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James Warburton with SA Premier Peter Malinauskas at last year's bp Grand Final in Adelaide as the pair signed an extension to Adelaide's deal to host the season closer. Image: GettyImages

RIGHT: As an ex-TV person, Warburton staked a lot on the revised commentary team for Supercars this year, which has so far failed to hit any serious goals despite elevations to the roles of James Courtney, Garth Tander and Mark Winterbottom. Image: Peter Norton

# WARBURTON EXIT NOT A SHOCK

James Warburton has departed Supercars less than 12 months into his return as CEO, following a series of operational issues, governance friction and a loss of confidence among key stakeholders, including most team owners.

*Andrew Clarke*

**JAMES WARBURTON** has left his role as the CEO of Supercars, departing on Thursday, 2 April and bringing an early end to his second tenure in charge of the championship after less than 12 months.

Supercars formally announced the departure at 11:45 am via a media release, shortly after chairman Barclay Nettlefold briefed staff and contacted team owners, with all but one reached prior to the public confirmation.

The move has been described as a 'mutual agreement'; however, it follows a period during which a probable exit had been building internally and did not come as a surprise within the paddock.

*Auto Action* understands that after a couple of months working through some issues, there didn't appear to be a way forward, so discussions accelerated in the days leading up to last week.

The terms for his departure were settled on Wednesday, with the relationship to conclude the following day. One of the key issues centred on a payout to the reported $1m-plus executive.

## WARBURTON'S RETURN

**WARBURTON RETURNED** to the CEO position in July last year, replacing Shane Howard, who was the second person to sit in the chair after Warburton's first stint in the big chair – the other being Sean Seamer. His first tenure was widely regarded as commercially successful, highlighted by a major broadcast agreement and a period of expansion for the sport.

His second stint, however, lasted less than 12 months and was shaped by a series of issues across governance friction, operational delivery and stakeholder alignment.

The governance friction arose from reports that Warburton raised concerns with the Supercars board in the weeks leading up to his exit, seeking greater autonomy to execute his strategy. One team principal is known to have supported that position and did so publicly; however, it was not widely accepted




across the paddock as the preferred direction.

Those discussions fell flat and raised concerns around the paddock.

Gradually, Warburton appears to have lost the confidence of most team owners, a significant factor in a category where teams remain central stakeholders – although not shareholders – in the sport's business and governance.

That loss of support followed a series of decisions and outcomes that raised concerns about execution rather than intent.

The issue was not the decision to change the television commentary team, which had been anticipated internally as early as Bathurst last year when *Auto Action* first raised the prospect publicly. By the Adelaide finale, it was widely expected that Neil Crompton and Mark Skaife would not be part of the 2026 broadcast line-up.

Instead, the criticism centred on how that change was handled.

Despite the long lead time, the decision was not formally communicated to the commentators until February, prompting both internal frustration and public scrutiny. The timing and process drew criticism across the industry, particularly given the stature and history of both figures within the sport.

To top it off, the revised broadcast product has also come under early-season pressure. While updated graphics have been introduced, there has been limited change to the overall structure and presentation, and feedback on the new commentary line-up has been underwhelming among both fans and industry stakeholders.

Broadcast performance remains a key commercial pillar for Supercars, placing additional focus on decisions made in that area. Warburton staked a lot on these changes, but his failure to take a step forward put him in the spotlight.

Operational issues also contributed to the broader picture, particularly those of a public nature.

Errors on the Supercars website, including incorrect promotion of event dates, were noted by stakeholders. While relatively minor in isolation, such issues were viewed as indicative of execution inconsistencies.

## LEADERSHIP ISSUES

**THERE WERE** also concerns regarding leadership visibility during race events.

As far as *Auto Action* understands, Warburton did not attend every day that Supercars were on track at Sydney Motorsport Park and Albert Park. That absence was noted by team owners and stakeholders during the opening rounds and added to broader concerns around engagement and presence.

Commercial activity was another area where progress was closely examined.

Discussions around event development, including Perth and the proposed Wollongong street race, did not translate into confirmed outcomes within the expected timeframe. However, Supercars is understood to be announcing this weekend an extended agreement to continue racing in Taupo, which is a positive given the uncertainties of late.

Warburton remained active in promoting the sport publicly during his tenure, including raising potential future initiatives and maintaining visibility in the media. However, those efforts did not offset concerns around the delivery of key commercial and operational objectives.

Internally, Warburton had begun to assemble a leadership structure that included several personnel he had previously worked with. His departure leaves uncertainty around the future of those roles and the direction of the organisation's executive team.

Warburton was reportedly earning more than $1 million annually in the role, reflecting the expectations attached to it regarding both commercial performance and stakeholder management.

## FAILURE TO DELIVER NEW ACTIVITIES

**DESPITE HIS** short tenure, his return initially generated strong support within the industry, with many viewing his experience in both media and sport as a positive for the category.

The decision to part ways was made before Easter, with staff informed the morning after the terms of departure were agreed. Warburton had already left the Sydney office by the time broader internal briefings took place.

Nettlefold, who has served as chairman since leading the consortium that acquired Supercars in 2021, will now oversee day-to-day operations as interim CEO.

His appointment consolidates leadership at a critical point for the category, which continues to navigate commercial, broadcast and strategic priorities in a changing sporting and media landscape.

Supercars will now begin the process of identifying a permanent chief executive, with the focus expected to be on aligning with the current ownership model, ensuring consistent operational delivery, and maintaining stakeholder confidence across teams, partners and broadcasters.

Warburton's second tenure ultimately reflects a period where expectations and outcomes did not align, leading to a change in leadership as the category moves into its next phase.

# WHO IS BARCLAY NETTLEFOLD

**BARCLAY NETTLEFOLD** does not come from the traditional motorsport system. His background is in media, commercial rights and audience growth.

He built his profile as founder and chief executive of QMS Media, growing it into a major player in Australia's outdoor and digital advertising sector before its recent sale. His strength is in converting audience reach into revenue.

That experience has carried into sport through TGI Sport, where he has remained active in sponsorship, venue commercialisation and broadcast-driven revenue models, areas that now underpin Supercars' commercial structure.

Nettlefold also has experience in swimming at an administrative and commercial level, reinforcing a broader approach to sport as a commercial platform, and was a reserve yachtsman for the Olympics in 1988.

He played a key role in assembling the RACE consortium, which acquired 100% ownership of Supercars in 2021, bringing together capital and media expertise to grow the category's value.

Since then, as chairman, his influence has centred on broadcast value, audience growth and sponsor integration.

As former CEO James Warburton put it at the time of his appointment, Nettlefold is a dealmaker, a skill increasingly central to modern motorsport.

**Barclay Nettlefold, Mark Pejic and Shane Howard remain three key players in the Supercars structure, and a governance play to sideline them was destined to fail.**
**Image: Mark Horsburgh**



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# WOLLONGONG LEADS RACE FOR NSW STREET EVENT

Wollongong is now leading the race to host Supercars' next New South Wales street event, with plenty of buzz building for a return to one of the state's coastal cities.

**IT'S BEEN** three years since the Newcastle 500 wrapped up, and while all the early talk was centred on the Hunter Valley, Wollongong has now emerged as the most likely place for the race.

The Newcastle event ran from 2017 to 2023 and pulled in big crowds and solid economic results, but a change in council support brought it to an end. That left a pretty obvious hole in Supercars' NSW calendar which Sydney Motorsport Park has failed to fill.

Since the Wollongong idea went public, it's picked up plenty of support from both industry and government. Still, not everyone in town is on board just yet.

Wollongong's Lord Mayor, Tania Brown, is keeping things grounded. She sees the opportunity but wants to make sure any plan ticks the right boxes for the community.

"This is something that would need to be carefully considered," Brown said.

"We understand the potential economic and tourism benefits, but it's important that any event like this works for residents, businesses and the city as a whole."

