheduled to make its public track debut alongside that of rival Chevrolet in the two-day open test at Barber Motorsports Park

next week, will race for the first time in the season opener at St Petersburg.

Meanwhile, the grid for IndyCar's curtain raiser came a step closer to completion this week after GP2 veteran Stefano Coletti was confirmed as Sebastien Bourdais' team-mate at KV Racing Technology.



Speed, Duval on Miami grid

Ex-Formula 1 driver Scott Speed and Audi Le Mans star Loic Duval will become the latest drivers to join the Formula E grid in Miami this weekend.

Speed (right) joins Andretti Autosport alongside Jean-Eric Vergne, while Duval replaces Oriol Servia at Dragon Racing to partner Jerome d'Ambrosio.



NEW CIVIC IN TWO WEEKS

Honda will reveal its 2015 British Touring Car Championship challenger at the series' Donington Park media day on March 24.

BTCC champions Matt Neal and Gordon Shedden have been retained for a sixth successive year as team-mates as the Team Dynamics-run factory entry prepares to

return to a hatchback Civic.

Last year's Civic Tourer became the first estate car to win a BTCC race, and Shedden said: "It was fantastic for us and created history in many ways, and I'm sure what we have planned for this year will generate a bigger buzz still."

For all the breaking news, visit **AUTOSPORT.COM**

Nissan curtails Sebring test

Nissan was forced to call an early end to testing at Sebring last week with its new GT-R LM NISMO World Endurance Championship contender.

The radical LMP1 ran at the Florida circuit on Monday and Tuesday before a component failure resulted in the Japanese manufacturer abandoning a test that could have continued until Friday.

GT-R LM technical director Ben Bowlby said: "It was actually a very minor thing,

but we just don't have a spare here." He refused to specify the exact component that failed, but said it was "to do with the engine mounting".

Porsche, meanwhile, tested the aerodynamic configuration in which its 919 Hybrid will start the WEC season over five days at the Motorland Aragon circuit. Toyota is testing its 2015-spec TSO40 HYBRID at the Spanish venue this week.



Quick men bolster LMP2 ranks

GT stars Laurens Vanthoor and Kevin Estre have been called up to make their Le Mans 24 Hours debut in June by the OAK Racing LMP2 team.

Vanthoor and Estre, factory GT drivers with Audi and McLaren respectively, will drive one of OAK's Ligier-Honda JSP2s.

OAK team principal Philippe Dumas said: "These guys are at the highest level of GT driver and have a big future in endurance." They will join fellow Le Mans

rookie Chris Cumming, a regular in the one-make PC prototype class in the United SportsCar series in the US.

Meanwhile, British GP3 and Formula Renault 3.5 race winner Nick Yelloly has made a full-time switch to LMP2 in 2015, with an attack on the European Le Mans Series and the Le Mans 24 Hours driving for the Jota Gibson-Zytek P2 team. He takes the place of Nissan-bound Harry Tincknell.



KIWI JOINS McLAREN GT

V8 Supercars star Shane van Gisbergen has joined McLaren's roster of factory GT drivers for 2015.

The New Zealander, who will switch from the Tekno Holden team to Triple Eight for 2016, is the second addition to McLaren GT's line-up this year after Bruno Senna and joins the Brazilian, Alvaro Parente, Rob Bell and Kevin Estre on the British manufacturer's books.

It is likely that van Gisbergen will race in a two-car attack on the Blancpain Endurance Series in a pair of VonRyan Racing McLaren 650S GT3s.

BIG NUMBER

21

Number of all-pro line-ups expected in the Blancpain Endurance Series entry when it is announced this week, almost double the 2014 tally.

In brief

STOCKINGER'S STATUS

Filipino Marlon Stockinger returns to Status Grand Prix for his first GP2 campaign in 2015. Stockinger, who has spent two seasons in Formula Renault 3.5, was a GP3 race winner for the team. Another GP3 victor to go GP2 is Romanian Robert Visoiu, who has joined Rapax.

CHARGES DROPPED

Criminal charges have been dropped in the case of Kurt Busch's alleged assault of his ex-girlfriend last year, but he remains under an indefinite suspension by NASCAR. Delaware state prosecutors said that there was insufficient evidence against the 2004 Cup champion to establish the required burden of proof.

E INVESTMENT

Formula E has secured investment from two companies controlled by US media mogul John Malone. Liberty Global, owner of Virgin Media broadband in the UK, and Discovery Communications, which controls Eurosport as well as owning the Discovery Channel, have become shareholders in Hong Kong-based Formula E Holdings.

RACING LINES IN BTCC

Volkswagen Racing Cup frontrunner Stewart Lines steps up to the BTCC this season. He will drive Houseman Racing's Toyota Avensis this season in place of 2013 Jack Sears Trophy champion Lea Wood.

Senna and Prost team up

The names Senna and Prost are to team up later this month for the first time since the 1989 Formula 1 season.

Bruno Senna, nephew of Ayrton, and Nicolas Prost, son of Alain, will both drive for the Prati-Donaduzzi team in the opening round of Brazil's V8 Stock Car series at Goiania on March 22.

They will partner Antonio Pizzonia and up-and-comer Julio Campos respectively in the mini-enduro, in which each series regular is joined by an 'international' co-driver.

Jacques Villeneuve, the 1997 world champion, will also take part, along with fellow ex-F1 drivers Nelson Piquet Jr and Lucas di Grassi.



Ellinas tops; Stoneman shunts

Strakka Racing's Tio Ellinas edged out Fortec hope Oliver Rowland for fastest time in last week's two-day Formula Renault 3.5 test at Jerez, while Red Bull junior Dean Stoneman escaped unhurt from a monster shunt.

The leading times were all set on day one, although Ellinas again topped the order on Friday, when the field ran in low-downforce trim. This included

Stoneman, the DAMS team having finished repairing his car at 6.30am.

Third and fourth fastest overall were respectively Roberto Merhi and Jazeman Jaafar. While Merhi's FR3.5 deal with Pons Racing could now be in doubt (see p7), Malaysian Jaafar will contest his third season in the series with Fortec Motorsport. He finished 10th in the rankings with ISR in 2014.

WELSH DUO BATTLE OCON

Former McLaren AUTOSPORT BRDC Award winner Matt Parry and fellow Welshman Seb Morris both graduate from Formula Renault to the GP3 Series this season.

Parry steps up from the FR2.0 Eurocup with Koiranen GP, while Morris takes a berth with Status Grand Prix.

They will come up against reigning European Formula 3 champion Esteban Ocon, whose deal with ART Grand Prix was due to be announced this week. The French team has also confirmed Marvin Kirchhofer, who stays for a second year.

Status has also captured Thai Sandy Stuvik, the reigning Euroformula Open champ. Jenzer Motorsport retains Matheo Tuscher and brings Ralph Boschung up from ADAC Formel Masters. Kevin Ceccon switches to Arden Motorsport.

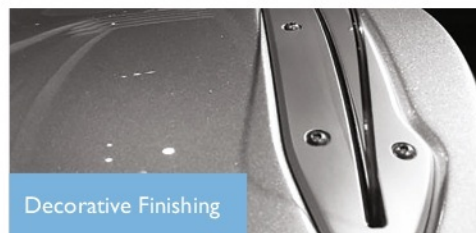
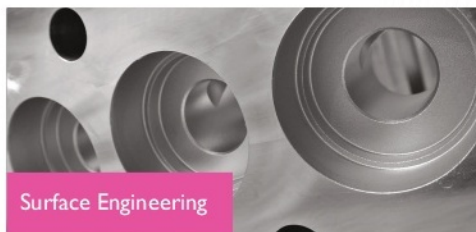
Good design sometimes needs a little help...

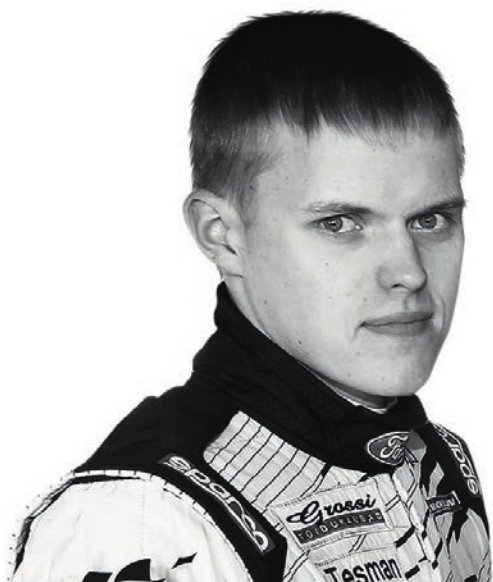
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Ott Tänak

The Inside Line

Swimming in a Mexican lake with helmet and race suit, car sinking fast – a weird way to start the rally weekend. Thankfully no one was hurt

When I started Rally Mexico last week, I was ready for a fight. I had a good place on the road for the first day and Raigo [Molder, co-driver] and I wanted to use it. The ceremonial start in Guanajuato is definitely the best of the season and this year it was fantastic. But I guess that's not why you're reading this page in AUTOSPORT...

So, Friday morning, we went to the start of the first gravel stage of the event, Los Mexicanos. Not the longest of the day, but a good way to get us warmed up.

Just over two kilometres in, there was a short right corner with a small compression. Maybe I braked too hard in the compression and something broke in the front-right; the wheel came open and I couldn't steer in the next left. We dropped down from the edge of the road and into the water.

I didn't see the lake from the road, but when we rolled off the edge, then I saw water hit the windscreen. In the first second it didn't look too bad, but the car started to sink quite fast. I shouted to Raigo that we didn't have much time and we had to get out.

He didn't really need telling that!

We got the seatbelts open, but when we opened the doors the water filled the car in just a few seconds. When we got out, obviously I was on one side of the car and Raigo on the other. I didn't know if he was out, so I was trying to go down under the water to check, but with the helmet and everything on, it wasn't possible.



found out we were OK. There was no radio, no people, we had no sign to show to the other drivers. You feel a bit like a person without hands because you really can't do anything at all, you are alone in the middle of nowhere.

It was an incredible feeling to get back to service to see the team again, really a lot of big emotions. But, once we were back, we started talking about getting the car out and getting started again on Saturday. I do some horse riding and it's right what they say about falling off the horse – you must get straight back on.

We got the car back and the team had fixed everything, the feeling was incredible when Raigo and I drove to parc ferme in the early hours of Saturday. Unfortunately,

“It was 17 minutes before the team knew we were OK, but alone in the middle of nowhere”

When the car was going down really quickly, I still had my helmet connected to the intercom and it started to drag me under the water. Luckily it disconnected.

We started shouting each other's names and then I heard him, but also the car disappeared under the water and we could see each other. We had to swim maybe five metres or so. I'm not sure if I am a good swimmer, but at least I was good enough!

I have been thinking about these things before, but when you are in the heat of the moment it's difficult to stay calm – you just have to move as quickly as possible.

I didn't care how hard it was, I just had to get out. It was really on the limit. We were alone. There were some spectators, but they were too far away and couldn't help.

The other thing that was really tough was sitting on the bank looking at the river and not being able to contact the team – this must have been tough for them too. We couldn't talk with the organisers or anything. This was not well organised. It was 17 minutes before the team

there was still some damp in the engine so although it started, it wasn't running too well on Saturday, so the boys fixed it again and we could start on Sunday.

Starting a stage for the first time since we rolled into that lake was a strange, but fantastic feeling.

The only sad thing about Sunday was that we had to start without the duck in the car. A few years ago, I built a rally car and when I did my first event in it, it came back from the ceremonial start with a small duck on the handbrake. I've kept the duck in my cars ever since – you may have seen it floating on the onboard footage...

Anyway, Malcolm [Wilson, team, principal] told me the duck's not getting back in the car. I told him it was OK, because the duck had flown home already!

Seriously though, I never expected to experience the kind of emotions we did when we came to this event. Raigo and me, we were really, really lucky. If you are in a lake, close to the limit of your life and fighting for it, when you finally win that fight it's an amazing feeling. ☘

AMG
HYBRID

JUAN MANUEL FANGIO

JACK BRABHAM

JACKIE STEWART

NIKI LAUDA

NELSON PIQUET



TIME FOR HAMILTON TO JOIN **THE GREATS**



Lewis Hamilton has the chance to match his hero, Ayrton Senna, and become a triple world champion this year. EDD STRAW asks where the Briton stands among the greats

ALAIN PROST

AYRTON SENNA

MICHAEL SCHUMACHER

SEBASTIAN VETTEL

LEWIS HAMILTON



Second title put Hamilton level with fellow Brits Jim Clark and Graham Hill. Next target: Jackie Stewart's three



“I just love driving the car, I love competing and I love racing. I love the challenge, and knowing I’ve a chance of winning. Motivation has never been an issue” Lewis Hamilton

Greatness is not the sum of statistics. It’s not quantifiable or to be objectively analysed. There is no metric that can be applied to anyone successful in any sphere of life that can draw a clear line in the sand between the great and the ‘merely’ very good. Life is more complicated than that. Some argue that this makes any such debate redundant. But this is one of the joys of following any sporting star in action; that a definitive answer is unreachable matters far less than the debate.

Lewis Hamilton is already in a select club of grand prix drivers by dint of being one of only 32 to have won the Formula 1 World Championship. Only 16 of those have won the crown more than once, meaning that he’s automatically in the top 0.2 per cent of those to have raced at this level. He’s fifth in the winners list with 33 victories, albeit with a long way to go before he gets anywhere near Michael Schumacher’s tally of 91, and fourth in the ranking of pole positions. And he starts the 2015 as the clear favourite for the world title.

If Hamilton does take another crown, it won’t prove anything new – not really. After all, he’s won it twice before, so all he would be doing would be achieving the same thing again. But there is something about the number three in terms of world championships that elevates a driver into the most rarefied of strata.

The 30-year-old steers well clear of any bombastic statements about how many more titles he will win. What is beyond question is that he has the means, motive and opportunity to join the ranks of the triple champions this year thanks

to a Mercedes that once again looks to be the class of the field. But the man himself is, as all great sportspeople must, concentrating on the process of achieving success rather than simply getting excited about how likely it is.

“The third title is not what gives me the motivation,” says Hamilton. “I just love driving the car, I love competing and I love racing. I love the challenge, as well as knowing I have a chance of winning. Motivation has never been an issue, it comes naturally. I don’t come here feeling like a world champion, I come here feeling like I’m number 44 and it’s another championship.”

“Of course, top drivers in the past, the greats, have three titles, so naturally if I have five, six, seven years left in the sport I’d hope, if I’m fortunate enough, to have another title and that would be amazing. But I’m also grateful for the two I have. Everything from now is a bonus.”

But Hamilton has hinted in the past a desire for a greater volume of championships. And why shouldn’t he? After all, the real answer for any driver on the grid when asked how many championships they want would surely be to demand as many as possible.

Interestingly, Hamilton hinted at the value of number of titles in an interview with AUTOSPORT two years ago (June 27 2013). At a time when it was already clear that Sebastian Vettel was in with a good shout of winning a fourth consecutive world title, he was asked about what the 2008 world championship meant to him.

“It’s all I have currently to prove what I’m capable of,” he explained. “When I had it, it was special, but as you get into F1 and more and more people start to win world championships it becomes less valuable and the only way to ▶



MASON/GETTY

JACKIE STEWART ON LEWIS HAMILTON

Lewis could become a three-time world champion this year. Does that mean he'll be up there with the true greats?

If he continues to win grand prix races he will definitely become one of the greats. You don't get to become one of the greats until well after your achievements. It takes time to come about and you don't do it just because you've won a world championship or two world championships, or even three. And Lewis has got every opportunity to win more than three. He's only 30 so he has a long road ahead of him. The success that he has on track will of course bring him to do other things in his life, as I did, as Fangio did, as sadly Jim Clark and Ayrton Senna never did.

What does it take to ensure that you have repeated success?

Performance on a consistent basis. Mind over matter, mind over enthusiasm. Mind management, as I call it. You don't win all the races you compete in, but you've got to accept that if you don't do it that day you make sure you still finish second, or third, and still pick up points.

Will Lewis find it easy to pick himself up and go again for a second successive year?

I think so, absolutely. He's very hungry. He said to me at a lunch at the BRDC not so long ago: 'I'm catching you up!'. He just looked me in the eye and said it. He wants to win three [titles] – and more."

How impressed were you with his all-round game last year, often qualifying behind but playing the long game well on Sundays?

As a driver, his strike rate was superb last year. As a man, I think he's come of age. I think he's a great asset to the sport, he's projecting the sport extremely well and he's very eloquent.

Jackie Stewart was talking to Henry Hope-Frost



TEE/LAT

Hamilton was pushed hard by Rosberg in 2014. Some think he won't let it happen again



► make it more valuable is to have more."

Now he has two and every chance of taking a third. Hamilton has been through enough ups and downs to know that you have to make the most of it when the going is good, because just around the corner could be another setback.

"I don't set myself a goal of titles," he says. "Naturally I want to win every race and championship I compete in, but you don't always get what you want. I'm fortunate that I'm here in F1 and that I have the opportunities, and [titles] are ultimately what I want. It's then up to me and the team to maximise and achieve the ultimate. I'm not going to sit here and say I want seven world championships; as I said I'm grateful for the two that I have – coming from where I grew up, I never thought I'd win two world titles, or have as many wins as Nigel Mansell. But I have years ahead of me and I want to win, and hopefully if I work hard, and I'm in the right place, I can achieve good things moving forward."

Contrary to the popular image of Hamilton, you get the impression that he is sincere in what he says. He's a character who wears his heart on his sleeve, with his visible unhappiness when things are not going as he might expect (on or off-track) often mistaken for arrogance. But there's no doubt that a third title would mean a lot to him, not least because it would elevate him onto the same plane as his hero, Ayrton Senna.

Martin Brundle, Senna's old British Formula 3 sparring partner, who has commented on all of Hamilton's grand prix career and will be there throughout the 2015 season as part of Sky Sports F1's commentary team, certainly believes that's the case.

"Ayrton Senna is Lewis's target, isn't it? His motivation, inspiration – and he won three world titles" MARTIN BRUNDLE

"I asked him that question when I interviewed him at Brackley [last week]," says Brundle.

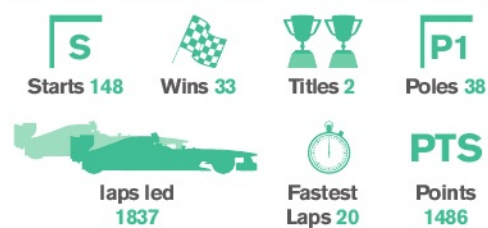
"Inevitably, they all play down the stats aspect, saying 'it doesn't matter' and 'I was lucky to win one and two's amazing if this is all I get', but I'm pretty sure he'd use Senna. Senna is his target, isn't it? His motivation, his inspiration – and he won three world titles. Lewis is going to want to leave F1, and he's starting his ninth season, having left his mark on it. Whatever they might say, they know that pole positions, race victories and world championship tallies are very much a measure of that."

Statistics in any sports are always limited in scope. Were you to judge Manchester United legends George Best or Ryan Giggs by their World Cup Finals appearances, you could conclude they were abject failures as they never so much as played in one. Similarly, there are great grand prix drivers who didn't win the world championship, such as Gilles Villeneuve. Then, there are anomalies like Fernando Alonso, a driver who only the most biased observer could



Rosberg has to look down on Hamilton more often for a 2015 title challenge

HAMILTON IN NUMBERS



Brundle reckons Hamilton has an eye on the F1 records

seriously contend isn't a great. Like Hamilton, he is 'only' a two-time champion, but you would just need to add a combined total of 11 points to his 2007, '10 and '12 campaigns to make him a five-time winner. That underlines that stats don't tell the whole story.

"I think it's more how you achieve them," suggests Anthony Davidson, who in his capacity as a Sky analyst has shown himself to be one of the shrewdest observers of drivers. "You can be a legendary driver and only have one title if you achieved it in an amazing way and then never had the package to do it again in the future.

"Look at Sebastian Vettel. Yes, four world championships is absolutely amazing in the record books, but somehow he still doesn't seem to get the same kind of respect as Ayrton Senna

or maybe Alain Prost. It's all about perception.

"Moving teams puts you into legendary status, if you move and win again, like Lewis did, like Schumacher did and pretty much all of the true greats have done. They take their talent to a whole new team and people gravitate towards them because of their greatness. That's probably more important than just notching up a tally."

Using Davidson's suggestion of considering drivers who have won titles for more than one team certainly places Hamilton in an elite group. This makes him one of only nine, alongside Juan Manuel Fangio, Graham Hill, Jack Brabham, Emerson Fittipaldi, Niki Lauda, Nelson Piquet, Prost and Schumacher. But even this has limitations as it eliminates Senna (who won all three titles for McLaren) and even Jackie Stewart,

who won championships in both Matra and Tyrrell machinery, but always run by Ken Tyrrell.

This illustrates how easy it is to run around in circles when assessing the statistics. Even Fangio is criticised by some for so often changing teams (not entirely fairly, given that twice the team in question quit the sport and once he left the best team to join fading Maserati and hauled it to the 1957 title). Some would argue that 'lifers' such as Jim Clark, whose whole grand prix career was spent in Team Lotus machinery, are more worthy. With such delineations largely redundant – after all, it is largely circumstances that dictate whether a driver stays loyal to a team or moves on – it's far more important to look at the way Hamilton goes about his business.

In 2014, we unquestionably saw a more rounded Hamilton, a shrewder operator who knew that he could win even if Mercedes team-mate Nico Rosberg had the advantage in the early stages of the race. While Rosberg generally needed optimum conditions to win, Hamilton seemed to have a wider operating window that meant he was always a factor. After all, of the five races Rosberg won last year, you could argue that Hamilton was compromised in some way on every occasion, even if by his own mistakes. All things being equal (including the machinery), Hamilton has the capacity to win in almost any circumstances – surely a defining characteristic of any great driver.

"Lewis just naturally feels the grip," says Brundle. "An F1 car changes through a race as you use up the fuel, as the tyres come and go, as the track changes. He can adapt, he's aggressive, and he's also a bit of a streetfighter in wheel-to-wheel combat." ▶

There's a sincerity to Hamilton's outlook that defies the perception

► That sums up Hamilton's strength well. He has coped admirably with the demands of the new-for-2014 formula and consistently used less fuel than Rosberg did, always seeming to be more at one with the car. While Rosberg had to force the issue, Hamilton could let the car do the work. To that, Hamilton also added a stronger all-round game, once he and the team had realised how important it was to let him do things his own way.

While Rosberg's interactions with the engineers in the debriefs tend to be livelier, it's often underplayed how seriously Hamilton now takes this side of his game. Those working with him report that often emails will drop into their inbox from Hamilton at unusual times of day (or night) as a result of thinking things over away from the track. Hamilton appears to thrive on absorbing the information and reflecting on it. In short, he's not the super-fast but one-dimensional driver he has sometimes been portrayed as.

It seems that the decision to leave McLaren at the end of 2012 was crucial to Hamilton realising his full potential. Regardless of the fact that McLaren hasn't won a race since Hamilton left, and therefore the move ensured continued success, his departure always had a feel of 'leaving home' to it. Having been involved with McLaren since his karting days, there was a lot to be gained from attempting to become his own man. At Mercedes, that's exactly what Hamilton has



STALEVILAT

done. And in doing so, he has demonstrated another mark of greatness: the ability to mould a team in his own image to allow him to get the best out of himself.

The switch gave him the equipment to win last year's title, and very likely this year's. Mercedes isn't going to be slipping down the order any time soon, so this is his chance to make hay and stack up the titles that evaded him while Vettel dominated. Some would argue that means it's the

car doing the job, but that has always been too simplistic a contention. Yes, a good car is a prerequisite of winning the championship, but it's no guarantee of anything.

What Hamilton showed last year is that he was able to dominate in a car capable of doing so. That's not as easy as it sounds. The mental fortitude he showed in the closing stages of the season, when he was able to reel in and overcome Rosberg repeatedly, was remarkable. What

THE TRIPLE CHAMPIONS

If Hamilton wins the 2015 world championship, he will be the 10th driver to have won three or more world championships. Here's how they stack up.

DRIVERS	LEWIS HAMILTON	MICHAEL SCHUMACHER	JUAN MANUEL FANGIO	ALAIN PROST	SEBASTIAN VETTEL	JACK BRABHAM	JACKIE STEWART	NIKI LAUDA	NELSON PIQUET	AYRTON SENNA
TITLES	2	7	5	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
STARTS	148	306	51	199	139	126	99	171	204	161
WINS	33	91	24	51	39	14	27	25	23	41
POLES	38	68	29	33	45	13	17	24	24	65
FASTEST LAPS	20	77	23	41	24	12	15	24	23	19

“Qualifying is all about perfection, but a race is a constantly evolving beast and you’ve got to live by your senses, and that’s where Lewis is stronger” ANTHONY DAVIDSON



Hamilton needs to do now is to deliver that consistently over not just the coming season, but the years that follow. If he can do that, and prove that his tendency to becoming unsettled a little too easily is in the past, then his claim to greatness will be undeniable.

