

Hamilton's **Ferrari** gamble rocks F1

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8 FEBRUARY 2024

AUTOSPORT

F1'S BIGGEST SHOCK

HAMILTON TO FERRARI!

Why the seven-time world champion is leaving Mercedes and how the surprise move happened

'I now have the chance to fulfil another childhood dream'

PLUS

The hits and misses of champs at Ferrari

Button and the British team taking on WEC

Williams, Sauber and Haas kick off F1 launch season





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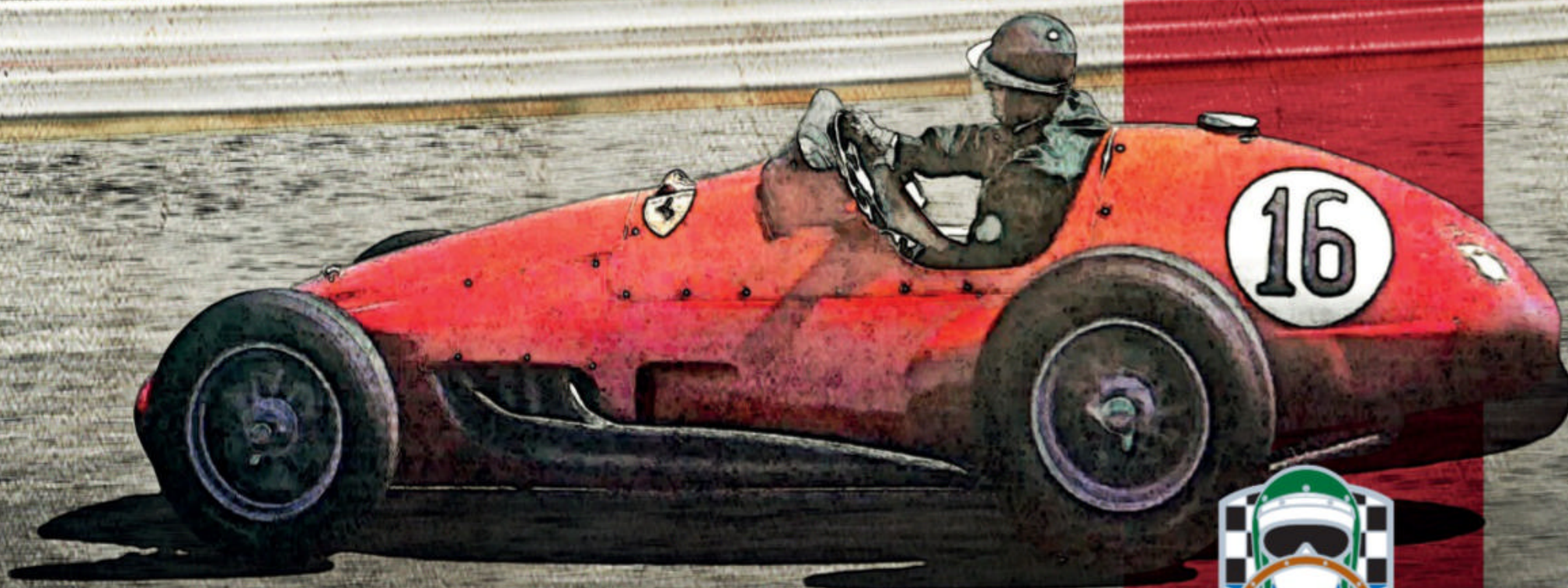
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A shock move made from the heart rather than the head?

It's a week since the news broke of the biggest driver move in Formula 1 history, but it still seems incredible. Rumours of Lewis Hamilton going to Ferrari have circulated on and off for years, but it seemed unlikely Hamilton would give up such a good Mercedes gig.

Being brutal, the move is not logical. Mercedes would surely be more likely to give Hamilton the chance of an eighth world crown than Ferrari, which hasn't taken a title since 2008. Recent designs have been tricky to drive and Charles Leclerc is arguably the fastest driver in the field over a single lap. An easy ride it will not be.

But there's no denying the romance surrounding Ferrari. Most, if not all, drivers want to race for the famous Italian team. And many believe that Hamilton's hero, Ayrton Senna, would have ended up there following his stint at Williams. The fact that Hamilton's old mate Fred Vasseur is team boss must also have been a factor.

Given the strength of Red Bull at the moment (despite internal tensions, see p6) and Ferrari's drought, a Hamilton title in red seems unlikely. But, after Hamilton took his seventh crown in 2020, we asked what he could possibly do to add to his status and legacy as one of the greats and there was only one answer. If he was to take an eighth title for a third team – one at which Alain Prost, Fernando Alonso and Sebastian Vettel failed to get the ultimate prize (p30) – against an entire generation of young hotshoes, it would be one of the most remarkable feats in motorsport history. And fine reward for a brave move that has supercharged F1.



Kevin Turner

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➔ P23 YOUR REACTIONS

Michael Andretti
has had his F1
bid kyboshed...

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F1 rejection of Andretti bid leaves sport and fans reeling

FORMULA 1

Formula 1 has rejected Andretti's proposal to form an 11th grand prix team. Four months after the American set-up's application was approved by the FIA, the championship issued a 1400-word review outlining its "summary and conclusions of commercial assessment process".

The series stated that an expanded grid would not add sufficient extra value since any new entrant would not be fighting for podiums and wins for several seasons. F1 also implied that a partnership with General Motors marque Cadillac would not immediately suffice since Andretti would still have to rely on a customer Renault engine – since it currently supplies the fewest teams – in its early years, which in turn raises concerns about intellectual property being shared. But it should be noted that Andretti did have an initial agreement with Renault, which suggests that this was not a major obstacle for the

French manufacturer. F1 also reckons that most newcomer engine constructors have struggled to be successful "in the last several decades". The argument surmises that F1 would offer more value to Andretti than Andretti can bring to F1.

Series chiefs also think Andretti would be overstretching its technical resources by building a car for 2025 only to start afresh the following year when major regulation changes come into effect. Damningly, an F1 statement read: "The fact that the applicant proposes to [enter both rulesets] gives us reason to question their understanding of the scope of the challenge involved."

That point is seemingly undermined by Haas, the most recent addition to the grid, debuting in 2016 ahead of the shift to 'wide cars' the year after. It performed soundly across both campaigns with a handful of top-six results. It should be noted that since Haas's arrival, the responsibility for dealing with new entries no longer falls primarily to the FIA. While Andretti satisfied the

governing body's criteria, the matter was then passed to Formula One Management.

Another argument put forward by F1 relates to lack of room for an extra team in many pitlanes and paddocks. The statement notes: "The addition of an 11th team would place an operational burden on race promoters, would subject some of them to significant costs, and would reduce the technical, operational and commercial spaces of the other competitors."

F1 has seemingly left the door open to Andretti trying again in time for 2028 – albeit the precise wording suggests that the series is more focused on retaining GM's interest. The final of 20 bullet points in F1's response concluded: "We would look differently on an application for the entry of a team into the 2028 championship with a GM power unit, either as a GM works team or as a GM customer team designing all allowable components in-house."

"In this case there would be additional factors to consider in respect of the value



...although his team won a world title in 2023, in Formula E with Jake Dennis

FERRARO
motorsport
IMAGES

that the applicant would bring to the championship, in particular in respect of bringing a prestigious new OEM to the sport as a PU supplier.” Although, come 2026, a new Concorde Agreement will have been instated, meaning the provisions for the field to grow may have been scrapped or the anti-dilution joining fee raised to \$600million.

F1 is adamant that its lengthy assessment of Andretti’s application did not involve any consultation with the 10 existing teams. But their objections to having to divide their slice of the commercial pie have been abundantly clear since the FIA opened the application process to potential new teams in spring last year.

In the days leading up to this verdict, Andretti shared how its nascent F1 operation was progressing, and even showed an image of a wind tunnel model complete with Red Bull-style sidepods, pull-rod front suspension and Mercedes/Ferrari-esque front-wing brackets.

An Andretti reply, which arrived five hours after F1’s ruling to suggest no advanced warning was given, said: “Andretti Cadillac has reviewed the information Formula One Management Limited has shared and strongly disagree with its contents. Andretti and Cadillac

are two successful global motorsports organisations committed to placing a genuine American works team in F1, competing alongside the world’s best. We are proud of the significant progress we have already made on developing a highly competitive car and power unit with an experienced team behind it, and our work continues at pace. Andretti Cadillac would also like to acknowledge and thank the fans who have expressed their support.” Team patriarch and 1978 F1 world champion Mario Andretti wrote on social media: “I’m devastated. I won’t say anything else because I can’t find any other words.”

The Andretti camp will now challenge F1 on two fronts. First, it says a 2025 entry was only really considered during its initial expression of interest. But the programme has since been working towards a 2026 start date. “The technicality of 2025 still being part of the application is a result of the length of this process,” said the team.

Andretti also denies turning down an invitation to meet F1 staff when offered a chance to present its application in person. It says the email was sent by an F1 employee, not CEO Stefano Domenicali, so ended up in Michael Andretti’s spam folder! As a result of the IT mishap, F1 issued its rejection statement without conducting any face-to-face enquiries or hearing a presentation from Andretti, relying instead on the information given to the FIA and some supplementary questions submitted in October.

The backlash to the rejection has been substantial. This has been partly down to the clout the Andretti name carries and the potential for this decision to alienate American fans. It also gives the impression that F1 is a closed shop since the bar has been set fantastically high for any applicants to pass the threshold to join the grid.

That F1 zeroed in on Andretti’s apparently inadequate technical credentials, despite the FIA approving this element, will only increase the tension in an already frayed relationship between governing body president Mohammed Ben Sulayem and F1 CEO Stefano Domenicali.

MATT KEW & ADAM COOPER



Team has carried out aero work in Toyota wind tunnel

ANDRETTI

Horner denies allegations amid Red Bull probe

FORMULA 1

Red Bull GmbH says it has launched an independent investigation into unspecified allegations against its Formula 1 team's boss Christian Horner. Red Bull did not detail the nature of the accusations, but Horner, who has been at the helm of the dominant reigning constructors' champion since its 2005 arrival into the top flight, has strongly denied any wrongdoing.

A Red Bull statement issued on Monday said: "After being made aware of certain recent allegations, the company launched an independent investigation. This process, which is already under way, is being carried out by an external specialist barrister. The company takes these matters extremely seriously and the investigation will be completed as soon as practically possible. It would not be appropriate to comment further at this time."

Speaking to Dutch newspaper



De Telegraaf, Horner, recognised for his services to motor racing with the awarding of a CBE in the recent New Year's Honours list, said: "I completely deny these claims."

The Red Bull F1 team was unavailable for further comment by the time Autosport closed for press on Tuesday.

JONATHAN NOBLE

Deal keeps 'heritage' track Suzuka on calendar

FORMULA 1

A five-year contract extension for the Japanese Grand Prix will keep Suzuka on the Formula 1 calendar until the end of 2029. While the renewal isn't as long as deals given to Australia (2035) and Bahrain (2026), it improves upon the Honda-owned circuit's previous three-year arrangements. And it leaves the British GP as the last remaining race with no guaranteed future beyond the end of this season, although a new deal is believed to be in the pipeline.

Osaka, Japan's third-most populous city, recently expressed interest in hosting F1. While city officials say their race would co-exist with – not replace – Suzuka, it's unlikely that the country could land two spots on the schedule when expressions of interest from other



Berger leads Prost at start of Suzuka's first F1 GP, back in 1987

potential host venues are in decent supply, especially since Suzuka and Osaka are only 85 miles apart. Mercedes sponsor Petronas is said to be keen on reviving the Malaysian GP too.

The new Suzuka contract is a win for old-school permanent circuits after F1 recently announced that the Spanish GP will move to

Madrid in 2026 on a 10-year deal. That blow to Barcelona hasn't stopped the circuit from pledging €50million towards renovation. Due to be completed before this June's race, the revamp includes remodelling the pit complex, and the construction of a new covered pit building terrace to house the Paddock Club.

It also features a new control tower and a walkway across the back straight that will connect the paddock with the stadium area and will house a large hospitality zone. The circuit is hoping to remain on the calendar but under a revised name, such as the Barcelona GP, Catalan GP or European GP.

MATT KEW & FILIP CLEEREN



RALLYING Toyota put its World Rally Championship stars Elfyn Evans and Kalle Rovanpera into action in last weekend's Arctic Lapland Rally to gather snow mileage ahead of next week's Rally Sweden, and it was Evans (above) who won after final-stage technical problems sidelined reigning champion Rovanpera, who skipped last month's Monte Carlo WRC season opener as he focuses on a partial campaign in 2024. Evans's GR Yaris Rally1 defeated the Rally2 Toyota of Mikko Heikkila by five minutes, while Toyota WRC team boss Jari-Matti Latvala finished 20th at the wheel of a Celica ST185. **Photograph by Toyota**

De Vries loses court case over F1 earnings and sponsorship

FORMULA 1

Ex-AlphaTauri Formula 1 driver Nyck de Vries has been ordered to repay a €250,000 loan and hand over half the salary and sponsorship income earned during his short-lived top-flight career.

The ruling in the Amsterdam District Court follows Investrand providing de Vries with the loan in 2018 so he could continue his FIA F2 career with Prema Racing after being dropped as a McLaren junior. The parties agreed that if the Dutchman became an active F1 driver before the end of 2022, he would split his salary.

While 2021 Formula E champion de Vries was given an exemption for his work as a Mercedes test driver, the court ruled that

the combination of his 2022 Italian Grand Prix cameo, where his reserve driver status allowed him to deputise for Williams racer Alex Albon, and 10-race stint at AlphaTauri passed the threshold.

Investrand's Jeroen Schothorst said: "We supported Nyck at a crucial moment in his career, when no one else wanted to do so. We would have preferred to reach an arrangement without procedures through proper consultation, but unfortunately our attempts to do so were resolutely rejected by Nyck and his lawyer. This made going to court inevitable. I wish Nyck all possible success in the continuation of his already impressive motorsport career, even though it will no longer be in Formula 1."

MATT KEW



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Peugeot keeps powder dry for revised 9X8 until Imola

WEC

Peugeot will wait until round two of the World Endurance Championship at Imola in April to give a debut to the heavily revised 2024-spec version of its 9X8 Le Mans Hypercar. Racing the car at the season-opener in Qatar at the start of next month was never an option.

The widely expected move was confirmed last week by Peugeot Sport technical director Olivier Janssonie. He explained that the homologation requirements in LMH precluded an early debut of a car that has undergone a radical overhaul after the decision to abandon the equal-size tyres front and rear of the original 9X8.

“We knew from the start that we couldn’t make it [the homologation of the revised car] in February,” said Janssonie. “The reason is that with this homologation process when you do a joker, you can’t just do half of the job, you have to do it fully, and that takes time to make sure you maximise the effect of your joker. We know that the level of competition was very high last year and will be

even higher this year, so it is very important for us to bring something that is making a clear step forward in terms of performance.”

Peugeot didn’t announce its decision to change from the 31/31 tyre option to the 29/34 run on the Toyota and Ferrari LMHs until last year’s Bahrain WEC finale in November, although it was known to have tested a modified current-spec 9X8 with the new set-up in the summer. The in-house factory Peugeot Sport squad is working towards completing the new homologation by the end of March in order to race the evolution version of the car at Imola on 21 April.

Janssonie insisted that “there is no question” of the debut of the revised car being pushed back until round three at Spa in May. He added that after initial testing “the results are matching our expectations”.

Janssonie would not confirm that this will include the addition of a conventional rear wing, something that appears to be the case on the evidence of spy shots of the car testing at Paul Ricard before Christmas.

GARY WATKINS

Vasselon WEC exit came early

WEC

Pascal Vasselon’s departure from the top engineering job at Toyota Gazoo Racing Europe was suddenly brought forward, it has emerged. The Japanese manufacturer has confirmed that a plan was already in place for the 60-year-old to be replaced by David Floury as technical director of the Cologne-based organisation that masterminds the World Endurance Championship programme.

The admission was made last week by long-time chief engineer on the WEC team Floury, who has been given the technical directorship on an acting basis for the moment. “The transition was expected anyway, but the timing may have been a bit different,” he said.

What he didn’t reveal was the reasoning for the move, which he would only say “came from top management”.

Vasselon was removed from his job after nearly 20 years on the eve of the first test of the year at Motorland Aragon in January. He subsequently didn’t travel to Spain and his “involvement in day-to-day operations temporarily paused”, according to a statement issued by TGRE.

Its timing points to some kind of fall-out between the top management at TGRE, which has so far only said that the reshuffle is part of a strategy “to develop the next generation of company leadership”. It was implemented by TGRE president Masato Hirai, vice-chairman Kazuki Nakajima and managing director Rob Leupen, according to a statement.

Toyota’s original plan involved Vasselon (below) segueing into a role on the programme designed to put a Toyota powered by a hydrogen combustion engine on the grid at the Le Mans 24 Hours in 2027. The statement from Toyota announcing his replacement by Floury said that it “expects him to resume an active role soon”.

GARY WATKINS



Rossi and Martin
shared BMW
last season



Martin stays with Rossi for WEC

WEC

Valentino Rossi will continue his partnership with Maxime Martin in 2024 when the motorcycle legend races in the World Endurance Championship for the first time. They'll also be teamed at the WRT BMW squad for a programme of GT World Challenge Europe events.

Silver-rated Rossi and Martin will share with bronze driver Ahmad Al Harthy, who is moving across to race a WRT BMW M4 GT3 in the WEC after a maiden season in the series aboard a TF Sport Aston Martin in 2023. Rossi and Martin will race in the five GTWCE Endurance Cup rounds with new BMW signing Raffaele Marciello and contest the early-season Sprint Cup events at Brands Hatch and Misano as a duo.



Farfus leads
second car

WRT's second WEC entry will be driven by Augusto Farfus, who like Rossi was confirmed at WRT on the release of the entry list in November, with team regular Sean Gelael and Darren Leung, who won last year's British GT Championship with Dan Harper.

WRT will run a further Pro class M4 in the GTWCE enduros for the all-factory line-up of Dries Vanthoor, Sheldon van der Linde and Charles Weerts. Vanthoor and Weerts will also contest the Sprint Cup in which they will be bidding for a fourth title in five seasons.

The BMW factory Rowe Racing team's line-up for campaigns at the Nurburgring 24 Hours and in the GTWCE enduros has also been announced. Marciello and Robin Frijns are among the seven drivers named for a two-car assault at the 'Ring in June, though the combinations have yet to be released. Nick Yelloly, Marco Wittmann and Philipp Eng will continue together in the GTWCE after winning last year's centrepiece Spa 24 Hours round, although the first two will not be available for the Monza round in September because of their IMSA SportsCar Championship commitments. Farfus will share the second car with Harper and Max Hesse.

GARY WATKINS

BIRD GIVEN MERCEDES-AMG FACTORY BERTH

GT

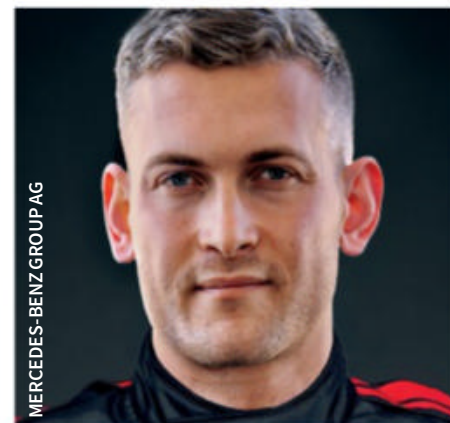
Frank Bird has joined Mercedes-AMG's factory GT roster for 2024. The 24-year-old Briton was named as a junior driver when the German manufacturer took the wraps off an expanded line-up last week.

Bird (below) has been picked up by Merc after two seasons racing customer AMG GT3s predominantly for the Haupt Racing Team across the GT World Challenge Europe, Intercontinental GT Challenge and Asian Le Mans Series. The opportunity came after he impressed in a young driver test at Valencia last November and was given a further evaluation the following month in the Gulf 12 Hours IGTC round, in which he finished fourth at the wheel of a GruppeM-run car.

"It's every driver's goal to have an association with a manufacturer and it's been my target for the past couple of years," said Bird, whose programme for 2024 has yet to be announced. "To get it over the line is a step in the right direction and I can't wait to start wearing the Mercedes badge."

Brazilian Felipe Fraga and Australian David Reynolds have joined the 19-strong squad on its second tier as so-called 'experts'.

GARY WATKINS



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Watson gets Speedworks Toyota seat for 2024

BTCC

Ex-Le Mans 24 Hours racer Andrew Watson has switched to the Speedworks Motorsport Toyota set-up for his second season in the British Touring Car Championship.

The Northern Irishman makes the move after claiming 2023 title honours as a rookie in the Jack Sears Trophy for those who have not scored an overall podium in a BTCC race. That came thanks to an impressive campaign with the Power Maxed Racing Vauxhall squad, which featured two podiums in rain-affected races.

Watson, 29, is part of the same Mark Blundell-led MBP management stable as West Surrey Racing BMW star Jake Hill, and was linked with a berth at that team,

which is still seeking a replacement for Carrera Cup-bound veteran Stephen Jelley. But he will instead form one half of the official Toyota Gazoo Racing UK line-up, with Josh Cook announced last week as part of the LKQ-backed 'sister' team.

"When we first came into the championship, Speedworks were among the people we spoke to and had our eye on," said Watson. "But Power Maxed was the right place for my first year. It was then Mark and Alex Watts [MB managing director] who got back in touch with the team. When both sides of the coin want to do it, it makes it much easier for it to happen.

"We spoke to West Surrey as well as Speedworks – they were the two leading contenders. I think the way my year in

front-wheel drive went was a consideration. I've learnt it now, so hopefully I can push forward, and for sure it's going to help."

Like Cook, Watson is targeting next month for his first mileage in the Corolla GR Sport. "There's still development work going on," he said. "We want to make sure we don't rush that, and the team are flat-out on that aspect. If all the pieces come together it should be a good year."

- The BTCC has confirmed its line-up of official pre-season test dates, all of which will be open free of charge to spectators. The first is at Brands Hatch on 3 April, before Croft on 10 April and the season launch at Donington Park on 16 April.

MARCUS SIMMONS

Dunne's done the deal for F3 graduation with MP



FORMULA 3

Alex Dunne, last year's GB3 runner-up, has secured his graduation to the FIA Formula 3 Championship – with MP Motorsport.

The 18-year-old Irish talent (left) had been tied to Hitech GP since he won the 2022 British F4 title with the team. As well as his GB3 season, he starred on his F3 debut at last November's Macau Grand Prix, where

he finished second with Hitech in the qualification race after just one test outing at Imola. But he appeared to be out in the cold when he was not part of Hitech's three-car line-up for the 2024 season.

Instead, Dunne joins fellow F3 rookies Tim Tramnitz and Kacper Sztuka – both Red Bull Juniors – in Dutch team MP's line-up.

"He had an outstanding year in GB3 and then, fresh

into an FIA F3 car, proved his innate pace at Imola and Macau," said MP chief Sander Dorsman. "His Macau performance in particular was hard to overlook, so we were happy to pounce and snap him up for our final FIA F3 seat."

Charlie Wurz, son of Le Mans hero and ex-F1 racer Alexander, has taken the final Jenzer Motorsport seat after also making his F3 debut in Macau.



NASCAR Denny Hamlin won the annual non-points season curtain raiser at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum – which ran a day earlier than expected. Predicted bad weather led to the race being brought forward to Saturday. Hamlin qualified his Joe Gibbs Racing Toyota on pole, but had to battle past Joey Logano and team owner Gibbs's grandson Ty (via a nudge) on a late restart. He then held off Kyle Busch following a late caution that sent the race into overtime, with Ryan Blaney third after starting 23rd and last. **Photograph by Kinrade/NKP/Motorsport Images**



Bourdais given Cadillac Qatar call

WEC

Sebastien Bourdais will race for the Ganassi-run Cadillac Racing squad in the World Endurance Championship season-opener in Qatar next month. The Frenchman will move over from the IMSA SportsCar arm of the operation to join WEC full-timers Earl Bamber and Alex Lynn in the solo V-Series.R LMDh for a race that could stretch to 10 hours.