With Destination NSW in its corner, Supercars is keen to get another street race up and running in the state, likely at the expense of Sydney Motorsport Park. Street events are still a big deal for the series, with places like Adelaide, Albert Park, Townsville and the Gold Coast pulling big crowds and plenty of support, and with Perth on the horizon.

Supercars' outgoing CEO, James Warburton, confirmed that the category is working closely with government stakeholders to bring a new event to life.

"We have a great partnership with Destination NSW and with their support, we run some fantastic events in the state, the iconic Bathurst 1000, the Bathurst 12 Hour and the Sydney 500," Warburton said.

"We're working closely together to put a New South Wales street race back on the calendar with some options which would be extraordinary.

"You see the enormous impact of street races to communities around the country, like Adelaide, the Gold Coast and Melbourne. We want to do this for New South Wales.

"The Newcastle 500 added $36–40 million to the local economy each year, drawing crowds up to 190,000 over three days.

"The great momentum and growing interest in Supercars and motorsport in general make this the perfect time to revive a street race."

Wollongong has also received support at state level, with NSW Member for Wollongong Paul Scully backing further investigation.

"This could be a fantastic opportunity for Wollongong and should be thoroughly examined," he said.

"Cities should look to have a diverse range of events and attractions.

"An event like this would support more tourism, boost local jobs and has the potential to deliver a multi-million-dollar injection into the local economy."

***Andrew Clarke and Thomas Miles***




Jamie Whichup leads the field away in Newcastle in 2019 in front a packed corporate facility. Image: GettyImages




Make your own mind up

SCAN ME

Toby Price at the 2026 Dakar Rally in January this year. Image: Red Bull Content Pool

# PRICE STEPS BACK AFTER SAN FELIPE DQ AS FALLOUT DEEPENS

**TOBY PRICE**'s future in desert racing is suddenly up in the air. The two-time Dakar winner has decided to step away from the sport after being disqualified from the San Felipe 250. What started as a single race result has quickly turned into a bigger question about where Price goes from here.

The ruling came from the SCORE Competitive Review Board, which runs the US-based SCORE International off-road championship. Price was disqualified for unsportsmanlike conduct, specifically, for allegedly placing rocks and debris on the course during pre-running. In desert racing, where the conditions are already wild enough, anything that adds extra risk is taken seriously.

What makes this case tricky is the gap between what's actually been proven in public and the decision the officials made.

Price has been firm in maintaining his innocence, arguing that the widely circulated video does not show him placing rocks and that witness accounts do not directly implicate him in doing so. His position is that he was at the scene, identifying a racing line, and that the only interaction captured on camera was a brief exchange with a bystander.

That much is consistent with what is visible and with videos on Facebook that *Auto Action* shared as the issue was coming to light two weekends ago. What is also clear, however, is that the footage places him at the location where the rocks were found, effectively at the centre of the incident that led to the disqualification.

Right now, the debate is all about whether being there means being responsible. Price has argued about the standard of proof, but in the end, he's accepted the decision.

There has been no escalation, no appeal, no attempt to fight the process publicly.

Instead, he's accepted the call and

# UPCOMING RACE EVENT CALENDAR

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• Supercars Rd 3 Taupo Super440 April 10-12 • NASCAR Cup Series Bristol April 12 • FIA WRC Rally Croatia April 9-12
• IMSA Long Beach April 19 • NASCAR Cup Series Kansas City April 19 • FIA WEC Imola April 19
• Supercars Rd 4 Christchurch Super440 April 17-19 • IndyCar Long Beach April 19 • NASCAR Cup Series Talladega April 26
• FIA WRC Rally Islas Canarias April 23-26 • MotoGP Spanish Grand Prix April 24-26 • Formula 1 Rd 4 Miami GP May 1-3
• Hi-Tec Oils Super Series 2 Days of Thunder QR May 1-3 • NASCAR Cup Series Texas May 3





Toby Price is well supported by corporate entities like Toyota and Red Bull, and now his future in the sport is uncertain. Image: Red Bull Content Pool

stepped back. In a way, that says more than anything else about how this has played out.

"That being said the CRB has made its decision and I am obviously treating this as final and respect the process," he said, before confirming he would take time away from desert racing and reassess whether he continues in the series at all.

Price had been putting together a real push in American off-road racing, moving over from rally raid and learning a new game where time in the seat really matters. San Felipe was meant to be another step forward. Instead, it's turned into a turning point, not just for his results, but for how people see him in the sport.



Toby Price appears from behind his car in the video that is still live on YouTube.

The fallout has not been contained to the result sheet.

Co-driver Brent Bauman quit right after the decision. Price said Bauman was taking 'some responsibility for the outcome.' That move breaks up the main driving partnership, which is a big deal in off-road racing, where trust inside the car is everything.

Team owner Paul Weel has also been dragged into the mess, even though he wasn't involved. Price made it clear Weel was nowhere near the scene and shouldn't be blamed, but the team still has to deal with the fallout.

A lot of time and money went into building this team, with Price as the main drawcard and a real future taking shape. Now, all that momentum has stopped, and the focus has shifted from chasing results to just trying to limit the damage.

People in the paddock haven't held back. Some have been pretty unforgiving.

In off-road racing, course tampering is black and white. It's a big safety issue, and that's why the CRB came down hard. But this case isn't simple. The public evidence doesn't show Price actually doing anything, yet the penalty is clear-cut. That gap is what's driving the debate, not just about Price, but about how these decisions get made and what it means for the future.

One thing's not up for debate: this is a big moment. Price isn't just another driver, he's a Dakar winner, a Red Bull athlete, and one of the biggest names to hit American desert racing in years. When someone like that gets disqualified for conduct and then steps away, it sends shockwaves through the sport.

What happens next is anyone's guess, and that's really the story now. Price hasn't ruled out coming back, but he's also said nothing is set in stone. He'll take some time to reset and figure out what's next, whether that's a return to SCORE, a move back to rally raid, or something else entirely.

***Andrew Clarke***

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# FORD LOCKS IN NEW-LOOK LOCAL MOTORSPORT STRUCTURE

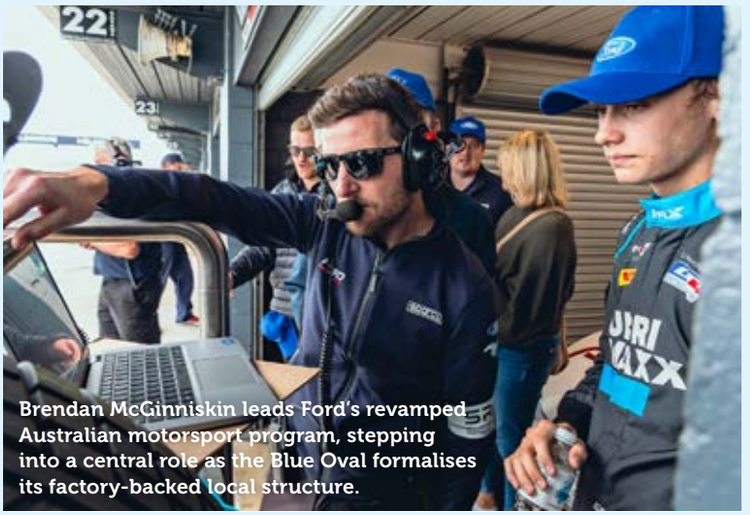
**FORD HAS** quietly reshaped its local motorsport structure, with a revamped factory-backed department now in place and reporting directly to the United States.

The change has been building since late 2025, but the shift became formal at the start of this year when Ford Racing replaced Ford Performance as the Blue Oval's global motorsport arm.

At the Australian end, that has translated into a dedicated three-person unit focused purely on racing.

The group oversees all factory-supported programs locally, headlined by Supercars and now expanded with the Ford-backed Mustang Cup.

At the centre of it is Brendan McGinniskin, who steps into the role of Australian Motorsport Program Manager. He has been a key figure through the Gen3 era and now effectively leads Ford's on-the-ground racing operations in this market.



Brendan McGinniskin leads Ford's revamped Australian motorsport program, stepping into a central role as the Blue Oval formalises its factory-backed local structure.

