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AFTER MONZA... FERRARI FIGHT BACK

BELGIUM 2007

It's been one of the most dramatic weeks in Formula One history, but the crucial action has taken place in Paris, not at the magnificent Spa-Francorchamps circuit. But here in Belgium, the drivers and teams further down the pitlane are still in the hunt for points as the F1 season builds to a climax. Time to go racing.

CLOSE EXAMINATION

Members of the World Motor Sport Council scrutinise the evidence as they deliberate on the spy scandal, which has overshadowed the 2007 season. Their verdict means the race to decide the winner of the constructors' title is all but run. Photography: FIA















FIGHT TO THE FINISH

In the McLaren garage, the team barely had time to come to terms with the FIA verdict before they had to get back to the job of trying to win the drivers' championship. Out on the track, the fans here at Spa were treated to one of the best qualifying sessions of the year. As we prepare to say "au revoir" and "tot ziens" to Europe, the gap between the teams further down the field is closer than ever as they race for the last few points in the constructors' championship.

Photography: LAT, Sutton Images, GEPA, Crispin Thruston



EVERY SECOND COUNTS

While most people are focusing on those at the sharp end of the drivers' title fight, the need to improve by even the smallest margin is no less intense further down the grid. It's been a difficult year for Jenson Button and Honda, but every moment in the car is used as an opportunity to move up the timing screen.

Photography: LAT

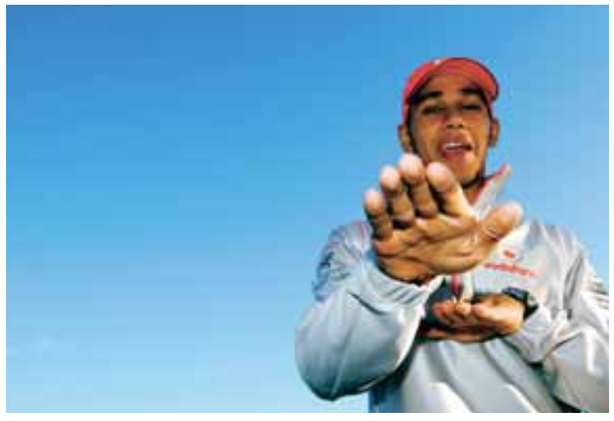


VICTORY DANCE

An emotional Karun Chandhok fights back the tears on the podium as he celebrates his first GP2 win at Spa this morning. The result certainly gives the 23-year-old Indian driver's hopes of a seat in a Spyker next year a big boost. Meanwhile, last year's GP2 champion, Lewis Hamilton, discusses the perfect overtaking move during his track walk, either that or he was busting moves while they played Kanye West on the tannoy. Photography: Sutton Images











CLOSE TO THE MARK

After a scare in the second qualifying session yesterday, Mark Webber focuses on today's main event. Red Bull's Australian driver missed his last run in qualifying and had to hold his breath while he waited to see if he would reach the last 10. In the end, he got through and today he lined up in seventh place on the grid, after Robert Kubica was penalised for an engine change. Photography: LAT



BATTLE BEGINS

The Ferraris made a clean getaway at the start. As the field headed into La Source, Lewis Hamilton challenged Fernando Alonso for third. But Alonso refused to give up the place and forced the Briton wide and off-track on the exit. The constructors' battle may be over for McLaren but the drivers' fight is still very much alive.

Photography: Crispin Thruston



PASS MASTER

With Heikki Kovalainen on a heavy fuel strategy, Nick Heidfeld knew he'd have to pass the Finn to maintain his strong championship charge. The BMW-Sauber driver didn't waste any time, making a brave move stick within a few laps of the start.

Photography: Thomas Butler











F1 FACTORY

Leaving Spa, Formula One says goodbye to GP2. With GP2 heading to a thrilling title showdown in Valencia, F1 will be a quieter place for the rest of the season – and the poorer for it. So to celebrate some great racing, The Red Bulletin looks back over the thrills and spills of the GP2 season to date.

TEN OF THE BEST PART 1

Not necessarily the good, the bad or the ugly, merely the 10 most memorable GP2 moments of the 2007 season...

1 SUNDAY MORNING IN BAHRAIN

A fabulous race and a microcosm of GP2 2007. Nicolas Lapierre – who must be the unluckiest driver in the world –on form putting his 2006 Monaco injury in the past, to take a well-deserved victory. But everything happened behind him. Off the line Lucas di Grassi and Andreas Zuber touched, Bruno Senna joined the group mid-accident and the safety car paid its first – but not last – visit of the season. Kazuki Nakajima showed himself to be quick and fearless, setting a fastest lap and terrorising his rivals with some overly optimistic passing attempts. It set the tempo for the magnificent season that followed.

2 JAVIER VILLA'S CELEBRATIONS

While winners always look happy, no-one comes close to Racing Engineering's Javier Villa, GP2's Sunday specialist. With wins in France, Germany and Hungary, Javier never looks like a man who's just won a motor-race: he looks like a man who's just won a motor-race, been given a pay-rise, a yacht, a puppy, and an unexpected present by his grid girl.

3 BRUNO SENNA ON THE TOP STEP OF THE PODIUM, BARCELONA

Excellent team strategy and a clever, effective drive took the Senna name back to the top stop of the podium. Proof, if any were needed, that Bruno has his seat on merit.

4 VILLA HOLDING OFF ADAM CARROLL IN HUNGARY

GP2 is all about overtaking. So much so, it is the rarer moment of valiant defensive driving that catches the eye. Adam Carroll was on a charge in Hungary. After winning race one, the FMS driver cruised into second position in race two, before coming up against the brick wall of Villa. Villa didn't move – and afterwards seemed more happy to hold off his former team-mate than to win the race – and we've already mentioned how happy that makes him.