Cadillac has announced that Bamber and Lynn will be complemented by Bourdais, his IMSA co-driver Renger van der Zande and “select Chip Ganassi Racing team-mates” through the season. It added that the team will “confirm the third driver ahead of certain endurance races”.

That stops short of confirming Chip Ganassi's comments that the team will go

into the five regular six-hour races with only two drivers. But the team boss was unequivocal at last month's Daytona 24 Hours that this was the plan.

A WEC outing for Bourdais will give him “the chance to refamiliarise himself with the WEC rules and regulations” and allow the team to “strengthen the bond” between its two arms, according to Ganassi director of operations Mike O'Gara.

One pressing question is who will join Bamber and Lynn should Ganassi's IMSA car receive an invite for June's Le Mans 24 Hours. Cadillac's statement last Friday made mention of CGR's reigning IndyCar champion Alex Palou's appearance with the team at Daytona. Ganassi didn't rule out the possibility of the Spaniard being brought into the Le Mans squad.

GARY WATKINS

SIX FP1s FOR BEARMAN

Ferrari Formula 1 reserve Ollie Bearman has been named in the same role at customer team Haas – and been handed six FP1 outings following his two runs late in 2023. Bearman's first FP1 will be at May's Emilia Romagna GP at Imola, and he is also nominated for his home event at Silverstone. IndyCar racer Pietro Fittipaldi is Haas's other reserve.

MALONEY'S SAUBER GIG

Bearman's 2023/24 F2 rival Zane Maloney, who is no longer part of the Red Bull Junior stable, has been recruited to the Sauber Academy. The Barbadian, who continues in F2 with Rodin Motorsport, will share F1 reserve duties with reigning F2 champion Theo Pourchaire, who is racing in Super Formula this year.

BILINSKI SLIDES TO VICTORY

Anglo-Pole Roman Bilinski notched up yet another win in New Zealand's Toyota Formula Regional Oceania series at Hampton Downs last weekend. A spin late in qualifying on a drying track left him 14th on the grid, but he carved through on a damp track in the race – with most of the field on slicks – to move past wet-shod Kaleb Ngatua into the lead and beat M2 Competition team-mate Liam Sceats. Ngatua, run by Giles Motorsport, avenged this in the dry race three to win from Bilinski, who lost the lead with an error on the first lap. M2's Alpine F1 protege Nicola Lacorte won the reversed-grid race.

SLATER GOES FOURTH

British 15-year-old Freddie Slater retained his Formula 4 UAE points lead at Dubai Autodrome last weekend, despite finishing fourth in all three races – and a track-limits penalty dropping him to 10th in the reversed-grid counter. Nikita Bedrin hauled himself into title contention with two wins for PHM Racing, while Slater's team-mate at the Prema-run Mumbai Falcons team, Jamaican-American Mercedes F1 protege Alex Powell, took reversed-grid honours.

F1 ACADEMY WILD CARDS

The F1-supporting all-female F1 Academy is introducing a wild card entry this year, with a local talent from each host region identified and run as an additional entry by top team Prema Racing. Superlicence points have also been granted, with 10 for the champion down to one for fifth. Meanwhile, a new rule will bar any driver from competing in more than two seasons in the series.

WILLIAMS GIVING LITTLE AWAY ON NEW DIRECTION

Bolstered by new sponsorship, the team showed off its 'hint at history, focus on the future' livery. And, while light on specifics, the positivity is strong

JAKE BOXALL-LEGGE

“When I look at the livery, it's got this progression between the blues, which for me signifies where we have been – and where we're going,” mused Williams team principal James Vowles, as the Grove squad unveiled its 2024 livery and a new sponsorship deal with Japanese heavy machinery manufacturer Komatsu at Puma's Fifth Avenue store in New York City.

Billed as a 'season launch', the livery was transplanted onto 2023's FW45 chassis while this year's new car remains under wraps. It features an evolution of the differing shades of blue used over the past two seasons. But, pleasingly, there's a nod to the team's history; a red and white pinstripe runs along the car's nose to evoke memories of some of Williams's most successful cars, including the FW14B and FW15C. Komatsu has also picked up significant branding presence after being involved with the team during the 1980s and 1990s. Sportswear giant Puma and data platform VAST Data have also joined the team.

“WE'RE TAKING MORE RISK, TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM OUR OLD WAYS”

“[The livery has] got a nod, which is subtle in there, but you will see it back to Frank and back to our history,” added Vowles. “It contains for me the history of what the team is, signifying elements of where we're going. And then just really some top class sponsors that are part of our journey. Look at the car 12 months ago and look at the car today. Look at the amount of top brand sponsors that are on the journey with us. And that for me is a real boon and that suggestion of direction of travel that we're in.”

The absence of a proper FW46 from the team's launch was a limiting factor in the information available, although the drivers relayed their experience of it within the squad's simulator, and quietly hinted at positivity and a step over last year's car. According to Alex Albon, Vowles's influence in the Williams set-up has pushed the technical team out of its comfort zone; the FW46 should be visually different



Team principal Vowles has set the bar high for the level of progress required at Williams

when it eventually meets the world in Bahrain. “I don't want to put pressure on James, but it's his first year where he's really taken control and you can see that,” Albon explained. “I think over the past four or five years, there has been an inherent way the cars have been designed. And this year there's been quite a big divergence to that. That's why you're hearing us talk about the car being so different. We're taking more risk and we're trying to get away from our old ways, old habits. It's definitely the right thing we're doing. Now, we have to see if it's going to work out.”

“[Vowles has] definitely put stress on the system,” Logan Sargeant added, “and I think, at the end of the day, that's how you grow as a whole and as a team. Personally speaking, he's been great to work





ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLIAMS

with for the past year. I really feel like I can see the team more motivated than ever to keep improving and get back to the front.”

In his own experience of the FW46's virtual counterpart, Sargeant reckoned that he may need to make a few adjustments in his driving style, but that the signs from the new car were that it would be easier to drive. If that comes to pass, then that'll be welcome on his part; he indulged in a few too many rookie errors last season as his confidence began to wane. The litany of shunts post-summer break had their own side-effects; to save on manufacturing costs, Williams had to equip Sargeant's car with older-spec aero parts, costing him further performance. A more stable platform should ensure that Sargeant's sophomore year will be less inundated with car-shattering antics.

With the technical team now bolstered by the addition of Pat Fry,

Williams should continue to see growth in its development over 2024. Whether the engineers have chosen to retain the straightline speed specialism that characterised the previous two Williamses or if it has opted for more of an all-rounder remains to be seen, but it's certain that the team has the ambition to close the gap between itself and Alpine in the constructors' championship.

“As hard as it sounds, I'm proud of what we've achieved, but seventh doesn't mean a tremendous amount to me,” Vowles added. “We've done a good job – not a great job, a good job – here's what excellence looks like and here's the gap that we've got to fill: you're not going to do it in one year. That's simply just not possible, but we will get there because the perseverance, the belief, the passion is at the highest level I've ever seen. And that carries you through a tremendous amount.”

SAUBER C44

The opportunity to break from recent liveries has been embraced with an eye-grabbing mix of fluorescent green and bare carbon

JAKE BOXALL-LEGGE

SUSPENSION

Sauber has switched to a pullrod front suspension layout for 2024. With the pushrod rear suspension package that was already in place, the team has settled upon the same set-up that Red Bull employed on its RB19. In theory, there's no distinct advantage to selecting a pullrod over a pushrod; it ends up being largely a decision influenced by the aerodynamics of the car. Pushrods became the norm for having a slightly more agreeable local aerodynamic advantage, but there is an inescapable centre-of-gravity benefit to running the torsion bars lower down in the monocoque with the pullrod layout. It's all a trade-off, and Sauber appears to believe that keeping the centre of gravity low is much more beneficial, a choice no doubt influenced by the performance shown by the underbody in simulations.

WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

Last year, the technical department at Sauber's Hinwil base was bolstered by the addition of James Key, who had previously held the role of technical director at the Swiss squad between 2010 and 2012 before moving to Toro Rosso and later McLaren. The Briton departed McLaren amid a reshuffle in the engineering department at Woking, but will offer Sauber some crucial expertise.

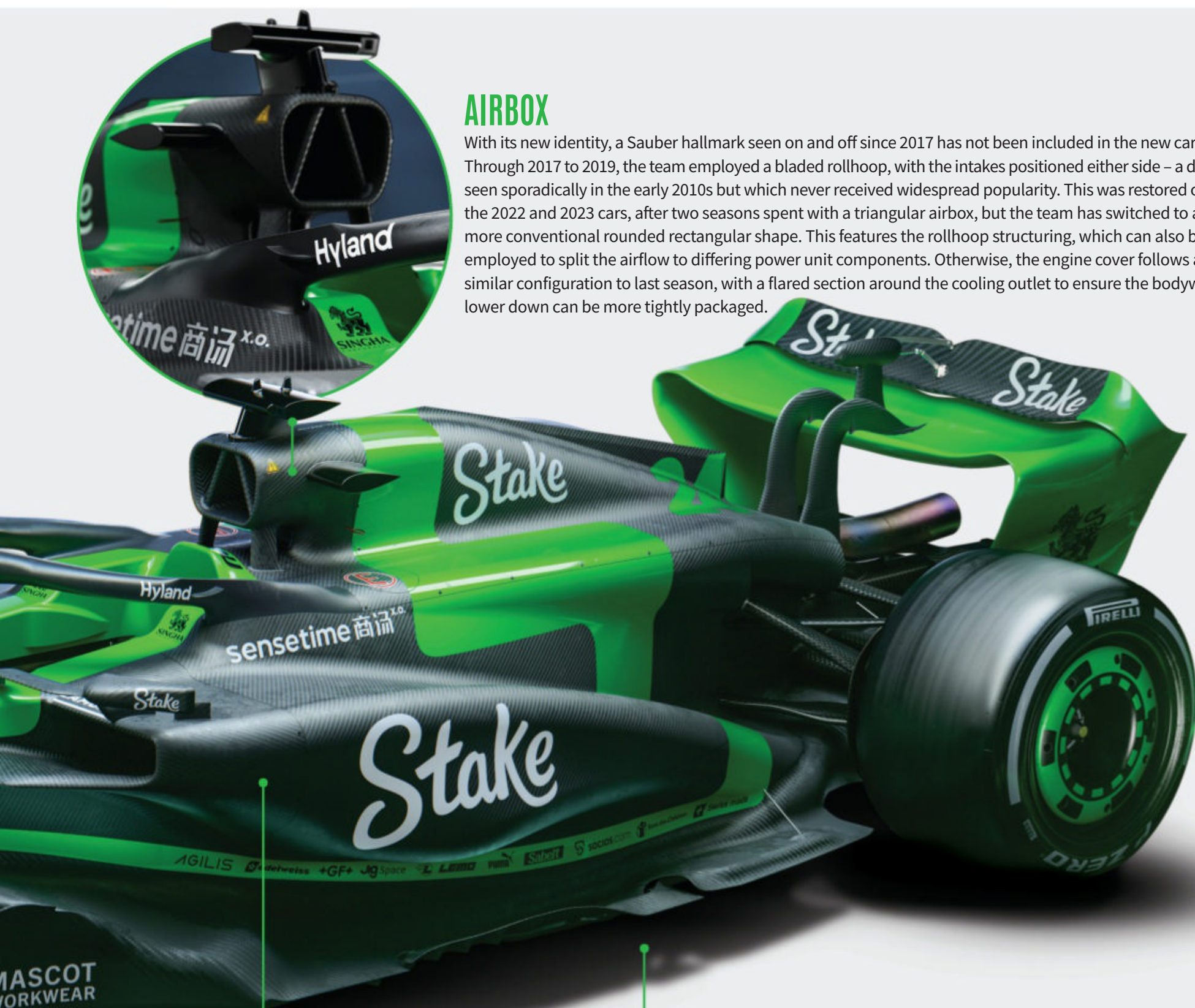
The C44 is also dressed in an all-new livery after receiving title sponsorship from gambling company Stake and streaming platform Kick, with fluorescent green trim lining the bare-carbon bodywork. The green paint is produced by chemicals giant BASF, while the bare carbon choice is primarily a weight-saving measure.



Front and rear wing treatment on launch car should be taken with a pinch of salt

AIRBOX

With its new identity, a Sauber hallmark seen on and off since 2017 has not been included in the new car. Through 2017 to 2019, the team employed a bladed rollhoop, with the intakes positioned either side – a design seen sporadically in the early 2010s but which never received widespread popularity. This was restored on the 2022 and 2023 cars, after two seasons spent with a triangular airbox, but the team has switched to a more conventional rounded rectangular shape. This features the rollhoop structuring, which can also be employed to split the airflow to differing power unit components. Otherwise, the engine cover follows a similar configuration to last season, with a flared section around the cooling outlet to ensure the bodywork lower down can be more tightly packaged.



SIDEPODS

To enhance the underbody flow, the sidepods have a heavy undercut treatment; like Red Bull, the leading edge of the inlet features an 'underbite' to serve as a clear delineation between the airflow for the inlet and that to be sent around the car's midriff. The sidepods feature a bulge on the underside, like that of a pelican's gullet, and there are likely two reasons for this. This helps maximise the space for any radiators within the bodywork, and should also restrict any lift created by the heavy sidepod undercut. On top of the sidepods, Sauber has persisted with the downwash trend, opting for a tweak over its 2023 design by creating a slight channel along the upper surface.

FLOOR AND WINGS

The sidepod changes have allowed the top of the floor to be opened up, which results in more control over the pressure differences between the topside of the car and the venturi tunnels underneath, since having more car on top of the floor limits what the aerodynamicists can do with it. There's little detail shown along the floor, and too many prognostications should not be made given last year's trickery, in which a serrated floor treatment was shown in the renders purely as a red herring. The team has been more surreptitious with its front and rear wing treatment on the launch car, suggesting that the real C44 will run with a different arrangement. The car shown at the team's London launch appeared to have the 2022 show car rear wing.



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: SAUBER

MORE WORK TO COME FROM HAAS

Team principal Ayao Komatsu concedes the fallout from events last year, resulting in his promotion, mean the VF-24 won't immediately blow any socks off come Bahrain testing

ALEX KALINAUCKAS

Given that McLaren had rather stolen its marketing-boosting thunder in by providing a livery-only season launch two weeks earlier, Haas has at least provided a few hints of what to expect from its real VF-24 car and its potential for the 2024 campaign.

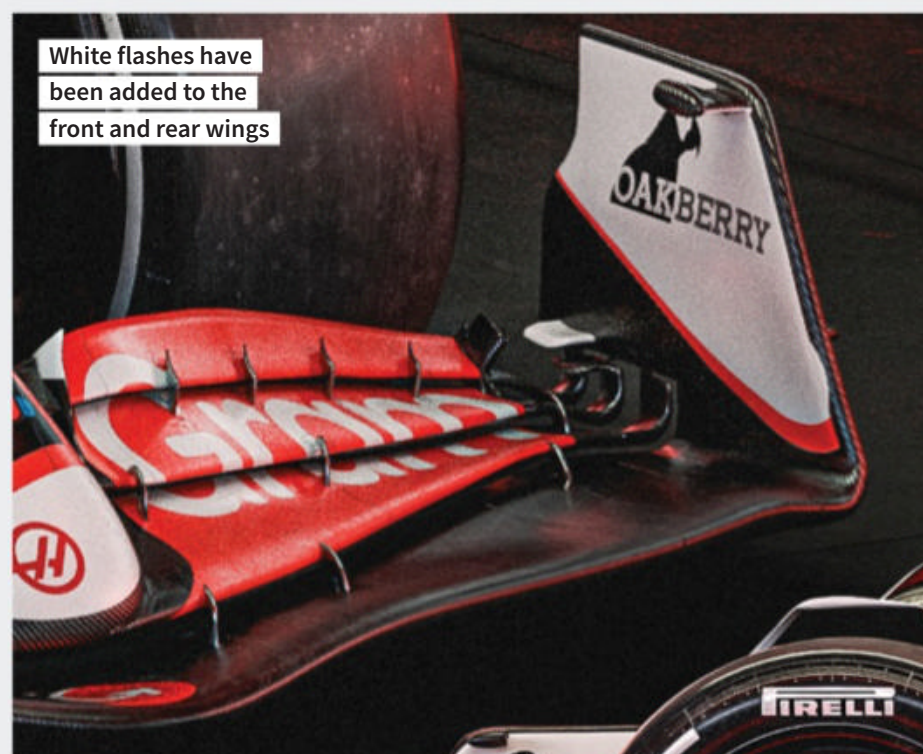
The new car will run for the first time in a Silverstone shakedown this Sunday. With Nico Hulkenberg at the wheel, Kevin Magnussen will have to wait until the upcoming Bahrain pre-season test for his first chance. The pair will eventually both be driving a car that, colour-scheme-wise in a first consideration, looks near identical to last year's VF-23. The only real change concerns the VF-24's nose, which is now mainly black compared to the largely white approach of last year. In the renders the American team has released, this appears to be a matte finish, but it would be logical to expect the real thing to run naked carbon fibre to save weight. There are also a few other minor livery alterations, including white flashes on the respective front and rear wing endplates.

But the renders do at least offer some clues into the developments

it has made to the package with which it sort of ended 2023. Haas was the last team to switch to Red Bull's downwash concept for upper aerodynamic surfaces, a change it made with a much-vaunted upgrade package at October's United States Grand Prix. But, after it had become clear that the changes provided little, if any, performance boost and didn't appear to solve the team's tyre problems in races, Haas put Hulkenberg back on the old specification to compare his car's aero performance with that of Magnussen at the final two events.

"In terms of physical changes, as everyone knows, when we made the upgrade in Austin that was the concept towards this year's car," Haas team principal Ayao Komatsu said in a lengthy statement released by his squad last Friday. "But because we had the physical limitation of the side impact structure, rad-duct arrangement, and cooling arrangement, we couldn't do the full-blown VF-24-type concept. I knew exactly where we were going for this year, but everyone saw a preview in Austin."

A blister seen in the floor surface of the VF-24's initial renders reveals that Haas has been able to lower the mandated Side Impact Spars (SIS). This means the undercut of the downwash sidepod can be expanded and, so far, it looks much more like a Red Bull-style design. The upper surfaces of the sidepods have been made smoother alongside an adoption of the shelf bodywork divider seen on many other 2023 designs. The car's engine cover is also seemingly set to abandon the VF-23's stegosaurus-like fins. Updates appear to have been made to the airbox intake, front and rear wings, plus a bi-plane



**"WE HAVE BETTER CONFIDENCE
IN WHAT WE'RE PUTTING OUT
ON TRACK NOW"**





ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: HAAS

beam wing arrangement. But given F1 is a year on from one team – Sauber – sending out launch images with developments that never became reality, there may be more, or indeed less, to come from the real VF-24.

Perhaps the most tangible takeaway from Haas's season launch release concerned Komatsu's projection for where the team will start 2024 in the pecking order. "Out of the gates in Bahrain... I still think we're going to be towards the back of the grid," he predicted.

"The reason our launch-spec car is not going to be quick enough in Bahrain is not because of the quality of the people we have here, but it's because we started late and then we stopped for two months to do the Austin upgrade. It really diverted resource, so we lost time there, but the team is finding good gains in the wind tunnel so that's positive and, in terms of characteristics, it's going in the right direction."

Komatsu is laying out this projection in the context of team owner Gene Haas axing his predecessor, and in effect co-team founder, Guenther Steiner, for the squad's lack of major results and finishing last in the 2023 constructors' championship. Komatsu vowed at a media briefing attended by Autosport shortly after the news of his promotion from engineering director had broken that he's "not trying to be Guenther Steiner" in terms of the Italian's outspoken,

Development delays were unavoidable, says Komatsu, but "good gains" are being found



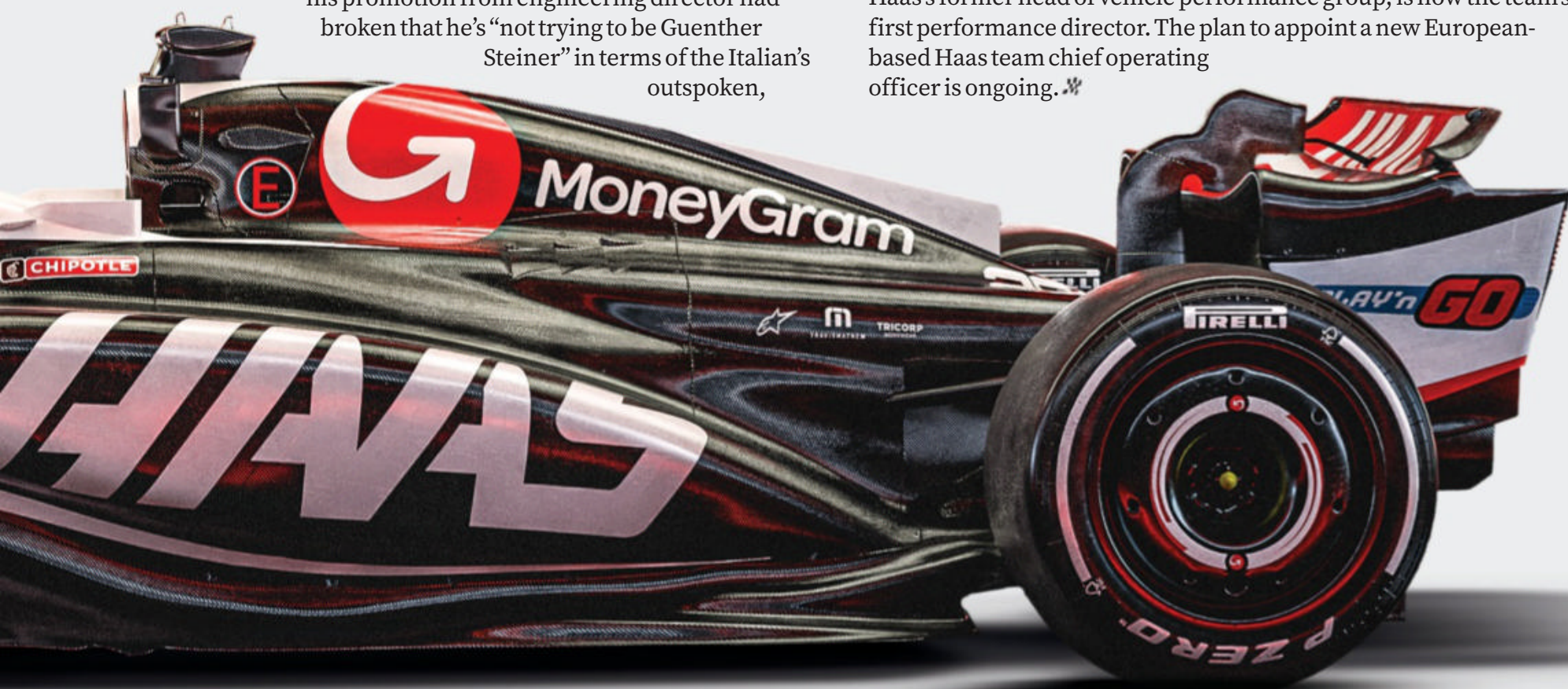
HONE/MOTORSPORT IMAGES

headline-grabbing character.