On the technical side, Lucas Kirby has come in to bolster the engineering depth. He joined late last year after six years with Garry Rogers Motorsport and slots straight into a sports car program role with a clear factory line back to the US.

The newest piece of the puzzle is Cameron Kirby, no relation, who shifts across from Ford's road car division into a newly created Sports Car Marketing Specialist position.

Ford has traditionally relied on broader communications resources for motorsport, but this formalises a dedicated marketing presence directly tied to its racing programs.

Kirby brings a different angle, having started out in journalism with Auto Action before moving into Ford Australia, where he was already heavily involved in motorsport activity alongside communications lead Ben Nightingale.

The restructure puts Ford in a different position than its Supercars rivals.

General Motors is still bedding down its own changes, with Grant McPherson set to join in a senior technical role alongside Simon McNamara, while Jeromy Moore's focus shifted towards the LMDh program.

Toyota, meanwhile, runs a more marketing-led model under Ben Casagrande, with support from ambassador Neil Crompton.

# LAWSON SUPERCARS TALK IN NZ DISMISSED AS FICTION

**TALK OF** Liam Lawson making a Supercars appearance in New Zealand has been dismissed by key stakeholders, with no evidence of any formal discussions taking place around the concept.

The reports, flagged by James Phelps on Motor Racing 360, were quickly hosed down as little more than fiction.

Auto Action understands there has been no meaningful engagement between Supercars teams and Lawson's management regarding a drive in the category, with the concept described as more of a 'how cool would this be' rather than a genuine proposal.

The most logical pathway, if explored, would be through Triple Eight Race Engineering, given its Ford alignment and links to Red Bull, with both of whom Lawson is contracted. However, even that scenario appears theoretical.

Triple Eight team principal Jamie Whincup confirmed no approach had been made.

"No one spoke to us, not sure where it comes from," Whincup told Auto Action.

There is also a practical reality being overlooked. While there is a gap in the Formula 1 calendar, that does not mean Lawson is available. Drivers remain embedded in simulator programmes, testing, sponsor commitments and preparation work between events, leaving little scope for ad hoc appearances in other categories.

While Lawson's profile as a New Zealand driver competing at the top level of international motorsport makes the concept appealing from a promotional standpoint, the practical hurdles are significant. Supercars' current regulatory environment, team commitments, and commercial considerations would all need to align for any such appearance to take place.



Liam Lawson is more likely to be working on his golf game than strapping into a Supercar in New Zealand. Image: Red Bull Content Pool

Not to mention getting a car to drive, which would likely have required a current driver to step away to make it happen, given the cars left for New Zealand weeks ago.

At this stage, there is no indication that the process has even begun.

# WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES FOR SEASON FINALE?

**FORMULA 1,** like the rest of the world, was taken by surprise when war broke out in the Middle East just over one month ago and had no alternative but to cancel the Bahrain and Saudi Arabia Grands Prix that were scheduled for the following weekends.

With hostilities still ongoing and no realistic end in sight, Stefano Domenicali and his team are working on alternative plans for the end of this year's championship. While there are still more than seven months until the Qatar and Abu Dhabi Grands Prix, Formula 1 is preparing to make a decision in the coming months rather than wait and see how the situation develops.

While Qatar and Abu Dhabi are likely to insist their races should go ahead as planned, believing the conflict will be resolved by Formula 1's summer break, and Saudi Arabia is still pushing to host its race later in the year, Formula 1 does not want to take unnecessary risks. There are also logistical concerns, particularly the possibility of sending freight to the Middle East and having it stranded should the conflict continue.

The concern is not unfounded. The war in Ukraine is now in its fifth year, a reminder that while conflicts can start quickly, they rarely end on a predictable timeline. Domenicali is therefore pushing for a relatively quick decision, also to give any replacement venues time to prepare their facilities and promote the event to ensure strong attendance.

Losing the final two races of the season would leave the championship with 20 Grands Prix, a scenario Formula 1 is determined to avoid. Beyond the sporting impact, there is also a significant financial consideration, with the two promoters combined paying around 160 million US dollars per year. There is also a direct link between the number of races and major broadcast agreements, meaning the financial implications of losing events without replacements would be substantial.



Turkey could make a surprise return to the F1 calendar as an option to close down the season. Valtteri Bottas won the last Grand Prix there in 2021. Image: GettyImages

Domenicali's objective is to secure two alternative venues for the final races of the season. With those races scheduled for late November and early December, Europe is not a viable option due to cold weather. That shifts the focus to the southern hemisphere and parts of Asia where conditions remain suitable.

Melbourne has been considered, but the Albert Park circuit will be undergoing renovations at that time. A return to Adelaide has not gained traction, with Formula 1 favouring modern, purpose-built circuits. Options in South Africa and South America are also limited. While Interlagos could theoretically host another race, staging a second event so soon after its existing Grand Prix is not considered feasible.

That leaves two realistic options, Turkey and Sepang. Istanbul Park has hosted Grands Prix during the disrupted 2020 and 2021 seasons and is expected to return to the calendar permanently from 2027. Temporary infrastructure could be installed to facilitate a race this year, although the cooler weather late in the year may impact attendance.

Sepang presents a more straightforward solution. The Malaysian circuit is well regarded, located close to Kuala Lumpur, and offers consistently warm conditions. While rain is a frequent factor, it has historically added to the spectacle of the Malaysian Grand Prix. The key question is whether the local government is willing to reinvest in Formula 1 after ending its previous agreement in 2017.

For now, the search for alternatives continues. However, the broader focus across the Formula 1 community remains on the hope that the conflict in the Middle East is resolved quickly, for reasons that extend far beyond the sport.

***Luis Vasconcelos***




# LOWNDES RETURNS TO FINKE WITH UNFINISHED BUSINESS

**CRAIG LOWNDES** will return to the Finke Desert Race with what he describes as 'unfinished business,' lining up for the 50th running of the event in a factory-backed Chevrolet Silverado ZR2.

Lowndes will again partner Dale Moscatt, with the entry supported by Supercheap Auto and General Motors Australia and New Zealand.

The seven-time Bathurst 1000 winner made his Finke debut in 2024 in a program put together by Chevrolet staff outside regular hours. It delivered immediate speed, with Lowndes setting a record time on the opening leg before a suspension failure ended the run.

That experience has set the tone for this year's return.

"It's great to be back racing Finke with Dale [Moscatt] this year thanks to the support of Supercheap Auto and GMSV," Lowndes said.

"After my first crack at the event in 2024 I was blown away by just how demanding the race is on both driver, team and vehicle.



Craig Lowndes is heading back to Finke in his Chevrolet Silverado.

"So we're heading back with the team from Rampex with the Supercheap Auto Racing Silverado with a goal of taking out the Production 4WD class."

Lowndes will again be supported by GM technicians as part of a broader push into off-road competition.

"We're taking our motorsport commitment to the world of off-road racing," said GM Australia and New Zealand motorsport boss Chris Payne.

"To have an event like the Finke Desert Race to showcase what the Silverado ZR2 is capable of, with our longtime ambassador Craig Lowndes behind the wheel, is something we're extremely excited about."

The Finke Desert Race remains one of the toughest events on the Australian calendar, with competitors tackling a 460km course between Alice Springs and Apatula.

Event president Antony Yoffa said Lowndes' return adds to the significance of the anniversary edition.

"It is exciting for both fans and competitors to have Craig Lowndes back at our event," he said.

"As one of the world's most difficult off-road races, having drivers of his calibre always makes for a great spectacle."

# EVENNETT JOINS EUROPEAN GT4 GRID



Lachlan Evennett's Toyota Supra for the European GT4 series.

**LACHLAN EVENNETT** will add a European campaign to his growing 2026 program, with the young Australian confirmed for a full season in the GT4 European Series.

The 18-year-old Queenslander has signed with Toyota Racing Europe customer outfit Speedy Motorsports and will contest the Silver class aboard a Toyota Supra GT4 EVO 2, beginning at Circuit Paul Ricard in France.