Ironically, one area where he needs to improve this season is in qualifying. Considering Hamilton is regarded, with some justification, as one of the fastest over a single lap, it is odd that he lost out so comprehensively to Rosberg on Saturdays last season. If he can turn the tables in qualifying in 2015, he will surely have the title wrapped up long before the final round. Old rival Rosberg is likely the only person who can derail Hamilton – other than perhaps Hamilton himself – but, as Davidson suggests, the chances of him doing so appear slimmer than they did in 2014.

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” says Davidson when asked what Rosberg can do to knock Hamilton off course. “I’m pretty sure Lewis will have the measure of him once again in race pace, but I might be proved wrong, I can’t see Lewis getting beaten hands down time and time again.

“Qualifying is all about perfection, and putting together all of the bits that you’ve learnt for that single lap, but a race is a constantly evolving beast and you’ve got to live by your senses, and that’s where Lewis is stronger. He’s more of a natural driver and there’s no time, when you’re going through the race with changeable conditions and variants happening, there’s no way you can stop, have a look at the data and then go back out again. You’re there, surviving by yourself.”

The bottom line is that Hamilton’s qualities are unquestionable. The one thing he now needs to do is prove that he can deliver championships year-in, year-out when the opportunity is there. Sunday’s Australian Grand Prix will offer him the perfect chance to pick up where he left off last year. If he does that, then even a driver as tenacious as Rosberg will struggle to beat him.

For that is where greatness lies – in the feeling that a driver is simply unbeatable. At times last season, particularly late on, that’s surely how Rosberg felt about his team-mate. The true greats are forces of nature, capable not just of winning but of dominating. It’s time for Hamilton to ram home the fact that he can do that. He unquestionably has the tools to do so.

Then he can truly stand shoulder to shoulder with his great hero, Ayrton Senna. ☒



LOOKING BACK HAMILTON'S ROOKIE YEAR

As Jackie Stewart rightly says, it will only be once Lewis Hamilton's career is finished that it can be put in its proper context. But already enough time has passed since his sensational rookie year to decide where he stands among grand prix racing's best newcomers.

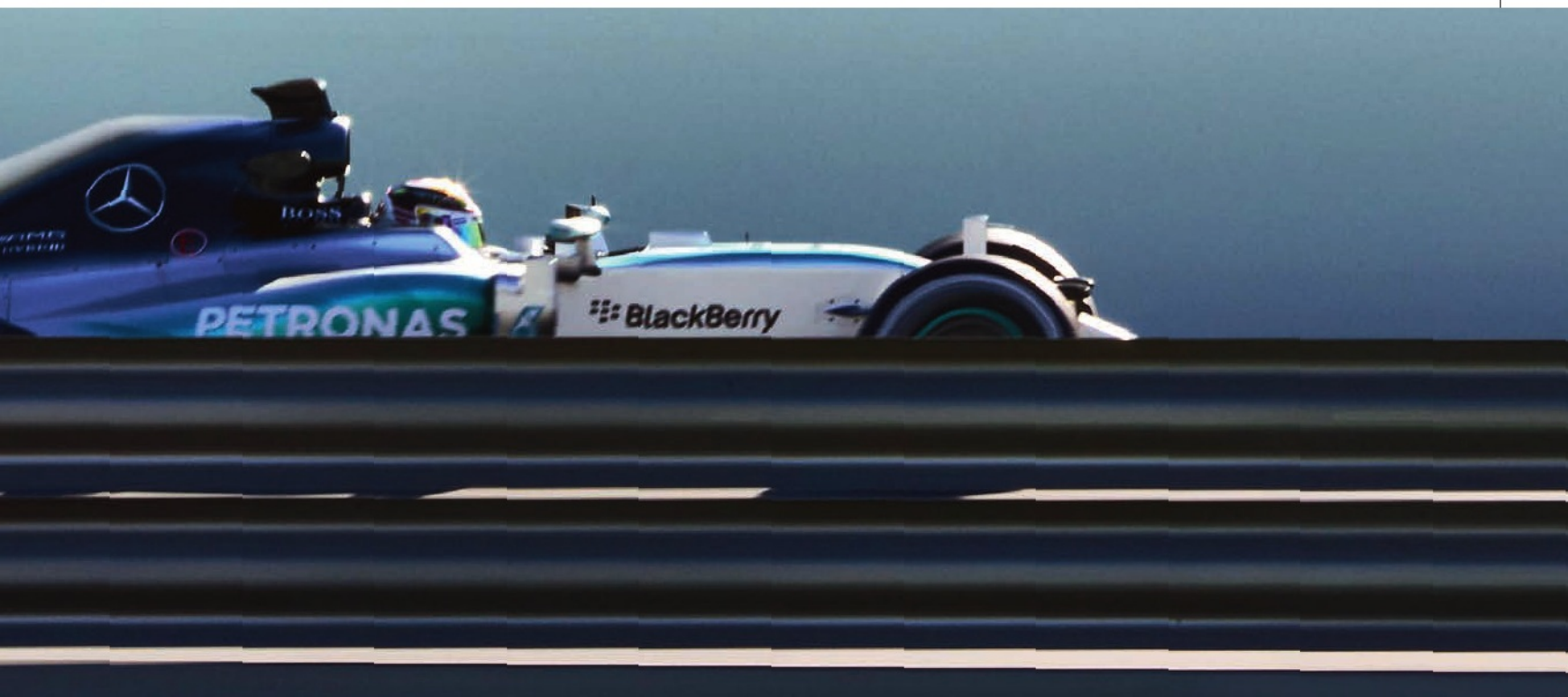
Amid the controversy surrounding Hamilton's relationship with team-mate Fernando Alonso and the spy scandal that engulfed McLaren, it's easy to forget just how remarkable Hamilton's season was. The GP2 champion laid down a marker by swooping round the outside of Alonso

at the first corner in his F1 debut in Australia.

A run of 10 consecutive podium finishes, including his first two victories in the Canadian and United States Grands Prix, laid the foundations for a title push that fell agonisingly short. Only McLaren's disastrous decision to leave him out on shot wets in China, which resulted in Hamilton in the gravel while attempting to pit, and car problems in Brazil robbed him of the title.

So was this the greatest rookie season in history? Well, there are some rivals. Clay Regazzoni won a race and finished third in the 1970 world championship for Ferrari despite missing five races. Stewart, in 1965, also finished third in the championship with his maiden win for BRM at Monza. And Jacques Villeneuve finished second in the standings in 1996 at the all-conquering Williams team. Technically, Giuseppe Farina won the world championship in his maiden season, but this was the inaugural year, 1950, and he was already a grizzled veteran.

But none of those maiden campaigns are quite as remarkable as the one Hamilton strung together. Regardless of how you assess the rest of his career, he is undoubtedly the greatest of the debutants.



THE QUESTIONS THE AUSTRALIAN GP WILL ANSWER

After the phoney war of testing, things finally get serious in Australia this weekend. **BEN ANDERSON, JONATHAN NOBLE** and **LAWRENCE BARRETTO** analyse the themes to watch

FINALLY, THE WAITING IS OVER.

The pre-season running has hinted at what awaits us during the 2015 Formula 1 season, but the Australian Grand Prix will be the first time that everyone has to show their hand.

While Albert Park certainly isn't the most representative circuit on the calendar, of the 19 times it has hosted the season opener, the winning driver has gone on to win the title on 11 occasions, and the winning team the constructors' crown 13 times. In short, victory in Melbourne is a very good omen.

But it's not just about who wins; throughout the whole field there are key questions to be answered.

CAN FERRARI CONFIRM ITS TESTING PACE?

The chart-topping pace Ferrari delivered at the first pre-season test of 2015 at Jerez raised eyebrows in the paddock. Could this be an early sign that Ferrari is back in business, or just showboating by a team that likes to look good whenever it can?

Its form through the remaining tests was less

spectacular, but certainly effective, leading new team principal Maurizio Arrivabene to declare Ferrari's targets had been "absolutely achieved" with its new car. It's got Williams worried too...

There is no doubt Ferrari is in better shape heading to Australia than it was this time last year. The general consensus says its engine is more

powerful and more efficient than the 2014 version, and the SF15-T is an easier car to drive than its predecessor. The Scuderia also appears to be a much more cohesive unit than it was last season.

All of this bodes well for the Maranello faithful, but Albert Park is a peculiar circuit so we'll need to wait until round two in Malaysia to be sure.



Ferrari's winter form has been good. Will that translate into racing success?

HUNBAR/LAT

WILL HAMILTON STILL BE ON TOP?

There is always the feeling with Lewis Hamilton that the biggest threat to the world champion getting a stranglehold on Formula 1 is himself.

No driver on the grid is more emotional than Hamilton. It's what makes him such an exciting prospect, but equally it can put him in costly situations where he doesn't produce his best.

There were a number of occasions last year where he made errors and couldn't fully explain exactly why he'd made them – just look at British GP qualifying. In such a tight fight, incidents like

that can be the difference between hero and zero.

When he's on top form, Hamilton is unstoppable. But if Nico Rosberg comes back at him stronger or, even better, manages to knock the world champion's confidence, then the title fight will be much tougher than 2014.

The key to it all will be momentum. Rosberg needs to break Hamilton's run early on, and unsettle him if he is going to have a chance of snatching his first crown and deny Hamilton a British-record-equalling third title.



Hamilton is favourite for a third title, so Rosberg must up his game

ETHERINGTON/LAT

HAS KIMI RAIKKONEN RETURNED TO FORM?



XPBIM/AGES

Kimi Raikkonen endured the worst campaign of his Formula 1 career last season. The 2007 world champion couldn't get comfortable with the difficult F14-T and was utterly trounced by Fernando Alonso. He looked miserable.

This year Alonso is gone, the car is better and Raikkonen looks a different man: laughing, joking, happy with his lot. So much has he changed that Ferrari team boss Maurizio Arrivabene was moved to say he thought Raikkonen must be "sick"!

Raikkonen is not sick (well, maybe of the sleepless nights he'll be having at home now he's become a father!), but he is clearly much happier at Maranello this year. Raikkonen has a very particular driving style, so it follows that his form will rise or fall on the technology put at his disposal. In short, if the SF15-T gives him the front-end feel that the F14-T couldn't, then the 2015 Kimi Raikkonen ought to be better too.

One swallow doesn't make a summer so one bad season shouldn't be the undoing of arguably the most talented driver of his generation.

CAN VETTEL BECOME A FERRARI LEGEND?

To leave the operation that funded your junior career and helped you to win four world championship titles on the bounce is a big step.

To then head to a team that appeared in disarray and was deemed not good enough by Fernando Alonso, who jumped ship to McLaren, could be considered a big risk.

But after being comprehensively beaten by Red Bull team-mate Daniel Ricciardo over the course of last season, Sebastian Vettel rolled the dice and headed to Ferrari.

The early signs are good as the SF15-T has looked strong in testing, rivalling Williams



for pace behind Mercedes. Vettel himself looks to have settled into his new surroundings quickly and is buoyed by the fact that he has a Ferrari that this year has a positive front end that suits his style.

His first challenge will be to beat team-mate Kimi Raikkonen, his second to build the team around him and inspire Ferrari to end a run of eight years without a title. If he manages it, he would edge closer to writing himself into the Maranello history books and emulating countryman and seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher.

HOW BIG IS MERCEDES' ADVANTAGE?

Mercedes was the clear winner of Formula 1's "winter championship", completing more laps in testing than its rivals and running through its programme largely trouble-free.

Everybody sat up and took notice when Nico Rosberg set the fastest lap of Barcelona testing on the soft tyre compound – a 1m22.792s.

McLaren's Jenson Button described

Mercedes' pace as "unbelievably quick" while Williams's Valtteri Bottas said: "Everyone knew they were quick, but they were very quick."

Their dismay was down to the fact that the closest any one got to Rosberg's time was Bottas. But the Finn needed the super-softs – and was still 0.25s off the pace. Pirelli estimates that the super-softs are 0.8s quicker than the softs,

which suggests that assuming comparable fuel loads, Mercedes holds a one-second advantage over its rivals.

And based on the fact that the reigning world champion team didn't feel the need to do a super-soft tyre run, this suggests it's pretty confident of its pace heading to Australia, and that the gap could be even bigger.



Is a Merc in the gravel the only hope for its main rivals?

24

HAS WILLIAMS TAKEN A STEP FORWARD?

On the face of it, pre-season testing couldn't have gone much better for Williams. Valtteri Bottas ended the Barcelona test with the quickest time on the super-soft tyre, while team-mate Felipe Massa was second quickest to Nico Rosberg on the soft.

The team freely admits that the Mercedes is quicker, but there is a feeling among Williams and its drivers that its own car is a step forward.

Williams was let down last year operationally, but that's something the team has worked hard to address during testing, with the Grove-based squad

even spending a whole day at Barcelona simply doing pitstop practice.

It's clear the team has got its mojo back, after last year's strong season helped soothe almost a decade of hurt, with chief test and support engineer Rod Nelson saying the team will be "less risk-averse" this season.

Williams is on the cusp of challenging for race wins consistently, but it will need to get it all right come race day if it's to topple big-spending Mercedes and hold off Ferrari and Red Bull.





Has Renault done enough to allow Red Bull to fight at the front early on?

HOW FAR BEHIND IS RENAULT?

Renault set a target of halving the gap to Mercedes before this weekend's season-opening Australian Grand Prix but, against a backdrop of serious improvement by the reigning world champion squad, coupled with some setbacks of its own, it could well fall short of its goal.

A problem with a "stupid part" related to the ERS water pump held it back initially in pre-season, but Renault's new power unit proved its reliability by covering several race distances during the first Barcelona test. Even so, performance upgrades introduced for the

final test highlighted new driveability issues that Renault admits it hasn't fully solved, and probably won't sort out until several races into the new season.

There is no doubt that Red Bull and Renault are in much better shape than at this stage last year, when Daniel Ricciardo pulled off a miracle by finishing second in his home grand prix (before being excluded for a fuel-flow irregularity). But as things stand, Red Bull-Renault is more likely to be scrapping with Ferrari and Williams than chasing after Mercedes this time around.

IS McLAREN-HONDA ABLE TO FINISH?

Given that Honda is a latecomer to the V6 hybrid turbo F1 party, it's the only manufacturer that can be judged on 2014 standards heading to the first race of the new season.

On that score, its pre-season has been similar to that endured by Red Bull-Renault in 2014 – terrible beginning, lots of unreliability, but some late steps in the right direction.

Jenson Button managed 100 laps on day two of the final test, but otherwise McLaren-Honda has struggled, with operational errors, many minor (but time-consuming) technical gremlins, and a recurring ERS problem. That's not to mention the

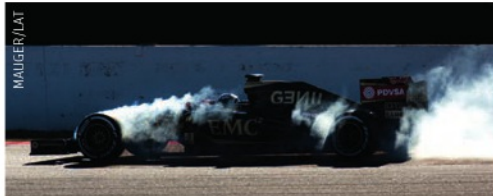
accident and resulting concussion that will mean star signing Fernando Alonso will be missing the first race in Australia.

Even without scheduled improvements, there's no reason why a McLaren-Honda can't reach the chequered flag this Sunday, especially if it doesn't run at full power.

But McLaren-Honda isn't here to make up the numbers. In the words of racing director Eric Boullier: "We won't turn up with power turned down because we care too much to lose the race. I'd prefer to get pole and blow the engine on the first lap."



McLaren and Honda are on the back foot heading into their first race together since 1992



HOW WELL HAS LOTUS RECOVERED?

From a team that was challenging for race wins as recently as 2013, Lotus came crashing down to earth last year when some financial cutbacks and Renault's engine woes hurt it badly.

Although its financial situation has not improved dramatically, the team can at least look forward to knowing that its technical package will be stronger thanks to the switch to Mercedes motivation.

The mileage the Enstone squad has completed in testing, allied to some strong lap times, shows that the nightmares of last season should be firmly put to rest.

Equally, it would be wrong to suggest that all of Lotus's problems were down to the engine. Budget limits have an impact on development, and there were some aero deficiencies with last year's chassis that meant it was only strong on particular high-speed circuits.

The E23 is solid though, and it should ensure that points become a regular reward during 2015. But the fight behind Mercedes is going to be incredibly tough, and it may be too much to expect Lotus to do what Williams did last year and make a dramatic leap forward.



WHO IS AT THE BACK?

No one is under any illusions that just getting onto the back of the grid at the Australian Grand Prix will be viewed as a victory for F1 minnow Manor.

But among the teams that have tested already, it's a much tougher call to decide which of them will be starting nearest the back.

McLaren has had a nightmare winter, with reliability troubles limiting its running and not allowing it to show its full potential yet. Strong race results may be a tough call at the start, but the MP4-30 could deliver decent form over one lap, potentially propelling the team as far as Q3.

If that's the case, the last-but-one slot could boil down to development and money. Sauber and Force India continue to face financial difficulties, and that may not allow them to make as big a step forward in form with Melbourne updates as they would like.

The lost tenths could be enough to shuffle them back for now, even if there is bigger potential in their packages over the longer term.

HONDA

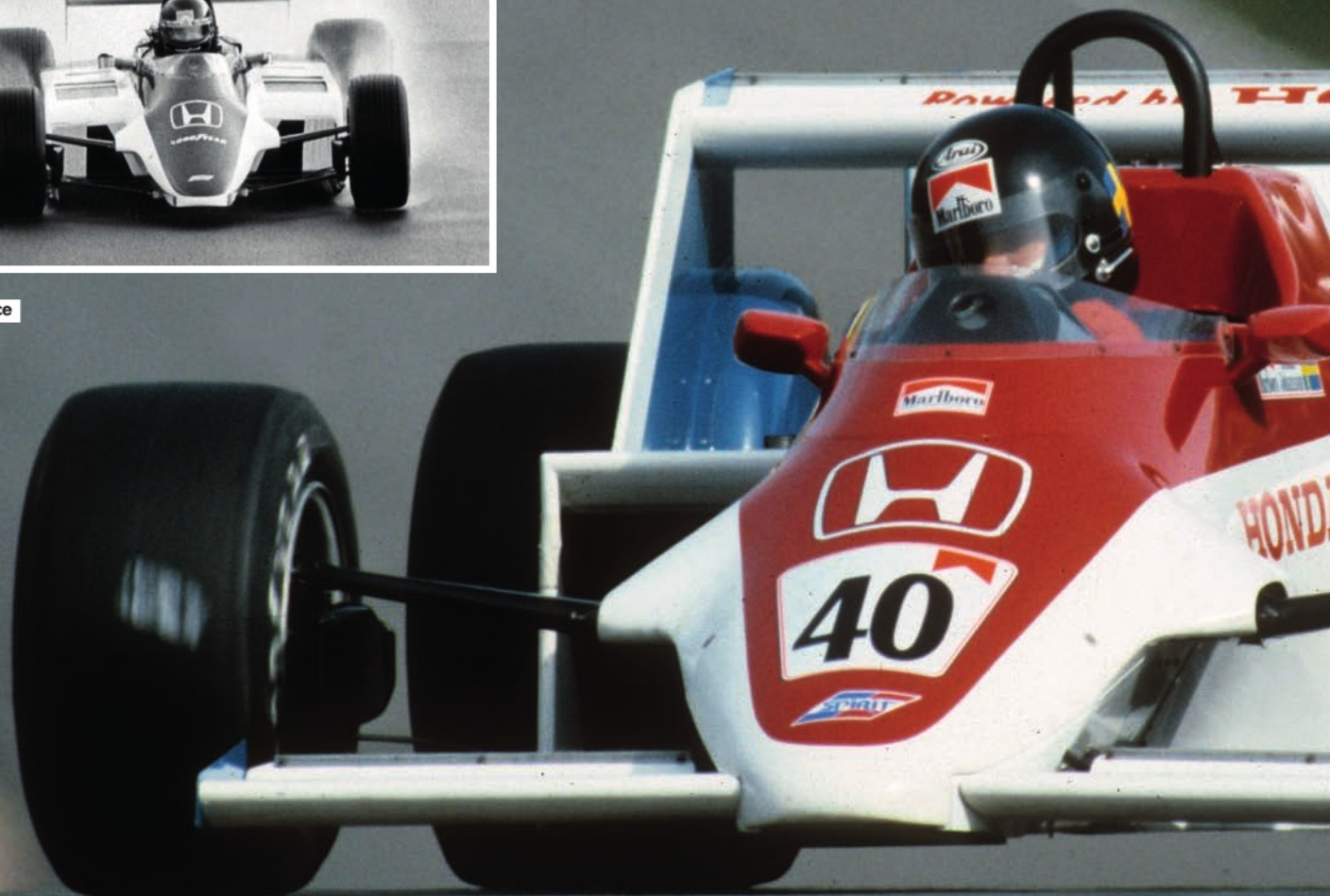
AND THE SPIRIT OF 1983

There was once a Honda Formula 1 return that was very different to its 2015 comeback with McLaren. **GARY WATKINS** tells the story of Spirit and the Japanese giant's turbo babysteps



F2-based test hack at Silverstone in late '82

Spirit-Honda made its race debut in 1983 Race of Champions at Brands



Suppose Honda was re-entering grand prix racing this season with Marussia rather than McLaren. Or supplying engines to a team plucked from GP2. That would be an unlikely scenario today, but it was the kind of low-key approach that the Japanese manufacturer chose 32 years ago. It didn't sign up with a grandee of the grid to end its 14-year absence from Formula 1, but promoted one of its existing squads from the lower formulae and only turned up mid-season with what was little more than a modified Formula 2 car.

The road to Honda's return to grand prix racing with the tiny Spirit Racing team in 1983 was one traversed in a series of pigeon steps. It started with Nobuhiko Kawamoto, who'd



Boutsen (left, winning at Spa) and Johansson were '82 F2 pair

worked as a young engineer on the marque's 1960s F1 campaigns, becoming boss of the Honda R&D department in the late '70s. He conceived the two-litre V6 F2 powerplant with an eventual F1 entry in mind, though there were also studies undertaken on a V10 turbo.

Even when Spirit, which had undertaken a European F2 campaign with Honda engines in 1982, was chosen to test the first RA163E twin-turbo F1 engine there was no commitment to go racing. Only after three months of development was the decision to join the grid made. And then at the last minute.

The back story to Spirit's F1 entry began when Honda R&D ordered a March 812 to be fitted with the V6 F2 engine that had been racing in the back of works Ralt chassis since the middle of 1980. John Wickham, who was team manager of the March F2 set-up, interpreted the purchase of the car as an attempt to keep Ralt boss Ron Tauranac on his toes, though the March-Honda did subsequently race in Japan in '81.

"There was a concern that although Ralt was performing [it won the '81 European title with Geoff Lees] they might have been taking their mind off the job, because they were producing so many Formula 3 cars," explains Wickham. "Eventually that led Honda to decide they wanted a group of people who could concentrate fully on F2."



Wickham with Honda chief Kawamoto

"There was always talk of a turbo, but it was all hearsay until they showed me an engine"

SPIRIT TEAM BOSS JOHN WICKHAM

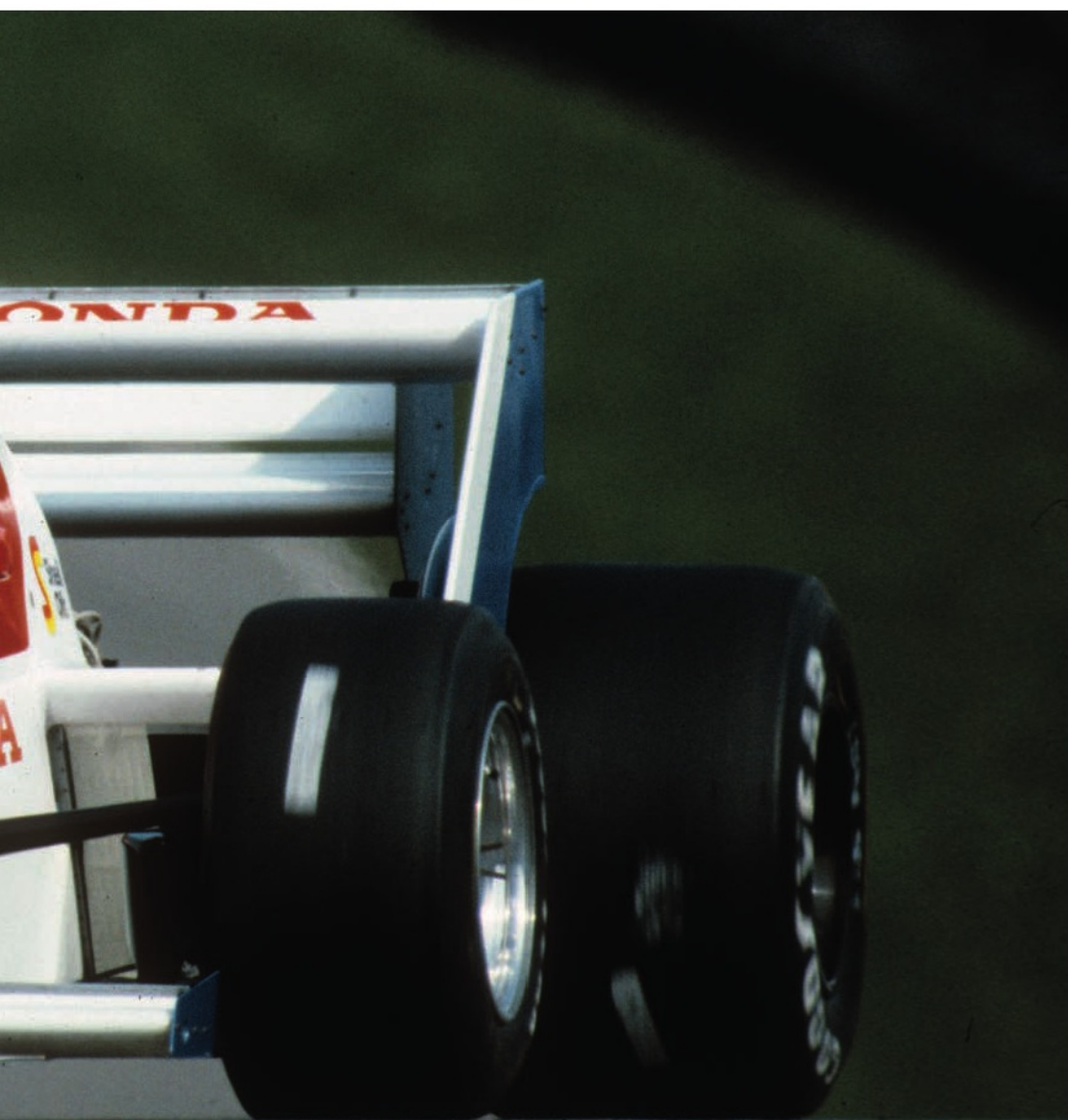
And that desire resulted in the birth of Spirit Racing, which took its name from the bizarre wording on a Bridgestone advertising hoarding spotted by Wickham as he was driving around Tokyo. 'Come Racing Spirit' it proclaimed. It had a ring to it, he reckoned.