5 HIRATE AND NAKAJIMA FIGHTING FOR SECOND AT THE NÜRBURGRING

With Javier Villa disappearing into the distance, attention at the Nürburgring switched to the battle for second, where Kazuki Nakajima was desperately trying to get past the resolute Kohei Hirate. Lap after lap the DAMS car tried to find a way around – over or through – the Trident, but with no luck, thanks to a very cool performance from Hirate. In the end, the pair crossed the line less than thee one-hundredths apart. The future of Japanese racing looks good.

6 PASTOR MALDONADO WINNING IN MONACO

Pastor put together the most dominant race of the season with pole, fastest lap and a commanding victory. He then proceeded to drown his Trident team principal, Alessandro Alunni Bravi, in champagne.

7 ADAM AND PASTOR AT SILVERSTONE

Another epic battle, but this time with a successful move at the end of it. Sunday morning at Silverstone saw Maldonado and Carroll pull away from the field, with Carroll clearly frustrated at not being able to get by. Lap after lap he followed, before finally finding a way through at Bridge, going on to record his first victory of the season. It was only one week after he got in the car for the first time.

8 THE ENTIRE FEATURE RACE AT MONZA

GP2 drivers don't need a second invitation to attempt an optimistic passing move, so given Monza's long straights, chicanes and tiny braking areas, the outcome was as predictable as it was marvellous to behold: there was kerb-jumping, brake-locking mayhem, with half the field not finishing and the other half receiving a post-race judicial censure from race control. Oh, and a home winner in Giorgio 'Mr Monza' Pantano of Campos.



9 ERNESTO VISO CRASHES

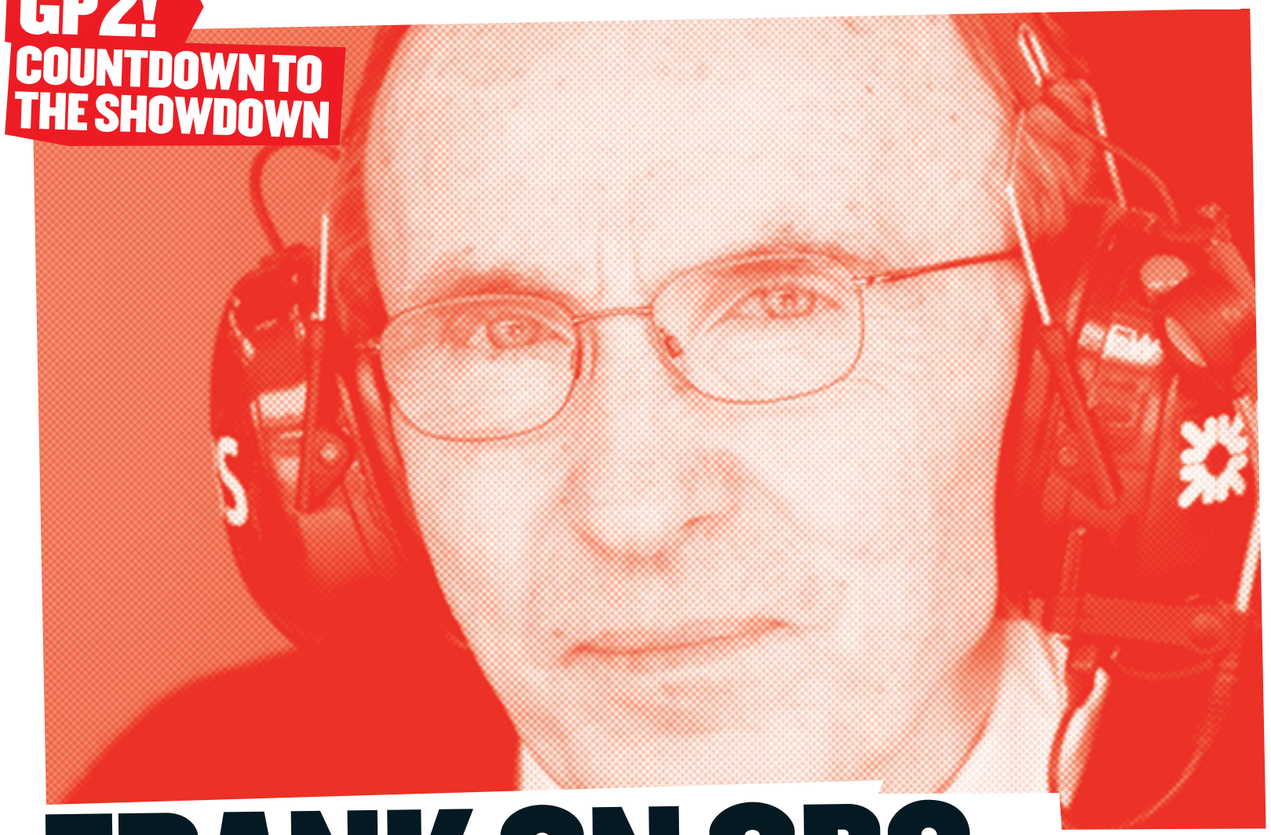
With people on the pitwall at Magny-Cours still shaking their heads after the iSport coming together (see below), halfway around the lap something more dramatic happened. Ernesto Viso, back for his first race of the season with Racing Engineering, had a horrific accident: getting airborne off the back of Michael Ammermüller's ART and smashing into the concrete dividing wall before barrel-rolling. Horrific scenes, thankfully resulting in no lasting damage.