The move makes Evennett the only Australian on this year's grid, which features drivers from 22 nationalities and machinery from 10 manufacturers.

It continues a rapid rise for the teenager, who is already balancing commitments in GRM Trans Am Australia and the Australian GT4 Series. His April schedule alone has seen him race at Phillip Island, Bathurst and now head to southern France in consecutive weeks.

Evennett said the opportunity to expand into Europe was a key step in his development.

"Exploring a different category in GT4 with the Toyota brand will be awesome and having the opportunity to race internationally in New Zealand and Europe alongside Australia will bring me to many circuits that I have not been to previously," he said.

"Racing in the highly competitive European GT4 Series is an exciting opportunity to showcase my skills and race on some very well known race circuits.

"A total of 20-plus race weekends will only help with developing my racing in 2026."

The six-round European calendar will take in Paul Ricard, Monza, Spa-Francorchamps, Misano, Zandvoort and Portimao, placing Evennett on some of the sport's most recognised circuits.

The GT4 European Series continues to serve as a key pathway into global GT racing, running alongside major GT World Challenge events and in front of large international audiences.

Evennett has already completed pre-season testing with Speedy Motorsports and will split his time between Europe and Australia as he juggles a packed, multi-category campaign.

# PERONI SMILING THROUGH PAIN

**YOUNG TALENT** Alex Peroni was a notable absentee from the opening round of GT World Challenge Australia at Phillip Island.

A pre-season cycling accident left Peroni with a fractured left arm, forcing him to watch the action from the sidelines.

It is a blow for Team BRM, which had high hopes for Peroni and co-driver Mark Rosser in their Audi. The pair claimed two wins last year and showed strong pace, with expectations of building on that form this season.

Thomas Randle stepped in as a substitute for the opener and made an immediate impression, qualifying third. The pairing was on track for another strong result before a final-lap incident in Sunday's race.

Peroni, who remained upbeat in the Phillip Island paddock, admitted he would have preferred to be racing.

"It is a big shame, especially at this time of the year," he told Auto Action.

"We had a fast car last year, and it was seemingly quick again.

"It is strange. It felt less weird because the car was in a different livery.

"Mark and Tom did really well together.

"It was just a shame what happened in Race 2, but they got a strong podium on Saturday.

"That means the championship is still there, which is why we got Tom to race."

Peroni revealed there was a motorsport link to the accident.

"It was just a silly training incident on the bike," he said.

"I was pushing my friend and messing around and fell off.

"It was not at high speed, but I fell awkwardly and fractured my elbow.

"Last time I was in hospital was when I had my F3 accident, so I had some flashbacks.

"But this time was more frustrating.

"I was happy with how I went at Bathurst from a personal point of view and good to get some practice before the start of the championship.

"I was feeling good."

Peroni said his recovery is progressing well and he is targeting a return at the next round at The Bend.

"It has been a good recovery so far and looking good for round two," he said.

"I still have not seen a physio yet, where I will get a clearer picture, but so far from what the surgeons have told me, I should be recovered by the start to middle of May, which is when The Bend is.

"But still taking it day by day.

"The team has made some big steps with two cars, and it's great to have someone like Woody to look at data with.

"It is looking good, and we will see how we progress."

***Thomas Miles***



Alex Peroni missed the opening round of the GT World Challenge with a broken arm.


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# NEW OWNERS CONFIRMED FOR HEATHCOTE PARK DRAGS

**VICTORIA'S HEATHCOTE** Park Raceway has changed hands, with a new ownership group taking control of the drag racing venue after an extended period of inactivity.

The incoming owners, understood to have ties to both motorsport and automotive business, have moved to secure the site and begin preliminary inspections. Early work has focused on assessing safety, infrastructure and compliance requirements ahead of any potential return to on-track activity.

The facility, located north of Melbourne, has sat largely dormant in recent years amid ongoing uncertainty around its future. While the venue has remained part of the conversation within the drag racing community, a lack of clear direction and investment has stalled any meaningful progress toward reopening.

Initial inspections are expected to determine the condition of key infrastructure, including the racing surface, timing systems, pit and paddock areas, and spectator facilities. Any return to competition will need to meet current regulatory and safety standards, which are understood to be a central focus of the early-stage work.

Sources familiar with the process indicate the new owners are taking a structured approach, prioritising due diligence before committing to a defined timeline. That includes working through planning requirements and engaging with relevant authorities as part of the pathway back to operation.

At this stage, no timeline has been confirmed for when the venue could host racing again. The scope of required upgrades, along with approvals and investment, will dictate how quickly progress can be made.

Heathcote Park has long been a fixture of grassroots drag racing in Victoria, providing an accessible venue for sportsman competitors, test-and-tune activity and emerging racers. Its absence has left a gap in the local landscape, particularly as opportunities for entry-level participation have become more limited.

The change in ownership represents a reset for the venue, with a clear shift from uncertainty to a defined process aimed at returning the track to use.

Further updates are expected once the assessment phase is complete, with more detail likely to emerge around timelines, investment and the structure of future operations.



Heathcote Park Raceway has a new ownership group that is promising a return to its glory days. Image: Heathcote Park Raceway




Phil Lamatiina won at The Bend with a 4.103s pass at 409.69km/h and leads the NRDC's Top Fuel Championship.

Image: Cackling Pipes Photography

# LAMATTINA WINS TOP FUEL BATTLE AT THE BEND

**PHIL LAMATTINA** has taken out Top Fuel honours as the National Drag Racing Championship returned at the Riverbend Nationals, headlining a weather-affected weekend at The Bend.

More than 180 drivers competed at the South Australian venue, with Saturday's program shortened due to inclement weather before a full slate of finals was completed on Sunday.

In Top Fuel, the 'Carrot King' Lamattina claimed the A-Final with a 4.103s pass at 409.69km/h, defeating Western Australia's Kyle Putland, who struck trouble and coasted down the track. Putland still secured his first NDRC Christmas Tree trophy as runner-up.

The result marked a strong recovery for Lamattina after engine issues in the second round, and he leaves The Bend as the BLAHST Top Fuel Championship leader.

"What a weekend, it had everything," Lamattina said. "The track came good, and we have been trying our best. We got a little bit lucky there, but it has been fantastic for everyone to get the win.

"We haven't won in a while, and it was great to have not only me take the win, but also Luca have the win in Junior Dragsters as well."

The B-Final saw RAI team-mates Damien Harris and Wayne Newby face off, with Newby delivering one of the standout runs of the weekend, a 3.824s pass at 521.65km/h to take the win over Harris' 4.831s effort.

XPRO Nitro Funny Car produced a re-match of the 2025 Riverbend Nationals A-Final, with Josh Leahy reversing the result to defeat reigning champion Morice McMillin. Leahy ran 4.144s at 409.04km/h, while McMillin battled a difficult pass as his car stepped out mid-run.

Damon Paton took the B-Final with a personal best 4.043s at 516.33km/h, earning low ET and top speed points, while Adam Murrihy followed with a 4.226s effort in a side-by-side contest. Justin Walshe completed the C-Final solo after encountering issues that affected his run.

In Top Doorslammer, 11-time champion John Zappia completed a full engine rebuild ahead of the A-Final and went on to secure victory with a 5.792s pass at 388.70km/h over Pete Lovering, who was chasing his first NDRC Gold Christmas Tree.

Defending champion Russell Taylor claimed the B-Final after earlier wins in rounds one and two, despite needing to manage the car through those passes. Salim Matta secured the C-Final with one of the quickest elapsed times of the day, while Emilio Spinozzi won the D-Final, defeating Jeremy Callaghan on reaction time despite Callaghan recording the fastest pass of the bracket.

Top Fuel Motorcycle honours went to South Australian Danny Rickard, who claimed an emotional A-Final win over Damian Martini, whose run ended early due to mechanical issues after showing strong speed. Corey Buttigieg took the B-Final after a cleaner run following earlier problems, including running wide and brushing the wall.