But, so far, his messages seem to be a conflicting mix of blaming Steiner's decision to delay updating the VF-23 to Red Bull's downwash design until late in 2023 and the knock-on impact this has had into the VF-24's development, while also acknowledging that Haas is better off understanding why its initial attempt at such a major change seemed to backfire. "It was a big exercise to do, and it did delay our VF-24

development, but if we hadn't done it and then had a huge surprise come pre-season testing, it would have hurt us immensely," Komatsu added. "It was a difficult balance, and doing the Austin package means the VF-24 launch car may not be as advanced as it could be but, at the same time, we have better confidence in what we're putting out on track now. We're all realistic that our launch car in Bahrain will not necessarily turn heads, but our concentration and focus is to work with the VF-24, understand the car, and then define the correct pathway to upgrade the car."

Haas has also announced that its former chief designer, Andrea De Zordo, has been promoted to technical director. He replaces Simone Resta, who had been working with the team on secondment from Ferrari before leaving at the start of 2024. Damien Brayshaw, Haas's former head of vehicle performance group, is now the team's first performance director. The plan to appoint a new European-based Haas team chief operating officer is ongoing. ❄





The GT-X2 is the new generation of Cube Controls' GT Collection. This project comes from a long collaboration with JAS Motorsport, for which we developed a real steering wheel for the Honda Civic Type-R, which shares most of the components with the Sim one.

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A switch that's sent shockwaves

Lewis Hamilton's decision to move from Mercedes to Ferrari is as intriguing as it is seismic in its significance, especially if it's one in which heart has ruled head

ALEX KALINAUCKAS

Apologies to Tazio Nuvolari and Auto Union fans, and to those who fondly remember Michael Schumacher switching from Benetton to Ferrari for 1996 after winning two world titles on the trot, but there's a case to be made that Lewis Hamilton heading to Maranello for 2025 is the biggest motorsport driver move ever. Ferrari remains F1's most evocative and successful squad; Hamilton's fame transcends the championship.

The parallels with Hamilton's exit from McLaren over a decade ago, when the V6 turbo hybrid era was set to arrive one year into his Mercedes tenure, are obvious. Today, the 2026 regulation changes are no longer far over the horizon. Yet, this time, the risks of a move are different for Hamilton. Back in 2012, the question was whether an untested and even openly doubted Mercedes squad could ever provide Hamilton with title-winning machinery, as he'd enjoyed at McLaren. His Ferrari switch should therefore initially be viewed as equally sideways, given how close Mercedes and Ferrari were – far in the wake of Max Verstappen – in 2023. But the first risk for Hamilton is that, in the short term, it works out as a backwards step from his clear goal of an eighth world title.

After all, there's been a markedly different approach in Mercedes' and Ferrari's positions on their respective 2024 cars. Mercedes technical director James Allison stated that his team feels "some of the more spiteful characteristics of the rear end

"In joining Ferrari, Hamilton has actually boosted his reputation in many quarters"

of our car" have now been eradicated in the W15. Should the car become a challenger to Red Bull, then Hamilton faces another short-term risk: that he will be isolated at his current team.

Meanwhile, Ferrari technical director Enrico Cardile ended 2023 by saying that "suspension set-up to me is a bit overrated". This is a staggering statement, given how open Red Bull has been about that element being key to its cars' being so good in the current formula, and offered a clue into what to expect from Ferrari's SF-24 design in this area... Unless he was attempting to mislead, it'll be 'don't expect much change'.

Running through all this, however, is Hamilton's call to abandon Mercedes in the first place. This is ultimately a vote of no confidence in its potential. Yet Ferrari lacks any title since its 2008 constructors' crown, its great starts in 2017, 2018 and 2022 all

coming to naught. And Ferrari has rather haemorrhaged technical staff of late. Head of vehicle concept David Sanchez is now at McLaren, sporting director Laurent Mekies joined RB, and Mattia Binotto's near-quarter-century of technical involvement ended with his axing as team principal. Ferrari's only signing of note in this time has been Mercedes' former performance director, Loic Serra, who can't start until 2025 anyway.

A key element is that by attracting F1's statistically most successful driver, still close to the peak of his powers, key technical staff might be lured in or back to Ferrari. But should a hiring spree now follow, it will surely take years to bear proper fruit thanks to the typically long car design lead times and gardening leave periods. Ensuing 2026 success is simply not guaranteed.

A greater risk in the grand scheme of things is how Hamilton might fare against new team-mate Charles Leclerc. At Mercedes, George Russell has proved to be much closer to Hamilton's level than had Valtteri Bottas, however much the younger Briton's run of 2023 mistakes sticks in the memory. And Leclerc's qualifying skills mean that he is likely to have the edge on a driver with a record 104 poles. Leclerc is also massively more experienced with Ferrari packages that tend to be peaky in terms of car handling. He also speaks Italian, and is familiar with what remains a complex organisation to settle into. Yet Hamilton is clearly still a step better – with Russell the key yardstick here – when it comes to the skill that brings the points in F1: tyre management. His mastery of this art could boost a team with a long history of tyre weakness in races.

But perhaps the biggest risk of Hamilton's move concerns his reputation. Inevitably, some will make the tiresome argument that this development is all about money. Such lazy takes disregard the fact that Hamilton was set to make a reported £50million at Mercedes anyway. And any financial improvement isn't exactly life-changing for a star with a fortune north of £220m.

There is a risk he has jettisoned a potential life-long association with Mercedes through a mooted ambassadorial role, and its contributions to his Mission 44 charity initiatives. And he risks spending years in the wilderness beneath the top step of the F1 podium, which he hasn't visited since the 2021 Saudi Arabian GP, all while being entangled with a young, determined team-mate. Comment on that in the context of his previous success would swell. But that was already happening at Mercedes in the two years since his 2021 title defeat. In joining Ferrari, and making the same romantic move as so many other F1 legends – one many believed that his hero Ayrton Senna would one day make – Hamilton has actually boosted his reputation in many quarters. And we know that the Ferrari dream is one on which he has long dwelled. ❧

 **P24 HAMILTON TO FERRARI**

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Opportunity blocks

When even the champions of 'feeder series' are considered charmed to be granted an F1 graduation, it's no surprise memories are stirred of a radically different era

MARCUS SIMMONS

One of the byproducts from last week's news of the impending shock transfer of Lewis Hamilton to Ferrari was that it raised speculation, through a handy hint from Mercedes F1 chief Toto Wolff that it may be "an opportunity to do something bold", that the Three-Pointed Star's 17-year-old sensation Andrea Kimi Antonelli may be called upon to fill the seven-time world champion's sizeable shoes in 2025.

Young Antonelli would be the lucky one. The Italian is clearly a sensational talent, about to embark upon his first season in Formula 2 as the reigning (but hardly dominant) title holder from the Formula Regional European Championship by Alpine. He may well win the F2 crown, although he does have the not inconsiderable obstacle of Ferrari protege – and Haas F1-destined? – Ollie Bearman working out of the same Prema Racing awning for 2024. Any F2 champion surely, by definition, deserves an immediate graduation to F1, but it rarely works out that way. Look at Theo Pourchaire, Felipe Drugovich before him, Oscar Piastri before *him*. Back in the 1980s, reigning champ Pourchaire would surely be gearing up for a rookie F1 season, probably with Ligier – although that might not always have been a good thing...

Making it even harder for these budding starlets is the effectively closed shop of F1. Also last week, F1 rejected the bid of Michael Andretti's team to join the grid. Bang went any chance of the field rising from 20 cars to 22, and with it any increased opportunity for newcomers to break through. Back in 2022, football fans were outraged by the attempted creation of a European Super League, with member clubs locked into the competition in perpetuity. Motorsport fans rightly feel similarly that Andretti's rebuff is scandalous – F1 is now a European Super League in all but name.

Also in the past fortnight, many in the sport were deeply saddened at the news that Gerrit van Kouwen had died after an illness at the age of 60. He was supreme in the 1984 Formula Ford Festival, and a race winner in British F3 in 1985 and 1986. His career ran out of steam, but he retained a close connection with the sport. It was in his blood, after all.

An engineer pal of mine, who worked with van Kouwen when the Dutchman was coaching and mentoring young drivers in the 1990s, messaged me on Monday. He was logged in to the video stream of the funeral, and remarked that footage had been shown of an F3 race at Silverstone where van Kouwen burst into the lead at the start. The field was so enormous, remarked my friend, that "it seemed like every F3 car ever built was in it!"

My immediate assumption was that it must have been the 1985 British Grand Prix support race. Coincidentally, I had reason to

dig out the programme last week, so it was close to hand. Sure enough, 36 drivers had qualified, and I'd also taken the trouble to note four non-qualifiers – presumably in case anyone failed to make the start and a reserve got shuffled onto the grid. And this got my mate (who is still active in engineering young single-seater drivers) and I chatting. What, we wondered, has gone wrong since then? We agreed that one-make racing has killed opportunities for many. Leading drivers back then such as van Kouwen, Andy

"What has gone wrong? We agreed one-make racing has killed opportunities for many"

Wallace or Tim Davies would never have been paying a full budget, but with competition between constructors – back then it was Reynard versus Ralt in F3 – it was in their interest to get the best young talent in their cars. Look also at Formula Ford from the late-1980s: Reynard (again) versus Van Diemen and Swift, even Mondiale. If they won races, they sold cars, so slipping a freebie or a cut-price weapon to a hot prospect paid for itself. The same principle could be applied to engine suppliers or tuners.

Nowadays, every step of the ladder is spec cars. Each category comes with its own list of parts that can only be supplied by one source. It's great in principle: identical equipment supposedly offers a level playing field and cuts costs in development. Yes, but it also takes the cost beyond the reach of some of those who might otherwise be able to compete in a freer arena. Is it a coincidence that the old philosophy of F3, the last single-seater bastion of open competition in chassis and engines, produced a certain Max Verstappen, who raced on a budget he would have struggled to get into an F4 team with before he was scooped up by Red Bull?

It also slashes the demographic. Look at the peak days of British F3 in the late 1980s. Grids overflowed into qualification races, around 20 to 25 of the drivers were worldwide up-and-coming talents, roughly 10 to 15 were very capable amateur racers – some as old as their thirties or even forties. Nowadays they'd be regulated out of most series by age or experience restrictions. In more recent times, single-seaters have been prefixed with the word 'junior'; or, even worse than that, 'feeder series'. All hideously subservient by the very phraseology to the bloated great god F1. Which, apart from throwing the best of them a few scraps of Friday FP1 outings, has shown with its Andretti ruling that it clearly isn't interested in giving new faces a proper chance. ❧

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YOUR SAY

To knock back an American team (the great Andretti name or not) having just made it three races in the States seems a negative to the potentially huge US market

MA SMITH

Short-sighted policy towards new teams

Disappointed. Frustrated. As an F1 fan for 40 years, this closed-door policy by FOM to new teams is in my opinion short-sighted.

I understand that another team would dilute the 'pot of money' that the teams rely on and that they feel a new starter hasn't earned this financial reward, but another team is of course two more seats available for up and coming drivers that the bigger teams might then want to sign up. The racing ladder of F3 and F2, the main feeder series for F1, has become almost surplus to requirements as where will the drivers go? F1 drivers these days sign long-term contracts that limit options for up and coming drivers. The extra seats should be welcomed.

Also, to knock back an American team (the great Andretti name or not) having just made it three races in the States seems a negative to the potentially huge US market. Andretti is in many forms of motorsport worldwide and is successful, so to say that this new team won't meet the standards required for F1 seems a bit uncharitable. Disappointing and frustrating sums it up.

MA Smith

By email

How about putting the fans first?

All I can say is, what a surprise. FOM's decision to turn down Andretti's application to enter F1 is typical of an organisation that is totally self-absorbed and insular.

The phrase in FOM's statement that annoyed me immensely was 'what value can a new team bring to F1?' The name Andretti is motorsport royalty. If that can't add value to F1, good luck anyone else trying to gain an entry. The phrase you should use is what value would a new team add to the fans' enjoyment of F1? Another team on the grid, especially one with such an iconic name, would make a huge difference to fans' enjoyment of F1.

We fans want more cars on the grid, more drivers to cheer on. Pull your head out from the clouds, read the reactions on social media, and start putting fans at the forefront of your decisions. You never know, it might be popular.

Michael Skeet

Lordswood, Southampton



Massive own goal for grand prix racing

Any business that ignores its customers is on the road to failure. If slipping Netflix ratings, 'sports washing' and unexceptional street circuits don't kill the goose, turning down Andretti F1 will.

Meanwhile, which of the current F1 principals were ever able to hold a candle to Mario Andretti in terms of fan impact and excitement? First outing in a Lotus 49 – pole! One-off drive in a Ferrari (above) in front of the tifosi at Monza – pole! Sebring win from way back in a Ferrari 512, USAC/Indy champion, Indy 500 winner... oh, and F1 world champion! The Andretti rejection is a massive own goal by F1 and its 'franchisees'.

Steve Singleton

By email

More cars can only enhance the show

Regarding the rejection of Andretti's bid to add to the F1 grid, I believe this is pure greed on the part of the existing teams and I hope it doesn't come round to bite them when the sport has one of its cyclical downturns in a few years. The Andrettis are pure racers, ambitious and well connected. More cars on the grid can only enhance the show and add more spaces for up and coming drivers. F1 needs someone who looks to the future.

Alan Springle

St Albans

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Vasseur and Hamilton: maybe they weren't reminiscing about the 2005 Pau F3 event then...



HAMILTON TO FERRARI

THE STORY OF F1'S BIGGEST MOVE

One of Formula 1's most celebrated drivers of all-time is joining its most feted and romantic team. Time to unravel how this biggest of 'silly season' shocks came to fruition

ALEX KALINAUCKAS

PHOTOGRAPHY  **motorsport**
IMAGES

With a single stroke of a pen, Formula 1 just got tremendously more interesting. Lewis Hamilton signing for Ferrari: even now, a week on, it sounds so exotically strange, a tease of the excitement to come.

That is now going to be studded into the upcoming 2024 F1 campaign too. Every time Hamilton faces the media across his final year with Mercedes, the Ferrari theme will hang in the air. Whether he feels he can't engage, as a mark of respect for the team where he will have raced for 12 seasons by the end of this year, remains to be seen.

Such questions will adapt if the risks heighten. If, for example, the Mercedes W15 turns out to be a clear step better than the Ferrari SF-24. Overall, though, the expectation now forever pressed into this 2025 exchange of silver and black for red will shine through.

It's something that not even Mercedes team principal and CEO Toto Wolff could have contemplated at the beginning of January. But when Hamilton arrived at his boss's Oxfordshire home last Wednesday, Wolff had already heard "rumours a couple of days earlier" that something was amiss. Hamilton had been at Mercedes' Brackley factory the day before this regular off-season appointment for his W15 seat fitting. He would sample the car in Mercedes' simulator the day after his impending departure was announced.

Over coffee with Wolff, Hamilton broke the news. At the same time, Marc Hynes, his long-time associate recently returned to working within the seven-time world champion's camp, arrived in Brackley to deliver a formal letter outlining the situation to the Mercedes squad.

Hamilton had wanted to notify Wolff personally, plus avoid letting the development hang over his final season with Mercedes and potentially destabilise it further. There was no attempt to try to change Hamilton's mind.

"That was basically it," says Wolff. "Then we had a good conversation. This is where we are."

Mercedes and Ferrari worked together to arrange when the news would be announced the following day – Thursday



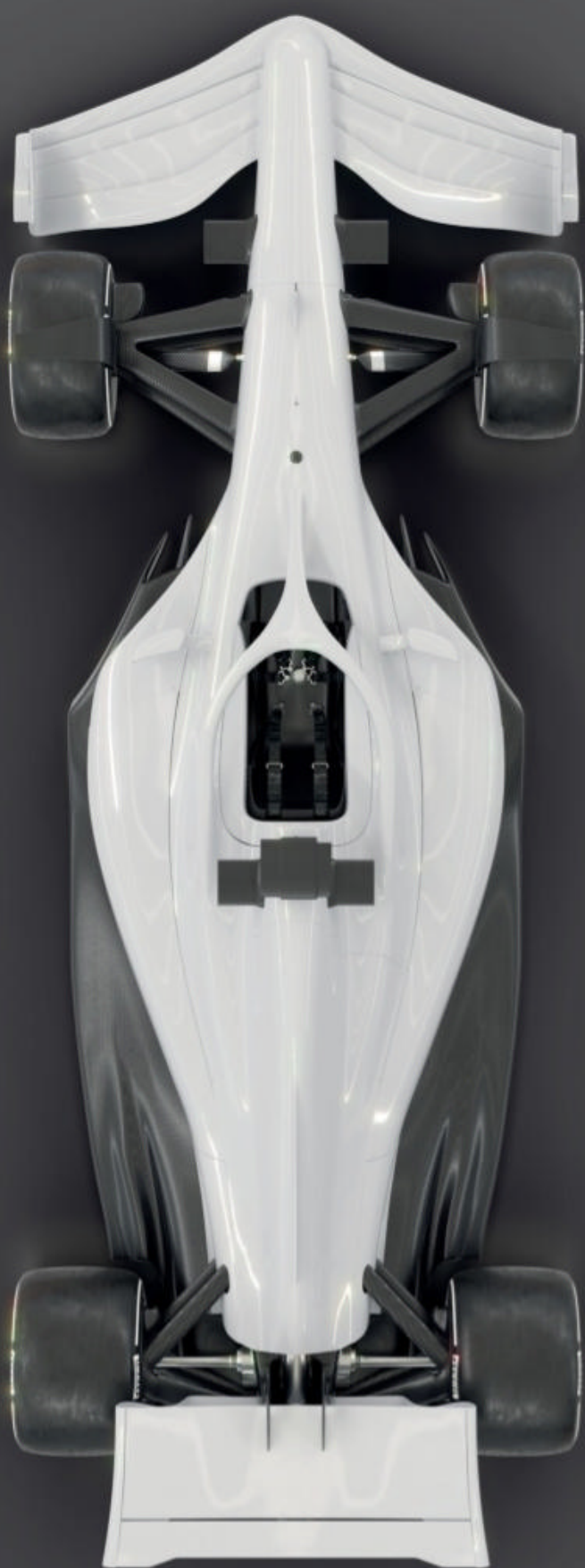
1 February. Suggestions that the 31 January date, when Hamilton delivered the news to Wolff, was down to a mooted cut-off point for the option covering the 2025 season in his final Mercedes contract are understood to be incorrect.

At 2pm last Thursday, with reporters already camped out at the roundabout entrance of the Mercedes campus, the team was gathered and informed of the situation by Wolff and technical director James Allison. Wolff chimed in via video, because he'd continued with a pre-arranged trip to Milan with some of Mercedes' engineers to meet F1 tyre supplier Pirelli.

The first media reports that day had come via Spain – the nation of soon-to-be ex-Ferrari driver Carlos Sainz – with enquiries to the >>



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Hamilton is behind
Sainz here, but takes
his drive next season

parties involved at the top level revealing that the situation was so much more than the speculative stories about Hamilton heading to Ferrari that surfaced last spring. It was, indeed, really on.

Five hours after the Brackley base meeting had begun, first came Mercedes' official comment: that Hamilton was to depart, having made what he called in a team statement "one of the hardest decisions I have ever had to make". Ferrari followed with a characteristically terse statement outlining how it was "pleased to announce that Lewis Hamilton will be joining the team in 2025". Five minutes later, Sainz released a typically classy statement vowing to "give my absolute best for the team and for the Tifosi all around the world" in what is to be his fourth and last Ferrari campaign.

So, how had the all-time longest relationship between any F1 team and driver, statistically F1's most successful gladiator to boot, finally reached the end? This was, after all, just five months on from Hamilton signing the deal that seemed to tie him to Mercedes until F1's next rules reset in 2026.

"We're big boys. We couldn't commit for a longer period. And he's taken the option to exit"

"I only know that we were very aligned when we went into the Christmas period," says Wolff. This was just before the confirmation that he and Allison had agreed new contracts with the team, apparently with no prior indication that Mercedes' main star was considering a departure: "We've said that in public and in the team. You need to ask Lewis why he changed his mind..."

Hamilton's main words on the situation have so far only come via that Mercedes statement, plus the 416-word Instagram post he released last Saturday. But here it's important to rewind to that Monza weekend last year, where it was announced that Hamilton and George Russell had signed their current Mercedes deals. This was revealed as a two-year contract for Hamilton, with Russell's arrangement extended to the end of next year too. But it's revealing that the 2025 season of Hamilton's offer was signed only as an option.



The first element in considering this is how Mercedes agreed to the deal, in the knowledge that there was a risk that Hamilton could leave, because it had wanted to keep its options open for 2026 and beyond. A typically pragmatic Wolff said as much in his call with the F1 press corps last Friday, the Austrian explaining “we felt that a longer-term contract would limit our options going forward”.

The reverse side of this is that Hamilton had apparently wanted a longer commitment. And when it arrived via a Ferrari offer – announced only as a “multi-year contract” in that short statement – he saw the chance to unite that reality with something more fleeting and emotional.

“How he framed it to me is perfectly understandable: that he needed a new challenge, that he was looking for a different environment and that it was maybe the last possibility to do something else,” says Wolff. “We’re big boys, we knew that by signing a short-term contract, it could be of benefit for both sides. We couldn’t commit for a longer period. And he’s taken the option to exit. We totally respect that you can change your mind. There’s different circumstances.

“Switching to Ferrari, maybe for the last gig in his career, maybe rolling the dice a bit. I can follow that decision. I think also maybe one of the considerations was the opportunity to sign a long-term contract with Ferrari and give it a really big go at the end of his career. We didn’t talk about whether the opportunity was better there or with us because I don’t think you can say.”

In his Instagram post, Hamilton has already opened up on his decision – particularly the pull of the Prancing Horse, which had its most recent period of sustained F1 success while he climbed the junior single-seater ladder as a teenager with McLaren.

Mercedes has made clear that its W15 launch next Wednesday will not feature any outside media scrutiny, so it may not be until the first press conferences of the Bahrain test, starting in a fortnight’s time, that Hamilton fields any of those questions about his Ferrari future.

One such should be whether there was anything more than a desire to secure a long-term F1 future that impacted his choice. This is for a driver who, back when he was racking up titles for Mercedes, was wondering whether he’d race past 40, a milestone he will reach when he joins Ferrari. “I feel incredibly fortunate, after achieving things with Mercedes that I could only have dreamed of as a kid, that I now have the chance to fulfil another childhood dream,” his post states. “Driving in Ferrari red. >>

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Hamilton and Leclerc will be team-mates at Ferrari in 2025



New to Mercedes in 2013. With Wolff, Rosberg, Brawn

"I still remember the feeling of taking a leap of faith into the unknown when I first joined Mercedes in 2013. I know some people didn't understand it at the time, but I was right to make the move then, and it's the feeling I have again now. I'm excited to see what I can bring to this new opportunity and what we can do together."

"However, right now, I'm not thinking about 2025. My focus is on the upcoming season and getting back out on track with Mercedes. I am more driven than ever, I am fitter and more focused than ever, and I want to help Mercedes win once again. I am 100% committed

"George has the potential to be the next lead driver in the team. Such a quick, talented and intelligent guy"

to the job I need to do and determined to end my partnership with the team on a high."

Wolff insists that Mercedes is now focused on putting "a car on the track that has more pace than last year's car", with its sights trained on Red Bull. Replacing Hamilton for 2025, Wolff says, is "not something I want to be rushed to", although he admits that the timing of his charge's decision "bit us a bit", with the recent announcements that Charles Leclerc and Lando Norris had signed fresh deals with Ferrari and McLaren respectively coming within two days of each other late last month.

There is already speculation that, following Wolff's assertion that "maybe it's a chance to do something bold", he could be eyeing a rapid promotion for Mercedes junior Andrea Kimi Antonelli (see panel). Of Russell, Wolff says: "George has the potential to be the next lead driver in the team. I couldn't wish for a new team leader when Lewis leaves... We've such a solid foundation, such a quick and talented and intelligent guy in a car, that we just need to take the right choice for the second driver, the second seat."