Honda provided Spirit with engines and workshop space in Slough, in the premises previously used as the European base of its 500cc grand prix motorcycle team, but it was far from an overt factory team. Wickham remembers having to "go out and find about half the budget" for its 1982 F2 campaign with a chassis designed by fellow Spirit director and March defector Gordon Coppuck, who had a brief spell at the British constructor after his departure from McLaren, and ex-Lotus engineer John Baldwin. The team even had to pay rent on the Slough building.

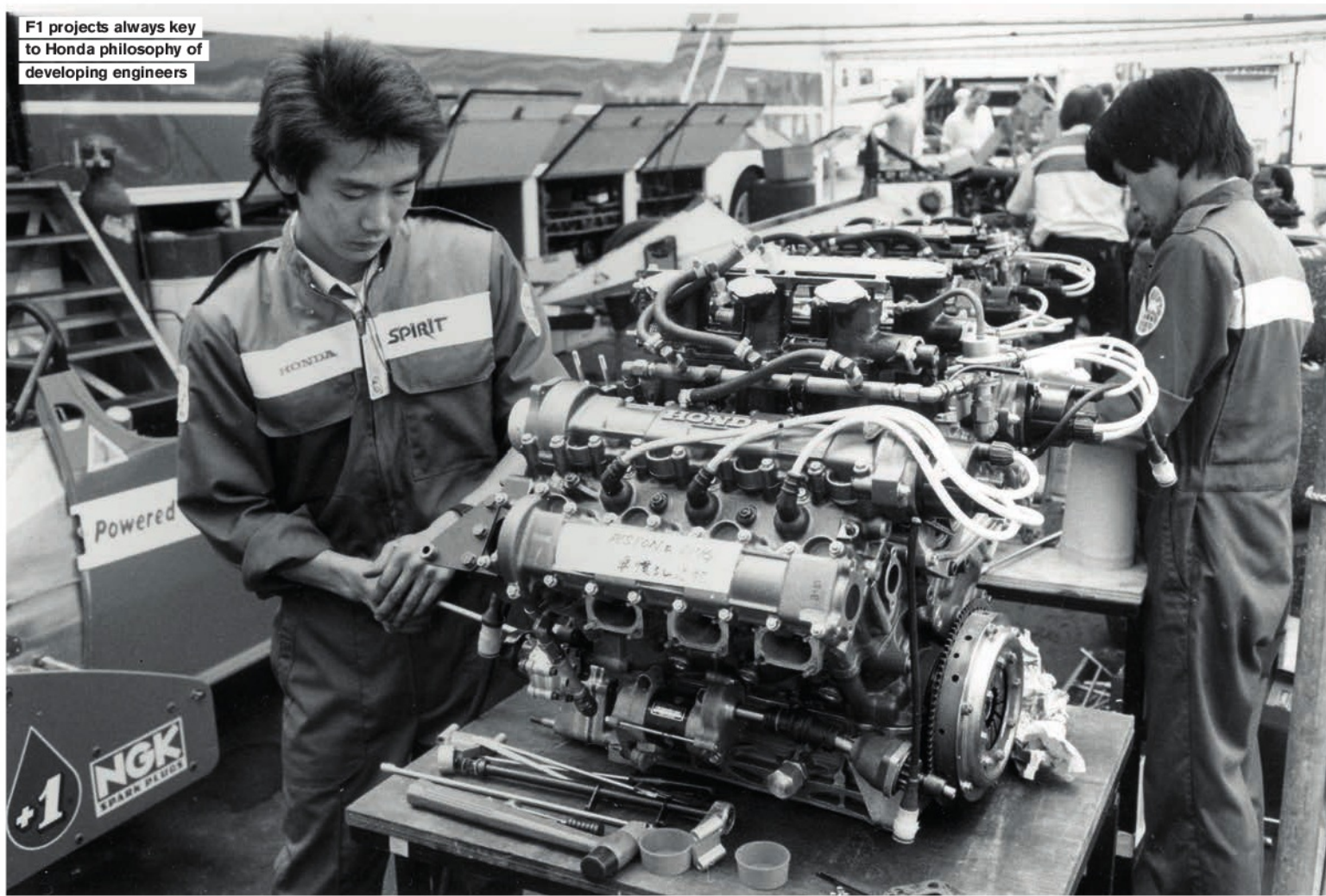
Wickham doesn't believe that Honda encouraged Spirit's formation with an eye on a future in F1. In fact, he recalls that Ralt was offered the chance to start testing with the new engine before Spirit got the call.

"They said to us it's either you or Ron, and he doesn't want to do F1 because it would be too complicated for him and his business," recalls Wickham. "They asked us if we wanted to do it, and we said, 'absolutely!'"

"There was always talk of a turbo, but it was all hearsay until they took me into a workshop in the middle of the year and showed me the



F1 projects always key to Honda philosophy of developing engineers



► engine, but they didn't make the decision that we would be involved until before the last F2 races in Europe."

Spirit missed out on the F2 title with its neat 201 design, which took eight poles from 13 races in the hands of Thierry Boutsen, who finished third in the points, and Stefan Johansson. Straight after the Misano finale, Spirit set about converting one of its F2 fleet, chassis #4 used by Johansson in the closing races, to take the new F1 engine.

The deadline to run the car was set for November 24 for no other reason than it was Wickham's birthday. Both Boutsen and Johansson tested that day at Silverstone, after which the team set about converting the car to flat-bottom specification after the rules bombshell the previous month outlawing ground-effects.

Spirit, together with both Boutsen and Johansson, decamped to California in search of decent weather after Christmas, running a

car with shortened sidepods and dubbed the 201B at Riverside and Willow Springs. On the team's return to the UK, Wickham began pushing to race the car.

"We were a race team, so that's what we wanted to do," he explains. "We also felt that if we didn't race, the engine would end up going somewhere else."

The go-ahead to race the car came very late. Wickham was waiting in his office as the midnight deadline for F1 entries approached. "We went right up to the entry deadline," he recalls. "I remember falling asleep by the fax machine."

The plan was to join the F1 grid at the British Grand Prix in July with a new-build, revised version of the F2 design with a bigger fuel tank, and to take in the non-points Race of Champions at Brands Hatch in April with the ex-F2 car. Johansson, meanwhile, got the nod over Boutsen to race a car by now known as the 201C.

"There wasn't much between them: Thierry

"You had to anticipate the power delivery; it was unbelievably bad, like a bomb going off behind you" STEFAN JOHANSSON

understood the car better, but Stefan had the ability to go out, wring the car's neck and set a lap time," explains Wickham. "He was closer to the stereotype of what Honda thought a racing driver should be."

Honda didn't make an auspicious debut in the last non-championship race in F1 history. Engine failures prevented Johansson from setting a representative time in qualifying and he retired with another after completing five laps, but he did end up second fastest to eventual winner Keke Rosberg's Williams during unofficial practice.

"That original car was very overweight and it was absolutely freezing cold, so the Cosworth-engined cars couldn't get any heat into their tyres and even the other turbos were struggling too," recalls Johansson. "Everyone was running the softest tyre, but we were blistering them because we were so damn heavy."

Engine failures were a regular occurrence through Spirit's part-season with the Honda V6. Detonation and turbo-seal problems were the most regular reasons.

Johansson took Spirit's best finish: P7 in '83 Dutch GP at Zandvoort



HONDA IN FORMULA 1

1964-1968

Joins the grand prix circus at the 1964 German GP with 1.5-litre RA271 developed in-house by Honda R&D. Takes in three end-of-season GPs with Ronnie Bucknum ahead of two-car assault in '65, which yields the marque's first victory in Mexico for Richie Ginther with the RA272. First car for three-litre formula arrives late in '66, but it is the 'Hondola' RA300 built by Lola that returns the company to the winner's circle at Monza in '67. Jo Schlesser is killed in '68 French GP at Rouen debuting new RA302 powered by air-cooled V12 and Honda withdraws from F1 at end of season.

1983-1992

Honda returns as an engine supplier with Spirit before joining forces with Williams at the end of its first season back. First full season in 1984 includes victory for Keke Rosberg in Dallas. Expands supply deal of twin-turbo V6s to Lotus in '87, then drops Williams for McLaren in '88 and takes first world

championship title with Ayrton Senna. Three more drivers' titles follow – first with a 3.5-litre V10 and then a V12 – before it withdraws after the '92 season. Also supplies V10s to Tyrrell in '91.

2000-2008

Deal for supply of three-litre V10s with British American Racing is forged after project to return as a constructor with a British-based organisation is abandoned after death of team leader Harvey Postlethwaite. Also supplies Jordan in 2001-02. Honda buys a stake in BAR in November '04 and completes the purchase of the Brackley-based squad the following September, renaming it Honda Racing F1 Team. Only GP success comes in Hungary in '06 with Jenson Button in first year of 2.4-litre V8 formula. Pulls out at end of '08.

2015

Honda makes its return to F1 – announced in May 2013 – as an engine supplier with McLaren.



Honda debut came in '64 German GP...



...with Ronnie Bucknum crashing out in RA271

"We ran electronic fuel injection, which back then was very new in racing, at the personal request of Mr [Soichiro] Honda himself," explains Coppuck. "Having to integrate that into the rest of the package caused a lot of stress."

"We had a lot of problems, which made some of the qualifying performances from Stefan pretty fantastic. Sometimes he'd only get one lap in the session but would pull out an unbelievable time."

Johansson remembers spending little time in the gym in '83: "I didn't have to do any physical training, because I did enough at the races running back to the pits to jump in the T-car."

The Swede's most vivid recollection of the season, however, was the massive turbo lag of the Honda engine.

"You had to anticipate the power delivery in the exit of the corner and give yourself enough room to gather it all up," he explains. "The power delivery was unbelievably bad; it was like a bomb going off behind you."

Johansson notched up a best qualifying result of 13th at Hockenheim, while he got to the finish in seventh at Zandvoort, only one lap down, in what was meant to be Spirit's final race with the 201C. A new Spirit called the 101 was due to come on stream at the Italian GP. The car was built on the experience of its predecessor, but had a larger fuel capacity that would have allowed it to complete a grand prix distance without stopping for fuel.

Production delays with the car meant it missed scrutineering at Monza. "We were late and got permission to go to the second scrutineering session, but the car didn't turn up until after that one," explains Wickham.

"That was a pretty bad weekend from the



Spirit lived on, briefly, with Hart power and Baldi (pictured) and Rothengatter

engine point of view. I think we went through four engines with the existing car."

Ten days later, Wickham was called to Japan and given the bad news that Spirit wouldn't be receiving F1 engines for the following year. Williams had landed a deal with Honda, something that had been communicated to Spirit shortly after it was given the go-ahead to race in the spring. There hadn't been a commitment to continue with the new team, but the possibility of running one car alongside Williams was on the table.

"We were told that the engine reliability was such that they couldn't supply two teams and therefore we wouldn't be doing the last race in South Africa, which was to be Williams's first race with Honda," reveals Wickham. "They said I had to hand all our engines and parts over to Williams after our final race at Brands [the hastily arranged European Grand Prix]."

Everything had been in place for Spirit to continue. Wickham had found sponsorship from Skoal Bandit chewing tobacco, which eventually ended up with the RAM team in 1984, and a tyre-supply deal with Goodyear. The problem was that both were conditional on a supply of Honda engines.

Spirit limped on in F1 with Hart (and very briefly Cosworth) power, Pirelli tyres and paying drivers in Mauro Baldi and Huub Rothengatter. It opted to sell its Pirelli deal to the tyre-less Toleman team after three races of 1985 to pay off its debts and attempt to regroup.

It turned out that there was no way back and the team closed its doors towards the end of the year – or just about the same time that Honda and Williams were getting into their stride with victories in the final three GPs of the season. ☒

Force India's recovery masterplan



30

Force India's delayed start to pre-season testing means it will kick off the season on the back foot, but it still believes this will be a breakthrough year. By LAWRENCE BARRETTO

The 2014 Formula 1 season was arguably the best in Force India's seven-year history, as the team bettered its 2013 points tally after just 13 races on the way to sixth in the constructors' championship. And for much of the year, it looked like it was going to be even better, as the Silverstone-based team headed McLaren in the standings before being overhauled with three races to go.

But this year hasn't started so well. The team missed the first test at Jerez, sent the 2014 car to the second at Barcelona, and only had a 2015 chassis ready in time to run on the last two and a half days of the final test.

Deputy team principal Bob Fernley insists the squad is prepared for a tricky start to the campaign

and "there were no surprises" following a combination of issues that delayed the 2015 car. And he remains confident that the team has put the right plan in place to bounce back.

Force India had previously split its windtunnel testing between Toyota's facilities in Cologne and its own in Brackley but, following the introduction of new rules forcing teams to nominate only one site, it chose to go with the Japanese manufacturer's facilities – which are considered among the best in Europe – despite the higher cost.

"The choices were using Brackley full-time, which meant using a 50 per cent model and a tunnel that with all due respect is past its sell-by date," says Fernley. "Or we have to spend a couple of million



more to use Toyota's facilities and a 60 per cent model. We made the decision based on the long term, not the short term."

But there was a problem. Toyota couldn't yet commit to offering its facilities full-time because it was sorting out contractual issues with Caterham, which was using the windtunnel but had since gone into administration.

"We had to wait, and quite rightly from Toyota's point of view, until it was legally clear for them to do so,"

says Fernley. "We didn't get the go-ahead until the first week of December."

The delay in having access to the windtunnel was one of the contributing factors to the team not having a 2015 chassis ready to run until the final three days of pre-season testing.

"In doing that, it set us back so we have had to take a hit, and even now we are still struggling with it," says Fernley.

Force India has traditionally



2015 car only made it to last three days of the final Barcelona test...



Development of the new car was hampered by outside delays



Team is playing catch-up from the off, but confidence is high



"We have to be able to finish, so reliability is key and that looks promising"

BOB FERNLEY



...but Force India was pleased to run 365 trouble-free laps

started the season strongly but tailed off towards the end of the year, as it can't keep up with the big-spending manufacturer teams in terms of development. That won't be the case this year, despite its reliable showing in Barcelona testing when it completed 365 trouble-free laps, as the team concedes it will be playing catch-up from the off.

"We are behind on the development programme," says Fernley. "The key thing for us

is damage limitation. We have to be able to finish, so reliability is key and that looks promising. We are behind in the development curve, but that is coming.

"I don't think we will see the true performance of the VJM08 until the start of the European season. A whole series of technical programmes is planned as early as Bahrain [in April], which may be more on the mechanical than aero side, but you won't see the full potential of those until after Monaco [in late May]."

Force India last year equalled its best finish in the constructors' championship, taking sixth for the third time in four years. Fernley agrees that the team had reached a plateau: "In 2013 and 2014, we were treading water because we couldn't make that next step. We need another step – and this is that step."

Cashflow issues for its suppliers, who were hit by Caterham and Marussia going into administration, meant Force India had to pay upfront for parts, and that in

turn created its own cashflow problems, which hindered its development programme.

Fernley then entered discussions with Bernie Ecclestone last month in an attempt to get an advance on Formula One Management's commercial-rights payments to help ease the team's short-term financial problems. Meanwhile, the manufacture of the chassis was delayed by 10 days after a machine broke down at the team's supplier, compounding its problems.

Amid all that, Fernley continues to lobby for a fairer distribution of the sport's prize money to ensure his team and others can survive in the sport.

"We won't stop fighting to try to get a better deal," he says. "And we made those decisions because we believe in Force India. We will fight all the way and I think it's a signal from Force India that we mean business."

The team now needs to talk the talk on track. ☒

Q&A



AP/BIMAGETTES

OTMAR SZAFNAUER FORCE INDIA CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

What were the reasons behind not running the 2015 car in the first two tests?

We had always planned to miss Jerez, but an issue with the manufacturing of the chassis meant we didn't make the first Barcelona test with the 2015 car. Had we made that, it would have definitely helped. We were delayed by 10 days as it took time for the supplier to fix the machine. We persevered, but eventually moved to another supplier.

What was the biggest challenge with only having three days of testing?

At the final test, you want to do performance work, race simulations and focus on preparing for the first race. But because of our situation, we had to compress all of that work into a few days, so it's been challenging.

Were you surprised by how reliable the car was after it completed 365 trouble-free laps?

In recent times – not to jinx ourselves – we've had good reliability. This year, we haven't had the same amount of time, but so far we have had good reliability, and I hope that continues.

What are Force India's targets for the opening races?

We need to be reliable, finish races and get as many points as we can. We will have significant upgrades to the car mid-season, so we want to finish strong. You need ideas to put performance onto the car and you need the budget to realise those ideas, and I think we can do both.



How Manor made it to Australia

The reborn Marussia team has won its fight to continue in Formula 1. **JONATHAN NOBLE** explains how



32

With new financial backers in place, guaranteed prize-money income and an updated car ready to run in the Australian Grand Prix, Manor has won its fight for Formula 1 survival.

But with no pre-season testing under its belt, and its rivals set to make a big step forward in pace compared with 2014, the battle it faces on track looks set to be just as tough as its fight to get to Australia.

Sporting director Graeme Lowdon is convinced, however, that the foundations for the team are stronger than they have been for a long time, and will ensure its F1 comeback is not short-lived.

"The problems we had in the past were not due to a runaway budget, or profligate spending," he says. "It does make an enormous difference to your ability to plan when a significant part of your turnover is prize money. Other teams we have raced against have had the benefit of that and we haven't. So that is a major, major difference."

THE NEW INVESTOR

The funding behind the resurrected Manor team comes from energy-firm boss Stephen Fitzpatrick. He is the founder of Ovo, although his involvement in F1 has nothing to do with the company and the money is his own.

With £30 million of prize money due to the team for finishing ninth in last year's constructors' championship, plus funding from drivers, Fitzpatrick's investment will make up the remainder of the anticipated £60 million budget for the season.

Fitzpatrick believes the return on his investment, and means of making Manor profitable, will come from attracting new sponsors in the short term rather than trying to spend money on moving up the grid. "There is not a huge financial increase in prize money to go from one place to the next," he explains. "If we want a bigger budget we need to work harder to engage sponsors and fans – I don't think finishing sixth will double our budget."

Manor will also receive



Former Sainsbury's CEO
Justin King brings huge
business acumen

assistance in guiding the business side from former Sainsbury's CEO Justin King, father of GP2 racer Jordan, who is acting as interim chairman before taking a non-executive role over the next few months.

NEW CAR LIKELY MID-SEASON

Manor is starting the year with an updated version of its 2014 car, which has been modified to comply

with new crash-test and nose regulations. Its focus on getting that car ready for the Australian GP has meant that work on its bespoke 2015 challenger has been delayed.

Once the season is under way, the team should be able to shift its resources over and prepare the new car for an introduction at some point in the middle of the year. Lowdon says that a final decision on the timing for the 2015 car



THE 107 PER CENT ISSUE

Manor's first target for 2015 will be in ensuring it does not fall foul of Formula 1's 107 per cent rule.

With only an updated 2014 car, the team is unlikely to be much quicker this year than it was last season, whereas the frontrunners are expected to be around three seconds per lap faster.

That means that there is a risk of the team perhaps struggling to get within 107 per cent of the fastest time. But until it hits the track it will not know how difficult this will be.

At the 2014 Spanish Grand Prix for example, Nico Rosberg's fastest time in Q1 was 1m26.764s, meaning

the cut-off to qualify was 1m32.837s. Max Chilton's lap of 1m29.586s was comfortably within the limits.

But if the fastest cars have leapt forward by three seconds, then repeating the 2014 Marussia performance will be right on the 107 per cent limit. Even so, the team says it's not too concerned.

"If it presents itself as a problem then that will be the first thing we need to engineer our way out of," says Lowdon. "The mechanics can't will the car around the track any quicker. We'll just have to address that as and when."

"We need to be moving forward. More teams are coming in and we want to beat them" GRAEME LOWDON

going to get penalties.

"Also, bringing in the new car at certain times, you can optimise when you would do an aero step change for example.

"The window to bring it in is quite wide at the minute, as it has not been our real focus, and that will narrow. My guess is we'll get back from the flyaways and that window [to introduce it] will start narrowing down. It depends also on what happens in the first few races, as that will have an impact."

LONG-TERM AMBITIONS

Manor's return to the F1 grid has been helped by the £30 million of commercial-rights income it will earn this year.

Furthermore, thanks to Caterham's demise, the team is guaranteed roughly the same income for 2016 and '17 too. It is only from '18 that new entrant Haas could qualify for prize money and force Manor to fight hard to keep its place in the top 10.

Although finishing 10th in the constructors' championship is



guaranteed this year, Lowdon insists that his team is not in simple cruise-and-collect mode. "In terms of the business plan, the aim is to be in the top 10 – but that could be misconstrued as simply accepting that," says Lowdon. "Anyone who thinks that just doesn't know us as people."

"We need to be moving forward. There are more teams coming into F1, and we want to beat them fair

and square on track. But we have to be realistic. Our starting point is significantly behind where you would want to be. So I just say to people – don't judge us on performance to begin with.

"The fans can justifiably judge us on how we interact with them and everything else, but it's our job to keep the team as honest as possible in terms of performance and that's how we will measure everyone."

Experience versus youth in F3

An oversubscribed field of 35 cars will battle out this year's Formula 3 European Championship. **MARCUS SIMMONS** assesses how prospects are shaping up

Carlin hard charger
Antonio Giovinazzi won
two races last year



34

Felix Rosenqvist and Prema Powerteam are the combination to beat in the Formula 3 European Championship as the series gears up for an incredibly competitive season, with 35 entries announced by the FIA last Friday.

The popular and vastly experienced Swede, who carried off Macau Grand Prix honours last November to sign off his four-season stint at Mücke Motorsport, is with the team that has run the Euro F3 champions in each of the years in which he has competed.

Rosenqvist is the driver Prema targeted to lead its challenge in an otherwise inexperienced line-up, with Jake Dennis moving from Carlin for a second year in F3, and Italian Formula 4 champion and Ferrari junior Lance Stroll plus sidekick Brandon Maisano graduating together from Prema's junior arm. The Rosenqvist deal comes with the full support of engine supplier Mercedes – for which he has competed as a works-backed driver since 2012. It must also come with the approval of Stroll's father Lawrence, who is known to be a partner in Prema (although it has never been officially announced) and therefore has a double interest in the team having a known quick quantity.

"It came from me discussing it with our engine-manufacturing

partner [Mercedes] and then we got a deal," says Prema team manager Rene Rosin. "Already before Christmas I was in deep discussions with Felix. He's a very good driver. Of course, he's very experienced but it's not the main reason we took him – it's because we have a very good line-up that can fit everybody together. He's useful for Lance, Brandon and Jake – the important thing at Prema is everybody works to share with everybody."

Until a two-day private test at Mugello this week, Rosenqvist's only previous drive in a Prema car came at the age of 16 in a one-off Italian Formula Renault outing at Spa in 2008. But he has become a friend of the team and ran Prema's Raffaele Marciello very close for the 2013 F3 title. He has also strengthened his links with Mercedes – AUTOSPORT understands that Rosenqvist will play a role in developing the marque's new GT3 contender and that he will race it later this year.