In Pro Alcohol, reigning champion Daniel Reed claimed the A-Final after Cheyne Phillips red-lit, denying what would have been the quickest pass of the weekend. Andrew Searle won the B-Final with a 5.472s effort after earlier reliability issues, including trouble keeping the blower belt intact.

Sportsman winners included Luca Lamattina, Kobe Ashelford, Mark Rossow, Michael Caroscio, Matt Jones, Ken Collin, Simon Madigan, Peter Furlanetto, Vlado Turic and Adriana Cartledge.

***The NDRC continues with the Nitro Champs at Sydney Dragway on 1–3 May.***

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Lewis Bates is one of the two Bates brothers leading Toyota's charge in the 2026 Australian Rally Championship.

Image: Supplied

# MASSIVE FIELD FOR ARC OPENER

**THE 2026** EROAD Australian Rally Championship will open in Queensland with a packed field of 63 entries, setting the tone for a highly competitive season.

Rally Queensland, running from 17–19 April in the forests of Gympie, marks the 57th edition of the championship and brings together crews from the ARC, QRC and Regularity Series.

At the front of the field, 23 cars will fight for outright ARC honours, with a clear battle line already drawn between Toyota and Skoda.

That manufacturer rivalry looms as the defining storyline of the season from the outset, as the championship begins with one of its strongest opening line-ups in recent years.

With reigning champion Hayden Paddon not contesting the 2026 series as he eyes off roles on the World Rally Championship, the hot favourites will once again be the Bates brothers, backed by the might of Toyota factory support.

Toyota v Skoda

At the top of the field, a pair of Toyotas for brother Harry and Lewis Bates – with Coral Taylor and Antony Mcloughlin, respectively, in the navigator's role – will be armed with new-look Toyota GR Yaris Rally2 cars.

Skoda's charge will be led by 2014 ARC champion Scott Pedder and Glenn Macneall as they target a return to the top.

Pedder has remained a consistent frontrunner in recent seasons and will again campaign a Fabia RS Rally2 alongside Macneall.

They will be joined by rising talent Jackson Long and his father Damian, who step up to outright competition following a breakout rookie campaign.

The Long pairing will field an R5-spec Fabia as part of a multi-car Skoda assault aimed squarely at the Bates brothers.

Troy Dowel and Bernie Webb in the Toyota GR Yaris AP4, along with the MRF Peugeot 208 AP4 of Tony Sullens, are also expected to contend.

Australian superstar Toby Price is entered and expected to be a popular presence in the paddock as he returns to the one-make Subaru WRX Challenge.

However, following recent developments in the United States and his decision to step away from SCORE, his participation remains unclear heading into the event.

Stepping in for Holly Kilbride as his co-driver is experienced WRC co-driver Ben Searcy, who is set to partner Price should he take his place on the start line.

The pair are also entered in the WOLF Cup and the newly introduced East Coast Cup, which feature strong local talent led by Josh Redhead and Ray Winwood-Smith.

The Junior Cup is also a new prize on the line, with returning driver Josh Wiedman and highly rated debutant Riley Waters set to feature.

Completing the program is the Classic Cup, led by husband and wife pairing Shane and Silvie Garner in their Racing Dipsy 1994 Subaru WRX Impreza.

Rally Queensland Clerk of Course Brian Everitt believes the field is stacked.

"It's very exciting to be able to kick off a season of the Australian Rally Championship, and to have such a strong field of Australia's best rally drivers entered for this landmark event for us is even better," Everitt said.

"There is a diverse range of drivers entered across all classes, so I am hopeful there will be strong competition throughout the field, which will give fans around the country plenty to get excited about.

"Everyone in the town is buzzing with the prospect of the first-ever Campbell's Super Special Stage, which is fully supported by local businesses, and I have no doubt this field will put on a show for what we are expecting to be a full house.

"Add all of that with our event being broadcast on Kayo SPORTS, we can't wait to get started later this month and look forward to welcoming the best ARC crews in the country."

***Thomas Miles***

# E30 RACING CRACKS THE QUARTER TON

One of Victoria's much-loved grassroots series, the BMW E30 Drivers Cup, is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2026, so Auto Action travelled to Winton Motor Raceway to find out what makes this one-make series so unique in its longevity.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: JD IMAGEZ, TW NEAL

**THERE'S SOMETHING** about a grassroots garage that hits different, whether it's the competitors who often span generations, the relaxed family atmosphere, or the mechanical camaraderie that embraces a pure love of machinery.

These E30 enthusiasts sit squarely in that niche, with a classic, howling straight-six model that has slipped neatly into the classic realm, while still remaining affordable for the weekend enthusiast.

While it's true that an E30 from that 1983–91 period isn't as cheap as it once was, comparatively, and to get them race-ready, it's still a bargain series considering that you're racing an attractive modern classic.

Primarily based around the coupe or sedan 325i model specifications, the series enjoys weekends of tight, evenly matched racing and offers several interstate trips per season, such as visits to The Bend, One Raceway, or, previously, even Baskerville.

In 2027, they are aiming to add SMP to that list.



Jess Bell leads the field off the line at The Bend.

In Victoria, its involvement with the VHRR, VRMC and VSRS has them going to Phillip Island, Sandown, Calder and Winton.

There can be the obvious distinction in pace between the two-door coupe and the heavier four-door sedan, yet the racing remains entertaining, and it's uncommon that someone simply skips away on the Yokohamas without being challenged.

In amateur racing, that's all a racer could want: bang for your buck and a ring dinger of a weekend at the track.

And sure, there are the occasional competitive gripes; there's still racing to be done after all, but in speaking to everyone on the grid, over the course of an individual's E30 journey, no one gets left behind.

Club president and racer Jess Bell, a member of the Bell Motorsport crew, expanded on the series' sense of community.

"I grew up in this category, and the E30 family has been my family since I was knee height," she told Auto Action.

"For everybody here, there is a real community feeling and family atmosphere, and we come together and celebrate that, and we obviously have a shared love of E30s and BMWs.

"They're an extremely fun car to race, and they're very reliable. When you're winning here, it's because you're good, and not because you can spend more money than somebody else.

"But I think what sets us apart is not just what's on the track, it's what's off it too. And not all categories have that.

"We're really lucky with the community that we have, because as soon as someone has an issue, everybody jumps up and suddenly it's, 'how can we help, what parts do you need, how can we get you back on the track?'

"I know we aren't the only category like that, but there are plenty that aren't."

At the Winton round, it was round winner Alex Jory's birthday, and everyone celebrated with a cake and a sing-along in his garage, where his children and wife were also present.

When I saw them at Sandown back in 2022, that tight-knit feeling was just the same, with both new and older faces getting about.

A trio of E30s at Winton.





Jess Bell at Phillip Island.

But at the end of the day, everyone is there because they love racing, and they're bonded by a dedication to the E30. The atmosphere is the bonus.

So why are E30s so good to race?

Racer Rory Plant, a member in his 40s who has been involved in the BMW Car Club for 10 years, is one of these devotees.

"Growing up in Australia, loving and watching Touring Cars, this is basically a scaled-down version of that for me," Plant said.

"There's a 2.5-litre engine up front that sounds great, a simple manual gearbox, drive at the rear, it's cheap to run, and no driver assist.

"That means the experience is all about feeling the car, and feeling the weight transfer and balance. We all started running at the back and just had to drive them as hard as we could, with limited modifications and opportunities.

"I was fortunate enough that when I started doing track events, I had purchased a BMW road car, so I joined the BMW Drivers Club and met this crew.

"One time, my car was off the road, and I borrowed Jess Bell's old E30 car, and I was hooked. And it was the supportive aspect of this series that then kept me here. No one goes home without everyone having a good crack at helping you have a good weekend, whether that's mechanical assistance or driving instruction."



Last year's champion Jesse Bryan gets into it at Calder Park.