Although Mercedes is set to enter 2024 with its long-established "transparent and fair" approach to its current drivers, Wolff is open that, as the year goes on, the team will have to re-evaluate Hamilton's access "in terms of technical information". This is standard F1 team practice and, while Wolff has no "doubt in Lewis's integrity", it would be logical to expect Russell to play more of a role in developing the W15 towards the W16.

Soon enough, Hamilton's full attention will be turned towards starting afresh with Ferrari. He'll have to learn Italian – something

that would play well with the Tifosi, who are surely set to give him a thumping welcome in any case – but he can at least quickly rekindle the relationship he previously shared with team principal Fred Vasseur. This covers the 2005 Formula 3 Euro Series campaign, in which Hamilton triumphed for Vasseur's ART Grand Prix squad, before doing the same in GP2 a year later ahead of his famous F1 debut.

Vasseur is still building Ferrari back up, which is what Hamilton is referring to when he evokes the doubters of his 2013 Mercedes move. That adds to the jeopardy of this switch, but Hamilton's own F1 history shows how big the potential upsides are in the surely massively lucrative deal he has now made – his current arrangement at Mercedes is reportedly worth £50million a year. His new terms have been signed off by Ferrari chairman and Hamilton acquaintance John Elkann.

But there's also the possibility of something much bigger being achieved in his move to Ferrari, F1's most storied squad. Juan Manuel Fangio and Michael Schumacher are the only two F1 champions to have joined the team and tasted more title success. Alain Prost, Fernando Alonso and Sebastian Vettel are the failures, while Ayrton Senna never got a chance to try what a driver who idolised him will soon be attempting.

Hamilton, like Schumacher, has already achieved championship glory with two teams, and so is a key factor in any assessment of the greatest F1 drivers of all time. They are tied on a total of seven titles, although there remains the possibility that Hamilton arrives at Ferrari as an eight-time world champion, the current supremacy of Red Bull and Max Verstappen notwithstanding.

If Hamilton's Ferrari dream move does contain the ultimate F1 success, he'd not only join an ultra-exclusive club, but carve his own huge piece of unique history too. ✨



Hamilton's hero Senna never got chance to race for Ferrari

GALLOWAY



WHAT NEXT FOR SAINZ?

A couple of months ago, Carlos Sainz thought he was negotiating a healthy pay rise and at least a two-year extension to stay at Ferrari beyond 2024. After all, he'd given Charles Leclerc a run for his money during their three seasons together. Maranello management clearly had other ideas. Fortunately for the Spaniard, that sound team-mate comparison should leave him with plenty of options – not least because, as it stands, 13 seats will be up for grabs come 2025.

Alpine, Williams, RB and Haas are yet to lock in either of their drivers but are likely the least appealing options. Towards the other end of the grid, Sainz is now acutely aware that Mercedes is short of a driver. So, he could hop on the reverse flight to Hamilton to shake Toto Wolff's hand. While George Russell is clearly Merc's next Formula 1 posterchild, and Sainz would have to make do with being overshadowed yet again, there's every indication that this would be an intelligent, well-matched partnership. Sainz would back himself to pass muster.

That said, this saga has proved that F1 driver contracts aren't watertight. The Three-Pointed Star could make an optimistic play for

Lando Norris or Leclerc in a bid to retain a blockbuster line-up. But they remain unlikely, and Wolff's teaser that his team "has a chance to do something bold" could indicate a promotion for junior driver Andrea Kimi Antonelli. The 17-year-old won the Italian and German F4 titles in 2022 before claiming the Formula Regional European crown last season. He will contest F2 for Prema Racing in 2024. Wolff says that Antonelli must focus solely on that, so there's little to be gained by distracting him with rumours of a hasty F1 promotion. Sainz could be a placeholder until the golden child is finally ready.



GRANT



SUTTON

Alex Albon, 27, is entering his peak years and is out of contract at the end of next year. With his F1 career rehabilitated at Williams, the Thai-Brit openly says he now wants to fight at the front. He's fast, mature, pally with Russell and no stranger to rebuilding a grand prix

team. Less likely, Wolff could rekindle his relationship with former Mercedes protege Esteban Ocon. The Alpine driver boasts a 2021 Hungarian GP win, although it's not known how highly Brackley values his stock. Then consider Fernando Alonso. He would tick that "bold" criterion, will be a free agent, and would start the 2025 season a youthful 43 years old.

That would create space at Aston Martin for Sainz. Alternatively, he could become the lynchpin around which Audi builds. Moving to the German manufacturer is now that bit more poetic thanks to Carlos Sainz Sr bagging the marque's first Dakar Rally victory last month. As that off-road programme is killed off to dedicate resources to the nascent F1 project, his son could pick up the Ingolstadt baton.

MATT KEW

BIG-NAME MOVES TO FERRARI

Lewis Hamilton is not the only star driver to arrive on Ferrari's shores after title-winning or title-contending success. Here's the story of F1's elite and their time dressed in red

JAKE BOXALL-LEGGE



Juan Manuel Fangio

Ferrari wins **3**
Ferrari titles **1**

Before Mercedes disrupted the pecking order in its short-lived foray into Formula 1 in the mid-1950s, Ferrari had been the class of the field. Once the Stuttgart firm had absconded after winning the drivers' titles in 1954 and 1955 with Fangio, he

considered retiring from racing, but circumstances at home in Argentina kept him behind the wheel. President Juan Peron had been ousted and exiled, and asset-freezes for some of Argentina's most renowned figures had been implemented, Fangio included. So he kept racing, and linked up with Ferrari to drive its Lancia-designed D50.

Fangio faced stern competition in team-mate Peter Collins and Maserati pair Stirling Moss and Jean Behra, but victory in Buenos Aires got the ball rolling for 1956, albeit in a shared drive with Luigi Musso after his own car was hamstrung by an ailing fuel pump. Despite some reliability issues, Fangio

reeled off two further wins at Silverstone and the Nurburgring to sit eight points clear of Collins in the standings at the Monza finale, needing just one point to sew up the title. Disaster struck when Fangio's steering arm broke, but Collins took sportsmanship to new heights by giving up his car to help Fangio secure a fourth world title. Together, they shared the points for second place, while Moss won to claim the championship runner-up position.

Although the Ferrari-Fangio relationship had borne fruit in its first year, it was never an easy relationship, and Fangio returned to Maserati in 1957 to secure his fifth and final title.



John Surtees

Ferrari wins **4**
Ferrari titles **1**

This winner of seven world motorcycle grand prix titles across 350cc and 500cc categories between 1956 and 1960 dovetailed his final year on two wheels with a handful of outings for Lotus in F1. He raced for Reg Parnell's squad in 1961 and 1962, his

fourth place in the latter championship driving a Lola bringing him to Ferrari's attention.

Surtees was hired by Enzo Ferrari to lead the team in 1963, which yielded a win at the Nurburgring, but his title success was achieved the following year amid a star-studded scrap for supremacy. Reigning champion and Lotus star Jim Clark led the way at the midpoint of the season, but unreliability nixed the Scotsman's hopes.

Surtees came on strong in the second half of the campaign, winning the German and Italian GPs, and went into the Mexico City finale as part of a three-way fight with Clark and BRM's Graham Hill.

It appeared that leader Clark was on course to take the crown, only to retire in the final miles. Lorenzo Bandini, who had previously been involved in a controversial clash with Hill, then moved aside for team-mate Surtees on the final lap. When dropped scores were applied, the second place was enough for Surtees to defeat Hill by a single point.

He was unable to repeat his title in 1965, a campaign of unreliability not helped by Surtees missing the final two races after a heavy Can-Am sportscar crash at Mosport. He departed Ferrari after two GPs in 1966 following disagreements with team manager Eugenio Dragoni.



SUTTON



Nigel Mansell

Ferrari wins **3**
Ferrari titles **0**

Mansell had been a firm title contender with Williams in both 1986 and 1987, but narrowly missed out on both. When Honda departed Williams after 1987, the naturally aspirated Judd engine could not keep Williams at the

sharp end of the field. In one of his last acts before his death, Enzo Ferrari turned Mansell's head and signed the Englishman for 1989.

At Maranello, Mansell became known as *// Leone*, and united at the team with countryman John Barnard as they set about bringing a revival to an inconsistent Ferrari squad. Despite the expectations that 1989 would be a transitional year, Mansell nonetheless won on his Ferrari debut in Brazil. This could not provide the impetus for a title challenge as reliability was lacking (and two clumsy disqualifications hurt chances to score more), but a mid-season purple patch and a

further win in Hungary offered hope for 1990.

Although Mansell had enjoyed the edge over Gerhard Berger in 1989, he had to face up to Alain Prost in his second year at the team – and was outclassed by the then-three-time champion. Unreliability also reared its head, the year offering just a single win, at Estoril. His 1990 was almost the inverse of 1989; the great form Mansell enjoyed at the mid-season European races in his first Ferrari year had deserted him in the second. The Briton planned to retire after 1990, but Frank Williams tempted him back to his team for 1991.



Alain Prost

Ferrari wins **5**
Ferrari titles **0**

After finding his position at McLaren untenable amid the ensuing tug of war against Ayrton Senna, Prost shackled up with Ferrari for 1990 as Gerhard Berger went the other way. But this was more than a hasty retreat from an uncomfortable situation,

because Ferrari's rather pretty 641 was the best car it had produced in years. This ensured that the Frenchman could once again fight for the title, but without the intra-team politicking that had dogged his final term at McLaren.

Prost picked up his first win in red at the Brazilian GP, and took four more as he exerted his dominance at the team over Nigel Mansell. But the Prost-Senna machinations once again came to a head at Suzuka; Senna was nine points clear of Prost at the top of the standings, and retaining that gap would effectively cement the title in the Brazilian's favour. And, per the late Murray

Walker, it happened immediately; Senna left his car down the inside of Turn 1 after a slower getaway from pole, and the two collided.

Prost enjoyed no more success at Ferrari, with 1991 proving to be a turgid year. The 642 – a development of the 641 – was becoming outdated, and the subsequent 643 was flawed. Prost had greatly disliked the 642's handling and asked for improvements to the follow-up; that it was barely improved on the 643 produced discord between Prost and the Ferrari management. Prost's public criticism of the team led to him being fired before the 1991 season finale.



Michael Schumacher

Ferrari wins **72**
Ferrari titles **5**

When F1 needed a new hero in the mid-1990s, Schumacher answered the call. After two titles with Benetton, he joined a Ferrari team in the middle of a rebuilding phase; Jean Todt was set to begin his third full season at the helm in

Maranello, backed to the hilt by Ferrari president Luca di Montezemolo.

It was crucial that Rory Byrne and Ross Brawn, two of the architects of Benetton's success, soon followed Schumacher across the aisle. The German demonstrated his excellence with three wins in 1996 despite a cumbersome car, his rainy Spain victory the most impressive. But his time at Ferrari also showed Schumacher at his worst, and a title challenge in 1997 was undone by his rash attack on Jacques Villeneuve at Jerez, which ensured he was thrown out of the standings.

McLaren and Mika Hakkinen were too strong in

1998, and Schumacher's attempt at the 1999 crown was derailed by a broken leg sustained in a crash at Silverstone. The wait for a title was finally over in 2000, when Schumacher dispatched Hakkinen in Japan to sew up the championship.

This began Schumacher's reign of dominance from 2000 to 2004; five successive titles were a perfect showcase of his excellence, but the spectacle began to suffer. Banning tyre changes in the 2005 regulations ended Schumacher's streak; although he battled Fernando Alonso in the 2006 championship, his Ferrari career ended that year after Kimi Raikkonen was signed to replace him.



Kimi Raikkonen

Ferrari wins **10**
Ferrari titles **1**

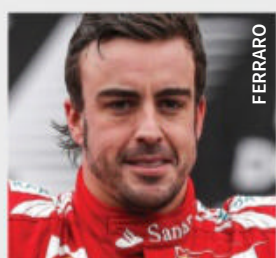
After becoming frustrated at McLaren, Raikkonen defected to Ferrari in place of Michael Schumacher. A win at the first time of asking emerged in Australia, followed by two podiums, but the Finn's momentum seemed to desert him

when the calendar moved into Europe. Instead, the warring McLarens had the upper hand; Lewis Hamilton and Fernando Alonso went head to head at the front, while Raikkonen found himself outpaced by team-mate Felipe Massa.

Magny-Cours was the turning point; more comfort with the F2007 car and a stronger pit strategy gave Raikkonen the win over Massa, and this was followed by a further success at Silverstone. Raikkonen clawed back the gap to the McLaren duo. Alonso's crash at Fuji and Hamilton's pitlane slip in China brought Raikkonen back into play for the Brazil finale, which he won to beat the

McLaren drivers by a single point. His title defence in 2008 took a back seat when Massa assumed the mantle of lead driver, while 2009 yielded just one win as Ferrari misjudged the new aero regulations.

Raikkonen was paid off by Ferrari, which wished to bring Alonso in, but the Finn returned after a two-year hiatus from F1 and two seasons with Lotus. His 2014 campaign was poor and he never got on with the F14T, but he became a dependable wingman to Sebastian Vettel in their four years as team-mates. Raikkonen managed just one win in his second Ferrari spell, before moving to Alfa Romeo while Charles Leclerc went the other way.



Fernando Alonso

Ferrari wins **11**
Ferrari titles **0**

The Spaniard was a two-time champion at Renault, but his switch to McLaren for 2007 ended in hugely controversial circumstances amid infighting against rookie team-mate Hamilton and the spy scandal. He retreated to Renault again,

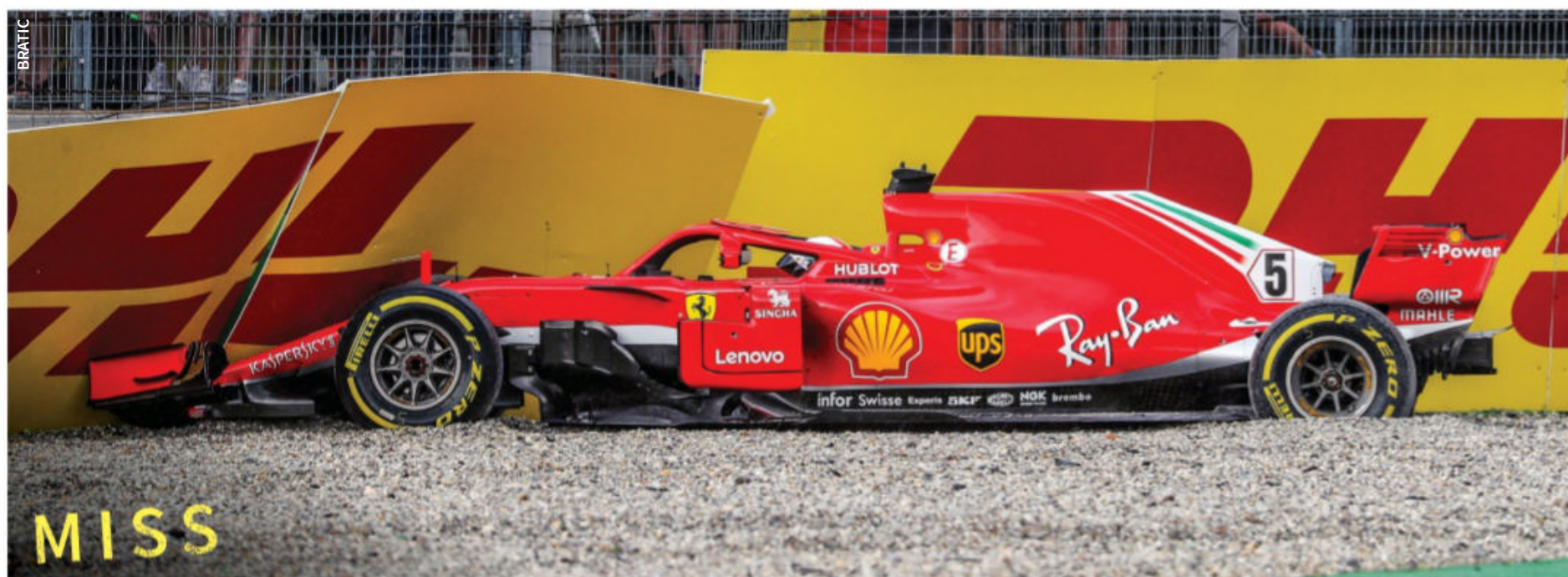
before Ferrari came knocking for the 2010 season.

Their relationship began auspiciously with victory in Bahrain, albeit assisted by Sebastian Vettel's Red Bull gearbox glitch, and he carried that form through to sit atop a four-way championship battle in the run-up to the final race of the season at Yas Marina. Ferrari set about trying to cover off Mark Webber, who went into the race as highest-placed Red Bull driver, but this ensured Alonso got stuck behind Vitaly Petrov. This was the first of two titles lost on the final day of the season at Ferrari.

The 2011 season was altogether less successful, and Alonso managed just one win, but 2012's

early-season unpredictability set up a mighty championship showdown between Alonso and Vettel in Brazil. Again, the Asturian missed out despite Vettel becoming embroiled in a first-lap tangle that put him at the back, before recovering to sixth to win the title by three points.

Two wins in 2013 could not put Alonso in the title fight again, and the final year with Ferrari in 2014 was hamstrung by the marque's less-than-stellar approach to the V6 turbo-hybrid regulations. So he made the switch to McLaren as the Woking squad had joined forces with Honda once more, which proved vastly unsuccessful.



Sebastian Vettel

Ferrari wins **14**
Ferrari titles **0**

Once Vettel's domination of the early 2010s had come to an end with the rise of Mercedes and his own struggles with Red Bull's flawed first car of the turbo-hybrid era, he followed in the footsteps of his hero Michael Schumacher with a move to Ferrari.

Ferrari had not enjoyed a particularly bright start to the switch to hybridised V6 powertrains either, but improved for 2015. Vettel finished third in his first race for the team and followed that up with a win in Malaysia, but the Maranello squad could not break Mercedes' grip beyond Vettel's three wins that season. Ferrari then endured a winless 2016 as Red Bull found form, but was a much stronger force the following season.

Amid a consistently strong opening to 2017, Vettel led the championship after the opening half of the year, but the post-summer improvements made at Mercedes swung the championship in

Lewis Hamilton's favour. The Briton chalked up three wins on the bounce in Belgium, Italy and Singapore, and slowly began to extend a gap that Vettel could not close.

Although the German held the championship lead in 2018 after the first 10 races, his infamous unforced shunt at Hockenheim's Sachskurve gave Hamilton the upper hand once more. The arrival of Charles Leclerc at Ferrari overshadowed Vettel in 2019, and the neutering of the team's powertrain ahead of 2020 led to a dismal final year. With Carlos Sainz signed for 2021, Vettel found refuge at Aston Martin for two years before retiring.



BUTTON'S NEW CHALLENGE

Jenson Button doesn't need to go racing anymore. It's a fascination with endurance competition that has led to his World Endurance quest with the Jota Porsche team

GARY WATKINS

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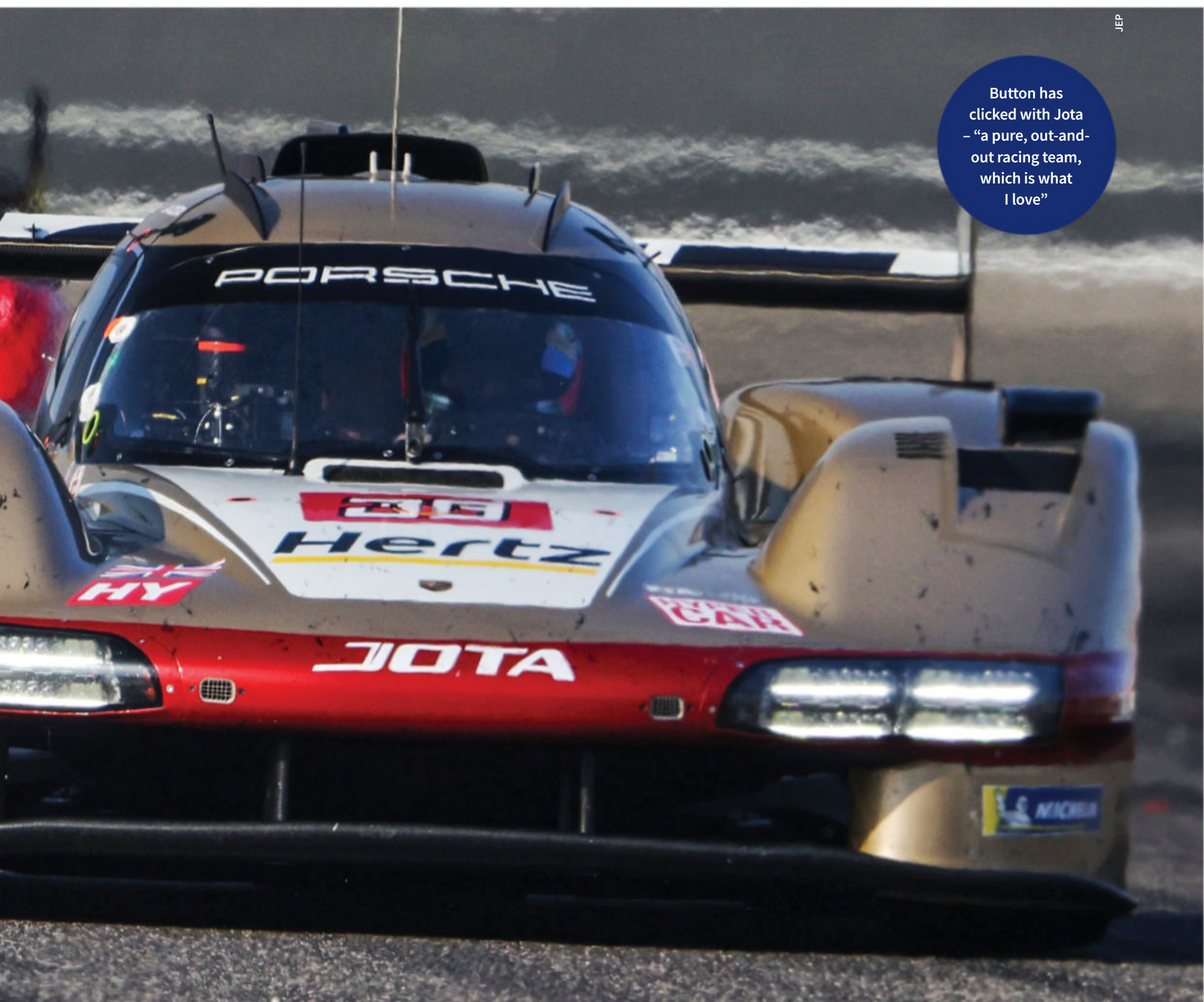


JEP

“I want to be in one of them!” That was Jenson Button’s thought at the Le Mans 24 Hours in 2023 as he thundered down the Mulsanne Straight and held on for dear life through the Porsche Curves aboard the Garage 56 Chevrolet Camaro LS1 NASCAR Cup Car. And by “one of them”, he meant one of the cars from the Hypercar class that kept buzzing past in the battle for overall victory last June. The 2009 Formula 1 world champion has got his desire for this year as part of his first full season of racing since 2019 by taking on the World Endurance Championship with the Jota Porsche team.

“I always loved Le Mans and going there again in a relaxed way was super-cool,” says the Briton. He enjoyed what was his second outing at the 24 Hours aboard the Hendrick Motorsports-run Camaro, but driving the car that filled the grid spot reserved for an innovative machine left him wanting more. It fired his aspirations to go back in something that was “fighting for the win”.

In fact, Button was talking about that in the build-up to Le Mans. A full season of racing was on the cards for 2024, he told the world last May, and sportscar racing was his target: a programme in either the WEC or the IMSA SportsCar Championship was something he was looking at. By the time he travelled home from Le Mans, he was >>



JEP

Button has clicked with Jota – “a pure, out-and-out racing team, which is what I love”

Button's TV punditry will be balanced with a committed return to the cockpit

already in negotiation with Jota about joining what even back then seemed certain to be an expanded assault on the WEC with a pair of Porsche 963 LMDh prototypes.