10 ZUBER AND GLOCK COMMIT PROFESSIONAL SUICIDE

With iSport emerging as the form team of 2007, it wasn't a surprise to see Timo Glock and Andreas Zuber make it an all-iSport front row at Magny-Cours. It wasn't a surprise to see them line up at combative angles in a game of iSport chicken, both trying to take the centre line into turn one. More surprising, though, was seeing them hold that line, collide and take both cars out of the race in the first 50m. Paddock rumours suggest iSport mechanics later fixed repelling magnets to the top of each car. ➜

PHOTOGRAPHY: DPPI, SUTTON IMAGES, REUTERS, XPB

GP2!
COUNTDOWN TO THE SHOWDOWN



FRANK ON GP2

Whenever GP2 races, Sir Frank Williams will never be far from a monitor. Matt Youson talks to one of GP2's most influential observers...

Out on track, GP2 cars stream towards the Rettifilio chicane. Given the length of the main straight at Monza, they arrive in the braking zone at speeds comparable to the F1 cars that will compete later. Unlike that F1 race, rarely a lap goes by without an incident: an attempted pass; locked tyres; a missed chicane. In the F1 paddock, Sir Frank Williams stares up at his motorhome monitors, thoroughly absorbed in the battle. This is not an unusual sight.

Williams' concentration only becomes truly apparent when it breaks, turning to discuss a race incident with Patrick Head, or anyone else who happens to be nearby. There are shared observations about a particular style or temperament, comments about strategy. Occasionally, there is just the ghost of a smile. It isn't entirely obvious whether he's watching for business or pleasure. Earlier in the day, that question itself raises a smile: "My reasons are primarily selfish. I want to see who's up and coming… though the racing is enjoyable, too…"

The point of view will be repeated up and down the F1 paddock. Many of Formula One's grandees seem fascinated with GP2 in a way that wasn't so readily apparent with the preceding format, F3000. So, just what is it that makes GP2 so attractive to the decision-makers of F1? "It's just very, very good; the format works. Simple as that," says Williams. "I admire the attitude and approach it takes. It provides entertainment and competitive cars. I also think reversing the grid has been very successful. I like that a lot.

"We – by which I mean the people within this team – respect the format because it has a lot of power. We're not talking a sterile 300-400 horsepower: these are fast cars, faster than an F1 car of only 15 years ago… maybe faster than an F1 car of 10 years ago. The cars can't be easy to drive, I imagine, with all that power.

"The racing also seems to be very competitive. It is prone to a lot of aggressive driving, and I think it rewards that aggression – but punishes over-aggression. The most significant thing for people like myself, is that it's pretty apparent it's the next best thing to F1 and obviously the place to find the next generation of grand prix drivers. There's no doubt that if a guy wins GP2, he's going to be a very worthwhile candidate for an F1 seat. It is the place you automatically look first. It is almost the only place you look."

GP2 has a habit of drawing winners from many teams, and as has been the case in seasons past, the driver's championship looks to be decided in a two-horse race: following Rosberg and Kovalainen in 2005, Hamilton and Piquet Jr in 2006, this season sees iSport's Timo Glock and ART's Lucas di Grassi emerging at the sharp end over recent races – but it isn't only the winners that catch Williams' eye. "Obviously winning is tremendously important, but it isn't the only thing I'm looking for in a potential F1 driver. I want to see who makes the fewest mistakes, who defends a position well, who does the most overtaking. There's a lot to learn from paying attention to the race rather than just looking at the results."

'IT'S PRETTY APPARENT GP2 IS THE NEXT BEST THING TO F1 AND THE PLACE TO FIND THE NEXT GENERATION OF GRAND PRIX DRIVERS'

It has to be said that Williams didn't have to look beyond the podium to recruit his current team leader. Nico Rosberg tested briefly for WilliamsF1 as a teenager (alongside Nelson Piquet Jr) but it was in GP2 that he really caught the eye. "It was obvious Nico had it," says Williams. "Sam Michael first drew my attention to him, saying that he had become a real charger. I first started to pay attention properly at Barcelona 2005, when he kept setting purple times lap after lap – and he kept doing it all season. It was obvious that he was an exceptional talent, and after seeing him in GP2 there was no doubt at all that he would make it in F1. He was racing hard against Heikki Kovalainen and got the better of him. I suppose it's a shame that Lewis wasn't there that year as well. That would have been very interesting."

Nico made a clean switch from GP2, coming into F1 with relatively little running before his winter testing programme. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that he suffered a slump in form in that first F1 season. Today, the preferred path for those marked out as having potential, is to contest the GP2 series alongside a limited F1 testing programme. WilliamsF1 have followed this route with Kazuki Nakajima, the Toyota prodigy acting as test and reserve driver, while also driving the FW29 on Fridays at the flyaway races. Constantly switching between two very different, high-performance cars brings with it a burden, but one which Williams has no hesitation in seeing his young charge carry. "It goes back to the earlier point. These cars provide for great racing and it is a great place for a driver to gain experience. Of course, we have a special interest in Nakajima and will continue to do so. For an F1 team, GP2 is a great place to compare one driver with another. At the moment I'm a little puzzled by Nakajima's spate of collisions – is it just a young man being over-aggressive, or is it carelessness and poor judgement?

"Regardless, it doesn't affect his work in our car. The reports he submits and the feedback are useful and our guys value his input. He's not frightened of the car and isn't much off the pace of the race drivers. That bodes well for his future."

There has been a suggestion made by more than one commentator that, with F1 running out of 'little' teams, the GP2 series has become part crèche, part surrogate home for the young, quick, obviously-talented driver who needs a few rough edges smoothed out before getting into the very serious business that F1 has become. While this is contentious, there is little doubt that GP2 functions as a proving ground.

'IT WAS OBVIOUS NICO HAD IT. I REALLY STARTED TO PAY ATTENTION AT BARCELONA 2005 WHEN HE KEPT SETTING PURPLE TIMES'

"We still keep an eye on the British F3 series and the Euro F3 series, but really the only place we're going to look for new drivers is GP2," acknowledges Williams. "We prepare our drivers in the simulator before each F1 race, but that only works to a certain extent. There is no substitute for prior knowledge of driving something very powerful, on the circuits where we race, in a competitive environment. That means GP2 or sportscars – and the problem with sportscars is that they are not so easy to throw around. GP2, on the other hand, has everything we like to see: 600-plus horsepower, ground effect, grippy tyres… Hats off to Flavio, GP2 is a very good series indeed."