Throughout the 25 years, the series has close ties with BMW Drivers Club Melbourne, and that organisation remains a strong supporter of the series to this day, with the founding E30 members having met through the club.

Brian Bourke, 2023 drivers' champion and regular frontrunner, who has an early 323 model, gave his perspective.

"The racing is so rewarding, and there's nothing closed doors here, we all grow together," he said.

"In the last race, the top five were split by just 0.6 of a second. As you move through the field from the beginning to the pointy end, and it doesn't matter if you're winning, it's about having a good dice.



A field of E30s at Phillip Island.

"There's nothing closed doors here, we all grow together.

"I love that in my 60s, I can come here and be competitive with a younger generation, because the series and cars foster talent."

In terms of the series' future, which now only exists in Victoria as a standalone category, although it's technically classed as Group 3J IPC, Bell highlighted some of the future challenges.

Although it's not quite an existential crisis, E30 availability is dwindling.

"Obviously, the older the cars get, the harder and more expensive it is to find parts because they're also a popular car in the general market. What used to cost a couple of hundred bucks to a few thousand has now risen to over 15 grand for a good one to turn into a race car.

"Looking to the future, it's about fostering what we've got. But do we look at expanding into other models, like in the US, where it's very popular?

"They have spec E30 but run other models, and it's about doing that the right way if we go down that path. So, do we expand and have a class-based structure? That will be a community conversation.

"We still have 40 race cars, and that doesn't include the new drivers coming in, plus there are new interested parties all the time. So I feel pretty good about the future, considering we have pretty consistent grid sizes."

***If you want to get out and catch the E30s, get involved, or see what all the fuss is about, you can still catch them at Calder on 17–19 April, Winton 23–26 July, or 20–22 November for the enduro, Sandown 7–9 August, or Phillip Island on 2–4 October.***

# STRONG START

The Motorcraft Mustang Cup Australia announced itself as a new player in the domestic racing scene in style at Phillip Island with rave reviews from drivers and fans alike.

**AFTER A** year in the making, the one make category debut attracted allcomers from Supercars stars, young guns, experienced veterans and more.

As a result, the full field of Ford Mustang Dark Horse Rs produced a spectacle to remember at Phillip Island.

The V8 cars were visually and viscerally stunning, with their engines roaring and racing hard.

BRT teammates James Golding and Aaron Cameron have taken Supercars by storm and carried on that momentum in the Mustang Cup, fighting for victories and standing on the podium.

Neither could wipe the smiles off their faces after jumping out.

"I had a great weekend," Cameron told *Auto Action*.

"We ran the cars in both dry and wet conditions and they were great, really user friendly.

"The GRM boys did a great job to get them ready and they were fast out of the gate on the first time on slick tyres, while the rain tyre was also great in qualifying and race conditions.

"It was just a great experience for me.

"Hopefully, the series has a bright future ahead. Hopefully, we can get some more young guys in this to help their development going forward.

"Pumped [about] what the future is for this category."

For Golding, it was the latest chapter of his growing journey with Ford, having also raced the Mustang in Supercars and Trans Am.

"It was awesome," Golding said.

"This is the third Mustang I've raced now, and I seem to go well in all of them.

"It is a different way to go racing, but it was a lot of fun.

"I think it is a really good stepping stone. It brings me back to my days racing Formula Ford. The speeds are pretty similar.

"Although it's a V8, it is very heavy, but the speeds are pretty similar.

"Being a tin top as well, there is a similarity to Supercars, but being a road car with some upgrades it is very different to drive."

For both of them, the driving experience took them back.

"They are a road car with a few upgrades. That is the best way to describe them," Golding said.

"They handle really well and even in the high speed stuff despite not having much downforce.

"Just getting used to a slower steering rack, brake booster, ABS made it a lot of fun.

"You are feathering the wheel the whole way through and keeping the car on the limit. The H pattern [gearbox] works well. You have to think what gears to use and in a couple of corners you are sort of in between gears because you can run higher and probably look after the rear a bit more using more torque."




Cameron McLeod won the finale of the opening Mustang Cup Australia round.

Images: Ford Racing/Edge Photograhics



The series attracted big names such as Aaron Cameron, James Golding and James Moffat.

"The cars are super easy to drive," Cameron continued.

"I like the H pattern, sort of old school style to it, with a few extra driving aids, like the auto blip and the down change.

"The shifts are so important in these cars because you can lose so much time."

The Mustang Cup enjoyed a fairytale start with Golding and Cameron producing an all time battle for the lead in the first ever race.


The field of Ford Mustang Dark Horse Rs ready to race.

The Supercars stars ran side by side in a photo finish to the chequered flag, where Cameron clawed ahead by 0.0600s.

"It was super unexpected," Cameron recalled.

"I didn't think Jimmy would let me in the last corner, running the high line a lot.

"I was trying anything and everything I could just to get a bit closer and to get him that close is pretty awesome.

"I got a bit lucky, but it was just such a cool race with lots of panel rubbing."

Golding reflected on his choice of lines.

"I am just here to have fun, learn and enjoy it to be honest, but that was one of the best races I have had," he said.

"He ran the narrow line through the last corner and I was running the higher line, so stuck with what I knew.

"For me to go narrow on the last lap was a risk.

"I just tried to help keep the car as straight as possible.

"When I went in, I lost where he was, so I sort of tried to cover, but by that point I wasn't going to cover him, so I would have been better off just keeping it dead straight down the line, and maybe that would have been enough, maybe not.

"It was so close you never know."

One driver who knows more about the Mustang Challenge than any is Ford Racing Development Driver Cameron McLeod.

Success on Sunday meant McLeod now has wins in both France and Australia after dominating on debut at the Le Mans 24 Hours last year.

"It is cool to win three of my four races in the Mustang Cup, and it is a big relief for me after a hard qualifying and first race," McLeod told Auto Action after his win.

"This is very special to me because many people who have helped me have come here for the first round, and they wanted me to win to show why I am in the development team and they are investing in me.

"It is a great confidence booster because it is a high calibre field and we are all in the car."

Having seen the Mustang Cup around the world in Australia, America and France, McLeod feels it can become a big part of the local racing scene.

"I really think it can," he said.

"A lot of people don't realise the car is a combination of the GT4 car with more grunt and less grip.

"It is a super great competition, and if we can get more drivers, it will be very good."

One of the big brains behind bringing the Mustang Cup to Australia was George Miedecke.

As the official Multimatic agent in Australia, Miedecke Motorsport supplied parts and support to competitors in the one make series.

Miedecke himself was a big influence behind the scenes during the planning process of the series.

Phillip Island was a fitting location as it was during the corresponding SpeedSeries opening round last year when the championship first came to light.

Miedecke was one of the first to drive the Dark Horse R in Australia and labelled it as having a "tough, muscle car vibe that would resonate with Aussie fans."

A year on, Miedecke was thrilled with the debut.

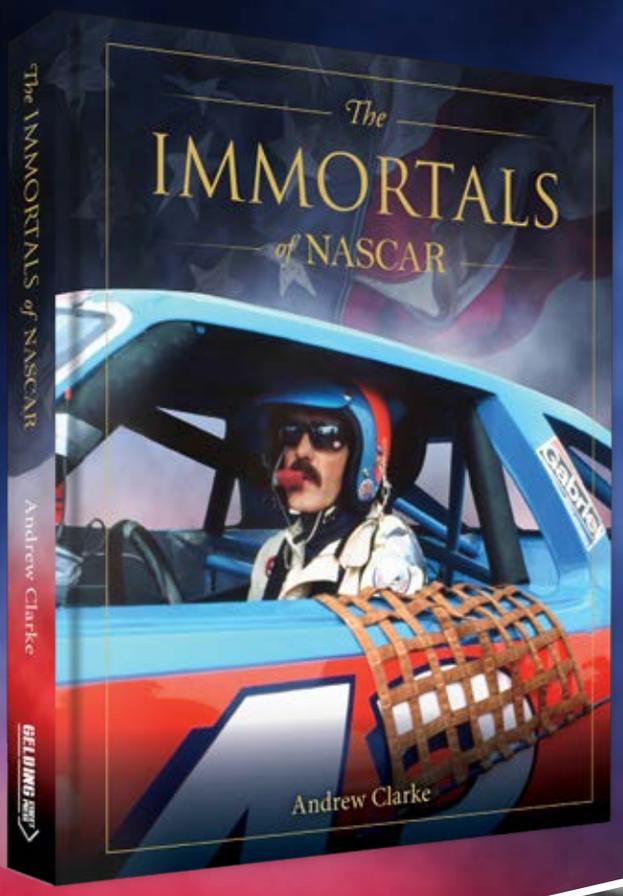
"Ford is a brand like no other, they are loyal to the people who are good to them and they are all racers," he said.