Furthermore, Prema hasn't changed its core engineering staff, although a slight rejig has resulted in Mattia Oselladore's promotion to technical director.

"It's Rosenqvist's championship to lose, isn't it?" says Trevor Carlin, whose team once again fields six drivers, with Formula Renault 3.5 driver Sean Gelael piloting a seventh, unregistered entry in

VAR's 2014 form with
Verstappen has netted
three quick rookies



selected races. "Prema have won it a lot, and have the most experienced driver ever in F3. They're absolute dead-cert favourites."

Carlin's logical main contender is Antonio Giovinazzi, who showed great speed on occasions in 2014 and won two races. "He's the most-experienced fast driver we've got," acknowledges Carlin, "so we expect him to do well. Whether he leads the team is up to him."

Carlin also has McLaren AUTOSPORT BRDC Award winner George Russell. The BRDC Formula 4 champion leads a strong group of 16 drivers eligible for rookie points, where he will be up against Carlin team-mate and Red Bull junior Callum Iott, Van Amersfoort Racing trio Charles Leclerc, Alessio Lorandi and Arjun Maini, Mücke

Motorsport's Mikkel Jensen and Maximilian Gunther, Signature duo Alexander Albon and Dorian Boccia, plus Stroll.

"Esteban Ocon and Max Verstappen did an amazing job as rookies last year," says Carlin. "I think the experienced drivers will have their work cut out against the rookies this year. Probably the one who can mount the most consistent challenge for a title attack like Ocon is George. He has the pace and intelligence; he's pukka!"

VAR boss Frits van Amersfoort, whose team tests at Imola this week, masterminded Verstappen's season in 2014 and is keeping expectations in check for his drivers. Each is an exciting newcomer, but they have zero F3 starts between them and Lorandi will be making his car debut



George Russell leads Carlin's rookie charge



Felix Rosenqvist starts the season as title favourite



Prema's strength and experience will be a major factor again

"It's Rosenqvist's title to lose, isn't it? He's the most experienced F3 driver ever"

TREVOR CARLIN

in next month's opening round at Silverstone. "We don't know exactly where we are but that's common for this time of year, for everyone," he says. "Alessio is taking a huge step – we don't need to deny that – but in testing he did very well."

Russell pinpoints Leclerc and Maini as his likely rivals for rookie honours. "For sure they'll be fast," he says, "and VAR is a proven package from Verstappen. I don't see any reason why they won't get there. Lorandi is quick but you need experience: track knowledge and car knowledge. It's impossible to judge how a newcomer who hasn't raced in cars will be able to compete."

Of his own expectations, 17-year-old Russell says: "I hope to learn early on from Antonio [Giovinazzi] and go from there.

Top rookie and top Carlin driver would be a respectable goal I think. Winning the championship in the first year will be difficult, so I just want to prove myself – Verstappen only finished third and got an F1 drive off the back of it."

The side-effects of the huge entry will be chaotic qualifying sessions, while there will be non-qualifiers for the Pau and Norisring rounds, where AUTOSPORT understands the grid capacity is 32 and 34 respectively.

"Do we realise what 35 cars means?" says van Amersfoort. "We will have awfully crowded sessions and trouble afterwards with accusations of destroyed lap times – the stewards will have a lot of work this year.

"And it's not good when we have to send drivers home because they didn't qualify – not always because they're not quick enough, maybe they had a technical problem. It gives me pressure in my stomach, we all know something can break."

On the other hand, organisers have dropped the format of teams taking pitlane positions relating to their previous year's series position. This hampered VAR and Verstappen hugely in qualifying last season, particularly when sessions were red-flagged and restarted, as the squad's poor 2013 results left it at the back of the queue. This year, to make it fairer, teams will alternate positions from track to track. ☞

ENTRY LIST

Felix Rosenqvist	Prema Powerteam Dallara-Mercedes
Jake Dennis	Prema Powerteam Dallara-Mercedes
Brandon Maisano	Prema Powerteam Dallara-Mercedes
Lance Stroll	Prema Powerteam Dallara-Mercedes
Antonio Giovinazzi	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
Gustavo Menezes	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
Tatiana Calderon	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
George Russell	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
Ryan Tveter	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
Callum Irott	Carlin Dallara-Volkswagen
Santino Ferrucci	Mucke Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Michele Beretta	Mucke Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Mikkel Jensen	Mucke Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Maximilian Gunther	Mucke Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Kang Ling	Mucke Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Charles Leclerc	Van Amersfoort Racing Dallara-Volkswagen
Alessio Lorandi	Van Amersfoort Racing Dallara-Volkswagen
Arjun Maini	Van Amersfoort Racing Dallara-Volkswagen
Fabian Schiller	Team West-Tec Dallara-Mercedes
Pietro Fittipaldi	Fortec Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Matt Rao	Fortec Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Martin Cao	Fortec Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Peter Li	Fortec Motorsport Dallara-Mercedes
Nicolas Beer	EuroInternational Dallara-Mercedes
Marvin Kirchhofer	EuroInternational Dallara-Mercedes
Julio Moreno	T-Sport Dallara-NBE
Nicolas Pohler	Double R Racing Dallara-Mercedes
Matt Solomon	Double R Racing Dallara-Mercedes
Dorian Bocolacci	Signature Dallara-Volkswagen
Alexander Albon	Signature Dallara-Volkswagen
Nabil Jeffri	Motopark Dallara-Volkswagen
Sergio Sette Camara	Motopark Dallara-Volkswagen
Markus Pommer	Motopark Dallara-Volkswagen
Mahaveer Raghunathan	Motopark Dallara-Volkswagen
Sam MacLeod	Motopark Dallara-Volkswagen



Chasing the American dream

Italian Luca Filippi is a veteran of the European single-seater scene, but never made it to the top. Now, as he tells **MARK GLENDENNING, he's finding his feet the US and targeting success in the IndyCar series**

It's a long way, figuratively and literally, from Italy's Piedmont region to central Indiana, and Luca Filippi has chosen a particularly circuitous route to get there.

He has been an F1 test driver for Honda, only to have the manufacturer pull out of Formula 1 that same year. He has made GP2 appearances in seven consecutive seasons and tallied up a record 110 starts in the category, which is almost an eternity in a championship that is supposed to serve as a stepping stone. He has been a championship contender in GP2, Auto GP and GT Open, but hasn't actually won a title since he claimed an Italian F3000 crown in 2005. He has been a GT development driver for the Ferrari factory team.

Now, he's an IndyCar driver, the holder of a secure seat in a professional single-seater championship for the first time in his career. By a quirk of fate, he'll replace Mike Conway, who stood alongside him as the other half of Honda F1's test-driver line-up at its season launch in 2008. And like Conway, Filippi's job will be to take Ed Carpenter's car to places it could never

otherwise go on road and street courses, and then hand the wheel back to Carpenter for the ovals. Where his and Conway's deals diverge is that unlike the Brit, Filippi will have a teammate: Ed Carpenter Racing's off-season merger with Sarah Fisher Hartman Racing to become CFH Racing means that he'll share the garage with Josef Newgarden. It's not a full-season programme but, for a guy who put himself on the map with a handful of one-off appearances with Bryan Herta Autosport and Rahal Letterman Lanigan over the past couple of years, it's enough for now. "It's great that I have an opportunity to

prove myself on the kind of courses that obviously suit me better, and hopefully I'll be able to have some results," he says.

"And with Ed, who is one of the best and most-experienced drivers on the ovals, I can learn a lot from the way he races and the way he tests. Maybe during the season we'll also have an opportunity for me to test the car on the ovals, which is something I'd like to do. At the moment there is no rush on that, but it's on our list."

Filippi's ability to capitalise on opportunities played a huge part in putting him on the radar for the deal with CFH in the first place. He made his debut with BHA at Mid-Ohio in 2013 as a replacement for Alex Tagliani and, despite having parachuted into the series mid-season with no testing, he showed enough raw speed to be invited back for another three starts before the end of the year.

"The few opportunities that I had; somehow I always managed to get something out of them," he says. "Even if I only had a few IndyCar races, those gave people in the series and people that really understand what motorsport is... they can read between the lines and understand whether I have the potential or not. And I think that apart ▶





Filippi suited up for his maiden IndyCar stint in '13

► from the results, those races showed that there was maybe the potential in myself.”

His opportunity was supposed to come a lot sooner. Eighteen months earlier, he'd signed to drive a second Rahal car in 2012, only for the deal to fall apart before the season.

“It was just a money issue,” he explains. “We all thought we could have done it, but... it was something that never really started in the first place, I would say. We tried as hard as we could.”

There were no hard feelings between team and driver, and Filippi would go on to race a second car for Rahal at the Houston and Toronto double-headers last year, giving him a total of eight IndyCar starts to draw upon as he prepares for his first outing in CFH colours at St Petersburg later this month. At the very least, that's enough to have given Filippi an appreciation that racing in the US requires a very different mindset to what he became used to racing single-seaters in Europe, especially with regard to race management.

When Filippi was rising through the ranks, European racing was essentially a series of flat-out sprints broken up by pitstops; in IndyCar, it's about knowing when to push and when to save fuel and tyres. The very best drivers – Will Power, Scott Dixon – are adept at conserving what's underneath them while still pumping out quick lap times but, even at its most basic level, it's an approach to driving that runs completely counter to the ragged-edge instincts developed in Filippi's junior days. Rubens Barrichello identified it as the hardest element of IndyCar racing to wrap his head around when he arrived in the series in 2012, but Filippi believes that the skills he picked up in GT Open will help in this regard.

“IndyCar is not a sprint race, but it's not an endurance race like WEC,” he says. “There are moments in the race where you have to push, and others where you just have to be in the right place at the right time, like in an endurance race. Save fuel, and don't take risks. I did some good things in my first IndyCar races; I was competitive. But I have to say that I also made some mistakes, and that was probably because I was too close to the limit at the wrong time. But I now have some endurance racing experience, and I have open-wheel experience from Europe. It's just a matter of putting it together, and I think I've found the right balance.”

It's fair at this point to wonder what drove him to make the effort in the first place. You don't spend so long in an F1 feeder category with the aim of creating a name for yourself in the US. Conway turned his sights across the Atlantic shortly after Honda F1 fell apart and, while Filippi recognises the Brit's wisdom with hindsight, he also questions whether he would have been ready for that kind of move at that point in his career.

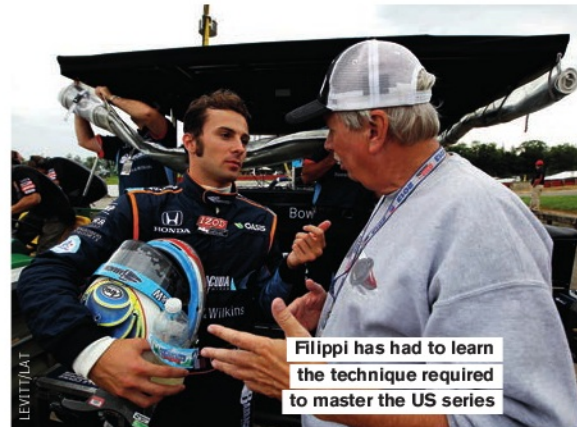
“After Honda withdrew from Formula 1 in 2008, obviously my contract kind of became toilet paper,” he says. “When they withdrew from F1 it might have been a good idea to move



“THE OVALS ARE ATTRACTIVE. IT'S LIKE AN ALPINE SKIER WHO TRIES DOWNHILL”

[to the US] earlier, like the move Conway made. But then I had another good season in GP2 – 2011 was a great year for me – and I had the opportunity to grow, not just as a driver but as a professional racer.

“Some drivers can grow up quickly, and at 17 they could be ready for Formula 1. Somebody else maybe needs a little more time. In my situation, I have to say that I probably got my best shape, my best performance – not just in driving the car, but in everything around it –



Filippi has had to learn the technique required to master the US series

when I was 25 or 26. Not before.”

European drivers in a similar situation now have a rejuvenated Indy Lights series to consider as a potential bridge to a career in the States, and indeed, Filippi's former GP2 rival Luiz Razia contested Lights last year. But at the time that Filippi was beginning to cast his own glances westward, that revitalisation of IndyCar's main feeder category was not yet on the horizon, and the prospect of uprooting himself to race in a series with poor grids, poor recognition, and a



First GP2 win came in Bahrain at the start of '07...



...and he won again for Super Nova at Algarve at the end of 2009



Filippi rates 2011 highly. This is Monza, one of three GP2 wins for Coloni that year



First IndyCar race came at Mid-Ohio for Bryan Herta Autosport in 2013

car that was a full decade behind what he'd been driving in Europe in terms of technical sophistication held little appeal.

"Indy Lights is getting very professional, and very interesting for drivers coming over from Europe," he says. "A couple of years ago it wasn't like that. It wasn't so attractive, honestly speaking. It wasn't about Indy Lights being a feeder series, or about me not having time to spend in a feeder series again. It was more the fact that Indy Lights was a bit down in those years. Now, they've done a good job. I'd actually advise a young, talented European driver to go to Indy Lights now."

Filippi's route to the US isn't one that would be easily replicated, and it's debatable whether it's one even he'd repeat given the chance to start from scratch. But if a road/street programme looks from the outside like something transitory, a final bridge to a full-time deal, that's fine. His entire world is in transition right now – he's moving to a new continent, is recently married with a child on the way, and for the first couple of months of the IndyCar season he plans to live in hotels before looking for an apartment in Indianapolis. "To be honest, it's cheaper," he says. "And I don't have to worry about cleaning."

His focus is very much on the opportunity that

has been given to him by CFH but, longer term, the idea of adding ovals to his repertoire appeals to both the racer and the romantic in him.

"This team, and this programme, is the best place for me to be at the moment," he says. "It's quite simple. I just need to do my best and do what I am supposed to do, which is be fast on the road and street courses, and then maybe one day I'll get the chance to have a full season."

"The ovals are very attractive to me. But at the same time I've never tried them, so I can't say whether I like them or not. I think it's like a good alpine skier who one day tries downhill. It's either something that you love, and you feel it and you know you can do it, or something that just doesn't suit you. The first time I test on an oval I'll understand whether it's something I like."

"There's also the history; thinking that 100 years ago they were already racing at Indianapolis and going for speed records. It's really impressive. If you want to be a part of American racing culture, you have to at least try ovals."

The enthusiasm is genuine, the excitement palpable. Filippi's old-school ethos and Carpenter's sleeves-rolled-up approach should be a good fit. If CFH's new arrival gets himself settled in quickly, the results are going to be fun to watch. ☘



A one-off GP2 win in 2012 came with Coloni at Monza



Taming the Toronto streets for Rahal Letterman Lanigan last season



Jakes hasn't raced since 2013 season

JAKES RETURNS

James Jakes will end a 12-month sabbatical from racing with his return to IndyCar this year, and he has done so by claiming one of the most desirable vacant seats on the grid: that of the second Schmidt Peterson Motorsports car.

The Brit will suit up alongside fellow new arrival James Hinchcliffe, and will attempt to build upon a 2013 season with Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing that was high on promise if low on results. He's in a good place to do it: SPM put itself on the map by carrying Simon Pagenaud to the top five in the points in each of the past three seasons.

"Sam [Schmidt] and I spoke at the end of 2013 and we tried to do something [for '14] but just didn't have enough time," says Jakes. "We kept in contact through most of the year, and were able to get the deal done."

Jakes was fractionally ahead of the current influx of European drivers to the US, making his debut in IndyCar with Dale Coyne Racing in 2011. He says that the series had always been on his radar ("I always spent a lot of time in the States, and IndyCar was something I was always interested in"), but that there was also a wariness of becoming trapped on the European ladder for too long.

"I just took the initiative to go to the States," he says. "And I haven't looked back. I've enjoyed every minute of it."





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DOES THE BTCC NEED MANUFACTURERS?

The British Touring Car Championship is thriving, with grids of 30-plus cars, but the days of the 1990s when there were as many as 10 manufacturer squads on the grid are still lamented. **SCOTT MITCHELL** investigates how important works teams really are

41





Mid-'90s marque heaven: Audi, Honda, Renault, BMW, Vauxhall, Volvo and Ford all raced

WIN ON SUNDAY, SELL ON MONDAY

The phrase is now archaic in motorsport circles, although car manufacturers must have thought it still made sense in the 1990s when they flocked to the British Touring Car Championship. British, continental European and wider-world marques justified exceptional expense with the popularity and reach of the BTCC's Super Touring era.

The manufacturers needed the BTCC then, or at least they thought they did. And did the championship need them? Massively. In fact, such was the dependence during the Super Touring era, and so long was the rehabilitation process thereafter as series bosses sought to hack costs and tighten regulations, that it would



EBREV/LAT



WSR BMW team took 2014 titles yet lost title sponsor

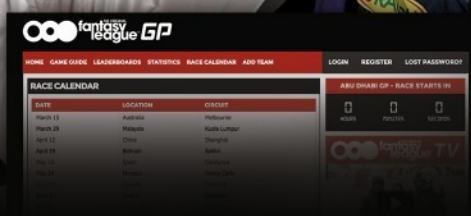
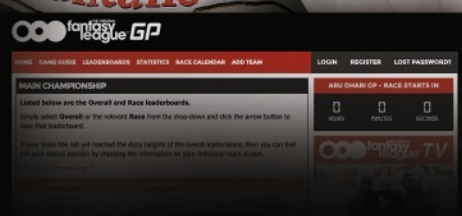
have long been inconceivable that the BTCC would ever not need them.

The general consensus is that the championship is now in rude health. Grids are at capacity, with organising body TOCA having to closely monitor entries to cap them at 31. The number of manufacturers represented on the grid (not

necessarily as entries themselves) is higher than it ever was in Super Touring, with the 2014 grid comprising 11 different makes and 14 models. The past two titles have been won by drivers in independent teams, and last season was the first time since 2008 that the championship was not decided at the final round. ▶



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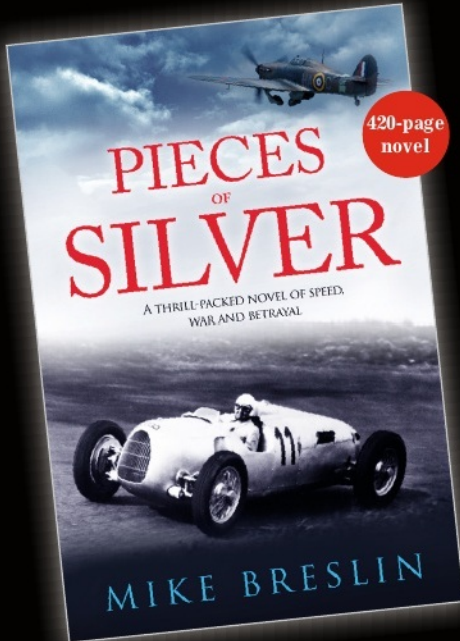


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The Sunoco 200 Challenge provides a winner, from Sunoco fuelled Championships that are not eligible for the Sunoco Whelen Challenge, with a race seat in the Sunoco liveried Chevrolet Camaro during the 200-mile endurance race on the Friday before the Rolex 24 At Daytona. 2015 Sunoco 200 Challenge winner Oskar Krüger took the massive leap up from his usual Radical to go on to master the controls of the powerful Camaro on the World famous 31 degree banking. But who will take the wheel of this muscle car next year?



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the race track was just
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Eurotech has joined series' established frontrunners

► Not bad for a championship seen as languishing in the shadow of former glory days. Not bad for a championship that has redefined itself as one that puts the independent teams first, with the NGTC regulations introduced in 2011 the first step towards a world where competition was not defined by costs.

The regulations have played a big part in the BTCC's transition to a series that doesn't rely on manufacturer investment to be popular, competitive or professional. But that process has been aided by the fact that the line between a factory team and a privateer effort is more blurred now. The people behind those Super Touring behemoths are still around today; they are just operating on their own.

"We have great independent teams, many who have sprung up relatively recently from very modest beginnings and who are now powerhouses and even constructors within the championship," says series boss Alan Gow.



Series boss Gow is proud of NGTC

"The variety we have is astounding. It's important for competition, for sponsors and great for our audiences – it's also a unique differentiator for the BTCC. Last year we had 11 brands and 14 models competing for outright honours – you simply can't see that breadth of variety in any other (single-class) major touring car championship anywhere else in the world. It's something I'm very proud of."

The foundation of that success is the teams. Triple Eight (MG), Team Dynamics (Honda) and WSR are the long-established behemoths, while independent squad Eurotech has joined the championship-winning party in recent years. Motorbase has established itself as a bigger team alongside building (and selling) NGTC Ford Focuses, while Team BMR, Rob Austin Racing and Ciceley Racing all won races last year.

Given the variety and competition the BTCC is enjoying, surely the answer to the question of this piece is easy. But it's not that simple. Because in a BTCC world where manufacturer backing is not forthcoming, it's the teams rather than the championship itself that feel the pinch.

How many of those race-winning teams have title sponsors? Not many. The budget Motorbase gained from Airwaves (which paid for the team to run Fabrizio Giovanardi last year) has gone, while WSR's reward for sweeping four crowns last year is the loss of title sponsor eBay. Eurotech has had to replace its headline backer after Pirtek followed Andrew Jordan to MG. Team BMR, the outfit that has snared Turkington and Jason Plato and runs four Volkswagens, is privately funded.

WSR boss Dick Bennetts reckons the regulations have overhauled the series in a mostly positive way, but the lack of financial recompense the independent teams receive for their success provides Gow with a problem.

"In Super Touring, cars would be out testing each week, and evolution was so fast you'd get upgrades regularly," Bennetts recalls. "The cost was just horrendous. My background is in engineering so I enjoyed it because it was a great exercise, but at the end of the day someone had to pay. That was the problem. The racing is just

"You can't see that breadth of variety in any other single-class touring car series in the world" BTCC CHIEF ALAN GOW

as good, if not better now, and the budgets are probably a tenth of what they were then.

"But it's tricky for TOCA because how do you define a non-manufacturer team? We're not an official manufacturer or a works team. BMW UK do not want to become a BTCC team at this moment in time. We just race BMWs and Andy [Priaulx] just happens to be a BMW driver who has been instrumental in bringing [sponsor] IHG into the BTCC this year.

"We are 100 per cent independent so we feel we're entitled to prize money [which would potentially be lost if WSR was defined as a manufacturer entry, as some have suggested it should be]. We don't get money from the manufacturer. If we're a constructor team because we've designed and built a car to race ourselves, well, what about Motorbase, as they have not only built NGTC cars, but sold cars to customers as well. Likewise Ciceley Racing, who have sold a car. So should they not be a constructor team? BMR have built NGTC cars and have got the first and second place drivers from the 2014 championship. So if they win the championship this year, do they become a manufacturer or constructor? How do we make this fair for all?"

The suggestion that WSR becomes badged as a manufacturer or constructor reflects a quiet desire within the championship to keep the manufacturer entries going, even if it doesn't strictly need them to be successful. It happened with the Aon Fords. It also shows that, while the ►

► BTCC is thriving, it's not utopian. It's a struggle to make any money out of it and, even when you look at the works operations, they still need to contribute to their own running costs, just not to quite the same extent.

"We're fortunate now we've got three budgets on board, but we still don't have the big number across the top," says Bennetts of WSR's situation in 2015. "When you've got X amount of budget in the kitty to play with there's a set amount to run three cars properly, a set amount of overheads, and you hopefully make a profit.

"We overspent a bit over the winter of 2013-14 because we went to the windtunnel twice, a four-poster rig and of course our own rig testbed. I'm glad we did because it paid off. We didn't make any money. You think, 'OK, that was last year, but we'll get it back this year'. Then eBay disappears, so your back's against the wall again.

"We're very happy having Andy, Sam [Tordoff] and Rob [Collard] on board, and the package is IHG, JCT600 and another sponsor not announced yet. We're very pleased to have them on board but they're not an eBay-style sponsor."

Teams are businesses, and if the money isn't coming in the team can't spend more than it gets from its drivers. For WSR, Bennetts says further progress for his fleet of BMWs will come in small increments, because the lack of a like-for-like eBay replacement means there's not enough in the budget to push the boat out on developments.

"We've got a good running budget but we

"We've got a good running budget, but not excess. We have to be careful what we spend on R&D" WSR BOSS DICK BENNETTS

haven't got excess," he continues. "So we've got to be careful what we spend on the R&D side.

"I'd struggle to reduce the amount of people on the team because it's hard enough to win when you do it properly. If you cut it down and employ more weekend warriors, there's more risk of mistakes. So why create more problems trying to scale back on good people?"

Financial restrictions have a negative impact on track and this is where a proper manufacturer deal provides the most significant help to the team on the ground. But the manufacturer involvement that does exist in the BTCC is a far cry from previous eras, as indicated last year when Triple Eight found technical developments potentially worth several tenths of a second, but the team was not prepared to bankroll the cost and MG would not step up either.

The MG/Triple Eight union shows that the modern-age manufacturer team still has its work cut out attracting funding. Witness the plastering of the MG that Jason Plato was behind – its entered name last year was MG KX Clubcard Fuel Save, in partial deference to the so-called 'manufacturer' behind it but largely a homage to Plato's various Tesco links.