The race at Monza over, marshals begin to clean up the debris from the collisions. Trucks tow bent chassis back to the GP2 paddock. In race control, stewards are busy working out how many penalties to hand out – as usual it is quite a few. It's been an exciting race, with a home win for Giorgio Pantano, in his Campos, who scored his third successive Monza GP2 victory. It was, as always, very entertaining. Williams watched with his usual keen eye – though what he saw, only he knows.



In 2005 Nico Rosberg and Heikki Kovalainen fought for the GP2 title, with Rosberg coming out on top. Both now have F1 drives.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAT, SUTTON IMAGES

20 REASONS WHY...

GP2 IS BETTER THAN F1

1 PR-SPEAK
F1 driver says: "The team is working hard to rectify the problems and we're confident of being more competitive at the next race." GP2 driver says: "The car was crap."

2 PADDOCK
GP2 truckies put up a tent, rather than try to construct the Bilbao Guggenheim.

3 COOLING
Race in a hot country? F1 solution: 3000kWh air-conditioning; GP2 solution: paddling pool.

4 SLICKS
Aerodynamicists will talk about an F1 car having 1500 per cent more downforce than GP2, but everyone else sees GP2 cars on big fat slick tyres, passing each other. A lot.

5 RIVALRY
F1 team-mates show their dislike by bitching to journalists. GP2 drivers just ram each other on the starting line.

6 NICOLAS LAPIERRE
As unavoidably fascinating to watch as an atheist holding a metal umbrella on top of a mountain during a thunderstorm.

7 SELF-PRESERVATION
The young have a firm belief in their own invulnerability. This allows them to attempt passes wiser drivers would avoid.

8 STUPID
Most F1 drivers understand that four cars won't fit through a chicane three cars wide. GP2 drivers think four cars might. (Actually, GP2 drivers think 15 might.)

9 SEASON
More races, fewer weekends.

10 LENGTH
Like F1, GP2 has a first lap, pitstops and a chequered flag. It just cuts out a lot of the boring bits in between.

11 KAZUKI NAKAJIMA
Excites crowds like the young Takuma Sato – but with less caution or common sense...

12 LUNCH
GP2 teams all sit down to lunch in the same room. Rather than settle their differences in court, they throw bread rolls at each other.

13 TECHNOLOGY
Races are won by drivers and race engineers, not wind-tunnels and computer labs.

14 AGE
At least one of the GP2 drivers looks as if he's only 13 years old. And he's won three races already this season. Of course, if his mother finds out he's racing, and not in his room, studying, he's in big trouble...

15 TRACTION CONTROL
The only driver aid in a GP2 car is the steering wheel.

16 MEDIA
Imagine telling F1 press officers that you want to take the top six drivers to the local waterslide and have them race each other. Then try to imagine the answer being "Sure, sounds like fun. What time do you want our boys there?"

17 INTERNATIONAL
Does F1 have a Dane, an Indian, a South African, a Turk, two Venezuelans and a Chinese driver? We think not.

18 FRANCE
Motorsport isn't valid unless there are French teams and French drivers. GP2 has two of each.

19 TESTING
Nelson Piquet Jr tests the Renault F1 car and improves it; Nelson Piquet Jr tests the 2008 GP2 car to make it more difficult to drive...

20 WINNERS
The teams in F1 that have won this season: Ferrari; McLaren. The teams in GP2 that have won this season: Super Nova; DAMS; Arden; iSport; Trident; Campos; Racing Engineering; FMS; ART; Durango. Enough said. ➜

GP2! COUNTDOWN TO THE SHOWDOWN









TEN OF THE BEST PART 2

Will Buxton, GP2's press man and primary cheerleader, recollects his 10 favourite off-track moments of the season.

1 MONZA GRID GIRLS EATING BREAKFAST

Christian Staurenghi and his hospitality crew cater for the entire GP2 Series community over the course of a weekend. They work some of the longest hours in the paddock, and their all-encompassing hospitality, to which all are welcome from big paddock and small, has seen its popularity rise over the three years of the series. Even some of the Formula One drivers have been known to have dinner every once in a while to escape the media glare. But even Christian was surprised to find the glorious sight of all Monza's grid girls sitting down to breakfast on Sunday morning. As the hospitality-guru himself stated, it made getting up early seem all the more worthwhile that day.

2 GOING THE LONG WAY ROUND

Getting to the GP2 paddock in 2007 hasn't been as easy as in previous years. Most notable in their tales of lengthy trips were technical chief Didier Perrin whose GPS sent him to the wrong country, and Racing Engineering boss Alfonso de Orleans Borbon who was denied entry to Turkey for five hours by border police who didn't believe he owned his magnificent Mercedes.

3 THURSDAY NIGHT IN BAHRAIN

The GP2 Series launch party in Bahrain was memorable because it was over before it really got going. As the local weather changed, high winds and rain battered the track, apparently picking up most of the FOM TV compound and depositing it on the other side of the circuit. The GP2 launch party was infiltrated by the local security guards and shut down rapidly as the venue was only a temporary structure, and also at risk from collapse. Step forward Nelson Piquet Jr who declared the party would continue at his hotel. Legend.