"You see that with the support here from America and the Australian support team are all here.

"They have been really welcoming. We have done the parts side and we are figuring it out as we go a bit, but we are really proud."

***Thomas Miles***

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# BROKEN BUT NOT BEATEN: SANDERS WINS IN PORTUGAL

From the hospital bed to Rally Raid Portugal winner in two months, KTM's Daniel 'Chucky' Sanders is on the World Rally Raid Championship winners list in 2026 and in the fight for back-to-back world titles.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: EDOPHOTO

**IT'S 'NO** guts, no glory' in the world of rally GP Moto riders, and Daniel Sanders has once again exemplified that motto.

January's Dakar Rally saw the KTM 450 rider go into survival mode with a broken collarbone, broken sternum, a cracked rib and a torn leg adductor after crashing over a dune while in the lead. Yet he still finished fifth and banked vital points in the title fight.

Round 2 saw the field head to a sodden Portugal from 17–22 March for a six-day slog, where heavy rain made the forest tracks and open sandy expanses particularly hard going, with deep water and mud adding to the challenge.

Despite limited recovery time from Dakar, the hard nut from Three Bridges, Victoria prevailed by 1m56s over Honda Spaniard Tosha Schareina.

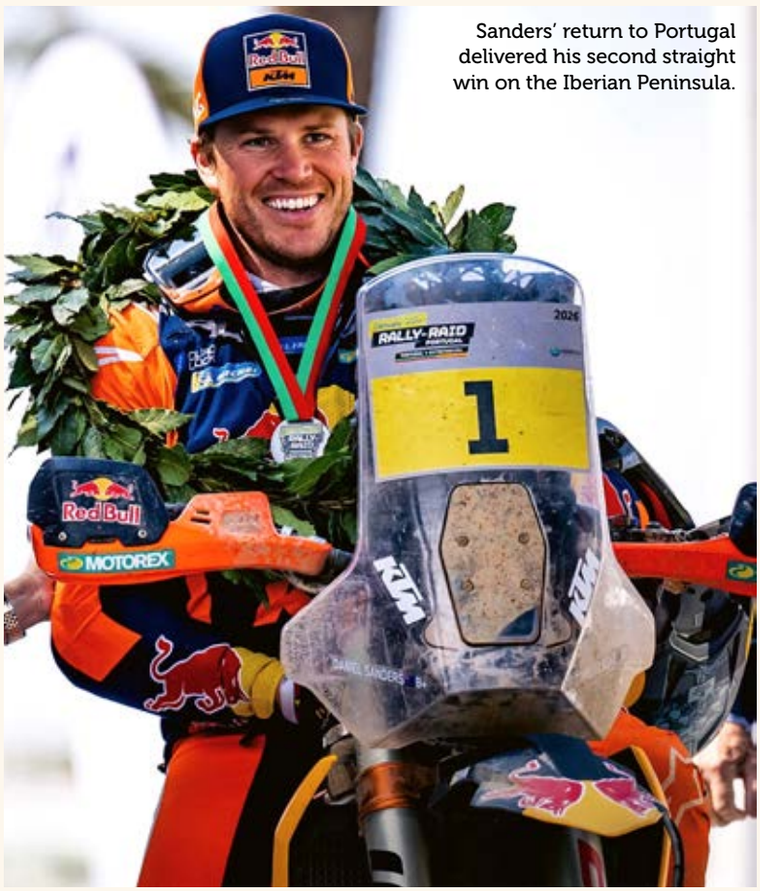
In the eight rounds since the 2024 Rallye du Maroc, Sanders has won six of them, including the 2025 Dakar, to emerge as one of the most dominant forces the sport has seen.

Last year he sealed his first world title with a win in Portugal, and this year his victory has lifted him into third in the standings, just six points behind his Argentine teammate Luciano Benavides.

From the Prologue in Grandola to the finish line in Loule, Sanders went wire to wire across the entire 2201km, including 1269km of timed stages, taking three of the five stages with a lowest classification of fourth.

"I'm super happy to get the win here in Portugal," Sanders said at the finish line.

"Tosha was pushing me the whole way in what was a really tough race with slippery, demanding conditions. It feels great to return to winning form after the injury at Dakar.



Sanders' return to Portugal delivered his second straight win on the Iberian Peninsula.


The conditions turned brutal, with riders forced to dismount and push through deep water.


With three rounds remaining, Sanders will fight across three continents to retain the number 1 plate on his KTM 450

"Delivering this result here at Rally Raid Portugal was important, not just for my confidence, but for the whole team.

"Although I was able to complete the Dakar, we lost a fair few points, so to get things back on track here gives us a big boost as we fight for back to back championships, which is the ultimate goal this season."

Following the Prologue, the opening Grandola–Grandola loop was an old school enduro slog, with Sanders having to push his bike through deep water at times to lead Schareina by 2m10s after the timed 180km.

Over the next 377km to Badajoz, Sanders had to be more calculated as the Spaniard closed the gap to 1m18s, only for Sanders to respond with a Stage 3 win in the Badajoz loop to extend the lead to more than three minutes.

While Schareina stayed on his tail to take Stage 4 as the field headed into the Algarve, just 1m25s separated the pair on a tough day that totalled 639km including liaison sections.

Sanders secured second despite two navigation errors on another slog through wet terrain, maintaining a 1m46s lead heading into the final stage.

A 10-second stage win on the final day sealed his second straight victory on Europe's Iberian Peninsula.

***The series returns on 24–29 May in Argentina with the return of the rugged Desafio Ruta 40, where riders will take on some of the old Dakar stages from when South America hosted the event between 2009–2019, with the Rallye du Maroc and the season-ending Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge to follow.***

## RALLY-RAID STANDINGS AFTER 2 ROUNDS

| | |
|---|---|
| Luciano Benavides (ARG) KTM | 48 |
| Tosha Schareina (ESP) Honda | 44 |
| Daniel Sanders (AUS) KTM | 42 |
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| Adrien Van Beveren (FRA) Honda | 31 |

# GROWING ON HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS

Historic Motorsport Promoters group has been formed to stop date clashes and grow participation in historic motorsport.

**A NEW** national group aimed at pulling Australia's historic motorsport promoters onto the same page has been formally launched, with its founders arguing the category's next lift will come less from nostalgia and more from coordination.

Announced late in 2025, the Historic Motorsport Promoters (HMP) group brought together event organisers from around the country with a simple pitch: stop tripping over each other, share what works, and give historic racing a clearer runway in a crowded calendar.

"Historic motorsport is about more than racing – it's about keeping alive the machines, the people, and the spirit of competition that defined the history of motorsport in Australia," HMP spokesman Mike Herlihy said in the group's statement. "Our mission is to support the promoters and organisers of historic motorsport events that not only celebrate this history but also inspire future generations of participants and fans."

Herlihy, who is also Vice President of the Victorian Historic Racing Register (VHRR), said the group's formation was a response to the way historic racing has traditionally operated: strong events, strong personalities, and too often too little coordination between them.

"The Historic Motorsport Promoters (HMP) was created around about October last year, and with a focus on all the promoters around Australia," Herlihy said during an interview recorded at the Phillip Island Classic. "If possible, to work together so that we're not one running conflicting race meetings, and two, that we can support each other."