Button at Jota turned out to be an easy fit. He already knew a lot of the players involved. Included in their number were team bosses Sam Hignett and David Clark, as well as Tom Wagner, the boss of Knighthead Capital Management, the private equity group that rescued car hire giant Hertz and then lent its colours to Jota for its WEC programme. Knighthead is also the owner of Birmingham City, the Championship football club that brought in Wayne Rooney as manager late last year – unsuccessfully so, it should be added, because he was quickly pushed out of the door. There was form there for recruiting a big name for its sporting endeavours. Don't forget that Jota also had talks with both Sebastian Vettel and Robert Kubica about racing for its team in 2024. At one point a super-team involving Button, Vettel and Kubica appeared to be a possibility.

“Even at Le Mans last year we were talking about it,” recounts Button, who will share the #38 Jota Porsche with Oliver Rasmussen and Phil Hanson. “It was going to happen; it was just putting pen to paper.” The deal was done some time before it was revealed to the world in December, he continues, “just not ready to be announced”.

Button's interest in Le Mans predates his first outing at the French enduro in 2018 aboard one of SMP Engineering's AER-engined BR1 LMP1 prototypes as part of a truncated assault on the 2018-19 WEC superseason. He reveals that he used to watch the race on TV as a child in the 1980s. But his time racing in the WEC with SMP and in Super GT for the Team Kunimitsu Honda squad, with which he won the 2018 title in his first season sharing with Naoki Yamamoto, fostered a love of endurance racing. (He doesn't mention his one-off assault on the Spa 24 Hours, then a touring car rather than sportscar race, aboard a Rafanelli BMW 320i during his Formula 3 year in 1999!)

He likes the atmosphere of sportscar racing, the fact that you have to leave the ego that makes you a success in single-seaters at home. “As a racing driver you are inherently selfish, as my wife pointed out when we first met,” he laughs, adding that in F1 “you have to be like that” but that endurance racing is “a little bit different. I had a taste of it in 2018 and 2019 in Super GT and WEC, and I love that atmosphere within a team: how you are wanting your team-mates to be as quick as you if not quicker, because that's what wins you the race.”

He also loves the new era of sportscar racing: “I have to say the Hypercars are the coolest looking cars ever – if I'd had to draw my dream car when I was a kid, it would have been a Hypercar.” And

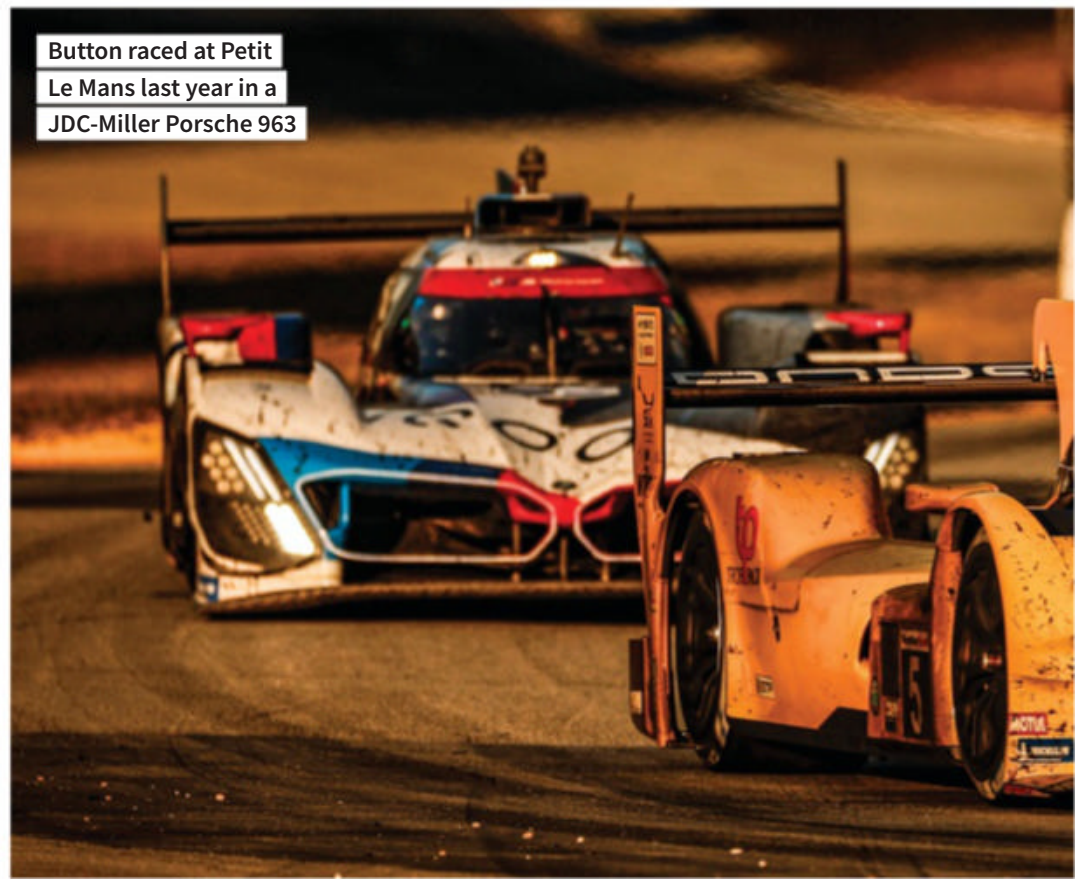
just how competitive it is: “Le Mans was insane last year, so good. With more cars on the grid this year, it will be even better.”

Button only had one crack at Le Mans in a prototype with SMP: he cut short his involvement with the team after four races to concentrate on Super GT, which meant he didn't contest the second edition of Le Mans encompassed by the superseason the following year. At the end of that year, he then quit Super GT. “The racing was great and I loved my teammate Naoki,” he says. “But travelling to Japan that often and with most of the team not speaking English kind of made it a lonely period.”

Since then Button the racing driver has enjoyed a nomadic existence, trying a bit of this and a bit of that. There was an outing with his own JBXE Extreme E squad, as well as one in the British GT Championship in the team that formerly bore his name as Jenson Team Rocket RJN. He also had a go at rallycross and took in the Baja 1000 off-road classic in California at the end of his second season in Super GT.

Last year there were a trio of NASCAR Cup starts – at Austin, the new Chicago street circuit and then on the Indianapolis road course – with the Rick Ware Racing Ford squad. They were followed by two outings aboard prototype machinery, the first since he stepped out of his SMP BR1 after Shanghai in late 2018. His path into them was smoothed by the contacts he made during the Garage 56 programme. He turned out in a Porsche 963 with the JDC-Miller MotorSports squad at last year's

Button raced at Petit Le Mans last year in a JDC-Miller Porsche 963





IMSA finale at Road Atlanta, the Petit Le Mans 10-hour race. The connection there was team regular Mike Rockenfeller, who was one of his team-mates in the Camaro. The driver coach on the Garage 56 programme was Jordan Taylor, son of Wayne Taylor and now once again one of the drivers for his father's eponymous team. That at least partially explains his presence on the grid at last month's Daytona 24 Hours IMSA curtain-raiser aboard one of the Wayne Taylor Racing with Andretti Acura ARX-06 LMDhs.

The deal for Button to join Jordan, Louis Deletraz and Colton Herta in the #40 car that finished third in the big race was done after he'd agreed terms with Jota, but the contact with WTR stretches back several years. “I've been talking to Wayne for a while; Daytona is a race that I've always wanted to do – I've watched it for years,” he explains, “but it somehow never worked out.”

There had been contact with Acura in the past. Button might have raced in IMSA instead of going off to Japan to compete in Super GT with Honda, a manufacturer with which he was maintaining a relationship that straddled his final years in F1 with McLaren and six seasons in the 2000s. Honda's Acura marque was about to kick off its Daytona Prototype international programme with Penske, and Button admits that he did have “a couple of meetings”.

Suggesting that he had a straight choice between racing in Japan and



“I’M STILL AT MY BEST, AND I FEEL YOUNGER THAN I DID IN F1. I’VE BEEN DOING A LOT OF BOXING AND WEIGHTS”

the US after a year off post-F1, which admittedly included a return for the Monaco Grand Prix and a one-off with the Team Mugen Honda squad in Super GT, is too simplistic, he says: “I always wanted to go to Super GT. That was the one I was going to choose. They also paid me more!”

Once the Super GT box had been ticked, COVID and fatherhood had a lot to do with why Button didn't have a proper programme for four seasons. But now the time was right to come back properly. “I think but for COVID I would have been racing in something [full-time],” he explains. “From 2019, I've had two kids and they are now at that age where me travelling isn't going to be so much of a problem. I've tried loads of different things, but you feel that you don't maximise what you can achieve with one-off races. You don't get the best out of yourself doing it that way, so I wanted to do a full season.”

Button says that he's “at the point of my career where I don't have to go racing”. It's not, he adds, “a job for me”. That's a good situation, he reckons: “I can enjoy it more, not stress as much, but still fully focus because I still want to win.”

He believes he has a chance to do that with a Porsche customer team in Jota, one that led the Porsche charge last time out in Bahrain and took its turn in the lead at Le Mans. “Jota is a pure, out-and-out racing team, which is what I love,” he says. “I wanted to be with a team that is out there purely to win. That's what I wanted coming back.”

Button also believes that he can bring something to the table at 44. “I'm still at my best, and I feel younger than I did in F1,” he declares. “In the past three years I've trained more than I ever did in F1, and I don't drink alcohol or eat sugar. I've been doing a lot of boxing and weights. In F1 you can't do weight training because you're worried about the weight you'll put on, but with these cars weighing more than 1000kg, a couple of extra kilos isn't going to make a difference.”

Button also insists that he's not back for a single season – some kind of farewell tour. “I don't want to be racing for many more years,” he states. “So I'm fully on it for what I want to achieve. I think I'm going to be doing WEC for the next couple of years.”

The try-it-and-see Jenson Button of the past few years is a thing of the past, he says. He no longer has a bucket list, though he hasn't ruled out a NASCAR return. That itch hasn't been scratched “because we never got a result, annoyingly because a couple of times we were quick”. He doesn't hanker after racing in the Daytona 500 – “ovals are not my thing” – and isn't likely to be seen in a rallycross car again: “I did one race and said, ‘Thanks, this is not for me’.

“I've done loads of fun things in the past few years, but you always come back to what you're good at. This is it.”



ILOTT'S MOVE INTO THE WEC SPOTLIGHT

His time at Ferrari ran out; his stint in IndyCar was cut short. But Jota's new recruit for its WEC Porsche Hypercar effort could be the real deal for the British squad

JAMES NEWBOLD

Had things gone as Callum Iloft had anticipated over the long IndyCar off-season – a full eight grand prix weekends have been held since he navigated September's Laguna Seca season finale crashfest to finish an equal-best fifth – then he'd be preparing for a third full-season in top-flight US open-wheel racing. But as the Cambridge native put it on the Autosport International show's main stage last month, "circumstances changed as they sometimes do in life". The 25-year-old duly found himself facing the exit door at Juncos Hollinger Racing, the team he'd joined for the final three races of a 2021 season that overlapped with his final year on Ferrari's books.

Fortunately for Iloft, while the door to a Formula 1 race seat had remained firmly closed, he'd not spent 2021 entirely kicking his heels as Alfa Romeo's underused reserve. A season in the Pro class of the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup for Iron Lynx, and a cameo outing for its World Endurance Championship squad that netted a GTE Am class podium on his Le Mans 24 Hours debut, had served as a useful barometer of what the 2020 Formula 2 runner-up could do in a sportscar. As a result, privateer Porsche team Jota knows the sort of talent it's snapped up to join its

two-car assault on the 2024 WEC Hypercar class.

"The Ferrari GT guys went into Hypercar and have done obviously a strong job, and I had a direct comparison to them," explains Iloft backstage at ASI, shortly after his main stage appearance before a healthy crowd, drawn in by the presence of the Hertz-liveried 963. "Not only does it help me as an endurance driver, because I've done it, but it helped them understand where I was at in a rookie year in a GT

"CALLUM WAS ON OUR LIST FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. IT MADE COMPLETE SENSE TO GIVE HIM A CALL"

car. And having driven it, I understand now why a lot of GT drivers are very successful within Hypercar. Because of the weight transfer and the way it goes through the corner, the driving style is similar."

After a pause enforced by EuroNASCAR's deafening arrival at the main stand, Iloft continues: "Obviously I wasn't too bad in 2021 and I have a good history of being quite quick. There's a couple of things that you need to learn, but it's definitely closer than I would have imagined."

Iloft will join Andretti Formula E driver Norman Nato and team regular Will Stevens aboard Jota's #12 963 LMDh, with Jenson Button, Oliver Rasmussen and Phil Hanson steering the #38. Jota boss Sam Hignett said Iloft's signing was "the easiest deal I've ever done" and is a long-time admirer. "Callum was on our list from the very beginning – we assumed he'd go to Ferrari with the factory team," he revealed on the main stage. "When the opportunity came up to speak to Callum and we had a seat open up in what is now going to be the #12 car, it made complete sense to give him a call and see if we could get a deal done."

Iloft could have been forgiven for viewing sportscar racing as a poor deal when the driver he'd pushed all the way to the F2 title, fellow Ferrari Driver Academy member Mick Schumacher, landed an F1 berth with Haas. But it's to his credit that Iloft recognised a return to sportscar racing at some stage was always "a realistic option", and so gave it his all in 2021 before taking the ticket to IndyCar. "Actually, I was kind of correct knowing that I could come back [to sportscars], >>







“YOU DO SOME THINGS RIGHT, YOU DO SOME THINGS WRONG, AND YOU’VE GOT TO LEARN FROM IT”

just not in the way I expected,” he reflects. “I would have had to do another year of GTs to then go into Hypercar anyway [if he’d stayed with Ferrari], so I think now it makes a lot of sense in the way that it’s been done, just in a very odd, roundabout way. I don’t have any regrets in the way it’s gone – it’s worked out really well.”

Iloft is unequivocal that he’s a stronger driver for his experience in IndyCar, racing on its versatile range of tracks and leading the technical direction of a small team, after being Juncos Hollinger’s sole focus until the arrival of a second car for Agustin Canapino last season. Trying to compete with powerhouse efforts from Penske and Ganassi without a team-mate to benchmark against in 2022 was a tough learning experience that means he won’t be fazed by much in the WEC paddock. “Of course, you do some things right, you do some things wrong, and you’ve got to learn from it and work with it,” he asserts. “I’m definitely in a better shape, a better driver inside and outside the car.”

And having already been through the experience of Le Mans, there’s plenty that will be more familiar to Iloft than your typical



IndyCar-to-WEC convert. That fact gives him assurance that “it’s definitely an easier transition” than the other way round. “The only thing that I’m missing realistically is being in the top category in a multi-class race, and overtaking people instead of being the one overtaken,” reasons Iloft. “But driver changes aren’t unknown, three-hour stints aren’t unknown, so 90% of everything that might be new to me is covered, which is good to know.”

“The great thing about GTs is I learned how to work with team-mates in that capacity, and what the goal is. The goal isn’t to be the quickest driver in the team – that’s great, everyone wants to be quick – but to make everyone comfortable and make the slowest person the quickest. That goes the same to adapting the [driving] position

JOTA’S FIRST YEAR IN HYPERCAR

Although fourth place in Bahrain constituted the best result of its nascent Hypercar programme in the 2023 World Endurance Championship, Jota Sport boss Sam Hignett (right) professed himself happy when facing the public at Autosport International last month.

The team’s single Porsche 963 had been delivered only 10 days before the Spa 6 Hours, and Hignett says he’s “never seen a bunch of humans work so hard” as his crew did to get the first racing example of a customer LMDh car ready, which elicited a telling comment from his Hypercar team principal Dieter Gass. “As the car rolled out of the pitlane for FP1, Dieter said, ‘I think that’s the most emotional thing I’ve ever experienced in motorsport,’” Hignett relates.

Sixth on its debut exceeded expectations, and the eight laps it led at Le Mans until Yifei Ye

crashed at the Porsche Curves matched the works Porsche Penske Motorsport team’s tally across its three cars. Hignett believes victory on the team’s 24-hour bow with Porsche “was never on the cards”, but reckons a podium finish “was definitely a reality”. A steering wheel glitch compromised Monza, but Jota split the works Porsches at Fuji and was the top-finishing 963 in Bahrain.

“The lovely thing is as the season went on, we improved at a greater rate than the factories because we were starting from a very different point, so by the time we got to Bahrain we could split the Ferraris,” says Hignett. “It’s nice to have ended the season as the fastest Porsche.”

Now that the team has scaled up to two-full season entries, Hignett is happy to reveal that talks were held with Sebastian Vettel, although



the “timing wasn’t right on that deal”. But with two strong line-ups, its entire focus now on Hypercar, and a proliferation of strong commercial partners, Jota is well-placed to compete in 2024. “It’s back to the old days of Group C, where there’s no reason why a privateer couldn’t win the LMDh battle.”



Results hard to come by with Juncos Hollinger, but Ilott (77) left nothing on the table in IndyCar

to fit everyone, so that everyone is comfortable.”

He doesn’t anticipate any difficulties working with Stevens and Nato, with the older Brit proving “such a help” to the team newcomers in sharing the 963’s nuances. Stevens, as the only driver from 2023 who remains on Jota’s books this year, may be a secret weapon for his car crew, reckons Ilott, although the former grand prix driver will be expected to be a similarly open book for Button and co on the other side of the garage.

“Knowing what’s right and what’s wrong in certain situations can be kind of lifesaving for the car,” Ilott says. “And they are very complex; it’s F1-level complexity. It’s important to understand that, and to have the ability and knowledge to make all the changes necessary between drivers to get the best out of the car. The other part of the team is going to need information [from Stevens]. Having him on our side is a benefit, but he’s going to be as much help to them as he is to us.”

Ilott is unwilling to completely shut the door on IndyCar, in his view the most competitive and close-fought championship he’s contested, “which is great and painful at the same time”. But with the likes of Scott Dixon and Will Power still firing into their forties, he knows time is on his side should he wish to return. “You do know that there would be space when they slow down a bit,” he reckons. But if IndyCar does

turn out to be a closed chapter, Ilott is satisfied that, even if the results don’t necessarily show it, he left nothing on the table in that theatre.

“If you look at the overall results, no,” he replies when asked whether he established himself in IndyCar. “But when you understand how it’s been and what you had to do in that situation, yes, 100%. People overlook that a lot of the time, so it depends who I’m speaking to [as to whether they agree].”

Riding the crest of the Hypercar wave is no bad place to be in the meantime, with the influx of manufacturers into the WEC and IMSA SportsCar Championship generating a buzz around endurance racing that many promoters would pay through the nose to capture. Ilott is under no illusion that he’s landed a plum seat, and recognises that his timing couldn’t be better as he joins a series “on the up”.

“It’s nice to be a part of that,” he grins. “I want to enjoy what I want to do, and I think that I’m definitely going to enjoy this. There’s so many drivers who have had such great careers and are going to have long careers. I’m excited to see what that is. And like a couple of people have said, it’s great to see me land on my feet – and I think not only on my feet, but kind of running. Jota are a small team in comparison [to the factories], but a very focused and direct team. I think it’s going to be brilliant.” ✨



Ilott stresses how significant IndyCar was to making him a more complete driver

GT experience invaluable in developing teamwork ethos

EHRLHARDT/MOTORSPORT IMAGES

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BLOMQVIST'S BIG CHANCE

He's been an IMSA star in recent years, and now this versatile racer heads to IndyCar

JOEY BARNES

PHOTOGRAPHY  **motorsport
IMAGES**

Blomqvist is itching to get going again following last IndyCar outing at Laguna Seca

The path to the IndyCar Series for Tom Blomqvist is not so much about the road less travelled, but rather one paved in perseverance. Born in Britain, raised in New Zealand, he's built up a diverse background that features a promising junior formula career that veered into DTM and Formula E, among others, before becoming a force in the IMSA SportsCar Championship.

Following an introductory three races in North America's premier open-wheel championship last year, he now finds himself back in single-seaters and bracing for a full-time rookie campaign, driving the Honda-powered #66 entry for Meyer Shank Racing.

"This is the first time in a while where I've got this anxious energy about getting started because it's so new," enthuses the 30-year-old. "Obviously, I've been doing something so familiar for the past eight, nine years, and jumping across to IndyCar is so different. But I'm really excited to get going. It's a completely new challenge. Although it is, I would say, a carry-on, a natural progression from my junior career I kind of sidestepped since 2015."

Blomqvist's year has already started pretty well, with a close second in the Daytona 24 Hours in Action Express Racing's Cadillac, following wins at the same event with MSR Acuras in 2022 and 2023. But his single-seater return is now the focus.

"THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN A WHILE WHERE I'VE GOT THIS ANXIOUS ENERGY ABOUT GETTING STARTED"

"I'm really excited to just get rolling again, and it'll be nice to get out in an IndyCar," adds the son of 1984 World Rally champion Stig. "I haven't driven since basically the race in Laguna Seca [in September]. So, thank goodness I did get some of that mileage under my belt the back end of last season, which has mentally prepared me for some of the challenges that may lie ahead. I'm just keen to get out on track at the end of the month, which is going to be good, going to be fun. »

“There’s going to be a lot going on behind the scenes – it definitely opened my eyes at the back end of last year getting those events under my belt and seeing the areas that I personally need to work on. Now I’ve got a whole season to work at it, so I’m keen to get things going.”

After Blomqvist tested an IndyCar for MSR in October of 2022, there was already the notion that it was a matter of *when* not *if* he would be part of the championship. That concept accelerated after Simon Pagenaud’s vicious practice crash at the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course last July, in which the 2019 Indianapolis 500 winner somersaulted several times before settling in a plume of dust in the gravel trap. The Frenchman was forced out for the remainder of the season, which prompted MSR to put Blomqvist in for selected rounds.

The debut on the streets of Toronto, regarded as one of the toughest circuits on the schedule due to its unforgiving and tight 11-turn, 1.786-mile layout, provided the best start to date in 20th. The best finish was a 24th at Portland International Raceway. But the best performance was undoubtedly in the season finale at Laguna Seca, where Blomqvist managed to dart through the field in an incident-filled race and break into the top 10, running as high as sixth, before falling into the clutches of chaos after 61 of 95 laps.

“It helps tremendously, more so in just preparing for the way the event runs,” says Blomqvist of his 2023 experience. “Whether that be the structure of the practice session, the qualifying session, or the little intricacies that people from the outside maybe don’t understand that aids a driver in getting the most out of a weekend. Because when you’re so new to that, your brain is constantly under stress when you’re doing them for the first time. You feel like you’re at 100mph in every area. So, when you’ve done that, you know and your body is prepared for it, your mind is prepared for it. It’s so much easier.”

It won’t be a normal year by any stretch, either: Blomqvist will also have to adapt to the incoming hybrid engine, which is expected to be on the grid sometime after the 108th running of the Indy 500 on 26 May.

Earlier this off-season, MSR co-owner Mike Shank shared that IndyCar’s move to a hybrid era is one of the motivations for bringing over Blomqvist, who adjusted accordingly in IMSA’s adaptation of hybrid power in 2023 with LMDh machines in the GTP class. Although



Blomqvist leads
Rosenqvist in Euro
F3 at Imola in 2014

Shank’s IMSA programme has since ceased operations following the conclusion of last year despite finishing third in the championship with three wins – including its controversial Daytona 24 Hours success – there is belief that Blomqvist’s experience should add value despite a lack of time in IndyCar.