4 WATCHING THE F1 RACE AT THE NÜRBURGRING

Usually, it's the GP2 races that provide an element of uncertainty, but at the Nürburgring we were treated to an F1 delight. Having experienced how quickly the weather could change in practice, the paddock looked towards the clouds and gave a prediction of a deluge just in time for the F1 start. By this point, the hospitality unit was rammed full of almost the entire paddock hiding from the rain. What followed was one of the most memorable moments of the season. As each new person arrived, the entire room, in chorus, would proclaim that Markus Winkelhock was leading, to the disbelief of the new arrival, and as driver after driver crashed out at Turn 1, the venue resounded to the cheers of the assembly, which increased in volume with every spin into the gravel.

'SEEING ERNESTO BACK IN THE PADDOCK AND KNOWING HE WAS OK WAS THE BEST MOMENT OF WHAT HAS BEEN AN AMAZING YEAR'

5 BRUNO'S SEXY PHOTO SHOOT

In Barcelona, media attention on one of GP2's 2007 rookies reached a high, as Bruno Senna took his first win. Bruno's weekend had started off with a photoshoot for GQ magazine and, after posing in a pair of frighteningly revealing pants for one shot, he was then sent off down the main road in his overalls, pretending to hitchhike. Bruno was surprised when a car pulled over to offer him a ride. What came as a greater shock was when he was later told that the part of road he'd been walking down was where local prostitutes hung out. Suddenly the story of a random man offering him a lift became more amusing.

6 ZUBER'S HONEST ANSWER

GP2 Series press conferences can be unruly occasions, where drivers outside the top three will often turn up to hear their rivals' opinions and even to challenge them over racing incidents. The answers given are almost always entirely honest and rarely politically correct. Which was why the look on a certain journalist's face during one such conference will go down as one of the best moments of the year. This writer posed his question to Andi Zuber who, with a baffled look simply stated, "That's a shit question." To be fair, it was.

7 LEWIS' PRESS CONFERENCE IN HUNGARY

GP2 is like a big family, with an amazing community spirit. These emotions don't end when our boys graduate to F1, as evidenced in Hungary. As usual, the hospitality unit was full for F1 qualifying, and when the "incident" involving Lewis and Fernando occurred, there were shouts of protest. The usual departure at qualifying's end was delayed as everyone waited for the press conference and Lewis' reaction. Then came the question. By how much had he missed the cut-off point? "By about as much time as I was held in the pits" was Lewis' reply. Queue cheers and a standing ovation.

8 THE RED BULLETIN WATERSLIDE CHALLENGE

One of the best moments of the year came courtesy of The Red Bulletin as the top six in the championship took to the Aquapark at Budapest for the Big Splash challenge. Glock, di Grassi, Filippi, Maldonado, Pantano and Nakajima all put on their swimsuits and leapt down the slide, much to the amusement of the general public and Red Bulletin staff. Lucas di Grassi came out on top, smiling the widest smile he'd worn all season, before laughing with us all that "It's the first race I've won all year!"

9 PLAYING A JOKE ON ALFONSO

Racing Engineering boss Alfonso de Orleans Borbon is famous for wearing shorts and sandals. But at Silverstone, he got the shock of his life when he received a call to the Stewards' office for breaching the GP2 Series Sporting Regulations over appropriate attire in the pitlane. Alfonso ran up to the Stewards, who looked as surprised as he did over the communication. Then they noticed the signatures – Mickey Mouse, Tony Blair and Jackie Stewart. Alfonso returned to the pits to find GP2's Marco Codello and Didier Perrin giggling uncontrollably.

10 SEEING ERNESTO VISO AFTER HIS CRASH

Magny-Cours brought the reality of the dangers the drivers accept as part of their job description into stark reality. In its third year of competition, the Dallara-designed GP2 Series car did an incredible job of protecting Venezuelan Ernesto Viso, who emerged from one of the biggest accidents the series has ever seen with only concussion. Ernesto has always been one of the most-loved drivers in the paddock and Magny-Cours was supposed to be his comeback to the series. The news of Saturday night's tragic helicopter crash reached us as we entered the paddock on Sunday morning and acted as the final sucker-punch to what was an event we couldn't wait to see finish. But as we walked into the hospitality unit, the first sight that greeted us was Ernesto, his neck in a bright blue brace, smiling and laughing. Knowing that he was OK, and seeing him back in the paddock, was the single best memory I will take from what has been an amazing year.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GP2 SERIES, THOMAS BUTLER

NOTHING IS EVER EASY

With GP2's new car soon to be launched, the series' technical director, Didier Perrin, explains the peculiarities of designing for a single-make series.

THE 2008 CAR: ALL PART OF THE MASTERPLAN



The premise behind Formula One is that a set of rules is established, and everyone builds a car to go as fast as it can within them. In GP2, the organisers decide how fast they want the cars to go, and then establish a set of rules to accommodate that. It's one of many quirks that make the work of GP2 technical director Didier Perrin so fascinating.

Next year will mark the fourth season of GP2, and the launch of its second car. It is, explains Perrin, all part of the masterplan: "The idea for GP2 was to produce a new car every three years – in that way we could keep the development costs low. The original target was to have a design close to F1, with an ideal pole-position time about six seconds off a midfield F1 position. We achieved that in 2005 – our first season – and it's more or less what we achieve now."

GP2's method of stabilising its performance gap, while retaining the same car, has been to alter its specification each year – for example changing maximum wing angles, adding chimneys, extra downforce, etc. The reasons for doing so have been a desire to ensure that experienced teams cannot rely on historical data, elevating the importance of good driver feedback to a premium. The new car will provide more of the same.



"The car is designed for three seasons," continues Perrin. "The new car being tested now has to be quick in 2010, so we won't deliver the entire package in 2008, allowing it to increase its pace in 2009 and 2010. We are staying with the same intention of being six seconds off the mid-grid F1 cars. Of course that means we have to estimate how fast a 2010 F1 car will be. We will have some flexibility – but I'll also be looking in the crystal ball! The most straightforward change will be to increase the levels of downforce, but we will also have a suspension modification in our pocket and an engine evolution."

