

CLASSIC DRIVER

Sir Jackie Stewart - "I was the first person to spray champagne in Formula One"

Lead

Great Britain's only triple Formula One World Champion, Sir Jackie Stewart, has dedicated a huge part of his life to top-level motorsport. Classic Driver catches the high-achieving Scot in a relaxed mood...



Sir Jackie, your sporting career has roots in clay pigeon shooting; quickly transferring to motor racing in the early 60s, how were you able to learn your race craft so quickly?

I bought an immaculate Austin A30 when I was 16, working as a mechanic. I drove it everywhere once I'd passed my test at 17. It took me all round the country attending shooting competitions, from Scotland to – on one occasion – Bournemouth, where I won the English Double Rise Championship. Later, I had an Austin-Healey Sprite that was fitted with a Speedwell conversion, supplied by Graham Hill, no less. Also, because my brother was a racing driver, I became very involved as a mechanic, preparing an AC Bristol and a Porsche 356 Super 90 to begin with, attending countless hillclimbs and track races in the process. I was so well bitten by the driving bug from an early age that, when I eventually started to race at around 23, driving and preparing cars was a natural thing. I was straight in and already a seasoned competitor.





Did your skills as a marksman play a role, too?

Yes, my shooting experience also had a lot to do with it. I learnt what I called my 'management' in shooting, a sport which was much more difficult than driving. If you make a mistake in shooting, the opportunity is gone, you've missed the target and you can't get it back. Whereas in a racing car, if I made an error at the chicane at Goodwood for example, I could make it up at Madgwick or St Mary's. Just one mistake in a shooting competition can take you off the podium. This is the reason I had so few excursions off the track during my career: I knew the cost of making mistakes.



When you famously and successfully campaigned to make motor racing safer, what was the biggest hurdle you had to overcome?

It was the complete blindness and ignorance of many of the racetrack organisers, who didn't see any need to improve track safety. The organisers at tracks such as Spa and the Nürburgring were the most obstinate. The naïvete and unawareness was one of the biggest problems – the lack of safety the whole way around both tracks was sacrilege. At Laguna Seca, they had fitted barriers behind trees and couldn't understand why I was complaining and asking for them to be removed.





What about in the UK?

At Brands Hatch, one very important person informed me the trees growing beside the track didn't need removing because they were "only young trees", as if crashing into them didn't hurt. You had to have some sympathy for these people though, as many of the tracks originated as dirt tracks, disused airfields or were in use before World War Two. The biggest challenge was one of education versus culture, a culture that they couldn't understand.

The starting grid at the recent Melbourne Grand Prix was the smallest for a season-opener since 1958... what would you change to attract more F1 entrants?

You could introduce a different class, I suppose, the GP2 cars for example, but it's important not to dilute the integrity of Formula One at the highest level. It remains the blue riband event in motorsport, with the highest rated drivers in the world. However, neither Bernie Ecclestone nor Jackie Stewart wants to see 14 cars on the grid.



Is it a case of capping team budgets?

Team budgets have always been a point of contention in the sport, even as far back as '54, when Mercedes-Benz arrived with its Neubauer transporter, for example. Having recently signed Fangio and Moss — and if we knew how much they were paid we'd be shocked, the German team effectively wiped out the other leading teams, such as Maserati and Ferrari. Maybe the spending has got out of control but, from my experience while operating Stewart Grand Prix, engineers will always want to spend more money in their search for more speed. That's nothing new. Teams have reduced the amount of testing to save money, for God's sake. The fact of the matter is, more than 300,000 people, including myself, attended the Australian Grand Prix — making it a very successful event; the magic is still there. The small grid was a bad start this year but I don't think you should base any judgment on one Grand Prix. In 1966, I was fortunate enough to win at Monaco when there were only four finishers; it's all part of Formula One. Another example: I drove a beautiful Mercedes-Benz W165 last year at Goodwood. This is a car that took 18 months to build in 1938, and was designed to win just one race, at Tripoli. Can you imagine what the budgets were in those days? People look back with stars in their eyes sometimes.



Why are classic cars and the business of ‘gentlemen racers’ so popular at the moment?

The types of cars driven by gentlemen racers were not as accessible in times past; there were no series and no events where they could be used. Nowadays, a great many of these cars are being driven by owner-drivers. There’s a great nostalgia in being able to turn the clock back and drive these beautiful old cars, some of which are performing far better than they ever did — although I suspect many are illegal. Sadly, I don’t think it’s something that will happen with modern Formula One cars, unlike my 40-year-old Tyrrell, which you can just start up and drive. If you were invited to drive someone’s GTO, ERA or Birdcage, you’d jump at it. The lure of historic cars is brighter, stronger and more passionate than ever.



You’re well known for approaching projects with a certain style and correctness, which is very admirable. What can we expect from Sir Jackie in 2015?

Well... still being around, I guess. Still being as passionate for motorsport, still supporting and being able to contribute. Also finding new sponsors. I like to think I’ve brought more money into motorsport than any other driver. Building long-term relationships too, like the association with champagne – I was the first person to spray champagne in Formula One and I’m still with Moët & Chandon 40 years later!

You mentioned Sir Stirling Moss. Was he as much of a lady’s man in the 60s as some of his more recent statements suggest?

Absolutely, (he laughs), although he didn’t describe himself as being a lady’s man, he called it ‘chasing crumpet’ – and still does.

Gallery

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