“In my opinion, there are many, many fast racing drivers out there and some of those guys require ten tenths of their brain power just to put in that fast lap,” says Shank. “The truly great drivers have another gear or another step that they can manage more inputs. GTP is a great example of that. Tom can handle going fast and managing all the controls that we have, and that’s going to be a new element to IndyCar. Tom has that brain capacity.”

“Many drivers, when you ask them to start managing the chassis with all the controls we have, it gets all messed up. Tom has the capacity to manage more systems and that’s another reason I chose him, because I think we’ll have a bit more of that.”

And in many ways, keeping up with the tools inside an IndyCar is easier than GTP. Blomqvist believes his ability to do this stems from that diverse background: “Even jumping in the GTP, it was easy for me because I was used to a much more complex system in terms of Formula E, and having experience there prepared me for what to expect, how to get the most out of some of the systems.”

“To be honest, the IndyCar system is even more straightforward in a way than that. I’m not too worried about it. I think we need to figure out exactly how it’s going to be used. The biggest thing is how you charge it up and how that’s implemented in terms of not affecting the driveability of the car, so in terms of braking; there’s the most efficient ways of generating lap time from a race car where you have to charge and discharge, and it’s how you as a driver can adapt to that. Not only adapt in terms of driving, but use it in an almost driver-friendly way,



Celebrating Petit Le Mans
win with Castroneves (left)
and Colin Braun last year

LEVITT





Three IndyCar races last year will help Blomqvist hit the ground running

BAKER

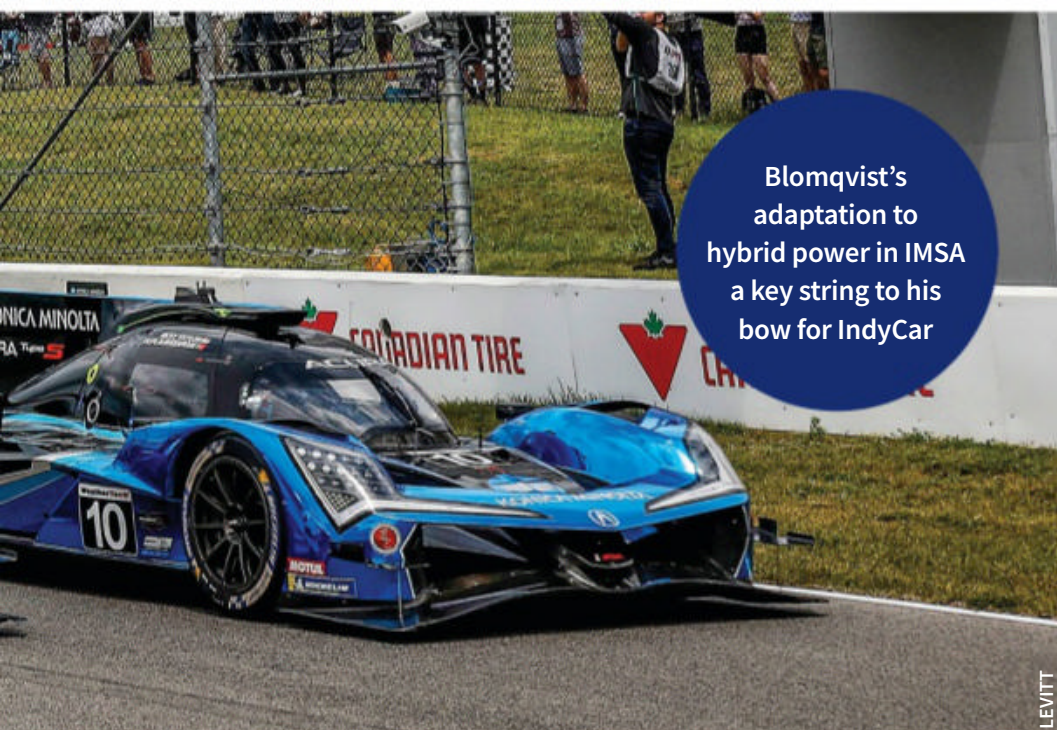
“THE TRULY GREAT DRIVERS HAVE ANOTHER GEAR OR ANOTHER STEP THAT THEY CAN MANAGE MORE INPUTS”

and work with your engineering team to make it as efficient as possible to deploy and to not affect the driving in a negative way.”

Although competing in IndyCar full-time will be a new experience for Blomqvist, there will be a significant amount of familiarity. With MSR's IMSA programme closing its doors – for now, at least – the personnel from that moves over to the IndyCar side of the operation, with Blomqvist retaining his number one mechanic.

The addition of Felix Rosenqvist, who joins MSR after spells at Chip Ganassi Racing (2019-20) and Arrow McLaren (2021-23), as a team-mate also provides familiarity. The two raced each other for the 2009 Formula Renault title in Sweden, which Rosenqvist claimed while Blomqvist finished third. They also battled for the Formula 3 European Championship in 2014, where Blomqvist finished runner-up to Esteban Ocon and directly ahead of current reigning three-time Formula 1 champion Max Verstappen. Rosenqvist ended up eighth in the standings, before winning it in 2015.

“As one of the smaller teams, I think we probably have many advantages,” offers Rosenqvist. “We have obviously Honda, who are deeply involved in hybrid tech in F1. We have Meyer Shank Racing, who competed very competitively in IMSA with a hybrid. We have Tom, who's been in Formula E, and is probably the strongest driver in recent times in IMSA with a hybrid. And then you have myself, who drove in



Blomqvist's adaptation to hybrid power in IMSA a key string to his bow for IndyCar

LEVITT



As a man used to fighting for wins, Blomqvist is setting realistic aims for this season

LEVITT

Formula E for two and a half years. I think we all have some experience, and that makes a big difference. For some people working in IndyCar, this is all brand-new stuff, and for us it's not. I think if you look at the direct competition, we definitely have an advantage.”

Four-time Indy 500 winner Helio Castroneves will also be someone to learn from. The 48-year-old Brazilian has taken a step back from racing full-time and leaned into an ownership role within MSR, but will still contest a one-off in ‘The Greatest Spectacle in Racing’ at Indianapolis Motor Speedway for the May classic.

“I'm very fortunate that Felix is, let's say not a veteran in the series, but he's now been here five years, so he's got a lot of knowledge and he's been through some of the things that I have,” says Blomqvist. “We kind of grew up together racing against one another, and I think his whole learning process when he came into the series, he came in this modern era so I can learn a lot from him, so I'm excited for that.

“Helio is a one of a kind. I've known him for a while now. We've been team-mates in the car, in the sportscar stuff for the past couple of years, so I know how he works, and I know how he operates. I think it's more about seeing how he gets through that whole month of May and how he structures his practice sessions, what he focuses on in a session to where he's driving the direction of the car and all those little things. I've got a good bunch of guys there to lean on in the various events we go to. I need to maximise that.”

In the end, the main goals Blomqvist aims to achieve aren't based as much on results as maximising his performance on a case-by-case basis while he develops: “The biggest thing is more a satisfaction level with my own performance. I'm used to everything I've done in years gone by; I'm disappointed if I'm not winning and on the podium, or fighting for victories, and I'm under no illusion that it's not what I'm going to be expecting when I first roll out.

“But if I can get to a place – which I strongly believe I can otherwise I wouldn't be here – where I'm satisfied with my own performances and getting the results for the team, that's realistic. Maybe a top-15 in St Pete [the season opener in March]. I think that's a reasonable target for me to go for. But the goal is to be here long term, and that means being competitive, race in, race out.” ❧



EXTREME E

BACK TO DEFEND HER CROWN

The fourth season of Extreme E kicks off later this month, so we caught up with Mikaela Ahlin-Kottulinsky, who will defend her 2023 title with Johan Kristoffersson and Nico Rosberg's squad

BIANCA LEPPERT

Fastest woman in the world? At least, that's what ex-Formula 1 world champion Nico Rosberg says about Mikaela Ahlin-Kottulinsky. The reigning Extreme E champion has to smile when she's asked about the compliment from her Rosberg X Racing team boss. "I was definitely very honoured when he said this," says the 31-year-old. "Being offered the opportunity to be a driver in his team RXR in Extreme E was a big deal for me."

When Ahlin-Kottulinsky joined the team in 2022, it had already taken the inaugural crown. She had very little off-road experience, but she and team-mate Johan Kristoffersson were a potent force during season two, only narrowly missing out on giving RXR another title. That experience only made her stronger, and the following season she approached things very differently, which ultimately led to her and Kristoffersson securing the title last December.

"I've worked with a mental coach for many years," she reveals. "Staying in the moment helps me to stay calm. Personally, the title means a lot to me. I've won races before and had strong seasons where I finished second or third. But it was such a calming feeling to know that I can win a championship."

Ahlin-Kottulinsky, who lives in Karlstad, Sweden, doesn't just aim to be the fastest woman; her dream is to be the fastest driver in general. She believes Extreme E's requirement to have a male

and female driver share each car has provided a crucial opportunity. "What Extreme E did was so clever because it brought female drivers to a top level of motorsport," she states. "Of course, you can play football in flip-flops, but if you don't have proper shoes you are not going to be the best. It is so important to have the right circumstances and support. When you compare the gaps to the male drivers between season one and season three, the speed increased by 86%. That is because you have the opportunity to work with the best."

That wasn't always the case in her career, even though she comes from a motorsport family. When Ahlin-Kottulinsky clinched her first championship under the expansive Chilean sky, she took a moment to gaze upwards, reflecting on how her triumph marked a full-circle moment. Her grandfather, Freddy Kottulinsky, conquered the 1980 Dakar Rally in a VW Iltis and shared race tracks with legends such as Keke Rosberg and Ronnie Peterson, competing in series including Formula 2 and Formula Super Vee. Rallying runs in her blood, with both her mother, Susanne, and her father, Jerry, having also made their mark on the sport.

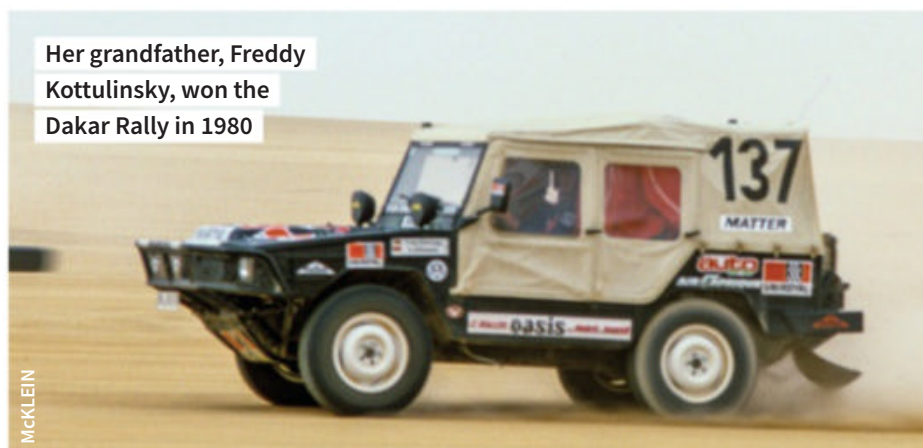
Unlike her rally driver brother Frederik, her path into the sport was not necessarily predetermined: "My brother knew from the get-go that he wanted to be rally driver, whereas I was not so into motorsport. I was into gymnastics and dancing."

Her first attempt at karting ended badly – the kart broke down

One-time test driver Ahlin-Kottulinsky helped develop the tyres for Extreme E



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Her grandfather, Freddy Kottulinsky, won the Dakar Rally in 1980

McKLEIN

after an accident, her brother cried, and she cried too. Now she laughs about it. Her second attempt followed six years later at the age of 12, and two years later she celebrated her first podium finish. This was followed by stints in the DTM-supporting VW Scirocco R-Cup, where she became the first woman to win, that series' successor the Audi TT Cup, Germany's ADAC GT Masters GT3 series, and in Scandinavian Touring Cars.

Ahlin-Kottulinsky is happy to venture into new terrain. Like many other Scandinavian racing drivers, she loves variety and switches back and forth between circuit and off-road. In 2023,

she raced in Extreme E, RX2e, Porsche Carrera Cup and SSX Nordic. Not only was she following in the footsteps of her grandfather, but her team-mate Kristoffersson was also a role model of sorts. "Johan didn't do any karting and started late with motorsport just when he was 17," she explains. "But he has done

"I want to try all the different things. The more you drive the more you learn, and the better it is"

so many different things and he can switch. This is the reason why I want to try all the different things. The more you drive the more you learn, and the better it is."

She also got involved as a test driver for Continental, helping to develop the tyres for Extreme E and thereby creating a link to the then-new series. Shortly afterwards, she was selected as a driver for Jenson Button's JBXE team.

"I have to admit, when I did the first race in 2021, I just thought, 'What have I got myself into? This is not my thing,'" she adds. "I was kind of terrified the first laps. But then I enjoyed it." >>



BAGNALL/EXTREME-E/LATIMAGES



“It is so important that girls can see us in Extreme E. They need to know this is something they can achieve”

Not only that, but she and team-mate Kevin Hansen ended the season with the most podium finishes and fourth place in the championship: “It opened up a new world to me and I felt I want to continue this gravel and off-road part.”

Today, Rosberg X Racing team-mate Kristoffersson is almost like family. “I straight away felt comfortable with him as a team-mate because he was so much like my brother and I knew how to handle him. The way they communicate, and they work a lot with sarcasm. He has kids and so he also has a lot of patience with me as I ask a lot of questions,” she laughs.

Team boss Rosberg is also a great support, even if he can’t always be on site. “We were talking about how to change the mindset, the way we think about things,” adds Ahlin-Kottulinsky. “In the end he was one of the team-mates to beat Lewis Hamilton in the same car and win the world championship. He is very much into details. For example, he analyses our starts and driving styles. Most of the time he watches the races on TV, but he joins us online

Q&A

NICO ROSBERG ROSBERG X RACING BOSS AND 2016 F1 CHAMPION

What was the key to winning the title in Extreme E in 2023?

It has become a lot more difficult to win the championship now in comparison to two years ago. A key was the driver pairing. Mikaela has made so much progress. She has a strong mental approach, which we really like. And she did some super sectors this past season where she was beating Sebastien Loeb. Three years ago, before Mikaela was confirmed as a driver for JBXE, she was a test driver for the championship’s founding partner, Continental, and she did a

shootout for another team but didn’t make it because she didn’t have the experience. Now, she is the fastest woman out there.

So you saw her potential and are a fan of developing drivers?

Yes, she just needs more mileage. Laia Sanz and Cristina Gutierrez have deals for the whole season. That is so special about Extreme E to give this opportunity to women. The women become the superstars of the sport together with men. I’m also sure that one day a woman will compete in Formula 1. It is just a matter of time. It would just be easier to find a special talent when we’d have more girls trying to get there.



Ahlin-Kottulinsky and Kristoffersson celebrate with Rosberg X Racing crew

in the debriefs and was on site in Sardinia.”

This season, she’s once again under contract with RXR. The goal is to defend her title, of course. And to be an inspiration to other young women: “It is so important that young girls can see us in Extreme E. They need to know this is something they can achieve. But it’s also about representation in media and having initiatives like FIA Women in Motorsport. I was lucky enough to have a mum who was a rally driver. But not everyone has this.”

Ahlin-Kottulinsky also considers programmes such as W Series or the F1 Academy to be extremely important for gaining initial experience and contacts in motorsport. After that, however, it’s crucial that young female drivers continue to have a programme and not just an introduction. For her, the fact that no woman has made a career in Formula 1 yet is just a matter of statistics.

2024 EXTREME E CALENDAR*		
RD	EVENT	DATE
1	Jeddah (SAU)	17-18 February
2	Europe TBC	13-14 July
3	Sardinia (ITA)	14-15 September
4	Sardinia (ITA)	21-22 September
5	Phoenix (USA)	23-24 November

*all double-headers

“If you give 150 boys the chance to come into Formula 1, we have to also give 150 females the chance,” she claims.

How can this work? By more people asking themselves what contribution they can make: “The responsibility should not be only on the females in motorsports. Everyone needs to ask themselves that question about being inclusive. Nico, for example, is pushing for females in motorsports. As a team boss you can

be more inclusive and also as a sponsor.”

F1 is no longer an issue for Ahlin-Kottulinsky. Instead, she dreams of taking part in the Dakar Rally: “This is a dream to get that experience but I need more understanding to do something like Dakar. You have to read the dunes, find that limit, and you have to know how much to push.”

How could you support Mikaela and female drivers in general?

As an advocate for equality in motorsports and as a father of a girl, I firmly believe in fostering a supportive environment for female drivers. One of the ways I can support this is by doing interviews like this to make people understand at what level the women in Extreme E are competing and how awesome that is. But honestly, the best support for Mikaela has been Johan [Kristoffersson]. It is so essential for the two drivers to work together, make progress in terms of driving lines and approaching the corners, set-up and everything.

What can you contribute now in the Extreme E team from your time in F1?

One of my greatest strengths as a Formula 1 driver was observing and using data for my advantage and making progress. So, I have a look even on TV when I see the line that Mikaela is driving and give her feedback.

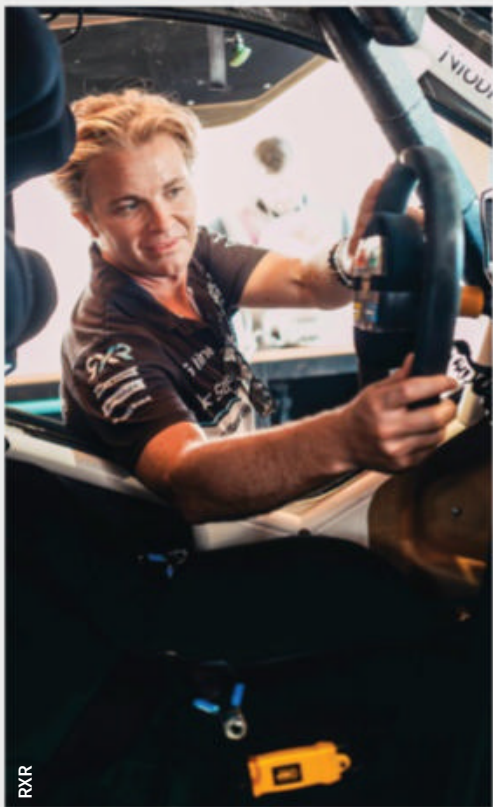
There is also a bit of criticism around Extreme E. What do you think about it?

The racing is exciting to watch, and Extreme E’s purpose is to raise awareness about climate change and sustainability everywhere we race. The drivers also take their own time to get involved in projects. In sport

we have such a big following that it should be a responsibility for us to use sport for common good instead of just entertainment. And Extreme E is being a role model in that.

What do you plan to do with your team in Extreme E in the future, especially in the hydrogen era from 2025?

I’m a big advocate for electrification. But I’m also open-minded for other technological avenues. And hydrogen certainly can be very interesting for the longer-term future. Our current focus remains on Extreme E, but Extreme H is definitely an exciting venture to consider.





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Mazepin and co put in winning shifts for 99

ASIAN LE MANS SERIES
DUBAI (ARE)
4 FEBRUARY
ROUND 2/3

The 99 Racing team extended its advantage in the Asian Le Mans Series LMP2 standings in Dubai, where Louis Deletraz, Nikita Mazepin and Ahmad Al Harthy took a second victory of the campaign for their ORECA over the similar Proton Competition car.

Following an early safety car, triggered when Alexandre Coigny's first-corner spin resulted in bedlam in the pack, Al Harthy occupied second in the early stages behind the TF Sport ORECA of Salih Yoluc, until the Omani was turned around by Proton driver Giorgio Roda. But by the end of his opening double stint, an inspired Al Harthy had moved to the lead with textbook moves around the outside of Turn 1 on John Falb (Duqueine ORECA) and Yoluc, whose car was later handed a drive-through penalty for track-limits abuse.

Mazepin controlled the pace in the middle stint under pressure from Laurents Horr (DKR) and Colin Braun,



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99 Racing's to lose


ASIAN LEMANS SERIES

the APR driver fighting back from a drive-through incurred for track-limits violations by starting driver George Kurtz. Roda had been similarly punished for his Al Harthy blunder, but the Proton car worked its way back from eighth at the end of the opening hour to fourth in the hands of Rene Binder, before Julien Andlauer took over.

Following a safety car to recover D'Station's Aston and the Duqueine ORECA after separate incidents, Andlauer's tussle with Malthe Jakobsen (in for Braun) and Tom Dillmann (in for Horr) was one of the highlights of the race. Jakobsen got the better of it, but was jumped in the final pitstops by Andlauer, who was left with

too much ground to make up as Deletraz stroked it home out front to win by 3.5s.

Cool Racing duo James Winslow and Alexander Bukhantsov led all but 13 laps to claim LMP3 class spoils by 8.6s from the similar CD Sport Ligier, while Klaus Bachler's Pure Rxcing Porsche 911 GT3-R just fended off the GetSpeed-run Almanar Mercedes-AMG GT3 of Fabian Schiller to claim the GT class, after Joel Sturm's pass in the Porsche on the Merc in the hands of Al Faisal Al Zubair with a little over 90 minutes to go proved decisive.

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Barnard win can't stop Taponen

FORMULA REGIONAL MIDDLE EAST
DUBAI (ARE)
3-4 FEBRUARY
ROUND 3/5

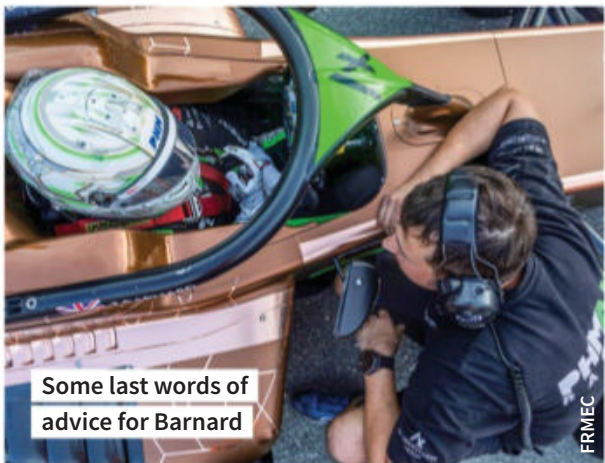
Taylor Barnard took a great victory under pressure at Dubai Autodrome from Tuukka Taponen, but it's the Finnish Ferrari protege who extended his series lead across the three races held last weekend.

Barnard took pole for the first race, and the PHM Racing driver had to defend

mightily from the R-ace GP car of Taponen. Time and again Barnard would seem to settle at the front, yet Taponen would come back at him – including during a mid-race sprinkle of light rain – and the Brit had to keep on his toes throughout. Rafael Camara took third with a boisterous move on Mari Boya, but the Brazilian earned a penalty for the pass that dropped him back to fourth.

Camara, another Ferrari-backed talent, emerged atop a scintillating battle with Taponen and Barnard during the early laps of the finale to take victory with the Prema-run Mumbai Falcons team. Barnard dropped away from second-placed Taponen and conceded third position to PHM team-mate Brando Badoer.

That was Badoer's second podium of the weekend. In the reversed-grid second race he tailed Nikhil Bohra and Tasanapol Inthraphuvasak. Taponen fought past Barnard to take seventh place.



Some last words of advice for Barnard

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WEEKEND WINNERS

ASIAN LE MANS SERIES
DUBAI (ARE)

- LMP2** Louis Deletraz/Nikita Mazepin/
Ahmad Al Harthy
99 Racing (ORECA 07)
- LMP3** James Winslow/Alexander Bukhantsov
Cool Racing (Ligier JSP320)
- GT** Klaus Bachler/Joel Sturm/
Alex Malykhin
Pure Rxcing (Porsche 911 GT3-R)

FORMULA REGIONAL MIDDLE EAST
DUBAI (ARE)

- Race 1** Taylor Barnard
PHM Racing
- Race 2** Nikhil Bohra
MP Motorsport
- Race 3** Rafael Camara
Mumbai Falcons Racing

FORMULA REGIONAL OCEANIA
HAMPTON DOWNS (NZL)

- Race 1** Roman Bilinski – M2 Competition
- Race 2** Nicola Lacorte – M2 Competition
- Race 3** Kaleb Ngatoa – Giles Motorsport

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The role:

- Analysis of the correlation between Wind Tunnel and track and making recommendations to improve the Wind Tunnel to reduce any differences.
- Involved in defining and analysing driver in the loop simulations to understand how aero performance sensitivities affect lap time and how this should affect our part selection in the Wind Tunnel.
- Involved in defining and analysing driver in the loop experiments to align aero performance and setup directions.
- Analysis of the correlation deficiencies between CFD and track and then working with the CFD group to improve our simulation.