It does beg the question: what does MG put in and get out of it?

When it returned as a factory BTCC entry in 2012, it was following the launch of the MG6, the first all-new MG in the UK in 16 years. Initial



new-car registrations were poor: 282 in 2010 and 360 in 2011, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, an automotive industry monitor. But by the end of the marque's first year back in the BTCC as a factory entry that figure more than doubled, to 782. It then registered 504 in 2013, and last year it rocketed to 2326, though that was mainly down to the launch of the MG3. While it would be foolish to attribute its recent growth to its re-entry to the BTCC, it

would also be churlish to say it's had no impact.

"It gives us great exposure in the UK and abroad too – we have lots of feedback from MG fans as far afield as Australia and New Zealand as well as the continent," says Matthew Cheyne, MG's marketing and PR manager. "So the reach of BTCC is strong.

"Our on-track involvement and success is great in itself, but we put a lot of effort into off-track promotions of the brand too. At every race we have a trade stand and we generate a huge amount

Q&A



Manufacturer input led to costs spiralling out of control in 1990s

of interest and enthusiasm from race fans who see the racing MG6 on track, and 50 yards away there is a production car they can climb into.”

That MG has committed to continuing beyond its initial three-year deal shows it feels it's getting something back, and it's understood that the manufacturer's investment has grown each year. That helps Triple Eight, the most successful team in the BTCC's history, push the boat out further. Not as much as it would like, or as much as it might have done in the past with Vauxhall, but every little helps.

A slight tangent, but would Dynamics be any less effective in running Hondas if it competed without a manufacturer tag? No. It didn't stop the team winning titles with Integras and Civics. Exactly how much Honda UK puts into the Dynamics coffers is unknown, but the relationship is significant enough for the team to introduce the Civic Tourer last year, which was as much to do with Honda UK's marketing as it was a genuine belief that the car would be better than the proven hatchback version.

The point here is that the BTCC has moved on a long way from the 1990s, during which success was decided by, as Bennetts puts it, “basically who had the most budget”. Now, the two factory teams of recent years do not want to lose their works status because it's additional support rather than a crucial component. It's nice work, if you can get it.

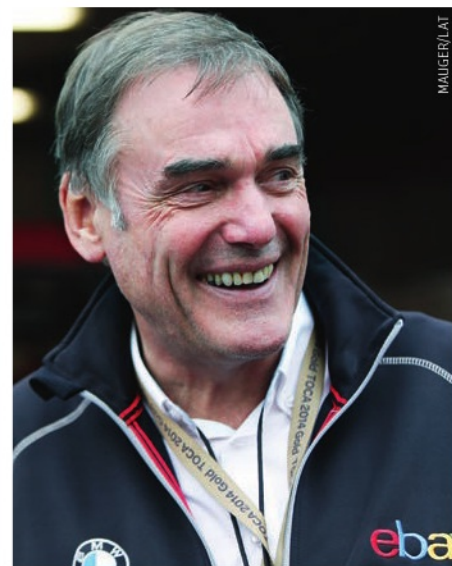
The bottom line is the BTCC needs manufacturers on a lesser scale than any time since Super Touring ended. That's not to say that modern works deals are glorified sponsors, because they do make a difference to how teams operate and the series is keen to keep them around for the glamour of it all. Motorsport always matters more when there is a factory element. Manufacturers make you care.

But the BTCC's always been something of an island. How many other championships have carried international recognition in their history while being based 100 per cent domestically? How many other championships could maintain as substantial a fanbase during a nadir like the early noughties?

The style of racing has always played a part in keeping up the series' appeal. Jordan, who clinched his 2013 title with his family-run Eurotech team against the factory concerns, says it's important that the NGTC regulations have allowed smaller teams to participate but ensured the racing has not been compromised.

“NGTC gets quite a bit of bad press but you can't get away from the fact that the racing is very good, and it has cut the costs,” he maintains. “More budget will always help but I think it comes down to having the right people.

“It's quite funny. A lot of people think NGTC is one-make racing, and that's bollocks. It's all the same components but there's so much you can ▶



DICK BENNETTS
WSR TEAM PRINCIPAL

Ran 2014 champion Colin Turkington, and fielded works entries for Ford and Honda in the Super Touring era and MG under BTC Touring regulations

What was a Super Touring factory team like?

The cost was just horrendous. Cars would be out testing each week, and evolution was so fast you'd get upgrades regularly. My background is engineering so I enjoyed it because it was a great exercise but at the end of the day someone had to pay. That was the problem.

And now that's changed?

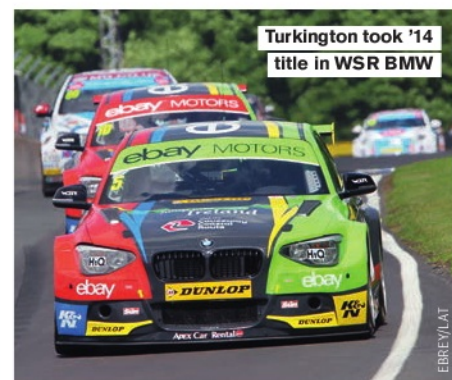
The heydays of ST were basically who had the best budget. Because drivers were being paid £350-400k each year. We run three cars now just on what the drivers got paid. Looking at the bigger picture, the championship now is very competitive and the cost is much less.

So does the BTCC need manufacturers?

We'd love to be a manufacturer team again because we'd hopefully be back to earning a profit again...

What's the likelihood of that?

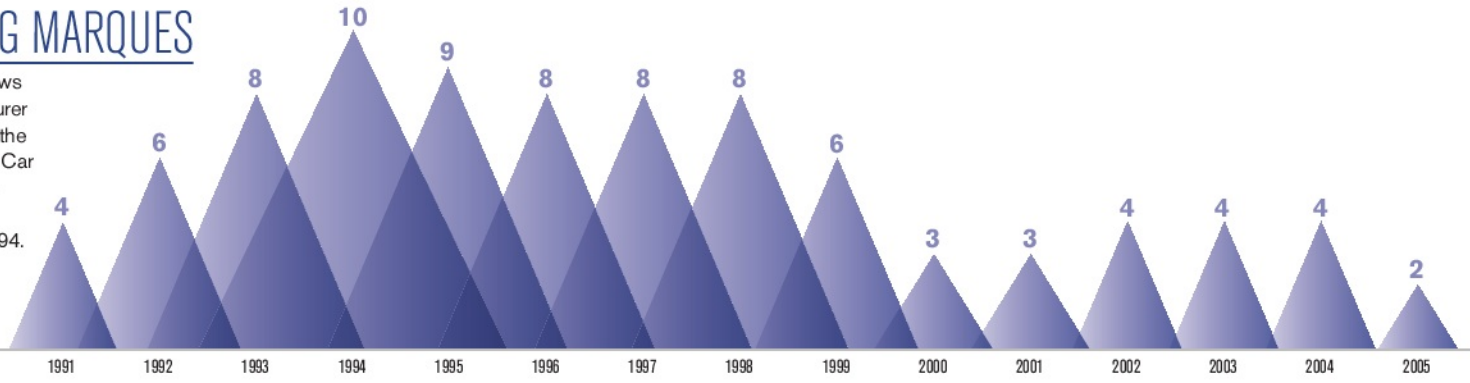
“We've been running the BMW brand since 2007, won the championship twice and one day maybe we'll be a BMW works team. They help with publicity by way of nice road cars, we get discounts on parts, we provide corporate hospitality and it's a very good brand name. But at the end of the day, we are 100 per cent independent.”



Turkington took '14 title in WSR BMW

MAPPING MARQUES

The graph shows how manufacturer involvement in the British Touring Car Championship peaked at 10 marques in 1994. It's unlikely to reach those levels again.



MANUFACTURERS IN THE BTCC

When the British Touring Car Championship rewrote its rulebook to run only two-litre saloons, which became known as Super Tourers, there were four manufacturer entries: Toyota, BMW, Nissan and Vauxhall. Here's how the number of official works teams, and participants, has ebbed and flowed from 1991 to 2015.

Manufacturer	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Infiniti															
Chevrolet															
SEAT															
Proton															
MG															
Audi															
Honda															
Alfa Romeo															
Volvo															
Renault															
Ford															
Mazda															
Peugeot															
Nissan															
Toyota															
BMW															
Vauxhall															



AmD's S2000 Golf was expensive

“There are no excuses now for smaller teams; it’s just hard work. That’s how it should happen” AmD HEAD SHAUN HOLLAMBY

▶ do with them. You do have a lot of freedom. In S2000, the manufacturer teams were pushing a new car out every other year. It was a big ask to match them, but now the cars last for years.”

Take an obscure example, Shaun Hollamby’s popular AmD team. The Jack Sears Trophy class-winning squad, which scored its first outright podium last year, started life in the BTCC with an S2000 Volkswagen Golf. Hollamby says its growth is thanks to NGTC and the championship’s desire to embrace smaller teams.

“NGTC gives me the confidence to invest,” he explains. “The key thing is everybody knows about the BTCC; it’s a hard sell to sponsors if you’re racing anywhere else. Anyone with a vague interest knows about it, and that’s irreplaceable. We can show our customers what we can do.”

“The Golf was never going to win, and that car was a lot more expensive to build and run than the NGTC. There are no excuses now for smaller teams; it’s just hard work. The quality of the team makes the difference and the driver is very important. That’s how it should happen.”

That’s also why the BTCC itself doesn’t need manufacturers. It’s rebuilt itself on a manifesto of lower costs and given smaller teams something to invest in and a platform to grow on. Six of this season’s 31 cars will be manufacturer entries, while a dozen of the series’ top drivers are in independent teams. That transformation from a series that reached its peak thanks to manufacturer-backed entities to a championship that attracts factory interest but doesn’t rely on it to be competitive is particularly pleasing for Gow.

“The BTCC doesn’t need more manufacturers, but of course we continue to welcome them with open arms,” he says. “Manufacturers bring along, among other things, great marketing, promotion and customer/audience involvement.”

“However, we all remember when manufacturers left the BTCC in the late 1990s mainly due to the astronomical costs, so it was important to ensure the bedrock of the BTCC was not shifted again by those movements.”

“We’ve now gone through the first five years of NGTC and nobody has the appetite to move away from such a successful formula. It would be an incredibly foolish thing to do.”

OGIER TAKES AN IMPOSSIBLE WIN

This was the rally that Sebastian Ogier made emphatically clear he couldn't win thanks to his strong start to the season.

DAVID EVANS explains how the Frenchman played a blinder

Photography McKlein.de





Rally Mexico

World Rally Championship
Leon, Guanajuato (MEX),
March 5-8

Round 3/13



RESULTS

21 stages, 245.572 miles

- 1 SEBASTIEN OGIER (F)/JULIEN INGRASSIA (F)**
VW Motorsport Volkswagen Polo R WRC #1 **4h19m13.4s**
- 2 MADS OSTBERG (N)/JONAS ANDERSSON (S)**
Citroen Total Abu Dhabi Citroen DS 3 WRC #4 **+1m18.8s**
- 3 ANDREAS MIKKELSEN (N)/OLA FLOENE (N)**
VW Motorsport II Volkswagen Polo R WRC #9 **+1m25.1s**
- 4 ELFYN EVANS (GB)/DANIEL BARRITT (GB)**
M-Sport WRT Ford Fiesta RS WRC #5 **+3m40.2s**
- 5 DANIEL SORDO (E)/MARC MARTI (E)**
Hyundai Motorsport Hyundai i20 WRC #8 **+5m01.8s**
- 6 MARTIN PROKOP (CZ)/JAN TOMANEK (CZ)**
Jipocar Czech National Ford Fiesta RS WRC #21 **+6m36.1s**
- 7 NASSER AL-ATTIYAH (QA)/MATTHIEU BAUMEL (F)**
Ford Fiesta RRC #39 **+14m52.7s**
- 8 THIERRY NEUVILLE (B)/NICOLAS GILSOUL (B)**
Hyundai Motorsport Hyundai i20 WRC #7 **+22m43.3s**
- 9 NICOLAS FUCHS (PE)/FERNANDO MUSSANO (RA)**
Ford Fiesta R5 #41 **+22m49.0s**
- 10 JARI KETOMAA (FIN)/KAJ LINDSTROM (FIN)**
Drive Dmack Ford Fiesta R5 #40 **+23m10.2s**

OTHERS

- 15 JARI-MATTI LATVALA (FIN)/MIIKKA ANTILA (FIN)**
VW Motorsport Volkswagen Polo R WRC #2 **+48m48.6s**
- 16 KRIS MEEKE (GB)/PAUL NAGLE (IRL)**
Citroen Total Abu Dhabi Citroen DS 3 WRC #3 **+51m50.3s**
- 18 ROBERT KUBICA (PL)/MACIEK SZCZEPANIAK (PL)**
RK Motorsport Ford Fiesta RS WRC #16 **+56m43.6s**

DRIVERS' CHAMPIONSHIP

1 OGIER	81	6 LATVALA	19
2 MIKKELSEN	47	7 SORDO	18
3 NEUVILLE	35	8 PROKOP	14
4 OSTBERG	32	9 TANAK	12
5 EVANS	26	10 PADDON	10

MANUFACTURERS' CHAMPIONSHIP

1 VW MOTORSPORT	99	4 CITROEN TOTAL WRT	42
2 HYUNDAI WRT	75	5 JIPOCAR CZECH NATIONAL	30
3 M-SPORT WRT	48	6 VW MOTORSPORT II	15

STAGE TIMES

F: Fastest L: Leader S: Second

SS1 STREET STAGE GUANAJUATO (LIVE TV) (0.63 miles) F: Neuville 52.8s L: Neuville S: Bartelli +0.2s	SS12 OTATES 1 (26.66 miles) F: Ogier 29m58.0s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +50.5s
SS2 SUPER SPECIAL 1 (2.86 miles) F: Ogier 3m19.8s L: Ogier S: Neuville +1.2s	SS13 EL BRINCO 1 (LIVE TV) (5.13 miles) F: Sordo 4m41.9s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m08.2s
SS3 LOS MEXICANOS 1 (6.16 miles) F: Meeke 7m35.2s L: Ogier S: Neuville +0.2s	SS14 STREET STAGE LEÓN 2 (0.85 miles) F: Kubica 1m11.8s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m08.3s
SS4 EL CHOCOLATE 1 (27.42 miles) F: Ogier 29m41.5s L: Ogier S: Neuville +13.3s	SS15 IBARRILLA 2 (18.81 miles) F: Ogier 17m26.7s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m13.9s
SS5 LAS MINAS 1 (9.66 miles) F: Neuville 11m07.5s L: Ogier S: Neuville +8.9s	SS16 OTATES 2 (26.66 miles) F: Ostberg 29m50.0s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m12.2s
SS6 STREET STAGE LEÓN 1 (0.85 miles) F: Ogier 1m12.4s L: Ogier S: Neuville +9.6s	SS17 EL BRINCO 2 (5.13 miles) F: Ogier 4m34.6s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m14.6s
SS7 LOS MEXICANOS 2 (6.16 miles) F: Latvala 7m29.4s L: Ogier S: Neuville +11.0s	SS18 SUPER SPECIAL 3 (2.86 miles) F: Mikkelsen 3m16.9s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m15.2s
SS8 EL CHOCOLATE 2 (27.42 miles) F: Latvala 29m14.1s L: Ogier S: Latvala +12.1s	SS19 GUANAJUATO (34.68 miles) F: Ostberg 35m26.5s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m12.8s
SS9 LAS MINAS 2 (9.66 miles) F: Ostberg 10m58.7s L: Ogier S: Latvala +10.9s	SS20 DERRAMADERO (7.20 miles) F: Neuville 3m22.1s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m10.9s
SS10 SUPER SPECIAL 2 (2.86 miles) F: Ogier 3m17.0s L: Ogier S: Latvala +13.5s	SS21 EL BRINCO 3 - POWER STAGE (LIVE TV) (5.13 miles) F: Ogier 6m50.5s L: Ogier S: Ostberg +1m18.8s
SS11 IBARRILLA 1 (18.81 miles) F: Ogier 17m41.4s L: Ogier S: Latvala +13.7s	

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LONDON, LAST DECEMBER. THAT WAS WHEN Sebastien Ogier insisted Rally Mexico victory was out of the question for anybody making a good start to the season. Last week, he went a step further and ruled out a podium.

In the intervening period, he'd made a pretty handy start to 2015, and was now ready to pay the price: sweeping the loose gravel clear for his rivals following him.

In the hours before the start, Ogier launched his final psychological salvo. And it was a beauty.

"For me," he said, "to be on the podium here,

my rivals will have to be pretty bad."

Boom.

Ogier took what he could from a brace of largely asphalt superspecials on Thursday night to take a 1.2s lead over Andreas Mikkelsen into the first gravel stage of the event, Friday morning's Los Mexicanos stage. This was but a loosener – pardon the pun – for the day's main event: the 27-mile El Chocolate test.

That was the one. That was where Ogier would be crucified.

Watch this.



Ogier (r) and Ingrassia took 2015 hat-trick and third straight Mexico win



Ostberg took second for Citroen to give the team valuable points

SENSATIONAL ON SOFT

Predictably, Ogier had a plan. Overnight temperatures hadn't been as high as during previous days, there had even been the threat of rain. And, when the morning dawned overcast, Ogier put his plan into action.

He would run two soft Michelins, crossed diagonally on the Volkswagen Polo R WRC. What if the morning mist burned off? If the sun delivered, surely his covers would be cooked.

It was a gamble. Or was it? Ogier had experimented during the shakedown and creamed the best of the rest to the tune of two seconds in three miles. He rolled the dice.

Between stages three and four, Ogier talked non-stop to the team. What had they heard? What was the weather?

Ogier's engineer Gerard Jan de Jongh said: "It wasn't the plan to use both soft tyres on Chocolate, we thought the temperature would come up. But he made the decision: he was sticking with them."

El Chocolate starts out on a perfectly natural Mexican gravel road all the way up to the village where cocoa is reckoned to have been first made into a drink thousands of years ago. But the second half of the stage isn't quite so natural, it was made by the organisers 18 months ago to make this route possible.

It's a real mix of twisty, technical and high-speed with topography that rises and falls through three main peaks, the highest of which is a power-sapping 2783 metres.

The sun didn't come. In fact, as the crews rode back up the mountains, they were greeted by fog. Only Mads Ostberg was faster through the first half (although Robert Kubica was sensational through splits one and two before going off), but from there to the finish, Ogier was absolutely nailed and quickest in every one of the three split sectors across the second half.

He'd driven beautifully with the perfect blend of force and faith in his tyres.

Getting to the finish, he had no interest in sharing his story with the waiting media. He was out of the car and inspecting the Michelins on every corner. First on the road and devoid of split times, he had no idea what he'd done and, as he waited the three painful minutes to benchmark his time against Thierry Neuville, his tyres would offer the only indication.

He smiled thinly. He wasn't sure.

There was no time to waste, a short road section demanded he left the line and moved into Las Minas. He dropped time in that fifth stage, but he expected that. A long, uphill drag provided the deepest gravel of the day.

Stage four times were the ones he wanted. And



Mikkelsen made it two VW Polos on the podium

he had nothing to fear. He arrived at the start of the Leon street stage happy.

"We calculated we would lose between 30 and 40 seconds this morning," he said. The result? He was 8.9s up on Neuville's Hyundai – with the Belgian kicking himself for replacing one of his two softs with a hard-compound Michelin for the longest stage.

Ogier had backed himself. And backed a winner. "I would never have expected that," he said, staring at the times. "Taking the two softs kept me ahead. We were clever."

Clever, but also absolutely controlled. Mid-way through El Chocolate, Ogier had given himself a talking to.

"I had a feeling we were going so slowly," he said. "It's so slippery and I had a problem of balance in the car because we really had no grip. In this case you have to not give up, you have the feeling that it's terrible, horrible and you cannot do anything. But that's when you say: 'OK, I will still do the best with what I have and keep pushing.' But when you push always, you are on the edge of the knife."

"This is more than I dreamed of."

THE SCIENCE AND SET-UP

De Jongh explained the science behind the softs: "When there is a lot of loose, you don't get so much heat going into the tyre. The thick cloud cover stayed on stage four and that helped keep the temperature down, which also helped us keep the tyre."

"But this was also him seeing an opportunity. We were looking at damage limitation on this loop, we hadn't identified any stages to attack on, we were just trying not to lose too much time. But when Ogier spots an opportunity, he doesn't waste it."

Crossing tyres diagonally is a relatively new phenomenon in the WRC, started by Sebastien Loeb on a typically wet-dry-damp Rally Germany a few years ago. But it remains a mystery to Francois-Xavier Demaison.

F-X is the technical boss at Volkswagen. He deals in fact, not feeling. And the fact is, crossing tyres shouldn't work.

"I don't know how they drive it, I really don't," he said. "I tell them, you do what you want, but I wouldn't do it like this. But they make it work. It's incredible."

"This is in the driver's hands to cope with this, they have to be thinking all of the time: 'How is the grip? Where is the grip?'"

Demaison draws the line at tailoring every damper to the compound of tyre.

"We didn't start setting these cars up like IndyCars yet," he smiled.

MAN-MADE DIFFERENCE

So, let's look at it. Ogier had a car that turned in differently on 50 per cent of the corners and ▶



It all went wrong for Latvala's VW on the Otates stage

▶ he was running in the worst of the conditions, in a scenario that had been winding him up since the middle of last year, when the FIA first mooted these new running-order regulations.

But he took all the peripheral stuff, the lack of split times, the expectation of a beasting and he put it out of his mind. He drew on his mental strength and drove faster, neater and quicker than anybody else.

And then gave short shrift to those questioning whether the conditions had been as bad as he feared at the front. A long breath, an adjustment to the cap: "If you cannot see by yourself what we have done, then I think there is a problem. Put anybody else in my position and see what he is doing, then maybe you understand what I have done on this rally."

JOB DONE

Neville rolled out on the second pass of the Chocolate stage, leaving Jari-Matti Latvala to chase his team-mate. But all the Finn could do was nibble. The closest he would get was 10.9s after Friday's final gravel stage.

By then, Ogier's job was done. Such had been the carnage and chaos further down the field, Ogier was scheduled to start eighth on the road, behind seven crews returning from retirement under the SuperRally regulations.

Bad indeed, his rivals had been.

And worse was to follow for Latvala, who retired with suspension damage at the end of Otates. The difference between Ogier and his nearest rival mushroomed from 13.7s to 50.5s in the space of a stage.

Ostberg might have led this event for the past two years, but Ogier had left the building. He won this rally on Friday morning, cemented it 24 hours later and celebrated it a day on.

Brilliant.



Neville again took the fight to Ogier. For a while...

LATVALA LUCKS OUT

After retiring from round two in Sweden, Latvala knew he needed to make this one count. In all honesty, he didn't come close. Such is Ogier's self-confidence right now, nobody can get close to the wave he's riding. Latvala smacked a bank avoiding a hole mid-way through Otates and that was that. The fight had gone.

If there was sympathy for anybody, it should go to Neuville. Again, the Belgian was the one who carried the fight to the championship leader. His i20 benefitted from a paddleshift and some new injectors for the first time, but it's still no VW. It's a reflection on last year's Rally Germany winner's determination to topple the title holder that he's able to haul the car to such great heights.

A NORWEGIAN FIGHT

The scrap for second place warmed up nicely on Saturday afternoon as Volkswagen's Mikkelsen closed on Ostberg's DS3. Mikkelsen was adamant he was doing his own thing. An early bath here 12 months ago meant much of the mileage was still foreign to him and he wasn't willing to risk missing out on much-needed experience.

Ostberg on the other hand has good knowledge of these roads and arrived looking to finish the job he'd started in the past two years when he led here. With victory out of the question, he was pretty relaxed about his 4.5s advantage over Mikkelsen on Saturday night.

"I don't want to increase the speed," he said. "I don't think it's necessary. He [Mikkelsen] can always do something, you never know, but this morning we increased the gap quite comfortably. We have to be focused, but I don't think we have to stress too much."

Fair enough. And good as his word, he went quickest through the event's longest stage, near enough doubling his advantage. He didn't look back from there, taking second place and landing Citroen some much-needed points – particularly as his team-mate Kris Meeke had been one of many victims of SS4. Damaged suspension ruled out the Northern Irishman.

Elfyn Evans ensured there was something for the British rally fans to smile about with fourth place. The M-Sport driver scored the same result 12 months ago, but this was completely different. He was gifted it in 2014, this year he grafted for it. And fully deserved it. Evans' efforts were, however, cast into the shade by the watery antics of his team-mate Ott Tanak, whose Fiesta was recovered from the bottom of a lake and returned to action a day later.

A returning Dani Sordo rounded out the top five, happy to be back after a couple of broken ribs forced him out of round two in Sweden. ☘

IN THE SERVICE PARK

DAVID EVANS
RALLIES EDITOR

@daviddevansrally



CHINA. THAT'S WHAT THE WORLD RALLY Championship needs. A bit of variety. Because the WRC's the same old story, rally-in-rally-out. Right?