The cost-effective car is one of three central tenets in GP2, the others, says Perrin "are a car that must be tricky to drive, and a series that will provide a good show." These two are intimately linked. The lack of driver aids, combined with the slick tyres, downforce and inexperience of the drivers has created a series of exciting races. It does, however, present something of a problem for test drivers Nelson Piquet Jr and Olivier Pla, developing the new car. "They are a bit surprised," conceded Perrin. "Every time they finish a session and tell us a new part makes the car better, we'll take that part away. It's a philosophy that takes some understanding! We are not trying to produce a downgraded car, we just want to create the car that will best present the GP2 drivers with an opportunity to show their skill."

FUJI'S LEGEND LIVES ON

F1 returns to Japan's Fuji circuit in two weeks' time, 30 years after the original track hosted the first two Japanese grands prix. Heinz Prüller recalls the momentous 1976 race.



The Japanese, very traditional people, have an old saying: "Whoever is lucky enough to see the top of our Fujiyama in bright sunshine is guaranteed good fortune and health and wealth by our gods for his entire life."

Niki Lauda and James Hunt, who were fighting for the F1 crown on October 24, 1976, only saw Japan's holy mountain beside the Fuji circuit covered in fog and through heavy rain.

Conditions that year were truly appalling: cars and drivers almost washed away in the last 15-minute warm-up, and with most aquaplaning all around the track, it seemed obvious the race would be cancelled.

But Bernie Ecclestone, then owner of the Brabham team, was neutral. "Whoever's happy to drive, good luck to them. But we won't force anybody," he said.

Max Mosley, then the boss of constructor March, fought desperately to have the race run because his young, daredevil driver Hans-Joachim Stuck was four seconds quicker than anyone else in practice.

But Niki Lauda, reigning champion, warned Max: "Stuck is too young, but as team boss it's your responsibility to tell Ronnie Peterson [his team-mate] what's going on out there."

Mosley deferred to Lauda's wisdom and experience, conceding: "You're right."

Lauda had been shocked at the sight of a helpless John Watson spinning in front of him, heading straight for his Ferrari, before skidding away at the last possible moment. "In the race," Niki said, "somebody will get T-boned, the other guy will drive straight through him and both will be killed without even knowing."

Was the world championship, or even a race win, worth the risk? Niki had come back to race after being nearly killed at the Nürburgring. He was read the last rites before he returned sensationally at Monza only six weeks after he had escaped death. But the comeback had drained him. "Under normal circumstances in Fuji," he says, 31 years later, "I could have lived with it. But not in the rain."

Hunt, meanwhile, Lauda's title rival, had won both the Canadian and the US GPs immediately before Japan. I remember a dinner with Lauda and Hunt, barefoot as always, in the Glen Motor Inn at Watkins Glen, that year's venue for the GP. "Be honest, James," asked Niki, "how desperately do you really want this title?"

Hunt gave him a straight answer: "Very much, Niki. Because I may never get the chance again. And by being world champion, I'd be free to retire at any time instead of going on and on until I kill myself."

"Wrong thinking, James," Niki corrected his rival. "In motor racing you should never put yourself under pressure. Look at me: I will stop whenever I want."

So when the Fuji Speedway was flooded by torrential rain, he was as good as his word. Daniel Audetto, Ferrari team manager, told the race director that Ferrari would start, but Lauda said: "In that case, you'll have to drive yourself."

The floods provoked this suggestion from Hunt: "We might as well do some jogging for the world title or play backgammon, Niki. What would you prefer?"

The race, of course, took place, but almost in darkness at the start.

Lauda promised himself: "I'll stay within my limits." Third after the first corner, he drove with extreme caution and was quickly overtaken by five cars. By the end of the first lap he was 10th. After lap two, in 21st position, he crawled to the pits. "I am not suicidal," he said. "I don't care what the world will think of me."

He was not the only one to give up: two-time world champion Emerson Fittipaldi and both Bernie's Brabham drivers, Carlos Pace and Larry Perkins, joined him. But they had not given away a world title. And they were not driving for Ferrari.

Mauro Forghieri, the Scuderia's designer, and Audetto almost dived into the cockpit when Lauda pitted, suggesting to their driver: "Niki, we'll tell Enzo it was an engine problem."

Lauda, popping his belts and standing up in the cockpit, thought for a split second: "Good idea, because in motor racing, it's always someone else who is to blame," but then he immediately put his mind into reverse: "No way! I never lie. Otherwise, for the rest of my life I'll be hearing from Enzo Ferrari that Lauda was looking for an excuse.

"And what's more I didn't lose the championship at Fuji, I lost it at the Nürburgring and when the engine blew-up at Paul Ricard when I was leading by half a minute."

Most people admired Lauda's courage. Only Mario Andretti doubted him: "Niki will regret that decision until the end of his life – he will pay the price for it quite soon."

But at least the great Juan Manuel Fangio showed more respect to the Austrian: "What Niki did, honours his name. To stop was more difficult than to race."

"Lauda out," shone the McLaren pit signal through the heavy curtain of rain and fog as Hunt went by for the third time. Later Hunt admitted to me: "I would have given up, too, if I hadn't been in the lead. I was the only one with a clear view."

For a few laps, Lauda watched indifferently from the pits. "But when the rain stopped and the circuit dried," he said, "I realised: wrong decision." At about half distance he climbed into a waiting Rolls-Royce with his wife Marlene and was driven by a quiet Japanese driver with white gloves to Narita airport – more like a VIP on his way home for dinner than a champion who had fought for his life and the world title. And even as he left he might still have taken the crown because Hunt had to finish at least third to beat Niki by one point.

"But that was something I could no longer influence," he says. "Whether I watched from the pitwall or flew home, it wasn't going to change a thing. And there are more important things in life than being world champion. To survive, most of all."