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Zamparelli takes his own team into Carrera Cup

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Collards join forces for tilt at GT title with Barwell

BRITISH GT

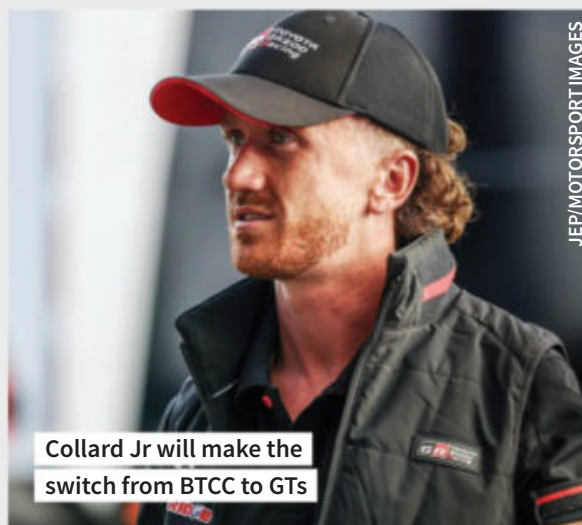
Father-and-son duo Rob and Ricky Collard will team up together for an assault on the British GT Championship this season at the wheel of a Barwell Motorsport-run Lamborghini Huracan GT3 Evo2.

Collard Sr, a multiple British Touring Car race winner, returns to British GT for the first time since taking the outright GT3 title alongside Sandy Mitchell in 2020. The 55-year-old most recently claimed second in the GT World Challenge Europe Pro-Am standings alongside Dennis Lind last year.

Collard Jr, meanwhile, will make his full-time debut in British GT after a one-off outing in 2018. He has already enjoyed GT success alongside his father after the pair were part of Barwell's Pro-Am-winning crew in the 2020 Spa 24 Hours.

"I'm not getting any younger, and it's an experience," said the 27-year-old, who will form a Pro-Am pairing with his father. "Me and dad won the Spa 24 Hours [Pro-Am class] and the opportunity might never come around again to do British GT with him. The memories we could make doing that together outweigh the glory and fame and fun, if you like, of British Touring Cars.

"It's something we can cherish. One day I'll have kids and I can say to them, 'I raced with your grandad.' And if we could win the bloody championship, it would be awesome. I'm doing quite a lot of sim stuff to try to readapt to rear-wheel-drive GT3 cars, and I'm excited to do the first test."



JEP/MOTORSPORT IMAGES

Collard Jr will make the
switch from BTCC to GTs

Collard Jr moves across to GT racing full-time after spending the past two seasons in the BTCC with Toyota and a partial campaign with BMW in 2018, during which time he took two podiums.

But ever-increasing budgets in the touring car championship mean Collard Jr has decided to focus his efforts elsewhere for the foreseeable future.

"It's a shame," he said. "When I joined back in 2018, I jumped straight in the car, no testing, no experience, just went out and had podiums and consistent top-10 finishes. I enjoyed it, whereas the last couple of years with Toyota have been quite difficult for whatever reason.

"Budgets are increasing all the time in touring cars, and it's just financially impossible. I'd love to have stayed in the championship, but it's crazy."

STEFAN MACKLEY & MARCUS SIMMONS

BRITISH GT RETURN FOR BUNCOMBE WITH RJN MCLAREN

BRITISH GT

Al Buncombe will return to the British GT Championship this year for the first time in a decade alongside Simon Watts at the wheel of an RJN McLaren 720S.

Buncombe spent 12 years with RJN – first in the GT4 ranks from 2007-11, before moving up as a factory NISMO GT3 driver until 2018 – and his spell included winning the GT4 European Cup and Blancpain Endurance Series. He also partnered Gran Turismo GT Academy winner Jann Mardenborough in 2012, with the pair finishing sixth overall in British GT before Buncombe had several outings alongside Olympian Chris Hoy.

After joining Bentley's factory roster, Buncombe spent last season running the JBXE Extreme E squad. His brother Chris and RJN founder Bob Neville last year sold the GT operation to Watts, but remain very much involved.

"Bob and the whole RJN team are like family to me and it's fantastic to be back with them for my return to British GT," said Buncombe. "I'm really looking forward to lining up and working alongside Simon and getting behind the wheel of the McLaren. It's been 10 years since I was last part of the British GT grid so I'm looking forward to racing the classic circuits that the championship visits."

Also competing in a McLaren in the GT3 class this season will be Simon Orange (below), who remains in the category with Orange Racing powered by JMH. Orange will form a Silver-Am partnership with Tom Roche, who he first worked with in Mazda MX-5s several years ago.



JEP/MOTORSPORT IMAGES

Orange will stay in
British GT for 2024

Zamparelli's team enters Carrera Cup

PORSCHE CARRERA CUP GB

Dino Zamparelli's Race Drive team will progress into the Porsche Carrera Cup GB – a series in which he finished runner-up three times – this season with a planned three-car entry.

Zamparelli initially founded the organisation as a trackday operator but moved into Porsche Club GB competition last year. Now he is stepping up to the Carrera Cup and has signed 2020 Walter Hayes Trophy winner Oliver White as his first driver.

"We had a pretty successful time last season but my heart was always in the Carrera Cup so we decided to move up straight away," explained Zamparelli. "I worked with Ollie when I was with Redline [as a driver coach] and he had a bit-part season last year and just hasn't quite been able to fully put all the pieces of the puzzle together. We met up at the end of last year and will come together and see what we can do."

Although Race Drive is a new name to the Carrera Cup, it will feature several experienced Porsche engineers and Zamparelli intends to immediately challenge the more established squads. "I've worked with multiple race teams in



the Carrera Cup and so I'm quite keen to put all the best bits of those teams into one team," said Zamparelli, who most recently raced in the series in 2018. "I know the series really well and all the people involved. The level of Carrera Cup is really high and, for a team, it's a good place to build your name and reputation. We're looking forward to the challenge."

Zamparelli added that he is in talks with other drivers to join White in this season's line-up. The Formula Ford 1600 star first moved to Porsche competition in 2022 but had a tough campaign in the competitive Pro class. He contested a handful of races

with Redline last year in Pro-Am and twice topped the division.

"The plan is to race in the Pro-Am class and challenge for the title, which won't be easy as there are lots of good drivers as always, but I'll give it my best shot," said White, who is a farmer in his day job and his restricted 2023 campaign was due to his brother breaking his leg and being out of action on the farm. "I got on well with Dino in my first season in the series. He's very capable, he's been around the Carrera Cup for a long time, and he's got a really good group of people behind him."

STEPHEN LICKORISH

NAPA drivers plan Race Across Britain charity bid

MINI CHALLENGE

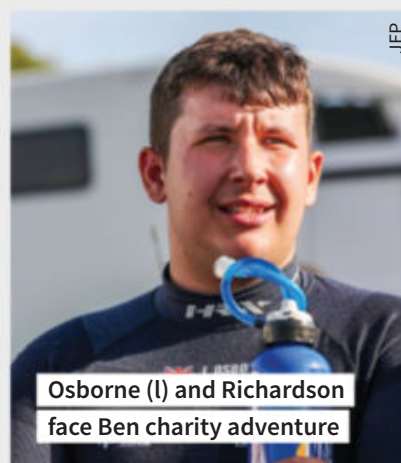
NAPA Racing Mini Challenge drivers Jamie Osborne and Cam Richardson will team up to tackle a charity 'Race Across Britain' event later this month.

The competition is inspired by the *Race Across the World* TV series and will feature teams of two having to navigate their way through the UK between certain checkpoints from 26-28 February. Participants have a strict budget to spend on food, accommodation and transport, while they are

not told any of the locations involved beforehand.

The event is being run by the Ben charity to raise awareness and support for its organisation that assists people working in the automotive industry, and their families, during hard times. NAPA Racing boss Pete Osborne has a history of supporting good causes and his son Jamie and Richardson have been recruited for this latest challenge.

"I love to support a charity – it's in the Osborne blood really – so anything we can



do as a family and individuals to help goes a long way for some people," said Osborne Jr, who admitted the navigational element of the event could be a challenge.

Richardson added: "The ability to take a step back from a very high pressured, high intensity world that is



motorsport and be able to have a laugh while doing something that's fundamentally good, that spreads joy and goodness back into what we do, is a nice breath of fresh air."

NAPA Racing also plans further fundraising events for Ben during this year.

STEPHEN LICKORISH

De Rooy was synonymous
with the DAF brand



Jan de Rooy 1943-2024

OBITUARY

Nobody did more to boost the DAF marque's public perception through motorsport than Dutch ace Johannes 'Jan' de Rooy, who died last week, aged 80.

The success of production 55s with continuously variable transmissions on the 1968 London to Sydney Marathon was immortalised in the model range's name, but de Rooy's spectacular rallycross, then rally raid, exploits earned legions of brand fans. De Rooy's connection went beyond motorsport as his family business grew its DAF fleet to 400 trucks in the 1960s.

A teenage motocrosser, de Rooy switched to cars in 1969, racing a Mini Cooper S on the loose. Not only was he quick, but he demonstrated great aptitude for making complex machinery work. Driving DAF coupes powered by Renault Gordini engines, then Ford BDAs, he won

Dutch rallycross championships from 1970-1973. A fifth was added with a Ford Escort RS1800 in 1979.

De Rooy and older brother Harry – who died in December – became household names through live televised events at the fabled Lydden Hill, with BBC's iconic voice of motocross to Formula 1 Murray Walker commentating excitedly on the DAF duo's tail-happy progress.

Having rallycrossed into the 1980s with an Audi Quattro, Jan looked to his roots, finishing third in the Paris-Dakar Rally's truck division on his debut in 1982. Collaborating with DAF engineers on subsequent raids to Senegal, he was rewarded with category victory in 1987.

After a break, de Rooy returned with son Gerard. In 2009, Jan's swansong was winning the inaugural Africa Eco Rally in an Iveco.

MARCUS PYE

F4 WINNER IRFAN TO GB3

British Formula 4 race winner Josh Irfan is the latest driver announced as stepping up to GB3 for this season. He finished 12th in the F4 standings last year with Rodin Carlin, and also contested a handful of GB4 races, but will now drive for JHR Developments in GB3. Meanwhile, Gerrard Xie is moving from Hillspeed to Hitech for his sophomore campaign after ending up 20th in last year's table.

BURGOYNE'S KMR MOVE

GB4 driver Harry Burgoyne will move from Graham Brunton Racing to KMR Sport for this year, after finishing sixth in the 2023 points. Meanwhile, Fox Motorsport has been busy testing prospective GB4 drivers, including Caterham Academy racer Megan Bruce and karter Branden Templeton.

AMERICAN TO UNITED FORD

American teenager Jason Pribyl is heading to the UK to race a Ray in United Formula Ford 1600 this season with the PWR1 squad. He has previous single-seater and sportscar experience and was a finalist for last year's Team USA Scholarship. "Jason comes highly recommended, and we can't wait to get started," said team boss Phil Wills.

ZELOS GETS SPECIAL AWARD

Mini Challenge champion Dan Zelos was among the special award recipients at the British Automobile Racing Club's annual ceremony last weekend. He received the President's Cup after sealing a second category title. Other winners included Steve Bemrose being chosen as Marshal of the Year, Junior Saloons coordinator Dave Beecroft was handed the Gerry Marshall Trophy, and British Formula 4 champion Louis Sharp was awarded the Peter Collins Trophy.

Fiesta champion Webster wins first Mini Scholarship

MINI CHALLENGE

Fiesta ST240 champion Albert Webster has been chosen as the inaugural winner of the Mini Challenge Scholarship after a three-stage selection process.

Over 100 applicants took part in the initial stage, a karting event in London towards the end of last year. The best contenders then progressed to a series of assessments at Croft earlier this month, with

the top 20 making it through to the final on the second day. Initially, drivers got to grips with the Cooper machines used in the Mini Challenge Trophy before the finalists were able to sample the new JCW Sport car.

Webster (right) was selected as the winner and now receives a prize package worth over £50,000 to compete in the new JCW Sport class with entry, car hire, fuel, brakes and tyres all being paid for.

"I didn't believe it when my name was called as there were loads of good drivers here, and I expected someone else to win," he said. "It sounds awesome to be named as the Scholarship winner and I can't wait to get going."

Former Ginetta Junior and GB4 frontrunner Harri Reynolds was also chosen from the finalists to receive £7000 from Alliance Racing before the last stage of the process began.



‘Friends and Family race’ at Snetterton

CATERHAM GRADUATES

The Caterham Graduates Racing Club will run a special race for new drivers at Snetterton this year.

The 20-minute contest over the 17-18 August weekend, which is being promoted as a ‘Friends and Family race’, is only open to those who have never competed or held a race licence.

They can use any car that is normally eligible for Caterham Graduates races, which spans models up to and including the Caterham Seven 310R. The idea originally came from one of the club’s members, and is designed as a way for people to experience racing in a less daunting environment and without having to pay for equipment.

“James McCall, who runs our driving standards team, approached us with the idea of getting people who come with us to race meetings to support us a chance to experience it for themselves,” said CGRC chairman Matthew Willoughby. “It’s open to anybody who might want to dip their toe in



SCOTT MITCHELL

New initiative aims to get fresh blood behind the wheel

the water. It’s a one-off, with minimal barriers to entry, for people to give it a go and see if they like it – it’s about the experience, having fun and saying you’ve done it. If some of the drivers then decide that they want to do more racing with us, that’s great.”

While those taking part will still need to have passed an ARDS test, the club will be able to guide participants through that process and then help them borrow a car or other equipment. “If you know someone who’s already racing a suitable Caterham and has got the kit, then that’s a big hurdle

out of the way, although various teams who support drivers in our championship have cars available to hire,” added Willoughby. “We don’t want people thinking they have to spend big money on equipment for one race. It’s about being inclusive and trying to increase the number of people participating. It’s not great times economically and anything we can do to help more people in, the better.”

Anybody wanting further details should go to the CGRC website – cgrc.uk.

STEPHEN LICKORISH

Riponian Stages to get BHRC season under way



PAUL LAWRENCE

Elliott will fight for win in Fiat 131

RALLYING

A new-look British Historic Rally Championship begins in the forests of North Yorkshire this Sunday with the Riponian Stages Rally.

The first of nine events this year is a classic one-day forest rally with an entry topped by regular contenders Matthew Robinson and Adrian Hetherington in Ford Escort Mk2s, and Nick Elliott in his Fiat 131.

The BHRC calendar has had a serious makeover for 2024 with 11 scoring rounds from nine events and three asphalt rallies to

broaden the appeal beyond gravel competition.

The high-profile Manx and Argyll rallies both join the calendar, while the season concludes with the new Rally Anglo Caledonian, which offers a 140-stage-miles double-header in late November.

PAUL LAWRENCE

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Boardley has yet to decide if he will race Cupra Leon again

Reigning champion Boardley to defend TCR UK crown with Hart GT

TCR UK

TCR UK champion Carl Boardley will launch a defence of his title as he once again teams up with the Hart GT team of Nick Hart to run a single-car attack.

In his first year in the category, Boardley took four wins en route to last season's title and, although his mount for this year is yet to be confirmed, he expects to be back in the same Cupra Leon Competition.

"There's a couple of options but I don't think we've extracted anything like the real potential out of the car," said Boardley, who aims to "build on what we learnt last year, hopefully unlock a little bit more pace from it and raise the bar a little bit".

Boardley had planned to bookend his year with the Algarve-staged inaugural TCR World Ranking Final and the FIA Motorsport Games at Valencia, until the former was postponed last month. "I was absolutely gutted," he said, after arranging his flights, accommodation and other logistics. "It would have been ideal to do Portimao at the start of the year, do the TCR UK season and the Games at the end of the year."

Luke Sargeant and Jeff Alden will also remain in TCR UK. Alden continues in a DW Racing Opel Astra, while Area Motorsport driver Sargeant has swapped Hyundai Elantra for Cupra Leon.

MARK PAULSON

Cronin starts with a win on Galway

IRISH RALLYING

Multiple British Rally champions Keith Cronin and Matt Edwards experienced contrasting fortunes on the opening round of the Irish Tarmac Championship at last weekend's wet and windy Galway International Rally.

Cronin dominated the traditional curtain-raiser on Ireland's west coast alongside co-driver Mikie Galvin, while Edwards – on his first visit to the

event – was forced to retire his similar Ford Fiesta Rally2 on the second stage after overcooking a turn and coming to blows with a stone wall.

"We haven't done a rally at this level in Ireland for a long time," said Cronin, who recorded a total of seven fastest times to end the two-day closed-road meeting with a commanding 38-second win.

Cronin's decision to prioritise the Tarmac Championship for the 2024 season took many by

surprise, as did his switch back to M-Sport's Ford Fiesta after relying on Volkswagen's Polo GTI R5 in recent campaigns.

Cronin's belief in the Blue Oval supermini proved to be the correct call against runner-up and current title-holder Callum Devine who, for large parts of the event, struggled to make the correct tyre calls for his VW.

Cronin added: "I certainly did not expect to win here – it's just fantastic to be honest."

JASON CRAIG

LOGGIE/NEARY JOIN FORCES

GT stalwarts Ian Loggie and Richard Neary will team up together in the GT Cup this season, driving a Mercedes-AMG for Neary's Abba Racing team. The championship has also confirmed that sportscar ace Johnny Mowlem, the 2013 European Le Mans Series GT champion and a multiple race winner in the GT Cup, will join as its driving standards officer for the 2024 campaign.

THIRD SEASON OF CIVIC CUP

Civic Cup podium finisher Harvey Caton has joined Ben Sharpe Racing for his third season in the championship. The 2021 Junior Saloons runner-up twice finished second en route to fifth in last year's standings, running as a privateer, while BSR ran early-season pacesetter Jack Harding before a budget shortfall halted his campaign. Former TCR UK racer Alex Kite will also continue in the championship, remaining with Pro Alloys Racing.

KARTER JOINS THE ELITE

Isaac Phelps will graduate from karting into car racing by joining Elite Motorsport for the upcoming Ginetta Junior campaign, after reaching the final six in last year's Junior Scholarship. The 14-year-old said: "I want to create a year to be proud of in my first year of Ginetta Juniors without creating any expectations. That said, of course I want to do the best as possible and hopefully have a really good first year in car racing to look back on."

HEY COMES OUT ON TOP

Aviation engineer Michael Hey, 21, won Sunday's New Zealand Formula 5000 Tasman Cup Revival races at Christchurch's Euromarque Motorsport Park on his category debut in a McRae GM1, earning the Bert Hawthorne Cup for the feature victory (below). The Formula Ford 1600 graduate passed wet Saturday heat winner Steve Ross's similar car before halfshaft failure forced its retirement, as veterans Kevin Ingram and Russell Greer (Lola T332s) chased Hey to the final chequer.



EUAN CAMERON

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MOTUL

Is winning races key for junior single-seater drivers?

With many point-scoring systems rewarding consistent results, our writers debate the importance of raw speed over championship success



YES
STEPHEN LICKORISH

It is arguably an old-fashioned view but, to me, a capability to win races, demonstrate brilliant racecraft and deliver outright impressive speed are the most important attributes for a driver to show when on the early rungs of the junior single-seater ladder. Consistency is important, but they need to showcase standout ability in order to progress up the ranks. There are hundreds of drivers duking it out across a plethora of different championships, with the majority having at least one eye on reaching Formula 1. But only the very exceptional get that chance.

Take the near-unprecedented situation of no completely new drivers joining the F1 grid this year. One factor behind that is a lack of standout performers in F2 that have made a strong enough case for deserving a seat. In a world where many point-scoring systems are weighted more towards consistency than race wins, this scenario is perhaps not surprising. Instead, drivers should be encouraged to secure those attention-grabbing results.

Taking impressive victories, for me, is a better demonstration of talent than continually picking up decent results. Unless a driver goes for that risky last-lap move for glory, makes that slight error and learns from it at an early stage of their career, they are going to struggle further up the ladder. I recognise that championship positions are all-important for talent spotters – and acknowledge the budget implications of hefty repair bills – but less emphasis should be placed upon these standings when they can mask the true stars.

Ultimately, consistency can be learned but delivering that raw speed and outstanding racecraft are far harder to teach. The example of Deagen Fairclough from British Formula 4 last year comes to mind. He was getting a bad reputation during the early events after a series of fairly clumsy collisions, but had also displayed some incredible opening-lap overtakes. Later in the campaign, he'd combined that speed with a touch more maturity, bagged a handful of wins and was very impressive. He's now one of the title favourites heading into this season having already demonstrated those stand-out skills. I would like to see drivers that excite, rather than just settle for points.

“Drivers need to showcase standout ability to progress up the ranks”



NO
STEFAN MACKLEY

There's no denying that standing on the top step of the podium is something all drivers want to achieve, but offer any young up-and-comer a choice between race wins or adding a championship to their CV and there should only be one answer.

Title challenges are built on a foundation of consistency and, while you would generally expect there to be at least one win among a driver's results if they are mounting a title tilt, it almost becomes a moot point at the end of the season. When eyes glance to see who sits at the top of the championship standings, not many people remember who finishes second, even if they have shown more outright speed over the campaign.

In a junior category such as the GB3 Championship, scoring points consistently is crucial given the current points structure, with the top 15 eligible for points, as well as more on offer for positions gained in the reversed-grid races. Not only that but, with overtaking as hard as it is in single-seaters, the risk versus reward element for gaining a position strongly favours discretion over valour.

“Failing to finish races due to incidents is no way to forge a career”

Reigning champion Callum Voisin, for example, had to wait until the 16th race of the season before he claimed his first win of the campaign and, while a second victory followed at the final meeting, it was Voisin's nine other podiums alongside just two non-scores

in 23 races that helped him to the title. Alex Dunne, by contrast, took five wins in his maiden season of GB3 but three non-scores ultimately proved the difference. Voisin is now already confirmed in Formula 3 for 2024 with Rodin (*and now Dunne is with MP – ed*).

Raw speed is an important aspect of course, but blending that with consistency is arguably more crucial, especially for future employers. At a level where budgets for many drivers are also stretched thin enough as it is, failing to finish races due to incidents is no way to go about forging a motorsport career.

Looking to the upper echelons of the sport, teams want to employ drivers who can gain results on a consistent basis, stay out of trouble and help mount title challenges. If a driver is able to show that level of maturity at a junior level, it bodes well for their future career aspirations.



STEVE JONES

FOUR DECADES OF NORTHERN SOUL

The BARC North Western Centre's Sports/Saloons Championship celebrated a major milestone last season, and coordinator John Leck has been a key figure throughout. Now he's stepping back (a little). Time to reflect on the past 40 years

STEPHEN LICKORISH

There are some pretty impressive statistics surrounding the British Automobile Racing Club North Western Centre's CNC Heads Sports/Saloons Championship. Over 700 different drivers have competed in the category during its history. It has played host to over 470 individual races. And 1999 champion Chris Maries, victorious in his Mazda RX-7, has contested the highest number of them, starting 222 in around 25 different cars. Yet it's no surprise that such big numbers are involved given the championship celebrated its landmark 40th season last year, and one person has been a key part in its success throughout that impressive period: coordinator John Leck.