Wrong. Big time.

Every year, Mexico demonstrates the diversity of the world championship and it manifests itself in many different ways. Taxis, for example. You genuinely can't move in Leon for green and white, 20-plus-year old Nissan cabs, complete with an empty fuel tank and a burning-bright engine warning light.

Rewind a couple of rounds and it's Gap: planet earth's very own taxi void. Then there's Karlstad, Sweden and the difference a month makes couldn't be more marked: far fewer flip-flops for a start.

Mexico's always an adventure and always impossible to second-guess. Getting out of Leon, Mexico's leather capital, and into the hills provides one of the season's most humbling trips to a stage. Ten minutes is all it takes to be out of town, completely alone and in a landscape that bears zero resemblance to anything else we see all year. The only movement comes from cowboys – proper ones – kicking up dust as they go about their daily lives on the horizon.

And as for Guanajuato on ceremonial-start night, it brings the kind of emotion only seen once a year. In that square, around that roundabout and in those tunnels. It's another world.

Yes, the WRC does need to get back to Asia, but last week highlighted again that the sport does diversity pretty well. I mean, can you imagine anybody trying to sell you a TV aerial and a slice of watermelon at the same time – all-in deal for 100 Pesos (about a fiver) – on the corner of Casino Square?



Mexico brings a unique atmosphere to the WRC

That duck's not getting back in the car...



M-Sport team principal Malcolm Wilson on Ott Tanak's lucky duck



Tanak and Molder landed in the lake, but would emerge OK (inset)

Tanak's lake plunge prompts safety investigation

THE FIA IS INVESTIGATING THE crash that left Ott Tanak's Ford Fiesta RS WRC submerged in a lake and the Rally Mexico organisers and M-Sport with no idea where the crew were for more than 10 minutes.

The Estonian's Fiesta disappeared from tracking screens after it rolled into a lake on SS3. Tanak and his co-driver Raigo Molder escaped the sinking car and were able to swim to shore. The organisers located the crew 12 minutes later, but M-Sport wouldn't find out they were unharmed for a further five minutes.

WRC manager Michele Mouton travelled to the scene of the crash and sought further detail from the crew, tracking suppliers and organiser, but wouldn't be drawn on any conclusions.

"We have been driving this stage for a lot of years without any problem," she said. "The organisers say the water is much lower usually, that's why they have the divers at the start of the stage. We can think about making changes, but don't ask me to make this decision today."

Once the car was retrieved from the lake, M-Sport worked overnight to allow

Tanak to restart on Saturday. The car was then halted by a sensor problem, but returned for the final day.

"The team did a mega job," said Tanak. "It's fantastic what they achieved. When Raigo and I drove the car into parc ferme a few hours after it had been at the bottom of the lake, we couldn't believe it."

"But, we have to think about this story a little bit as well and think about what might have happened. It's not so nice to have something like this and I think the FIA needs to start looking at things a little closer. Safety always has to come first"

Citroen defends Meeke's form

CITROEN HAS CONFIRMED ITS support of Kris Meeke despite the Northern Irishman's third successive mistake on last week's Rally Mexico.

While Meeke himself voiced concerns over his position, deputy team principal Marek Nawarecki said his place in the squad remains safe. Meeke, who retired from day one with suspension damage, said: "I know my job's on the line. If I want to continue, it's got to be right. You're only as good as you're last result and my results haven't been good enough."

Nawarecki added: "We cannot say after three rallies that this position is somehow different."



Ogier: tyres helped the result

RALLY MEXICO WINNER

Sebastien Ogier has poured cold water on suggestions that running at the front of the field won't be as much of a problem as he feared.

The Frenchman said running a softer tyre allowed him to make the difference on the opening day of the event.

"Without using the soft tyres on the first day, the result in Mexico just

wouldn't have been possible," he said.

"Wait for some rallies like Sardinia where we have no option to go on soft tyres and then you will see the difference and for sure we are going to lose. But I am happy that, at least on this rally, we managed to do something which I didn't think was possible."

Ogier leads the championship by 34 points from Thierry Neuville.

MEXICO TOUGHENS UP

Next year's Rally Mexico is set to get even tougher as event director Patrick Suberville wants his rally to be known as a modern-day equivalent to the Safari Rally. Suberville and his team are investigating the potential for running a 50-mile stage on the Leon-based event.

TOYOTA'S SNOW TESTS

Toyota's Yaris WRC was in action testing again last week. The German-based team was running the car on Rally Sweden stages close to Karlstad in an effort to benchmark the car against the times achieved – albeit in different conditions – on the second round of the World Rally Championship last month. Eric Camilli and Sebastian Lindholm did the driving.

SOLBERG CELEBRATES

Former Rally Mexico winner Petter Solberg enjoyed belated celebrations of his FIA World Rallycross title in his hometown of Spydeberg on Saturday night. More than 1000 locals turned out to line the streets as the Norwegian star donned his way around the town. "The last time this happened was when we won the WRC in 2003," said Solberg, "so it was fantastic to do it again."

NASSER TOPS WRC2

Nasser Al-Attiyah won his favourite WRC2 round of the season aboard his Ford Fiesta RRC. The Qatari star is no stranger to running long stages in hot, tough conditions, having won this year's Dakar. He was, however, forced to give best to Yuri Protasov before his fellow Fiesta driver went off the road and out of the lead second time through Otates.

DMACK ENTRIES UP

Entries are flowing in for this year's Drive DMACK Fiesta Trophy, which starts on May's Rally of Portugal. Both M-Sport managing director Malcolm Wilson and DMACK chief Dick Cormack want 20 cars, but Wilson says 15 is more likely given that it's only 10 weeks away and the all-new Fiesta R2 one-litre cars are still being built at M-Sport's facility in Poland.

FIESTA RS DELAYED

The Fiesta R2 had been expected to make its first public appearance on last weekend's Malcolm Wilson Rally in Britain. Late-arriving parts forced Sander Parn out of his zero-car role. M-Sport is now eyeing a rally in Spain to complete a similar job. In the meantime, the R2 will continue with a rigorous test and development programme.

GUERRA'S HOME RUN

Benito Guerra will contest WRC rounds in Portugal and Poland following his seasonal debut in Mexico last weekend. The Mexican drove a Motorsport Italia-run Ford Fiesta RS WRC and finished 12th.

WHAT'S SPANISH FOR PLUS CA CHANGE?

It took Jose Maria Lopez just one weekend to disabuse his rivals of the hope that things would be different in the World Touring Car Championship in 2015. **STUART CODLING** headed to Argentina to see the home hero in action

Photography DPPI/WTCC





TERMAS DE RIO HONDO



CHANGE BRINGS HOPE. SUMMER IS COMING TO A close in Argentina, as evinced by the echelons of migratory birds tracking northwards over the spa town of Termas de Rio Hondo at dusk. It is a season the country's citizens will not remember fondly, marked by drought and wildfires in the south and the worst flooding in 50 years in the north, in the neighbouring province of Cordoba. With the turn of the season comes a hope that fortunes will change, and certainly it's winter, not summer, that brings an influx of affluent tourists to bathe in the naturally hot springs of this calm, picturesque lakeside community 1000km north of bustling Buenos Aires.

We are but temporary interlopers here in the off-season, and as you take the short walk along the two-lane brick boulevard from the hotel on the outskirts of town to the circuit – pick your moment, because the humidity can reach 85 per cent and it's scorching when the sun emerges from behind the clouds – there's little traffic save for the wiser race folk in air-conditioned cars. For the most part the single-storey houses that line the road are neatly kept, with freshly painted walls and fences; only the occasional crumbling habitats, 'Vente' signs perched precariously atop rotting porches, hint at the recent economic turbulence.

Pause for refreshment at the newly opened (and government-owned) 'One' hotel at the circuit

entrance and you'll be whistled around a full tour; marvel at the giant photos of Juan Manuel Fangio in action on the walls, dodge Sebastien Loeb as he whistles past on a microscoter, and finally end up on the roof terrace where your guide gesticulates proudly at the view and says, "It's a beautiful circuit, no?" Hard to disagree: Tom Chilton rates this gently undulating but tricky test of the tin-top art, with its proliferation of possible lines, as one of the world's top 10 touring car venues.

In a WTCC calendar scarcely recognisable in order and content from last year, Argentina is enthusiastically embracing its new position as

season opener, a slot that series boss Francois Ribeiro intends it to occupy for the foreseeable future. Backing from the Argentinian tourist board lubricates the wheels of commerce, of course, but the logistical challenges of transporting the cars onwards to the far east when it occupied a mid-season slot in 2014 also compelled the change. The tight turnaround between the cars arriving back from Macau in January and the freight deadline for the season opener in mid-February provoked some rancour among teams hoping to do some development work, but with Qatar now closing the season



Hondas of Monteiro and Tarquini were best of the rest



Race two lunge up the inside did not pay off for Tarquini



Success for Lopez on home turf in race one...



...is met with congratulations from his wife

there will be more room for manoeuvre next year.

So the 2015 season begins in the homeland of the man who dominated the previous season so completely. And if a *fin de siècle* feeling of imminent change and renewal was percolating through the World Touring Car Championship paddock in advance of the new season, it would soon be dispelled as the circus arrived in Argentina. Here the name of Jose Maria Lopez haunts your peripheral vision in roadside graffiti throughout the 90-minute road transfer from Tucuman airport to Termas de Río Hondo, subliminal torture for those aiming to topple him from his position of supremacy.

"I feel great," said Lopez before the track action began in earnest. "When I won the championship I asked Yvan [Muller] what it felt like when he won, and he said he felt exactly the same. But for me it's been something amazing. Day by day I've been enjoying it, but ever since Macau I've been thinking about the first race of this season, focusing on it, trying to do what I did last year.

"It's a question I've been asking myself: how should I react, how should I approach things now? But I think the situation has changed for the others, not me. I can only try to do my best – to perform at the same level. The competition will be stronger because they know me now, and they'll push harder. You can see it already – the

Hondas, the Chevrolets, they are pushing, and there is a lot more commitment from Yvan."

From whom will the principal challenge come? From poker-faced Loeb, phone seemingly clamped permanently to his ear while he's not in the cockpit? From old slugger Muller, who lived up to his prizefighter reputation by arriving at the mayor of Termas de Río Hondo's reception dressed in a red tracksuit, as if fresh from the set of *Rocky*? From Citroën's two new full-time signings, Ma Qing Hua and Mehdi Bennani? The factory Hondas? Even – whisper it – the new ORECA-developed Lada Vestas?

Testing, practice and qualifying began to indicate from where the answers might come. Loeb went fastest in a 30-minute test on Thursday morning under overcast skies. Then Lopez showed his hand: quickest by just under half a second from Tiago Monteiro's Honda in first practice; on top again in second practice, this time by 0.244s from Ma, a race winner in his limited outings for the team last season. Muller was there or thereabouts, but not near enough; the Hondas, again, just under half a second off; and now something started to click in the Lada garage as Rob Huff began to throw his new Vesta around with greater confidence (see panel, p78).

So when conditions shifted on Saturday to searing sunshine and greater humidity, and in the

early minutes of qualifying Citroën had seemingly gone backwards, it looked like there might be an opportunity for someone else to make their mark.

"The track changed completely, I was really struggling to find balance," complained Muller, P8 in first qualifying, but only after a late charge. His previous best would have left him out of the top 12. Lopez, too, snatched a top-12 spot in the final minutes. It was the grinning Huff who topped the times in Q1 from Bennani and Loeb.

But Lopez is on a roll. Winning the title has given him a seemingly unstoppable momentum. Bennani went off the track on his Q2 out-lap and Huff's car developed a misfire after sitting in the pitlane in the baking sun while Bennani's semi-works C-Elysee was extracted from the gravel. Citroën was missing a car but its engineers had got on top of whatever set-up changes they needed to make. Q2 ended in a Citroën 1-2-3-4 led by Ma, Tiago Monteiro best of the rest in the JAS Honda.

"We are not quite in the same race," sighed Monteiro's team-mate Gabriele Tarquini.

He had let his rivals enjoy their time in the sun, but now Lopez emphasised his authority when it counted. His flawless lap in the final top-five shootout for pole position was a blistering 1.2s quicker than Muller, 1.6s faster than Loeb. Both Ma and Loeb made conspicuous mistakes and ▶

► ran off-track at the fast Turn 11 on their laps, but as Loeb pointed out, "I didn't lose pole there."

Lopez was taken aback by the margin of his superiority. "I don't think anybody apart from me did a clean lap," he insisted. "It's not possible to have a gap of one second in Q3."

Neither would his rivals' morale improve in the first race. Lopez found his car creeping before the start signal and put his foot on the brake, enabling Muller to snatch the lead for a few tantalising seconds until Lopez regrouped and calmly ran his rival onto the dirty side of the track at the next corner. Muller gave him precisely the amount of room he needed to not take them both off, and not a millimetre more. Lopez wriggled through, and thereafter Muller could do nothing.

"After that," he said later, arms folded, "the race was over. When the car in front is the same as yours, you can do nothing."

"This race was going to be difficult because we had very similar pace," said Lopez. "We touched a little bit. He gave me a bit of space but it was very on the limit."

Loeb ran in a distant third, the factory Hondas of Monteiro and Tarquini an even more distant fourth and fifth. The other Citroens eliminated themselves from the hunt – Ma by stalling on the grid, rendering the midfield a little chaotic in the opening laps, and Bennani by taking out Huff in a clumsy bid to capture seventh place that earned him a drive-through penalty.

So far so 2014. It was in race two that Loeb demonstrated what it takes to unseat Lopez: go hard, and don't let him get ahead.

James Thompson enjoyed a short-lived moment of glory from reversed-grid pole position, for his Lada was already ailing after being taken out by John Filippi in race one; he got poor traction at the start, enabling Stefano d'Aste to nip out from behind in his Chevrolet Cruze. The two touched and Thompson's front suspension cried enough, while d'Aste spun off at the next corner.

Another Cruze-mounted privateer, Tom Coronel, might have been the beneficiary from his front-row start, but he had his mirrors full of Castrol stripes as Tarquini launched an audacious bid to overtake on the inside, on the grass. All of a sudden it was Ma and Loeb up front from seventh and eighth on the grid, while Coronel's dice with Tarquini ended with the Dutchman spearing off-track and damaging his splitter.

Under pressure from Loeb, Ma ran wide. Had overnight thunderstorms not drenched the area this mistake might have been less costly, but as it was he had to pit to clear his radiators of mud and grass. A brief safety-car period instilled some calm but then Lopez made short work of Tarquini to claim second, the Italian then getting a little sideways, allowing his team-mate to steal third.

Muller would play no part in the battle at the sharp end, after a poor start and a tangle with Bennani, the run off road scooping mud into his radiator. His race ended in the pits, later being handed a five-place grid drop at the next event.

"I saw Pechito [Lopez] in my mirrors and wasn't happy he was there so quickly, so I just pushed," said Loeb. "You know you can't be confident when he is behind, as he is so quick."

In the final laps Lopez let off the gas and stroked it to the finish. "It was important to win the first race," he said, "so I could be patient with the overtaking in the second. Seb was fast and I couldn't catch him."

Last year Lopez won both races at his home round, here just one. Perhaps change will indeed bring hope to his embattled rivals.

"Maybe," he laughs, "I'm just getting old..." ☞

Not a bad start for Loeb; a third (only behind his team-mates) and a win



Thompson got a pole, but Vesta was fragile



LADA JOINS THE PLAYERS

For several years now Lada has been a bit-part player in the WTCC; not a joke, but not considered to be a hugely serious presence, either, even after Rob Huff's breakthrough win at Beijing Goldenport last season from reversed-grid pole position. The new Vesta was meant to change all that and, if there were any lingering doubts that Lada means business, they were swept away as the new ORECA-developed cars rolled out of their crates in Argentina.

It's still early days for the Vesta, which according to Huff had just three half days of testing before the two complete cars (a third is in build for Mikhail Kozlovskiy) had to be shipped. The first test and practice sessions

at Termas de Rio Hondo proved inconclusive, but in second practice they started to find ways to switch the car on.

"I think today we've learned more about the car than we did at Magny-Cours," said Huff on Saturday. "This morning we were struggling a bit with set-up but in the second practice session we really started to get somewhere."

In first qualifying Huff set a time good enough for P5 on old tyres, then bolted on a fresh set and went fastest of all. Then Citroen's Mehdi Bennani crashed on his out-lap in Q2, bringing out red flags, and the long wait in the pitlane in the searing heat may have contributed to a misfire that afflicted Huff thereafter and consigned him to 11th place.



IN THE PADDOCK

STUART COOLING
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

@CoddersF1



THOUGH WE STAND BY OUR VERDICT ON THE World Touring Car Championship in our February 19 issue – where we ranked it fifth out of the eight world's leading touring car categories – there's no doubt the series is working to eliminate its perceived weaknesses and build on the strengths we highlighted. Lack of strength in depth, recent domination by one or two marques, and excessive conservatism in race one have been the key flaws; but nobody disputes the drama of the new TC1 cars and the daring choice of venues.

Getting 18 TC1 cars to the first race (no need to pad it out with TC2 machinery) was a start. Series boss Francois Ribeiro reckons there are 21 TC1 cars in the world and they will all end up on the grid; Campos Racing has a third Chevrolet Cruze awaiting a driver, while Munnich Motorsport also has a second car vacant, and Lada has another Vesta coming for Mikhail Kozlovskiy.

The next step is to develop the star quality of the drivers, which Ribeiro aims to address using the web and



social media, including a conflict-driven post-race video webcast in which pitlane reporters Ben Constanduros and Alexandra Legoux play good-cop-bad-cop.

The younger drivers really need to get their names out there. Hugo Valente is talented and yet somehow flies beneath the radar, while John Filippi and Gregoire Demoustier, taking their first steps in TC1 weaponry, seem keen to keep their heads down. They should take a look at the Tom Coronel book of lively self-promotion.

Ribeiro hasn't run out of blue sky in his thinking on unusual venues, either; in Argentina, he mentioned the possibility of running a qualifying race on the oval at Motegi, if the earthquake-damaged track can be repaired.

As for ending single-marque domination, Citroen has added Mehdi Bennani and Ma Qing Hua to a roster that already includes world champion Jose Maria Lopez, Yvan Muller and Sebastien Loeb. Could be tricky, that one...



Buoyant Huff claimed fastest time in Q1

No matter: team-mate James Thompson, whose car had been afflicted with various mechanical maladies throughout the day, nailed the crucial 10th place that gave pole position for race two.

It may be a while before the Vesta is developed enough to stand toe to toe with Citroen's C-Elysee (see main report), but taking pole position straight out of the box – even a reversed-grid pole – is a signal of intent. "I'm genuinely impressed with this car," said Huff. "I wasn't convinced before that we could take the fight to Citroen, but now I am – we've got a hell of a car.

"Give us six races and a bit more testing and you'll see what we can do."

WTCC
Rio Hondo (RA)
March 8
Round 1/12



RACE 2

15 laps, 44.69 miles

1	LOEB (G8)	29m33.508s
2	LOPEZ (G10)	+4.690s
3	MONTEIRO (G6)	+10.149s
4	TARQUINI (G4)	+11.564s
5	BENNANI (G12)	+14.956s
6	MA (G7)	+19.697s
7	MICHELISZ (G16)	+17.948s
8	CHILTON (G5)	+21.338s
9	RYDELL (G15)	+30.607s
10	DEMOUSTIER (G14)	+32.304s
11	MULLER (G9)	+43.627s
12	FILIPPI (G18)	+1m12.280s
R	BORKOVIC (G13)	8 laps-spun off
R	CORONEL (G2)	4 laps-overheating
R	HUFF (G11)	2 laps-race-one damage
R	THOMPSON (G1)	1 lap-accident damage
R	D'ASTE (G3)	0 laps-spun off
NS	VALENTE (G17)	0 laps

Winner's average speed: 90.708mph.
Fastest lap: Loeb, 1m46.708s, 100.749mph.

QUALIFYING

- Q3 1 Lopez, 1m45.461s; 2 Muller, 1m46.701s; 3 Loeb, 1m47.061s; 4 Ma, 1m47.203s; 5 Monteiro, 1m47.633s.
Q2 6 Chilton, 1m46.738s; 7 Tarquini, 1m46.967s; 8 D'Aste, 1m47.120s; 9 Coronel, 1m48.322s; 10 Thompson, 1m50.165s; 11 Huff, 1m50.553s; 12 Bennani, no time.
Q1 13 Borkovic, 1m48.443s; 14 Filippi, 1m48.507s; 15 Demoustier, 1m49.042s; 16 Rydell, 1m49.267s; 17 Michelisz, no time; 18 Valente, no time.

DRIVERS' CHAMPIONSHIP

1	LOPEZ	48	6	MA	16
2	LOEB	43	7	MICHELISZ	14
3	MONTEIRO	28	8	BENNANI	10
4	MULLER	22	9	CHILTON	8
5	TARQUINI	22	10	RYDELL	3

RACE 1

13 laps, 38.71 miles

1	JOSE MARIA LOPEZ (RA)	23m25.060s
	Citroen Total Citroen C-Elysee WTCC (G1)	
2	YVAN MULLER (F)	+3.170s
	Citroen Total Citroen C-Elysee WTCC (G2)	
3	SEBASTIEN LOEB (F)	+7.500s
	Citroen Total Citroen C-Elysee WTCC (G3)	
4	TIAGO MONTEIRO (P)	+14.168s
	Honda Racing Team JAS Honda Civic WTCC (G5)	
5	GABRIELE TARQUINI (I)	+16.322s
	Honda Racing Team JAS Honda Civic WTCC (G7)	
6	NORBERT MICHELISZ (H)	+18.470s
	Zengo Motorsport Honda Civic WTCC (G17)	
7	MA QING HUA (PRC)	+20.164s
	Citroen Total Citroen C-Elysee WTCC (G4)	
8	TOM CHILTON (GB)	+23.499s
	ROAL Motorsport Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G6)	
9	STEFANO D'ASTE (I)	+27.306s
	Munnich Motorsport Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G8)	
10	RICKARD RYDELL (S)	+30.266s
	Nika International Honda Civic WTCC (G16)	
11	DUSAN BORKOVIC (SRB)	+34.387s
	Proteam Racing Honda Civic WTCC (G13)	
12	GREGOIRE DEMOUSTIER (F)	+36.213s
	Craft-Bamboo Racing Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G15)	
13	MEHDI BENNANI (MA)	+37.906s
	Sebastien Loeb Racing Citroen C-Elysee WTCC (G12)	
14	TOM CORONEL (NL)	9 laps-turbo hose
	ROAL Motorsport Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G9)	
R	HUGO VALENTE (F)	4 laps-accident
	Campos Racing Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G18)	
R	ROB HUFF (GB)	4 laps-accident damage
	LADA Sport Rosneft Lada Vesta WTCC (G11)	
NC	JAMES THOMPSON (GB)	2 laps
	LADA Sport Rosneft Lada Vesta WTCC (G10)	
R	JOHN FILIPPI (F)	1 lap-accident damage
	Campos Racing Chevrolet RML Cruze TC1 (G14)	

Winner's average speed: 99.191mph.
Fastest lap: Lopez, 1m47.702s, 99.819mph.

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NASCAR XFINITY

Sprint Cup racer Austin Dillon won at Las Vegas on Saturday, but had to drive a very wide Chevrolet to keep the charging Ryan Blaney, who was on new tyres, behind him. Blaney had pitted after his car snapped loose and knocked Erik Jones into the wall, and the contrite Ford driver didn't make an issue of Dillon's defence causing him to tag the wall at the final turn on his way to second place. Regan Smith, Denny Hamlin and Chase Elliott were next up, with Dillon's younger brother Ty moving into the points lead after finishing eighth.

GT OPEN WINTER SERIES

There was a slim field at Paul Ricard, but the top two were covered by just 0.2 seconds in the single race after a great scrap between the two leading AF Corse Ferraris. Raffaele Giammaria led the first stint, with Pasin Lathouras second by the time of the driver changes. Michele Rugolo took over from Lathouras and caught Giammaria's co-driver Ezequiel Perez Companc, the duo passing and repassing over the final laps before Rugolo won. The Teo Martin McLaren 650S of Alvaro Parente and Miguel Ramos was withdrawn on race morning with suspension problems.



Harvick drove battle scars into Victory Lane

Harvick holds Vegas nerve

KEVIN HARVICK'S POST-RACE

performance to the cameras on Sunday was as worthy of a place in the Las Vegas entertainment industry as his drive was the city speedway's Victory Lane.

"I was so scared," he claimed, referring to a call to his team 10 laps from the end that suggested his race was run. "Something wasn't right."

That was about as difficult as the afternoon got for the 39-year-old, whose victory marked six consecutive top-two Cup finishes, a true statistical anomaly in modern NASCAR competition.

Stewart-Haas Chevrolet man Harvick started 18th but gradually made his way forward and hit the front when Jimmie Johnson suffered the first of two loose wheels on his

Hendrick Chevy that meant his race ended in the pitlane.