Meanwhile at Fuji, all hell broke loose. The chocolate-soft rain tyres overheated, lost rubber and Hunt gestured desperately every time he passed his pit. "What shall I do?" he demanded.

Then his left front tyre exploded. It took the mechanics 27 seconds to change all four tyres, a record at that time. But Hunt fell back to sixth. Lauda, halfway to Tokyo, was world champion for a few minutes, even if he didn't know it. But then Hunt started his fight back and took the flag in almost complete darkness to finish third, and shouted at McLaren team boss Teddy Mayer: "Only fifth or sixth, you bloody idiots, why the hell didn't you get me in earlier?"

Teddy grinned: "Why are you complaining, James? You've just become world champion!'

Sixty-nine points to 68. One point, one life. But there was one guy who didn't know what had happened – Niki Lauda. Sitting in his comfortable Rolls-Royce was more like being on a bed of nails he was so edgy and desperate for information.

The Japanese driver searched on the car radio and finally found a station broadcasting in English. With excitement in his voice, the newsreader announced: "And now to sports: the winner of the Formula One world championship in Fuji today is…" But then, as if in a bad B-movie, the Rolls passed under a bridge at that very moment and the voice was gone. It was almost unbearable.

Soon, though, he was at Narita airport and saw the face of the Japanese Ferrari dealer who had come to see him off officially. His expression told him everything he needed to know: Hunt was world champion.

When Enzo Ferrari received the news, the Commendatore was unexpectedly nice: "No accusation. You should not feel guilty. Ferrari prefers a living Lauda to a dead Lauda."

Only the German daily Bild wrote: "Yes, the ice-cold world champion was frightened." The Italian press were more understanding: "Lauda has taken off his robot-suit. He is the only one who knows the borderline to craziness. Hunt is world champion, but Lauda is a human being."

Many years later, when Hunt died, I asked Niki for an obituary. "You can write: 'He won the world title in an inferior car to my Ferrari.'"

"But Niki," I said to him, "you always said that in 1976 the McLaren was the better car."

"Yes, but I would like to say some nice farewell words about James."

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAT; SUTTON IMAGES



'I DIDN'T LOSE THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP AT FUJI, I LOST IT AT THE NÜRBURGRING'
NIKI LAUDA

FORMULA UNA BELGIUM
JULIE CASIER



THE GOOD NEWS KEEPS COMING FOR JULIE. The 19-year-old has just finished her first year at college in Antwerp and got top grades in all her exams. And now she's going to Brazil to represent Belgium in the Una grand final. She said Spa has been the best weekend of her life. "I'm looking forward to meeting all the girls in Brazil, if it's like this weekend, it will be great."