The numbers have not always been quite so large. Just nine cars competed in the very first race at Oulton Park on 31 March 1984 and the series had very humble beginnings. It was created, alongside a shortlived Formula Ford 2000 single-seater series, as a way of securing the future of the North Western Centre. "As a centre, we used to organise car meetings and sprints and autotests in the north west and they had all started to fizzle out

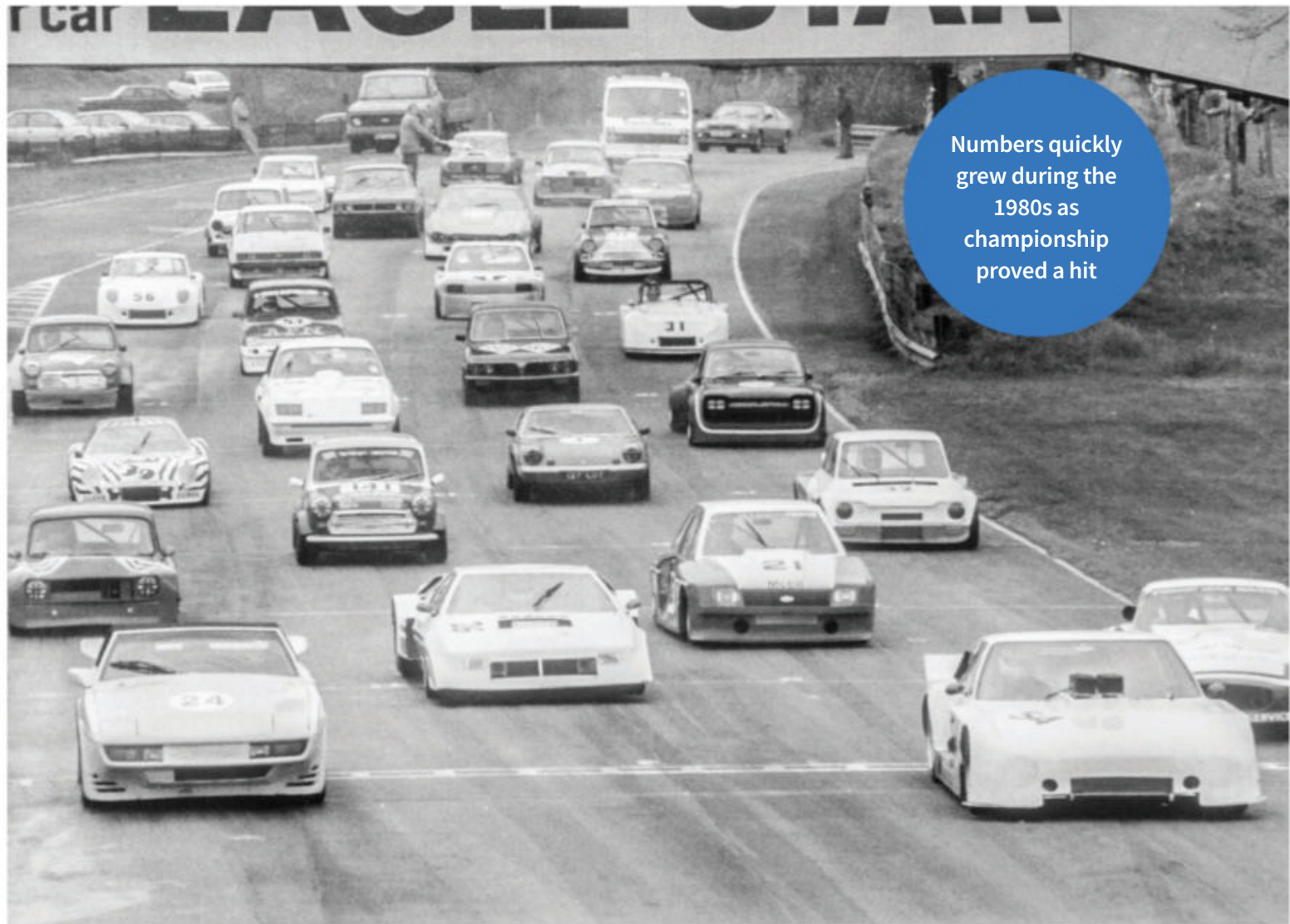
and we were always dependent on Oulton Park offering us dates," recalls Leck. "At the time there were several Special Saloon Car championships and also the start of the Modified Saloon Car Championship. But there were a lot of cars that had been uncompetitive in those championships because they were starting to get dominated by Special GTs – F2/F3 cars with bodywork put on – and a lot of money was being spent on them. We had this view there were a lot of Modsports and Special Saloons cars in people's garages that weren't competitive any longer, and maybe there was the potential of getting them out."

Alongside centre chairman Ken Mitchell and David Simpson, Leck helped launch the category, despite only getting involved with the centre for the first time six months beforehand. "The three of us got together and thought we would give it a whirl," he adds. It started off as a non-championship north-west-focused Special GT Challenge with a very simple premise. "If you've got a car that was eligible for Special Saloons or Modsports, irrespective of its shape, then come out and race with us," states Leck.

Despite those modest initial entries, the division was granted



BARC North Western category continues to attract diverse grids after 40 years



Numbers quickly grew during the 1980s as championship proved a hit



Organisers worked hard to boost entries for 2023

PHIL RAINFORD



MARVIN HALL

Leck (right) presents trophy named after another series founder, Dave Simpson

championship status for its second year and quickly became a very popular competition. “We sat down with the drivers at the end of the first few seasons and discussed what was working and what wasn’t working,” says Leck. “It just grew and grew and we had 20 to 30 cars regularly coming out.”

And, 40 years on, it’s still going strong. Very few club-level championships enjoy such longevity and there are several key factors behind that success. “We haven’t really changed the regulations, they’re basically the same,” explains Leck. “If you’ve got a sports or saloon car that can be identified as a car you can see on the road, then you can do what you like with it, we will have a class for you. It’s fairly stable so, if you’ve got a car, it will remain in the same class and be competitive continually. Initially, we excluded the big centre-seated cars – it was only last year we removed the regulation to allow centre-seaters, with the silhouette specials class created.”

Such stability is often a recipe for loyalty, as is the friendly paddock the series has built over the years where competitors are more than happy to help out their rivals. Good driving standards

are maintained and new racers are continually welcomed into the championship. “Every year, we get eight, nine, 10 new drivers and we give them a mentor,” says Leck. “There’s a lot to think about – we’ve got some very quick cars and some not so quick cars and the speed differential is significant – so novices need to know what to

“If you’ve got a sports or saloon car that can be identified as a car you can see on the road, we have a class”

expect. Communication is paramount – I’m always sending emails out to drivers so they know what’s going on.” Even so, the regulars are also taken care of and never neglected in the pursuit of fresh faces. And that approach is clearly paying off as drivers from as far afield as Edinburgh to the south coast of England have been >>

attracted to race in the championship.

While Leck has been a constant figure and the ethos of the series has remained the same, plenty has changed in the past 40 years. Take the type of cars competing. On that very first grid, there were the likes of special John Maguire-built Minis, alongside Lenhams and Davrians, while the inaugural race and first championship were won by Bob Trotter's highly modified, Rover-engined Ford Escort. But the number of such Special Saloons and Modsports machines has gradually dwindled in the years since. "If you looked at a grid in the 1980s, they were nearly all tin-tops, closed cars," explains Leck. "We've then moved to getting a lot of Caterhams and Westfields in the 1990s

"We probably took 10% of the costs out of the championship and reduced entry fees from £450 to £400"

and 2000s, and now it's moved back more to tin-tops. But we've always had an eclectic collection of cars." Such diversity also means that it's a popular championship among the marshals in the north west, with the men and women in orange also recognised at its special 40th anniversary meeting at the end of October when they were given free lunches.

Leck has also encountered significant changes on the operational side. "We were the ones that introduced computers to the BARC in the mid-'90s," he recalls. "In the '80s, everything was manual – the entries came in the post. We had to keep them in the right order and send tickets out to drivers. The effort in just



Trotter and his Escort won the inaugural title

handling the communication was massive."

There have also been plenty of challenges over the decades, and one of the most threatening came very recently. Average entries dropped significantly in 2022, falling by 15% to 23 drivers per event. It was a tricky time for national motorsport as the post-pandemic bounce had tailed off and costs were rising. "We came out of COVID and we were strong and then the cost of living situation cropped up," says Leck. "Entries dropped quite a lot in 2022 and it was worrying. We also suffered from people not being able to get spare parts with the supply chain being restricted, so we were hit by a few things at the same time.

"That's when we looked at it and we said we will knock off a race meeting and increase the number of races at a meeting. We probably took 10% of the costs out of the championship and we reduced entry fees from £450 to £400, so we made it more cost-effective." Those tweaks paid off and entries were averaging 33 in last year's anniversary season, a 43% increase that was comfortably within the top 10 largest rises among all English categories in 2023.

Numbers had dipped even lower back in 1996, dropping to an



Sugden (left) and Cumming were both champions



average of just 16, with Leck and the North West Centre taking a look at how this could be addressed. “Either you pack it in or you make some changes,” he says. “We made some changes to the regulations and, in two years, we were back up to 22 cars.”

For all those ups and downs, Leck certainly did not expect the championship to continue for so long. “We never thought it would last for 40 years, never!” he admits. “If I had known it was going to last 40 years, I would’ve done things differently – I would’ve collected stuff, like photos, from the first race!” And, while Leck has been a key figure throughout that time, he has always enjoyed great support from the North West Centre’s committee, a team of driver representatives and a range of sponsors. Many of these have been companies with a connection to the championship and, for the past 16 years, that has been loyal competitor Ric Wood – who first joined the ranks in the 1980s – through his CNC Heads concern. Such sponsors have played their part in the series’ longevity and helped ensure its unique position today, where it is the only truly BARC-controlled championship – all the other series in its portfolio are operated by individuals/ companies that buy track time from the club.

But there is change afoot in the world of the CNC Heads Sports/ Saloons Championship. Having been coordinator for 40 years, Leck is now handing over the reins to regular Proton Putra competitor and 2004 champion Duncan Aukland, although he is still very much remaining involved, looking after the website and managing the communications. “It’s good to be handing it over when it’s healthy – with Duncan, it’s in safe hands,” concludes Leck, who has thoroughly enjoyed his time in charge. “I could never race because I couldn’t afford it and wouldn’t have been any good at it. For me, running a successful championship for many years is as good as winning it in one year. I’ve got a passion for the sport, for the championship – I do it because I love doing it.

“The best things are the fact that drivers come up and say thanks for running the championship, and giving a trophy to someone for the first time, or presenting a trophy for driver of the year – those are the things that come to mind as being the best times.”

Now, after celebrating his baby’s 40th season with some bumper grids – it reached impressive highs of 37 and 40 in 2023 – Leck can relinquish some of his duties confident for the future, and with the championship demonstrating that there’s the potential for more successful years to come. 🏁



Proton racer Aukland is now taking on the role of series coordinator from Leck

BARC NORTH WESTERN CENTRE SPORTS/SALOONS CHAMPIONSHIP OVERALL TITLE WINNERS

YEAR	DRIVER	CAR
1984	Bob Trotter	Ford-Rover Escort
1985	Richard Johnson	Vauxhall Astra GTE
1986	David Ellis	Aston Martin V8
1987	Phil Hepworth	Mini
1988	Roger Matthews	Lotus Elan
1989	Andy Cumming	Lenham Le Mans Coupe
1990	Andy Cumming	Lenham Le Mans Coupe
1991	Garry Wilson	Lenham Le Mans Coupe
1992	Ron Harper	Triumph Spitfire
1993	Phil Wadsley	Mini Jem
1994	Alastair Cunningham	Opel Manta 400
1995	Andy Cumming	Lotus Elan
1996	Phil Hepworth	Mini
1997	Tony Sugden	Skoda Coupe Cosworth
1998	Mike McGoun	Ford Escort Cosworth
1999	Chris Maries	Mazda RX-7
2000	Gareth Lloyd	Ford Escort Cosworth
2001	Ian Wilson	Banks Europa
2002	Chris Griffiths	Davrian Mk7A
2003	Iain Gorrie	Darrian T90
2004	Duncan Aukland	Rover 3500SE
2005	Ian Hall	Darrian T98-GTR
2006	Rob Pritchard	Caterham-Vauxhall
2007	Paul Dobson	Mazda RX-7
2008	Paul Dobson	Mazda RX-7
2009	Robert Spencer	Stuart Taylor Locosaki
2010	Paul Dobson	Mazda RX-7
2011	Paul Dobson	Mazda RX-7
2012	Dennis Crompton	BMW M3 Evo
2013	Simon Allaway	Lotus Esprit
2014	Steven Hibbert	Lotus Elise
2015	Joe Spencer	Stuart Taylor Locosaki
2016	Paul Rose	Saker RAPX
2017	Joe Spencer	Stuart Taylor Locosaki
2018	Paul Rose	Saker RAPX
2019	Robert Burkinshaw	Honda Integra
2020	Jamie Cryer	Ginetta G20
2021	Jamie Cryer	Ginetta G20
2022	Jon Woolfitt	Spire GTR
2023	Ian Bamber	Ginetta G20

FINISHING STRAIGHT

It's NASCAR's turn to chase the Netflix effect



DOCUMENTARY SERIES
FULL SPEED
Netflix

Full Speed is NASCAR's attempt at cashing in on the docuseries market popularised by F1's *Drive to Survive* and, while it isn't a carbon copy, it follows

a similar format in showcasing the lives of the drivers and their weekend battles out on track.

NASCAR remains king in viewership among US-based racing fans, but the younger demographic is one the series is desperately chasing. A compelling on-track product won't be enough to attract most of them. They need stars. Even non-racing fans know who Dale Earnhardt Jr, Jeff Gordon and Tony Stewart are.

The problem is, those are the stars of yesterday and are no longer behind the wheel. What about the stars of today?

This docuseries had to do more than just showcase all the drama that exists with the 10-race playoffs format NASCAR's Cup series uses to determine the champion. It had to take these drivers and show them in a way not yet seen, bringing their personalities to the fore and really giving people a reason to root for – or perhaps root against – them.

The action, the drama, the politics and the personalities, it's all right there. NASCAR already has a great product, but they need help selling it.



Full Speed opens in a surprising fashion with a pre-race scene for the penultimate race of the year at Martinsville Speedway. It's then followed by an introduction that portrays these drivers as they should be – gladiators facing off in a high-speed arena.

The opening episode covers the regular season finale at Daytona International Speedway, with most drivers in a must-win situation ignored. This ended up being the right move, as it instead focused on explaining the awkward position Denny

Hamlin found himself in. He drives for Joe Gibbs Racing, and Coach Gibbs' grandson was the first driver outside the playoffs. The driver he was chasing? Bubba Wallace, who drives for Hamlin. They spend a lot of time on Hamlin's dilemma and his decision to publicly admit that he would help his driver over his boss's grandson.

Something the show could have really benefited from was going deeper into the preparation of the cars, giving viewers a look at the entire process from the building, wrapping, transporting and so on. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to get just one car from the shop floor to the track on Sunday.

A criticism of *Drive to Survive* was how it left the viewer in suspense over Romain Grosjean's horrific crash during the 2020 Bahrain Grand Prix. Something similar with Ryan Preece's rollover crash at Daytona could have happened, but *Full Speed* chose not to draw it out. Refreshingly, it opted not to overdramatise anything.

The formula for the show became clear from the second episode, with each subsequent one dedicated to a three-race playoff round. We see more of Bubba Wallace, while also being introduced to defending champion Joey Logano. NASCAR's rather complicated playoff





format could have killed the narrative dead if not explained in the right way, but the series didn't spend too much time going into the little complexities of it.

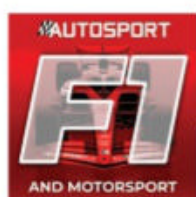
The outro of *Full Speed* is a perfect wrap-up to a show. We get emotional scenes with both of the Hendrick drivers who lost out, Ryan Blaney as he is officially crowned champion and is embraced by his father, as well as final thoughts from the other stars of the show.

Full Speed certainly isn't a *DTS* rip-off, it stands on its own two feet and does exactly what it set out to do. The series could have benefited from additional episodes, as

there were so many other stories that it just wasn't able to tell. Among them: Martin Truex Jr, who won the regular season title before an absolutely disastrous playoffs, was not a featured driver. Neither was two-time champion Kyle Busch, who was embarking on his first season with a new team after 15 years with Joe Gibbs Racing. The end of Kevin Harvick's Cup career and RFK Racing's playoff run was left out as well.

While its five-episode run is to its detriment, that fact proves how much value *Full Speed* has to offer NASCAR fans and those new to it altogether in its short run.

NICK DEGROOT



autosport.com/podcast



The top 10 Max Verstappen wins... so far

"It's tough to remember them all!" That's what happens when you put a Formula 1 driver that's clinched 54 grand prix victories on the spot. Luckily, Autosport's Alex Kalinauckas decided to help out and put together his own list in addition to getting Max Verstappen's own ranking at the Mexican Grand Prix. Joining Alex is Kevin Turner and Motorsport NL's Ronald Vording, as the three debate what is Verstappen's greatest victory so far.



WHAT'S ON

INTERNATIONAL MOTORSPORT

Formula Regional Middle East Round 4/5

Yas Marina, United Arab Emirates

9-10 February

Livestream on Motorsport.tv,
Fri 1330, Sat 0545, 0920

Toyota Formula Regional Oceania Round 4/5

Ruapuna, New Zealand

10-11 February

Livestream on Motorsport.tv,
Sat 0300, Sun 0000, 0300

Asian Le Mans Series

Round 3/3

Yas Marina, United Arab Emirates

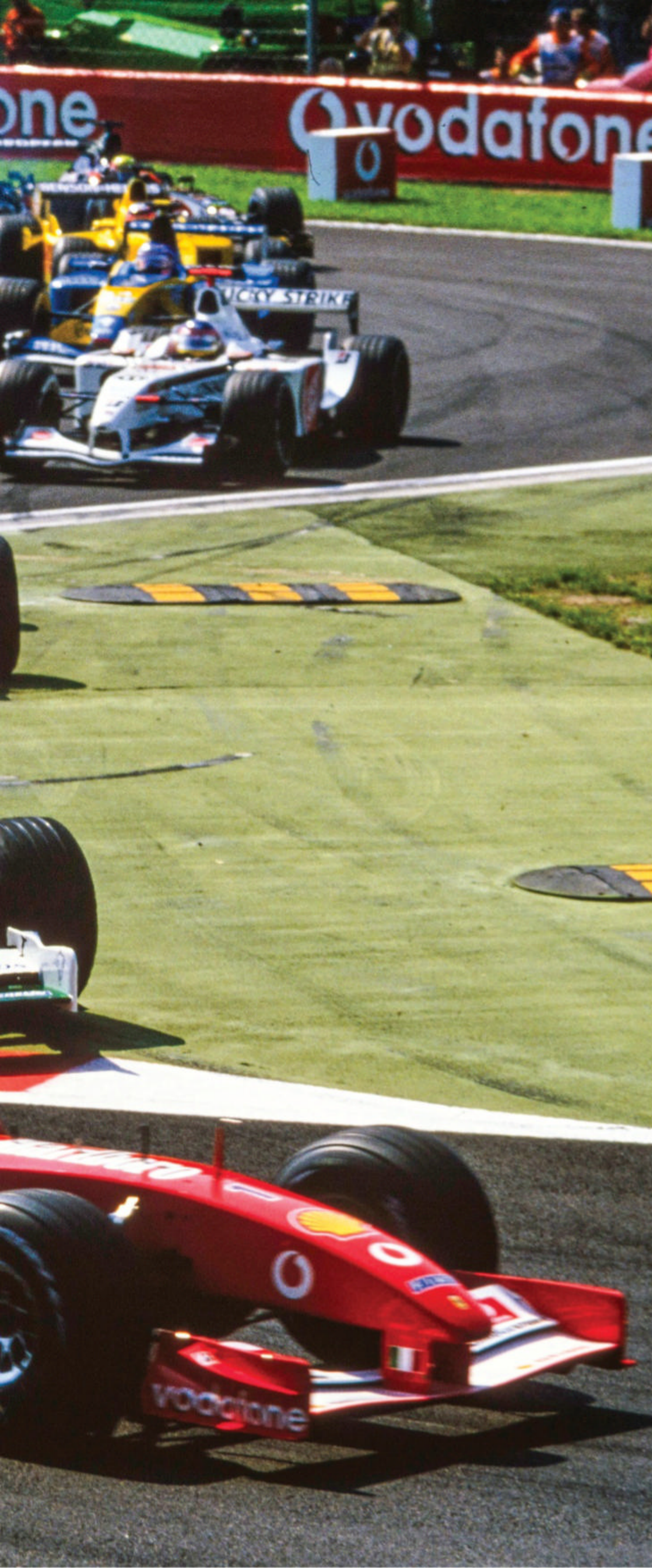
10-11 February

Livestream on Motorsport.tv,
Sat 1030, Sun 1130



Formula Regional
Middle East





FROM THE ARCHIVE

Michael Schumacher (Ferrari F2002) exits the first Monza chicane – at this point in fourth place – while the Jaguar R3Bs of Eddie Irvine and Pedro de la Rosa and Mika Salo's Toyota TF102 take to the run-off on the hectic opening lap of the 2002 Italian Grand Prix. Schumacher had qualified on the front row, but a particularly robust blocking move off the line by polesitter Juan Pablo Montoya (Williams FW24) killed his momentum, allowing his brother Ralf (Montoya's team-mate) and Ferrari #2 Rubens Barrichello to steal ahead from the second row. Moments before this photograph was taken the Williams duo had almost collided at the chicane, Schuey Jr taking a shortcut that put him in front. Instructions to cede position were rendered moot when his BMW engine exploded, the smoke from the conflagration briefly unsighting Montoya and allowing Barrichello to seize the lead. At the flag the Brazilian was followed home in formation by his world champion team-mate, Irvine taking the final podium place, almost a minute behind.



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Peugeot 908 HDi FAP

Just five race outings in the Peugeot 908 are enough for Christian Klien to select it as his favourite racing car. Victory in the 2009 Spa 1000Km when Audi stayed away was the high point of the Austrian's involvement with the turbodiesel LMP1 machine, which ran alongside a test role for BMW-Sauber's Formula 1 team that precluded him from racing more often, before he joined Aston Martin in 2011.

Klien, who started 49 grands prix with Jaguar, Red Bull and Hispania, relished the 'diesel wars' with works budgets that "wasn't too much difference to F1".

"That was an extremely fast car," recalls the 41-year-old. "A lot of power, a lot of downforce, and driving this car in Le Mans was just awesome. The fact that it had a diesel engine in, it was quite special to drive because you had a lot of torque from the bottom end."

Klien finished third on his first competitive outing with the car at the 2008 Le Mans 24 Hours. He concedes "we even could have done better" after he was tipped into the gravel passing a slower car. His first race in anything other than an F1 car since 2003 is one he remembers fondly: "I did for five years only F1 and there isn't so much overtaking, and then you come to Le Mans, you have an LMP1 car, obviously



the quickest on the circuit, so you do lots of overtaking. Standing on that podium was just an incredible feeling."

Klien and Peugeot were narrowly beaten into second place in Petit Le Mans by Audi, and suffered air conditioning and gearbox issues at Sebring in 2009. A dominant victory – they led every lap – at the Spa 1000Km hinted at a strong Le Mans return, but hopes were dashed inside the first hour when contact from another car in the pitlane meant Pedro Lamy had to drive a full lap with a puncture. But Klien has only positive memories of the 908, and singles out an unexpected highlight.

"It was quite silent in the car, so it was not very spectacular let's say, but you could do all the debrief in the car with your race engineer!" he chuckles. "The radio communication was just perfect."

JAMES NEWBOLD



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