Thereafter it was plain sailing for Harvick, who was able to take four tyres in his final pitstop, overtake race-long rival Dale Earnhardt Jr (who briefly took track position having opted for just two new tyres) for the second time, and take the Vegas jackpot for the first time.

Earnhardt slipped to fourth by the end, behind the rejuvenated Martin Truex Jr and charging Ryan Newman. Truex is unrecognisable from the man who led just one lap across the entirety of 2014 and was a constant frontrunner at Vegas as he claimed a first podium since the '13 finale.

Top qualifier Jeff Gordon made steady if unspectacular progress from the back having been forced to

forfeit his pole position, eventually finishing 18th. Gordon was three places behind Brian Vickers, who returned following heart surgery at the end of 2014.

RESULTS

1 Kevin Harvick (Chevrolet SS), 267 laps in 2h47m15s; 2 Martin Truex Jr (Chevy), +1.640s; 3 Ryan Newman (Chevy); 4 Dale Earnhardt Jr (Chevy); 5 Denny Hamlin (Toyota Camry); 6 AJ Allmendinger (Chevy); 7 Brad Keselowski (Ford Fusion); 8 Kyle Larson (Chevy); 9 Matt Kenseth (Toyota); 10 Joey Logano (Ford). **Chase grid**
1 Harvick, 1 win/134 points; 2 Logano, 1/123; 3 Jimmie Johnson, 1/91; 4 Earnhardt, 0/125; 5 Truex, 0/118; 6 Allmendinger, 0/100; 7 Kasey Kahne, 0/92; 8 Hamlin, 0/87; 9 Casey Mears, 0/87; 10 Kenseth, 0/85; 11 Greg Biffle, 0/84; 12 Newman, 0/82; 13 Paul Menard, 0/82; 14 Clint Bowyer, 0/81; 15 Aric Almirola, 0/80; 16 Keselowski, 0/77.

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WORLD CHALLENGE GT AUSTIN (USA), MARCH 7-8 RD 1/11

Estre gives McLaren its first victory

WORKS MCLAREN DRIVER KEVIN

Estre holds the early points lead after a dominant win in the wet at the Circuit of the Americas – the first victory for the 650S GT3.

The Frenchman splashed away to win by half a minute from the Porsche of Scottish expat Ryan Dalziel and Dutchman Nick Catsburg's Reiter Lamborghini.

Catsburg was heartbroken in the first race, which was run in the dry. He led from pole, but was given a drive-through penalty for crossing the blend line into Turn 1, a rule he didn't even know existed.

That promoted Dalziel into the lead, but he was coming under great pressure from international GT veteran Olivier Beretta. The Monegasque's Ferrari probed the Porsche for lap after lap, until finally



Flying Lizard-run 650S was on top

making its way by with two laps remaining. Johnny O'Connell, piloting the new works Cadillac GT3 car, completed the podium, with Estre in fourth.

Ex-European Formula 3 driver and GT novice Michael Lewis picked up a pair of class wins in his Porsche.

RESULTS

Race 1 1 Olivier Beretta (Ferrari 458 Italia GT3), 23 laps in 49m18.091s; 2 Ryan Dalziel (Porsche 911 GT3-R), +1.603s; 3 Johnny O'Connell (Cadillac ATS-VR GT3); 4 Kevin Estre (McLaren 650S GT3); 5 Michael Lewis (Porsche); 6 James Davison (Nissan GT-R GT3). **Race 2** 1 Estre, 18 laps in 50m03.320s; 2 Dalziel, +30.344s; 3 Nick Catsburg (Lamborghini Gallardo FLII); 4 Mike Skeen (Audi R8 LMS ultra); 5 Ryan Eversley (Acura TLX-GT); 6 Madison Snow (Audi). **Points**
1 Estre, 230; 2 Dalziel, 224; 3 Beretta, 209; 4 Catsburg, 171; 5 O'Connell, 167; 6 Lewis, 144.

EUROFORMULA OPEN PAUL RICARD (F), MARCH 7

Kanamaru sets the pace

JAPAN'S YU KANAMARU STARTED the season in style with a win and a podium in the Winter Series event at Paul Ricard.

Kanamaru qualified his De Villota Motorsport car on pole and led all the way, with Armenian John Simonyan second.

The action was just behind. BRDC Formula 4 graduate Diego Menchaca held third in the early stages, but the Mexican got outfumbled by the group behind and was relegated to sixth. Moving the opposite way was Formula Renault ALPS ace Alessio Rovera, the Italian rising

from sixth to grab third from Brazilian Vitor Baptista on the penultimate lap, with Thailand's Tanart Sathienthirakul in fifth.

Menchaca was on pole for the reversed-grid race, but a stunning charge from Kanamaru took him from sixth into the lead.

Kanamaru held on until two laps from the end, when BVM Racing-run Rovera managed to chisel his way into the lead. Baptista, the reigning Brazilian F3 Class B champion, also got through and kept the pressure on Rovera to the finish. Menchaca finished this one in fourth place.



A win and a third for Kanamaru

FOTOSPEEDY

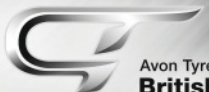
RESULTS

1 Yu Kanamaru, 14 laps in 29m30.476s; 2 John Simonyan, +3.019s; 3 Alessio Rovera; 4 Vitor Baptista; 5 Tanart Sathienthirakul; 6 Diego Menchaca. **Race 2** 1 Rovera, 14 laps in 28m47.973s; 2 Baptista, +0.948s; 3 Kanamaru; 4 Menchaca; 5 Andres Saravia; 6 Sathienthirakul.

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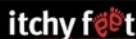
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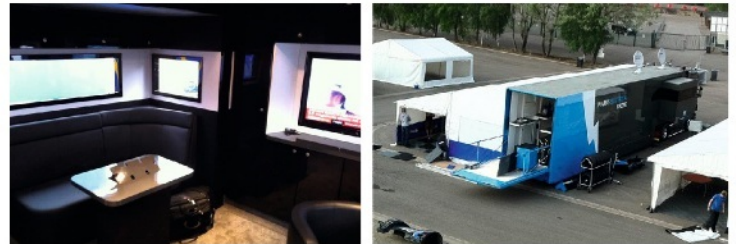
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The Motor Sports Association (MSA) is the national governing body of four-wheel motor sport, responsible for its regulation, administration, development and promotion in the UK - under the authority of the world governing body, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA).

The MSA is a not-for-profit organisation (company limited by guarantee) comprising 750 affiliated motor clubs. Representing 33,000 competition licence holders, 7,000 officials and volunteer marshals, the MSA also issues 5,000 motor sport event permits every year.

An exciting opportunity has arisen for a new post of Director of Training & Development. The holder of this role will report to the Chief Executive and be responsible for Club development, Volunteer Officials and Marshals, Regional Development Officers, MSA Academy/Team UK, Anti-doping, UK border signatory functions, Safeguarding Policies, and MSA's responsibilities as an FIA Regional Training Provider.

As a member of the Senior Management Team the successful applicant will also have general management responsibilities, including for all related budget controls. The Director of Training & Development will liaise with national and international agencies to ensure that MSA policies and procedures are acknowledged as exemplifying best practice within motor sport and, as relevant, UK sport generally.

The ideal candidate will have excellent communication skills to work at all levels within the sport, with external bodies and agencies and also the ability to represent the MSA on the national and world stage. A formal training qualification is desirable but not essential, but wide experience in the field of training including in the development of, and alignment with, best practice standards and competency frameworks is essential.

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Ram will run sole Mercedes in British GT

EBREY

Mercedes back in British GT

Ram to run SLS AMG as Motorbase signs Lloyd for Aston attack

FORMER WORLD ENDURANCE Championship team Ram Racing will bring Mercedes back to British GT this season.

The European Le Mans Series-winning GT team competed with Ferraris in the WEC last season until budget issues forced a downscaling of its operation. It recently finished as runner-up in the Dubai 24 Hours with its Mercedes SLS AMG GT3 and will field Radical champion Lewis Plato in the UK championship this season.

Plato, 21, a race winner in the Radical SR3 Challenge, tested the Mercedes last year. He will share with former Lotus GT4 driver Alistair McKinnon.

"British GT is going to be a

brilliant experience and I can't wait to get started on what will be an exciting new development in my career," said Essex racer Plato.

"I liked the feel of the Mercedes, it was very quick and consistent. Being with Ram is a great opportunity too because I ideally want to race in Europe, and British GT is the first part of a two-year plan."

Porsche Carrera Cup GB race winner Daniel Lloyd will also make his full British GT debut, replacing Michael Caine alongside Ahmad Al Harthy in one of Motorbase's Aston Martin Vantage V12s.

Lloyd contested the Blancpain Sprint Series last year in a Bhai Tech Racing McLaren MP4-12C, but also competed in the Silverstone and Spa Blancpain

Endurance events with the Beechdean Aston Martin squad.

Scot Rory Butcher returns to share the sister car with former British Touring Car Championship racer Liam Griffin. Butcher, 27, finished ninth in the points last year after sharing his car with a string of team-mates. Griffin contested just three rounds in 2014, but gets a full schedule.

Motorbase boss David Bartrum said: "Having two class drivers like Rory and Dan on board is great. I think we've got two very strong pairings. We have to go one better this year in the drivers' championship. It was great to win the teams' title last year, but it's the drivers' that you really want to win so we have to work even harder this season."

"The Aston is such a proven car and it's great to be with a team like Motorbase," said Lloyd. "I'm confident we'll be at the front this year because Ahmad has proven he's one of the fastest Am drivers in the championship."

Motorbase is open to running a third car in British GT, with Bartrum adding: "We've still got a third Vantage ready and waiting at the workshop and our intention is to expand the GT squad even further this year."

SCOTT MITCHELL
FEATURES
EDITOR

scott.mitchell@haymarket.com
@ScottMitchell89



BRITISH GT HAS HAD TWO OR three great seasons on the spin now, improving each time, and there is reason to believe that this year could continue that trend.

One thing that, in my eyes, is a concern is the shared grid. Not from a "this-is-an-abomination!" point of view, because top-level endurance racing is multi-class and therefore it shouldn't be a problem. It's more that the growth of GT4 – which should be congratulated, not dismissed – has probably exceeded all expectations.

GT4 warrants its own grid now, and that's a good thing. It shows the time and effort invested in the class by the championship was worthwhile. OK, not splitting it means the number of places on the grid for GT3 cars, the headline act don't forget, is reduced. But is that actually happening?

Ram Racing joining the grid with a Mercedes is great news because one of British GT's finest assets in recent years has been the sensational variety. The SLS AMG, and the VonRyan McLaren 650S entries, add a flavour that was missing last season.

But really that just makes up for the expected loss of Porsche and Audi entries. Then you've got the two Bentley squads from last year not returning, and nothing yet about Nissan either. When you look at it like that, British GT's not quite shaping up in the same way as last year.

That said, the combined numbers are strong and the driving strength – Alexander Sims and Adam Carroll the prime examples – is still very good. Hopefully we'll be looking at another 'should-the-grid-be-split?' argument come the end of the year – I just hope it's not a lack of GT3 entries that stops the series' growth continuing.



Lloyd replaces Caine in Motorbase Aston

HAWKINS

EBREY/DAT



British GT4 has grown significantly



Anglesey race has attracted 45 entries

Race of Remembrance

Race of Remembrance sells out in March

THE RACE OF REMEMBRANCE

will feature a capacity field of 45 cars after the Anglesey-based event filled its entry list eight months in advance.

Twenty-four cars took the grid last year for the first edition of the Mission Motorsport-run event, which aims to raise funds for the Help for Heroes charity.

Race organisers have already drafted a provisional entry list of 45 teams and an

additional 12 reserves for this year's meeting on November 8.

The Strata21 team, which won last year's race with British Touring Car race winner Tom Onslow-Cole, Jade Edwards and Paul White behind the wheel of its VW Golf Diesel, will return to defend its crown, while podium finishers CTR Motorsport and Paul Sheard Racing are also on the provisional entry list.

Marino Franchitti, Paul O'Neill and Calum Lockie were also among last year's competitors and are set to return again for the 750MC-run event.

Organiser Jon Earp said: "It's a bizarre situation to find ourselves in, but also a phenomenal one. We are very lucky we have the support that we do. It's panning out to be an incredible event again."

The three-day meeting comprises a

Friday qualifying session with Formula 1 demonstrations and supercar, rally, rallyingcross and drift passenger opportunities on Saturday.

The 1000km race itself is split into three parts, the first three hours taking place on Saturday evening before resuming on Sunday morning, pausing for the Remembrance Sunday memorial service, and then running to the end.

Formula Renault Eurocup

Award finalist Scott makes Eurocup switch from FFord

BRITISH FORMULA FORD

runner-up Harrison Scott will contest the Formula Renault Eurocup this year after signing with the AV Formula team.

Scott missed out on last year's Formula Ford title after a controversial collision with title rival Jayde Kruger at the season-closing round at Brands Hatch.

The 19-year-old now joins Formula Renault NEC racer Inigo Bikuna at Adrian Valles's team for an assault on this year's Eurocup title, explaining that the prospect of graduating to the Formula Renault 3.5 series was integral to his decision.

"I tested with AVF at the end of last year and we've been in contact with Valles for a while," said Scott.

"They're a great bunch of guys – very experienced and with a lot of FR3.5

knowledge. The graduation link with the team into FR3.5 was one of the key reasons why I joined."

Scott took part in the Le Mans Eurocup test this week, while Kruger was also in action with Strakka Racing.



JEM MARSH: 1930-2015

JEM MARSH, RACER AND COLOURFUL co-creator of Marcos sports cars, died on March 2 at the age of 84.

After moving into car manufacture with the Austin Seven-based Speedex specials, Marsh and Frank Costin produced the first Marcos in Dolgellau, North Wales, in 1959.

The plywood monocoque chassis cars, with distinctive fibreglass bodies, were successful on track. One carried future triple F1 world champion Sir Jackie Stewart to his first victory at Charterhall in 1961. Marsh later won a Thoroughbred Sportscar title in one in the '70s.

The iconic Marcos shape spanned five decades, clothing Ford and Volvo-engined GTs of the mid-'60s to the Chevrolet V8-powered machines



which competed into the 21st century.

The Repco V8-engined Marcos Mantis XP sports-prototype, which appeared at the 1968 Spa 1000km, was typical of Marsh thinking outside the box. "Better to have tried" could have been his motto.

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British RX

British RX Supercar boost

THE ENTRY LIST FOR THIS

weekend's British Rallycross opener at Croft features 11 Supercars.

Boosting the flagship class has been high on the priority list for the series, which has struggled for entries as the world championship thrives.

Julian Godfrey arrives at the Yorkshire circuit targeting a fifth successive crown in his Ford Fiesta, while former champions Ollie O'Donovan and Pat Doran both return to the series full-time in a Fiesta and Citroen DS3 respectively.

European Rallycross winner Kevin Procter is also campaigning a Fiesta, with Focus drivers Andy Grant and Steve Mundy rounding off the five-strong Ford contingent. Citroen's representation is also bolstered by Mark Watson (Xsara

T16) and Steve Harris (DS3).

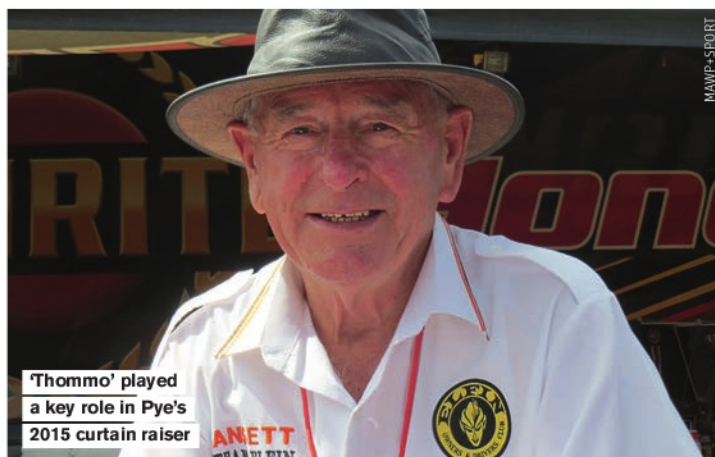
Completing the 11-strong entry are the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo of Steve Hill, the recently acquired Opel Astra of Geoff Dolan and the Peugeot 208 of Andy Scott, who will be joined at his Albatec Racing team by Mark Flaherty from the second round at Lydden Hill onwards.



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MAMP-SPORT

Aussie racing legends star at Phillip Island festival

Last weekend's 25th anniversary Phillip Island Classic Festival of Motorsport, organised by the Victorian Historic Racing Register's volunteers, was a triumph – great sport, played out with wonderful spirit on one of the planet's finest circuits, thrilled spectators over three action-packed days. And, for dyed-in-the-wool fans, the presence of numerous Australian racing legends made the occasion all the more special.

Meeting event patron Bryan Thomson was a thrill, as the Aussie tin-top ace brought his ex-Norm Beechey '65 national saloon car championship-winning Ford Mustang to Britain for the '67 season, in which I saw him race at Castle Combe. The weather was so dire that the programme didn't survive, alas, but happily the car does. Having been drag raced in the interim, it's now being restored to its former glory by its current owner Chad Parrish.

'Thommo' also bought a new road version for his wife in the '60s, which they still have. Indeed, at the ripe old age of 80, he has been hailed as the oldest first Mustang owner, an accolade of which he is as proud as he was beating '65 British champion Roy Pierpoint in an end-of-season Mustang shoot-out at Mallory Park 48 years ago. His presence, plus that of the Coca-Cola Mustang in which Canadian Allan Moffat won 101 of 153 starts in Oz, headed a silver-jubilee celebration.

Thomson later pedalled some fearsome Sports Sedans, including the wild Chevrolet V8-engined VW Type 3 fastback that he and Peter Fowler built around the ex-Warwick Brown F5000 McLaren M10B F5000 for Calder Park's big-money series

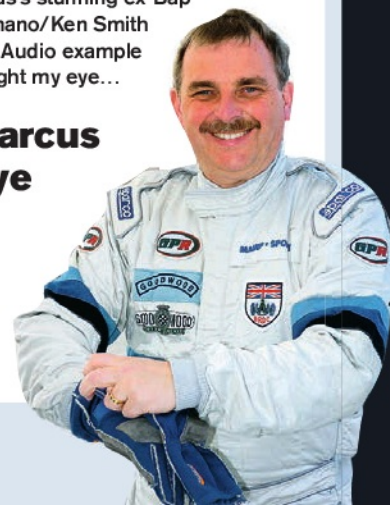
in '74. Looking not dissimilar to Colin Hawker's DFVW, it was a winner, but tested Bryan's reflexes. When Frank Gardner's Chevrolet Corvair arrived, however, the combo was as dominant as Gerry Marshall and the Vauxhall Firenza 'Baby Bertha' [at Phillip Island with Joe Ward at the helm] in contemporary British Supersaloon events. The VW parts of Thommo's hybrid were

"Meeting Bryan Thomson, who I saw win at Combe in '67, was a thrill"

eventually skipped!

Among the other heroes at Phillip Island was Ron Tauranac, the design genius behind so many iconic Brabham and Ralt chassis. Now 90, he flew from Sydney, met Sir Jack's widow Lady Margaret Brabham and cast a paternal eye over Shane Hughes's ex-John Smith Formula Atlantic Ralt RT1 (raced by Jamie Larner) and an impressive bunch of RT4 wing cars, of which Peter Lucas's stunning ex-Bap Romano/Ken Smith Pye Audio example caught my eye...

Marcus Pye



ADAC Formula 4

Newey joins Schumacher at Van Amersfoort F4 team

HARRISON NEWEY, THE SON OF Formula 1 technical guru Adrian, will partner Michael Schumacher's son Mick in Van Amersfoort Racing's ADAC Formula 4 team in Germany this year.

Newey Jr, 16, will take part in six of the championship's eight meetings alongside his BRDC Formula 4 campaign.

Frits van Amersfoort, whose team announced it would run Schumacher in

the youngster's debut season in single-seaters last week, said he was "honoured" to be fielding the duo.

"This has been one of the most pleasant weeks in our four-decade history," he said. "We're extremely honoured to have some of auto racing's most credible persons choosing to entrust our team in the development of two promising young talents."



EBREY

Oval racing

All-American motor festival to be held at Rockingham

THE ROCKINGHAM CIRCUIT WILL host an all-American motoring festival, featuring Indycar and NASCAR machinery, in August.

The inaugural 'Cars & Stripes' event offers visitors the chance to take a ride in a NASCAR Cup car around the Corby circuit's banked oval, as well as the opportunity to drive vintage US muscle cars on the infield track.

Headlining the racing action is the Pickup Truck Championship in an event dubbed the 'Rockingham 100'; while there will also be demonstrations of Indycar racers, Hot Rods, Ford Mustangs and Harley Davidson motorcycles.

Rockingham chief executive Peter Hardman said: "This is an event I've always wanted to do. Seeing as Rockingham is the only US-style circuit in Britain, we wanted to take advantage. The plan is to build the event annually, much like Chris Evans's Carfest."



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The development company behind the CoW continues to push on with plans



In brief

Smith to VW Cup

Former BTCC driver Mark Smith will return to racing this year with an attack on the Volkswagen Racing Cup. The 49-year-old has not competed regularly since his BTCC foray in an Alfa Romeo 156 in 2006 (above), but will race a Scirocco R run by his InFront Motorsport team.

GTC champions return

Jamie Stanley and John Seale will return to the GT Cup this season in an FF Corse-run Ferrari 458 Challenge. The pair took eight wins and 15 podiums en route to the GTC title last year. FF Corse will also field Darren Nelson and Nigel Greensall in a Ferrari 458 Italia GT3 on a full-season basis for the first time.

Lambo for Huggins

Neil Huggins will race a Lamborghini LP560-4 Super Trofeo in selected UK GT events this season with long-time partner team Topcats Racing. Huggins, who is set to compete in the Britcar 24 Hours at Silverstone in a Marcos Mantis, will make his debut in the Super Trofeo event at Silverstone in May, and contest selected GT Cup and Britcar races.

BRSCC gets live radio

Downforce Radio will broadcast live coverage of British Racing and Sports Car Club meetings in 2015.

Mazda prize for Soar

Racing novice Alex Soar has won an entry into four rounds of the BRSCC Mazda MX-5 championship, worth over £7000, after his name was chosen in a prize draw run by Go4It Racing. "I'm looking forward to the experience and meeting everyone involved with the series," Soar said.

Arrowpak to Ultimate

The British Racing and Sports Car Club is replacing its Arrowpak Saloon and Sportscar Championship series for 2015 with a new Ultimate Saloons Championship, catering for cars with at least 250bhp. The inaugural round of the new series will take place at Snetterton in April, the first of six double-header meetings.

Martins comes to UK

Brazilian karter Rafael Martins, a protege of ex-Formula 1 star Rubens Barrichello, will make his car-racing bow in the UK as he joins the SWB Motorsport squad's assault on the new-for-2015 MSA Formula.

Circuit of Wales

Circuit of Wales inquiry begins

A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE planned £325 million Circuit of Wales development that will determine the future of the venue has begun.

The 10-day inquiry will assess the project's request last September to deregister 250 hectares of common land in south Wales, where the circuit and additional facilities would be built.

It will end on May 20, after which the

planning inspector will recommend a decision to government ministers.

A final answer on the application is not expected until June, but it could take until September, and development cannot take place unless it is approved.

Heads of the Valleys Development Company chief executive Michael Carrick reiterated his confidence in the project despite a series of setbacks.

"Five years ago, we were first attracted to Blaenau Gwent due to the opportunity for regeneration and this has not changed," he said in a statement.

"The public inquiry is the next and final step before we can move towards the construction phase."

Carrick claimed £125m has been conditionally committed to the project, which needs £200m of private funding.



Proctor is a Ginetta podium finisher

Ginetta Juniors

Proctor returns with BMR

LEADING BRITISH TOURING CAR squad BMR will contest the Ginetta Junior Championship this season with series returnee Senna Proctor.

The 16-year-old made his Ginetta debut last season, taking 12th in the points with JHR Developments, which will continue to run Proctor in 2015 under Warren Scott's 'Team BMR' banner.

Proctor, who went on to finish runner-up to Jamie Caroline in last year's Winter Series, said: "I want to prove myself as a BMR driver. The goal is touring cars and hopefully Warren can take me all the way."

Scott added: "I am delighted Senna is on board and I'm looking forward to building a long-term relationship between the two of us."

PETE FORTUNE: 1958-2015

CATERHAM RACER PETE FORTUNE has passed away at the age of 57 after suffering a suspected cardiac arrest at a pre-season Caterham trackday last Sunday (March 8).

Fortune was a regular podium scorer during his four years in the Caterham Motorsport programme. The father of two joined the Caterham Academy in 2012, winning the opening Aintree sprint, and eventually finished second in the championship behind Stephen Nuttall.

He subsequently moved up to the Roadsport and Tracksport classes, taking six victories in total, and had been tipped to be a main challenger for the Supersport title this season.