PHOTOGRAPHY: THOMAS BUTLER

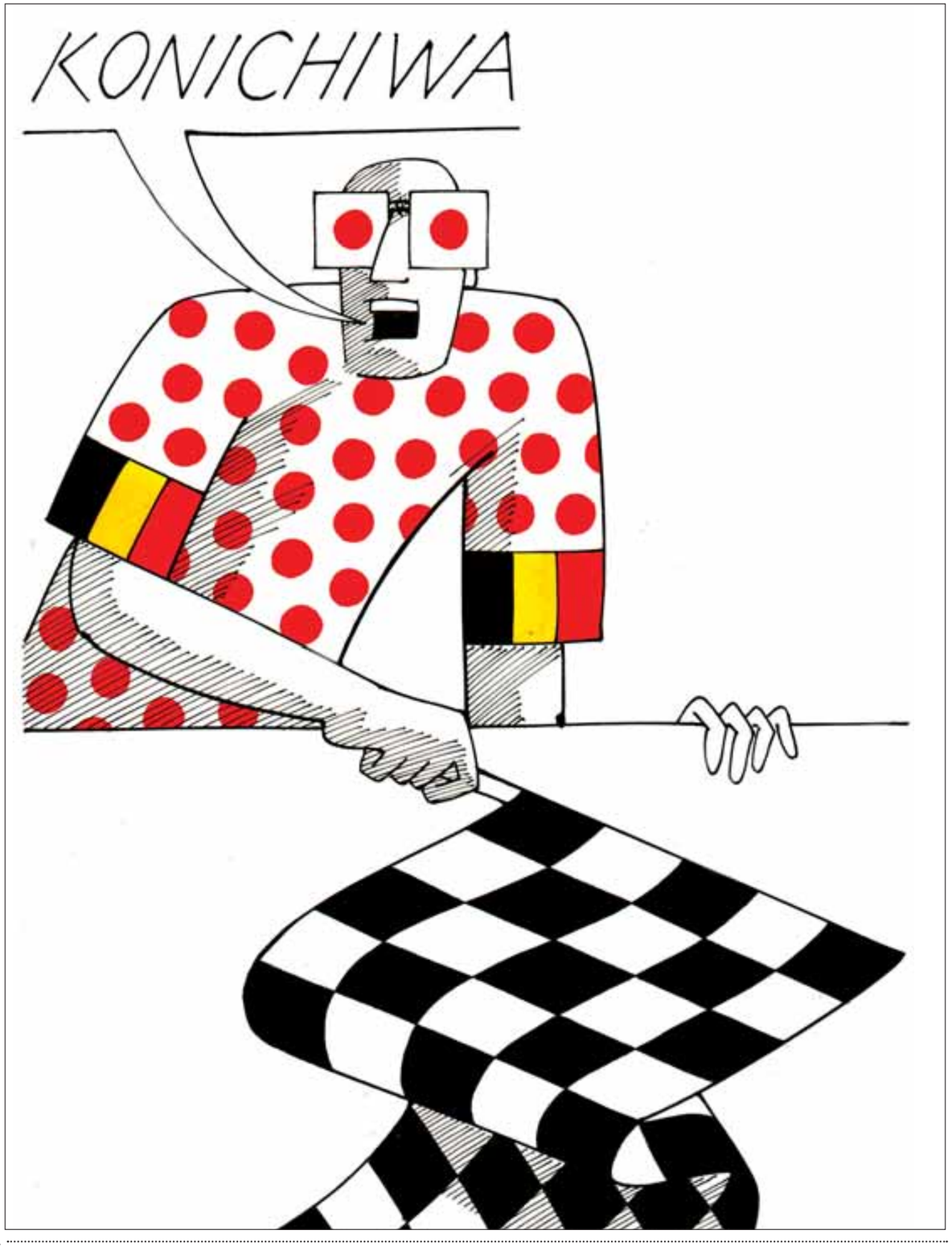


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BEL'07 RACE RESULTS

2 F MASSA FERRARI
1 K RAIKKONEN FERRARI
3 F ALONSO MCLAREN-MERCEDES

RESULTS IN FULL

	DRIVER	TEAM	LAPS	TIME	POINTS
1	Kimi Raikkonen	Ferrari	44	1hr 20:39.066	10
2	Felipe Massa	Ferrari	44	+4.6 secs	8
3	Fernando Alonso	McLaren-Mercedes	44	+14.3 secs	6
4	Lewis Hamilton	McLaren-Mercedes	44	+23.6 secs	5
5	Nick Heidfeld	BMW-Sauber	44	+51.8 secs	4
6	Nico Rosberg	Williams-Toyota	44	+76.8 secs	3
7	Mark Webber	RBR-Renault	44	+80.6 secs	2
8	Heikki Kovalainen	Renault	44	+85.1 secs	1
9	Robert Kubica	BMW-Sauber	44	+85.6 secs	
10	Ralf Schumacher	Toyota	44	+88.5 secs	
11	Jarno Trulli	Toyota	43	+1 lap	
12	Vitantonio Liuzzi	STR-Ferrari	43	+1 lap	
13	Rubens Barrichello	Honda	43	+1 lap	
14	Adrian Sutil	Spyker-Ferrari	43	+1 lap	
15	Takuma Sato	Super Aguri-Honda	43	+1 lap	
16	Anthony Davidson	Super Aguri-Honda	43	+1 lap	
17	Sakon Yamamoto	Spyker-Ferrari	43	+1 lap	
Ret	Jenson Button	Honda	36	+8 laps	
Ret	Alexander Wurz	Williams-Toyota	34	+10 laps	
Ret	David Coulthard	RBR-Renault	29	+15 laps	
Ret	Sebastian Vettel	STR-Ferrari	8	+36 laps	
Ret	Giancarlo Fisichella	Renault	1	+43 laps	

FASTEST LAP: FELIPE MASSA 1:48.036

DRIVERS' CHAMPIONSHIP

	DRIVER	PTS
1	L Hamilton	97
2	F Alonso	95
3	K Raikkonen	84
4	F Massa	77
5	N Heidfeld	56
6	R Kubica	33
7	H Kovalainen	22
8	G Fisichella	17
9	N Rosberg	15
10	A Wurz	13

CONSTRUCTORS' CHAMPIONSHIP

	TEAM	PTS
1	Ferrari	161
2	BMW-Sauber	90
3	Renault	39
4	Williams-Toyota	28
5	RBR-Renault	18
6	Toyota	12
7	Super Aguri-Honda	4
8	Honda	2
9		
10		

To see more from the weekend visit: WWW.REDBULLETIN.COM

COLIN MCRAE 1968-2007



Journalist Anthony Peacock, who followed McRae's driving career for 10 years, shares his memories of one of motorsport's greatest characters.

One of the world's best-known rally drivers, Colin McRae, died aged 39 with his five-year-old son, Johnny, and two other passengers in a helicopter crash near his home in Scotland, yesterday. Witnesses report that the Squirrel helicopter came down in woodland just a few 100 metres from the McRae family home in Lanark.

Rallying has lost not only a former champion, but also a cult hero. McRae transcended his sport: he inspired the PlayStation generation with the Colin McRae Rally game, and was responsible for the large number of blue Subaru Impreza turbos that we see all over our streets.

He started his professional career with Subaru, winning the British Rally Championship in 1991 and 1992 before graduating to the World Rally Championship with the Prodrive-run team. He powered the iconic Subaru Impreza to the world title in 1995. At age 27, he was the sport's youngest-ever world champion and the first British driver to lift the title.

Sitting in a car with McRae was an unforgettable experience. The speeds were awesome, but the most amazing thing was he made it look easy. His input to the steering wheel was almost languid, his expression impassive. Ford – McRae's team from 1998 to 2002 – once wired heart monitors to the driver to measure his stress levels. Colin's heart rate never faltered – not even when heading for a wall at speed.

It's a painful irony that Colin should die in a helicopter, when he regularly cheated death in a rally car. A number of his accidents were spectacular – perhaps the earliest was as a teenager when he 'borrowed' his mother's new Ford Escort. "The accident started here," he said with a grin, as he pointed out the relevant stretch of road many years later. "And ended here," he proudly concluded, several minutes later.

Colin seemed indestructible, which makes his death even harder to take. His sense of fun was legendary, leading him to crawl through an airport security machine in Nairobi, be driven around the Monaco grand prix circuit in a car boot and ride a motorbike into a hotel in Greece.

His natural talent was astonishing enough to put him just off Martin Brundle's pace when he tested a Jordan F1 car in 1997. He took on the challenge of the Dakar Rally in 2004 and he was due to compete again next year – amid rumours of a return to the WRC. Now we will never know.

Colin is survived by his wife Alison, his daughter Hollie, his brother Alister and his parents: Margaret and five-time British Rally Champion Jimmy McRae.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAT. COVER PICTURE: PETER NYGAARD/GRANDPRIXPHOTO