Albert wants a title attack

BRDC Formula 4

Albert stays at SWR in F4

JORDAN ALBERT WILL REMAIN IN the BRDC Formula 4 Championship in 2015 after extending his partnership with Sean Walkinshaw Racing.

Albert placed 11th in last year's standings in his rookie season before climbing to fourth in November's Winter

Series with five podium finishes.

The 18-year-old is bullish about his prospects in his sophomore BRDC F4 campaign, saying: "Last year I felt my results didn't show my true pace. This year I have the experience I need to win the championship."



ISLAND PARADISE

Historic racing is one of Britain's top motorsport disciplines, and it's thriving elsewhere too.

MARCUS PYE was at Phillip Island last weekend for Australia's classic annual behemoth

For 25 years the Phillip Island Classic Festival of Motorsport has been the centre of the universe for Australian historic racers. Blessed with one of the finest playgrounds in the world and organised by the super-enthusiastic Victorian Historic Racing Register, the largest event of its genre in the southern hemisphere has long attracted competitors from the United Kingdom and USA. More should make the pilgrimage.

Picturesque Phillip Island, the favoured holiday resort and beauty spot 90 miles east of Melbourne, is steeped in motorsport history, having hosted the Australian GP between 1928-35. Fans can still follow the fearsomely quick rectangular road circuit abutting main town Cowes via Gentle Anne, Hell, Heaven and Young & Jackson corners. Built by the Phillip Island Auto Racing Club, boosted by public subscription, the inspired 'permanent' circuit – a fast, flowing 2.7-mile stunner overlooking the Southern Ocean – opened on a foul day in December '56.

Geelong's Murray Rainey, an engineer revered in British hillclimb circles, and Melbourne hero Lex Davison were the first winners in concurrent single-seater races. Both drove Coopers, Rainey claiming the 500cc F3 prize over three laps in his Norton-engined car and Davison the longer main race in his supercharged

Vincent HRD-powered Mk5, brainchild of the great Phil Irving. Now owned by Cowes's Graeme Noonan, the Cooper Irving was at PI last weekend where Davison's grandson Alex brilliantly won four races from five in father Richard's F5000 Lola T332, tamed by his uncle Jon and Alan Jones in period.

This year's Classic celebrated 50 years of the Ford Mustang with the participation of patron Bryan Thomson and Allan Moffat's all-conquering car. More than 500 entries showcased Australia's racing heritage superbly to a knowledgeable audience, many of whom arrived in beautifully presented classic cars. Their marque enclaves along the Gardner Straight were an education in themselves, while other gems were dotted around the grassy escarpment overlooking the track.

For racecar nuts among the healthy throng, combing the paddock revealed a rich vein of wonderful machines spanning Australia's manufacturers. I spotted ASP, Birrana, Bolwell, Bowin, Cheetah, Elfin, Galloway, Koala, Lynx, Matich, Milano, Nota, Rennmax, Stag and Wren in the pit garages and shelters. Plus of course a plethora of Brabhams and Ralts, with designer Ron Tauranac, now 90, and Lady Margaret Brabham looking proudly on.

Owned by the Linfox organisation, the facility has been transformed



Classic celebrated Mustang's 50th

LLEWELLYN

since I visited in 2003. New buildings have gone up and the sensational 10-corner circuit – a MotoGP standout eulogised by Valentino Rossi – has been totally resurfaced. Next in line for an upgrade is the control tower that boasts the most panoramic 360-degree vantage point in the sport. I joined a constantly revolving commentary team (anchored by old racers Ron Simmonds, Chris Smith and Bob Morrow with media man Charles Rogers) and also roved with veteran broadcaster Don Kinsey who, at 84, has the finest voice and delivery I've worked with.

The mix of cars at the Phillip Island Classic is probably more eclectic than any other event's worldwide. From early roustabout

specials to Porsche 962s, the 49-race programme was packed with delights. Single-seater aficionados were captivated by the Cosworth DFV-powered Surtees TS9B raced in 1972 by current CAMS president Tim Schenken, ex-Alan Jones Beatrice-Hart THL-1 and ex-Gerhard Berger Benetton B186 F1 turbo cars plus ex-Vern Schuppan March 81C Indycar, while quadruple Gold Star winner Alfredo Costanzo was back in F5000 action with Alan Hamilton's McLaren M10B.

Unlike at European or American festivals, races are short and sharp, which is kinder on machinery and keeps onlookers engaged. The other key difference is the lack of big-rig transporters and motorhomes (paddock-cloggers elsewhere), which



Alex Davison tamed brutal Chevrolet-powered F5000 beast



Group C race came down to a close finish

CARTER



Rusty French (99)
won three races

“Egos were left at home and everybody revelled in a common interest”

not only improves working logistics but also public access. Virtually all the well-prepared cars were run off remotely parked trailers by proud custodians delighted to chat to paying punters. Egos were left at home, rivals lent each other spares and everybody revelled in a common interest. The Phillip Island recipe, fostered by the VHRR, is built around fun for all.

Overseas drivers were invited to race several times per day, which British debutants Tim Cousins (Chevron B23), Joe Ward (ex-Gerry Marshall Vauxhall Firenza ‘Baby Bertha’) and David Carrington Yates (Chevron B16) loved. There was plenty of single-seater track time too. Andy Newall – a PI devotee for a decade now – scored a brilliant third in FF1600 with his historic Palliser WDF2 in Friday’s wet race, but was ambushed under yellow flags in Sunday’s finale. Two \$1000 fines were meted out as a result. Andrew Wareing (Brabham BT11A) had fun, while California-based Irishman Paddins Dowling won a race in ERA R10B, Peter Whitehead’s 1938 Australian GP winner, which he will demonstrate at this weekend’s F1 event in Melbourne.



Single-seater field
was eclectic

The buzz on the spectator banks when racing begins at Phillip Island is palpable. A collective intake of breath as engine revs rise and lights change is redolent of events of my childhood at Crystal Palace, Brands Hatch and Silverstone. The cars look fast here; indeed, as fields stream under the Melbourne bridge all competitors can see is blue ocean momentarily as the track dips breathtakingly into a wickedly fast right-hander, flat in top for FF1600 frontrunners and approached at 180mph in an F5000 or Group C car. From then on it’s busy all the way for the drivers, who receive warm appreciation on completion.

Having sat in the big Theodore Racing-liveried Lola for the first time on Thursday – his last monoposto foray was in the 1999 Formula Ford Festival at Brands – long-time Porsche pro Alex

Davison’s stellar performance was a spectacular reminder of brutal F5000 Chevrolet power. Fittingly it completed a family odyssey on the relaunch of Ecurie Australie, 50 years after his four-time AGP-winning grandfather’s untimely death, aged 42, at Sandown Park.

George Nakas matched Davison’s tally, having taken to the ex-John Winter/Frank Jelinski/Stanley Dickens Blaupunkt Porsche 962 like a duck to water and held off Wayne Park (guesting in Peter Harburg’s Jagermeister version) in a photo finish. But the weekend’s best racing came in the up to 3000cc Historic Touring Car category in which Bathurst’s Phil Woodbury overcame mechanical woes and screamed his 300bhp Mazda RX2 Capella through a big pack to scoop a sensational treble. Club racing does not get better than this! ☘

Humbler cars
also entertained



1938 GP victor won
again in 2015



RESULTS: WINNERS

- GROUPS Q & R RACING & F5000 (5 RACES)**
Alex Davison (Lola-Chevrolet T332) 4; Paul Stubber (March-Chevrolet 81C) 1.
- GROUPS Q & R SPORTS CARS (5 RACES)**
George Nakas (Porsche 962) 4; Rob Tweedie (Elfin-Chevrolet MS7) 1.
- HISTORIC TOURING CARS UP TO 3000CC (5 RACES)**
Phil Woodbury (Mazda RX2 Capella) 3; Quentin Bland (Ford Capri) 2.
- HISTORIC TOURING CARS OVER 3000CC (5 RACES)**
Darryl Hansen (Ford Mustang) 2; Darren Smith (Ford Falcon XY GT) 1; Darryn Davies (Ford Mustang) 1; Angelo Taranto (Chevrolet Camaro) 1.
- GROUP SC SPORTS CARS (4 RACES)**
Rusty French (De Tomaso Pantera) 3; Geoff Morgan (Porsche 911 Carrera) 1.
- GROUPS J, K & LB SPORTS & RACING (4 RACES)**
Nick McDonald (Elva Courier) 2; Steve Bowden (PRAD 5 Sports) 1; Paddins Dowling (ERA R10B) 1.
- GROUPS SA & SB SPORTS CARS (4 RACES)**
Damien Meyer (MG Midget) 2; Philip Ross (Chevrolet Corvette) 1; Joseph Dibartolo (Chevrolet Corvette) 1.
- GROUPS M & O SPORTS & RACING (5 RACES)**
Sean Whelan (Brabham BT30) 3; Richard Carter (Elfin Mono) 2.
- FORMULA FORD (4 RACES)**
Tim Blanchard (Van Diemen RF88) 3; Jonathan Miles (Van Diemen RF88) 1.
- FORMULA VEE (4 RACES)**
Andrew Grevis-James (Spectre) 3; Tony Painter (Moxon) 1.

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THIS WEEK

LETTERS • ON TRACK • TV PICKS • FROM THE WEB • AUTOSPORT.COM

What you think of the motorsport news of the past week



DC shows he's at home on the F1 podium

DC and MB belong on podium

After-race thoughts for 2015: please can you suggest that we never have to suffer Nelson Piquet again doing a podium interview. Preferably no Eddie Jordan podium interviews either. Ideally they're all done by Martin Brundle or David Coulthard.

In the post-race chillout room, can we make sure we can hear the drivers' reactions, as adrenaline settles down. And definitely no Vladimir Putin in the drivers' room. Thought Lewis handled his intrusion brilliantly last year.
Brian McCausland, Portishead, Somerset

CVC has made billions from Formula 1 since acquiring the commercial rights. Now that interest in F1 – which is reflected in TV audiences and ticket sales – is declining, shouldn't they now be spending money promoting 'the show'?

So far this year I have seen no money being spent on the new-season launches, nothing in the papers, TV, anywhere, getting people worked up about the start of an exciting new season, except from Sky TV.

Mr E has done nothing to promote F1 around the world for years, yet he expects it to stay top of the popularity list. Wake up Mr E, sports competition on TV is fierce and a complete lack of promotion is part of the reason F1 is not so popular. It's time CVC allocated money for F1 promotion around the world – they can afford it.

Chris Grint Hertford

As we approach another new season, which I hope will be just as good, if not better, than last year, it reminds me that it will be 38 years since we lost the great talent that was Tom Pryce. I was very little when he died, but his story still resonates. What might have been...

Chris Adams By email

In reply to Tim Richardson (February 12) and Sarah Thomson of Rockingham Motor Speedway (February 26), there already is a Euro-NASCAR race every June at Brands Hatch's American SpeedFest. And while it's good racing, I have always wondered why this series does not race at either Rockingham or Germany's Eurospeedway Lausitz.

NASCAR in America is renowned for being predominantly oval-based; why does the European series not follow suit where there are a few permanent large ovals available? (Having just checked their

schedule, they do have two ovals, but both are about half a mile long, a very different challenge to the larger ovals.)
David Baker Benfleet, Essex

I am sure you will have had countless emails on this subject: Graham Hill's helmet colours were not black and white (*This week in F1*, February 26) but dark blue and white, as per rule no2 of the London Rowing Club.

For some reason I had always thought that Damon used a very deep dark maroon colour for his, but I am obviously mistaken. Perhaps Damon could confirm for us all that he *did* use the dark blue like his father?

While perhaps not iconic per se, it could also be argued that the helmet designs of John Surtees and Chris Amon were very distinctive, making them easy to identify.
Rev John MA Thomson Hamilton

BIG NUMBER

75 Number of cars entered for Saturday's Mugello 12 Hours, the second round of the Creventic-organised endurance series. It'll be hectic in the Tuscany hills...

MILESTONE

Formula E ends its two-month break, and can it provide a fifth winner in five races? Series leader Lucas di Grassi, Sam Bird, Sebastien Buemi and Antonio Felix da Costa are on the roll of honour so far.



WHAT'S ON TRACK



Melbourne hosts the season-opening GP

AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX

Formula 1 World Championship
Rd 1/20
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
March 15
f1.com

V8 SUPERCARS

non-championship
Melbourne, Victoria,
March 13-15
v8supercar.com.au

March 14
fiaformulae.com

MUGELLO 12 HOURS

24 Hour Endurance Series
Rd 2/6
Mugello, Italy
March 14
24hseries.com

FORMULA E

Rd 5/10
Miami, Florida, USA

MY FAVOURITE DRIVER

Juan Pablo Montoya

The Colombian spoke his mind and didn't care about ruffling feathers – in F1 and elsewhere. Which made him appeal to **Lawrence Barretto**

MY EARLIEST MEMORY OF JUAN

Pablo Montoya is when he burst onto the Formula 1 scene in 2001 and had the audacity to muscle his way past Ferrari's Michael Schumacher at Turn 1 during the Brazilian Grand Prix at Interlagos. The Williams then proceeded to pull away from the reigning world champion with ease.

It was a feisty, ruthless move that spelt out exactly what the Colombian was about – and I couldn't help but be impressed. Later in the race, he was punted out of the lead – and the race – when Jos Verstappen piled into the back of him. A moment of brilliance was wiped out by bad luck, something that happened all too often in his F1 career.

There's no doubting Montoya's talent. The Colombian is the only driver to have won the CART championship, Indianapolis 500 and 24 Hours of Daytona at the first attempt. He



Charging hard with Williams in 2004

secured seven F1 victories – one of which came in Monaco – and a brace in NASCAR. That's a CV any racing driver would be proud of, although the feeling remains that he never achieved as much as his talent warranted.

While in F1, the fact he was outspoken, wasn't afraid to publicly slate his team and didn't really try too hard when it came to working on his fitness didn't sit well with many, but for me he broke the mould of your average monotonous racing driver. Quite simply, he was pretty cool.

I didn't care that he wasn't winning every Sunday afternoon. In fact, I liked not knowing which Montoya would turn up, because I knew that on any given day he could perform a brilliant overtake or dance the car around a track in a way I could only dream about doing.

I met Montoya for the first and only time at a NASCAR race at the Texas Motor Speedway a few years after he left Formula 1, and it quickly became clear that he didn't care what people said about him. He just wanted to enjoy racing and



Outspoken Montoya didn't care what people thought



NASCAR beckoned after F1 went sour

Formula 1 didn't tick the box so he quit.

After the interview had finished, we stayed perched on the worktops inside the Chip Ganassi Racing team truck for a while talking about Formula 1, motor racing, life in

“He wanted to enjoy racing and F1 didn't tick the box”

America and Europe and even a favourite topic of mine: burgers. Montoya came across as just a normal guy. It just so happens he is a very good racing driver too.

I wouldn't say Montoya is my hero, or the greatest driver ever. But he's my favourite because, unlike many racing drivers, what you see is what you get. And that's what matters in my book. ☒

FROM THE SOFA

WHAT'S ON TELEVISION



Q&A

ANTHONY DAVIDSON

SKY SPORTS F1 ANALYST

@antdavidson

AUTOSPORT: How do you reflect on your career in broadcasting so far?

Anthony Davidson: It was never really something that I aimed to do; it all started through my Friday driving in the Honda days and I had the chance to join in with the BBC Radio 5 Live guys. It went from being a bit on the side to becoming pretty much a full-time job after Super Aguri folded. Once I got into sportscars I didn't stop because being a racing driver is a bit like being an actor; it can be great when you've got a gig but if you don't you have no income, so I just thought it's a great way to cover all bases.

AS: Does it help that you're also racing alongside your broadcasting, to keep your input current?

AD: Yeah, definitely. Still being an active driver and having won the championship last year in LMP1,



racing comes first, but one day maybe the broadcasting and commentary role will become more of a permanent job. I love putting into plain English what happens on the track and explaining the fine details of a very technical sport.

AS: Do you still get a buzz of anticipation in the run-up to the first race of the Formula 1 season, just like when you were competing in F1?

AD: Absolutely. It's always exciting to see the pecking order of the new season, and the new cars. It's a miracle in some ways how teams develop a brand-new package every single season, and that should be respected and applauded. That comes to a head at the first race; that's when you realise what's been achieved.

"Once I had to go it alone, I remember being nervous"

AS: How did the move from a co-commentator role at 5 Live to doing analysis at Sky and playing with the Skypad come about?

AD: I'd never done TV before but I thought it was a new exciting challenge for me, and a great network to be involved with. I love technology; the current cars in F1 suit me because I love the techy side of F1, and the Skypad is kind of like the equivalent in the broadcasting world. You can use it to really enhance the explanation of a technical sport.

AS: How easy have you found it?

AD: The most daunting bit for me was being on camera. I used to just chat away with 'Crofty' in a commentary box like being down the pub watching F1 on the TV, and I never really thought about the numbers listening. When there's a camera in front of you it changes everything. Once I had to go it alone, I remember being very nervous; my heart was pumping and it felt like the same adrenalin rush you get on the grid before a race. Now I'm very much at ease with the machine itself and what I want from it. What not many people see is all the background work behind what goes on screen, and for me that's almost as rewarding as pulling off a good presentation when it's live.

Anthony Davidson was speaking to Lawrence Barretto

TV pick of

Edited by Peter Allen



AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX FULL UK LISTINGS

Sky Sports F1

Practice 1: Friday 0100-0320

Practice 2: Friday 0515-0730

Practice 3: Saturday 0245-0415

Qualifying: Saturday 0500-0745

Race: Sunday 0330-0815

BBC1

Qualifying highlights: Saturday 1250-1400

Race highlights: Sunday 1315-1440

Radio 5 Live

Race: Sunday 0430-0700



1996 AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX

Sky Sports F1

Thursday 2100-2145

Relive the first Australian Grand Prix at the modern day Albert Park circuit in Melbourne. Williams pair Damon Hill and Jacques Villeneuve were dominant, and the exciting new Canadian led much of his debut F1 race from pole position. But Hill was able to claim back-to-back victories down under – having also won the final Adelaide race at the very end of 1995 – and kick-start what would become a title-winning campaign with maximum points thanks to Villeneuve suffering an oil leak that forced him to slow in the final laps.

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the week



FORMULA E MIAMI - LIVE **ITV4**

Saturday 1900-2130

After the first four Formula E races were rather spread out over previous months, the Miami round signals the start of a more compact run-in leading to the London-based (in Battersea) double-header finale in June. It's the first of two opportunities for the new series to wow the American audience; a trip to the famous Long Beach street circuit follows next month. If there's a repeat of the excitement seen in Buenos Aires two months ago, comfortably the most dramatic race produced by the new series, it will be a hugely entertaining race.



NASCAR PHOENIX - LIVE **Premier Sports**

Sunday 1900-2330

Round four of the NASCAR season takes place at Phoenix, an event that's been pushed back a couple of weeks from its former post-Daytona slot. Kevin Harvick has won the last three races at the Arizona venue, including both of the series' visits there last year on his way to the Sprint Cup crown, so will no doubt fancy his chances here again. The racing is invariably fraught at the classic one-mile, low-banked tri-oval layout too, with plenty of drivers determined to secure the win they need to make The Chase.



RALLY MEXICO HIGHLIGHTS **Motors TV**

Friday 2235-2340

Catch up with the best of the action from the first gravel event of the 2015 World Rally Championship, and the first major test of the revised running-order regulations for this year. Sebastien Ogier was, unsurprisingly, enraged by having to sweep the roads on both Friday and Saturday, which was expected to give the likes of Jari-Matti Latvala and Thierry Neuville a shot at becoming the first non-French winner of the WRC round in Mexico since Petter Solberg's success 10 years ago. But Ogier, who was on inspired form, had a very different outcome in mind, and one by one his rivals just fell away.



GLOBAL RALLYCROSS 2014 **LAS VEGAS**

Motors TV

Saturday 1415-1545

Motors TV has been showing highlights from the 2014 season of the US-based Global Rallycross series over recent weeks, and the last instalment comes from the Las Vegas finale. There were four drivers in contention going into the event, with Marcus Gronholm protege and ex-Formula Renault racer Joni Wiman trying to hold off American superstar Ken Block and ex-Formula 1 drivers Nelson Piquet Jr and Scott Speed in this action-packed event, set in the grounds of the venerable Linq hotel and casino.

ONLINE



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PRE-SEASON PASSES IN A blur on autosport.com. It's by far our busiest time of year in terms of workload but also traffic, as a lack of mass-media coverage means we are one of the few outlets to cover F1's test and launch season in such depth, with a team of reporters on the ground at every test.

So, as we wave goodbye to the season of speculation, how about an insight into what has got our readers clicking in 2015 so far? Looking at stories specifically related to testing, the details of the speed-trap figures

from Jerez – which highlighted that the Mercedes-powered cars still had an advantage after four days of Ferrari engines topping the timesheets – leads the way.

This was before the soft-tyre runs at Barcelona gave away more about the W06's potential, by which time most of the interest had switched to the other end of the grid – McLaren.

The troubled team occupies eight of our top 20 slots in 2015 so far, a trend that is unlikely to change any time soon given the intrigue surrounding McLaren-Honda.

HOT ON THE WEB THIS WEEK

YouTube GEORGE RUSSELL SEAT FITTING



SEARCH FOR: George Russell 2015 Seat Fit

Reigning McLaren AUTOSPORT BRDC Award winner George Russell is stepping up from BRDC F4 to European F3 this season with Carlin. Check out his seat fitting, and get his thoughts on the upcoming season, with this video.

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TOP TEN

F1 SEASON OPENERS

On the eve of the 2015 Australian GP, **EDD STRAW** chooses the greatest F1 season openers

Every grand prix season opener is eagerly anticipated. But while it's rare for the first race of a Formula 1 season to be dull, it's fair to say that some races

are far better than others. It's difficult to define the ingredients that make for the perfect season opener, but usually it comes down to a great battle, a shock win,

a landmark success or a stunning fightback. Examples of all four are included in this selection, taken from the world championship era. Some great season openers loom

large in the memory, but others are barely remembered at all. Some of the choices below will come as a surprise but, once you read the facts, it will be hard to argue with them.



1 South Africa 1982

After taking the lead from Renault team-mate Rene Arnoux early on, Alain Prost was cruising at Kyalami. All seemed lost when Prost suffered a left-rear puncture, rejoining a lapped eighth. Sensationally, it took the Frenchman just 27 laps to catch and pass Arnoux for victory.

2 Argentina 1977

"If you had told me this morning I was going to win, I would have said you were mad," said Jody Scheckter after winning on the debut for the new Wolf team from 11th on the grid. So he was as surprised as anyone to pass Carlos Pace's Brabham to win with five laps remaining.

3 Australia 2003

It looked set to be another Ferrari redwash, with Rubens Barrichello leading Michael Schumacher early on. Barrichello crashed out, Schuey hit Kimi Raikkonen, who then earned a penalty, before Juan Pablo Montoya then spun out of the lead. That handed David Coulthard his final F1 win.

4 United States 1990

Gerhard Berger on pole for his McLaren debut, Pierluigi Martini's Minardi on the front row, Jean Alesi leading the early stages, then impulsively retaking the lead after being passed by Ayrton Senna... what's not to like? While Senna won, it was Alesi's second place that stole the headlines.

5 Monaco 1961

Stirling Moss had caused a stir in the Rob Walker-run Lotus 18 by taking pole and, after losing the lead to Richie Ginther, repassed the Ferrari driver. But Ginther came back hard, the pair trading fastest laps in the closing stages as Moss hung on for Lotus's first world championship race win.

6 Brazil 1989

There was no chance whatsoever of the Ferraris making the finish, everybody knew that. So from sixth on the grid, Scuderia newboy Nigel Mansell decided to go for it. Expecting his semi-automatic gearbox to fail with every shift, he passed Alain Prost for the lead and, to his surprise, took victory.

7 South Africa 1993

Not a celebrated race, but how many times did we see Ayrton Senna, Michael Schumacher and Alain Prost in a three-way battle for the lead? Eventually, Prost won after a great pass on Senna, with a furious Schumacher third after spinning when squeezed onto a kerb by the Brazilian.

8 Argentina 1958

There were only 10 cars on the grid, but they produced a classic. Stirling Moss set a searing pace in his Cooper T43. Ferrari's Luigi Musso had to pit for fuel, but charged to within three seconds at the finish, unable to deny Moss the first world championship race win for a rear-engined car.

9 Argentina 1973

This race looked certain to fall to Francois Cevert's Tyrrell, who secured a seemingly comfortable lead after a battle with Clay Regazzoni's BRM. But in the closing stages Emerson Fittipaldi attacked in his Lotus 72, eventually diving past with 10 laps to go to take a spectacular victory.

10 Australia 1997

David Coulthard's shock victory in Melbourne ended a McLaren victory drought that stretched back to the end of 1993. After a first-corner accident eliminated favourite Jacques Villeneuve, Coulthard prevailed after a battle with Michael Schumacher and Heinz-Harald Frentzen.

NEXT WEEK

F1 kickoff: Australian GP

Plus: Audi's LMP1 fightback; Formula E Miami

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