The motivation has already been tested. One of the biggest historic meetings on the Victorian calendar, Sandown Historics, was cancelled for 2026 after losing its scheduled weekend when Sandown was required for thoroughbred racing while Caulfield racecourse underwent resurfacing works.

"It's unfortunate that we had to cancel the VHRR Sandown Historic event this year," Herlihy said. "The racetrack is also a horse racetrack. And unfortunately, they're resurfacing Caulfield. All the horse races are having to go to Sandown. So we lost our weekend, although we had it booked."

Alternative dates were offered, but the VHRR chose not to take them if it meant colliding with other established meetings interstate.

"We lost our weekend and we were offered two other weekends which would have gone against one either Baskerville or two HSRCA Historics in Sydney," Herlihy said. "We refuse to




**Diverse fields of classic racing is one of the great attractions of historic car racing in Australia.**

**Image: VHRR/Revved Photography**

**ABOVE RIGHT: Peter Killick (Chairman of Baskerville Historics) and Mike Herlihy (Vice President VHRR) at Phillip Island.**

**Image: Bruce Williams**

actually take those dates on as part of this process of working together."

The call drew criticism, but Herlihy said the principle mattered more than the short-term hit.

"And we've got some criticism from a number of areas of not going ahead with the meeting, but I stick by it that we will not overwrite those other events," he said. "We have got to work together."

For HMP, Sandown is the kind of real-world pressure point the sport is going to face more often: competing venue demands, limited weekends, and a national competitor base that is more financially and logistically stretched than it used to be. In that environment, a date clash is not a mild inconvenience. It is a forced choice that can thin fields, upset categories and weaken the product promoters are trying to sell.

Herlihy said that, even in its early months, HMP discussions had extended well beyond Victoria.

"Even in that short time that we've been together, it started working," he said. "We've already had a lot of discussions, particularly with Queensland, New South Wales, the Austin Seven Club, which do Historic Winton, South Australia, and Peter Killick from Tasmania, who runs the Historic Baskerville event."





The early emphasis has been on the most controllable lever promoters have: the calendar. Tasmanian organiser Peter Killick, chairman of the Baskerville Historic event, said spacing meetings more intelligently can deliver immediate benefits for competitors and promoters alike.

"I think in the establishment of the date was certainly the first one," Killick said. "Mike and I spoke very early on that Baskerville was probably a bit close to Sandown. So we moved Baskerville a week earlier so that it gave competitors a bit of breathing space between the two events."

Killick's view is that breathing room is not simply a courtesy. It directly affects grid strength, which in turn shapes how an event looks and feels to spectators, partners and the next wave of entrants. Thin fields make even a well-run weekend appear smaller than it is. Strong numbers create spectacle, and spectacle is the easiest thing to sell.

As the national calendar grows, Killick expects categories and competitors to be more selective, not less. The sport's economics do not allow most people to do everything, and planning has to start from that reality.

"As time goes on, I think what will happen is a lot of the categories… will probably choose, there might be, I don't know, eight, nine, 10 historic motorsport events across the year," he said. "People can't afford to do them all."

His argument is that organisers should stop treating selectiveness as a threat and start treating it as a structure: if categories decide early which rounds they will prioritise, promoters can build stronger programs and avoid spreading the same cars too thinly across too many weekends.

"So what you might find… say, Heritage Touring Cars, sit down at the start of the year and do maybe four or five events through the year," Killick said.

He used Heritage Touring Cars as a simple example of why concentrating numbers can be better than chasing more appearances.

"Heritage Touring Cars is a good example that I obviously compete in," he said. "So there's a group that will go to all those rounds and then there's another event they might get six or eight cars and another event they might get 10."

"Well, to me, you're better off to go, well, pick these four and get a field of 35," he said. "It's better for us to promote. It's bigger and looks, as a spectacle, so much better."

If calendar coordination is the first step, the longer question is what historic motorsport wants to look like over the next decade. Killick argued the sport is already in a demographic shift that will keep moving the goalposts on what audiences recognise and what competitors want to drive.

"There's a demographics shift and what we're trying to do is actually understand what the next generation wants and how do we get younger people involved in historic motorsport," he said.

"That's just a natural shift as the older people that are obviously interested in pre-war cars are dropping away," Killick continued. "And you'll see that shift around the world where eras of historic categories dates have been moved out later and later."

He noted that in some countries, cars built up to the year 2000 now fall within historic definitions. His point was not that Australia needs to adopt any single cut-off, but that the definition inevitably shifts with generational reference points.

"It's easy for me because I'm a 60s child, so I like 60s touring cars and that, but it's understanding what my son and his friends want to come and see," he said.

"They still have an appreciation for… an open wheeler that raced in 1970," Killick added. "But in their eyes, a 2004 BA Falcon is a historic car."

That tension between preservation and relevance sits at the centre of what HMP says it wants to achieve: promote the sport's heritage without turning it into a museum piece.

In announcing the group, HMP said it would support promoters nationwide, lift awareness of Australian motorsport heritage, provide a united voice, and foster partnerships with clubs, sponsors and motorsport organisations.

Herlihy's focus, though, is immediate and practical: more cars on track, and fewer reasons for owners to keep them locked away.

"So one of the other things we've got to look at is getting cars out of garages," he said. "What do we need to do to get the cars out of there?"

He suggested travel habits were changing, with some competitors less willing to haul cars interstate than they once were. That puts extra weight on calendar decisions, because clashes now have a sharper consequence: if a competitor is only doing a small number of meetings, a conflict does not just inconvenience them, it knocks an event off the list.

"Some of the messages that we're getting is people are… they're not as committed to going to Queensland and Sydney from Victoria anymore," Herlihy said. "They'll go to Victoria… maybe South Australia, and they won't go as far afield."

His longer-term ambition is a framework that allows promoters and categories to plan together early enough to avoid the late scramble, and to spread participation across the year in a way that makes sense.



# COOLER HEADS MUST PREVAIL

**AT THE** risk of sounding like a broken record, I reiterate that I feel a lot of Formula 1 people, a lot of my colleagues in the media, and also a good number of fans are overreacting to the direction in which racing has evolved this year.

We have all spent the last 10 years complaining that overtaking was impossible and that races were being decided at the pit stops. The DRS trains were derided by everybody, as some drivers were extremely good at using that tool to defend from faster cars. The fact that the whole grid was sometimes covered by less than one second did not seem enough to excite people, so Formula 1 changed the rules, making the power unit the crucial element of the competitive package.

Given we had four years with the previous set of regulations, following another eight of stability, to draw definitive conclusions about the validity of the new Technical and Sporting Regulations after just three Grands Prix is premature.

Yes, we had too much overtaking for my liking in Melbourne, China was a great race, and in Suzuka, we got a mixed bag. On a track where there had been one legitimate overtake during last year's race, there were some interesting battles; Leclerc, holding Russell in a much faster car, was a masterclass in using the new tools to hold a position.

But as Verstappen can testify, overtaking did not become too easy, as by Sunday night the Dutchman could probably design the rear end of Gasly's Alpine A526 from memory...

Then, of course, there was Ollie Bearman's crash, a high-speed impact with the wall being the consequence of finding himself on the grass at over 250km/h while going around the outside of Colapinto's car in the flat-out 200R right-hander.

I should not need to make this clear, but it is obvious I do not want any driver to get hurt, I do not like seeing major crashes and, believe you me, I have had more than my fair share of shocks and heartbreaks in the last 40 years following Formula 1 onsite.

So, yes, it was worrying to see the Haas on the grass at full speed, cross the track and the gravel trap at Spoon Curve and hit the barrier.

But the young British driver was out of his car almost immediately, had a small limp as he had apparently hit one of his knees on the cockpit and by the end of the afternoon, his main focus was on the mistake he felt he had made, the points he had lost and the damage he had caused to the car.

I cannot say I was surprised to hear some drivers bang on about how these rules made the cars dangerous, how it was necessary to do something of substance about it, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, those were mainly the drivers who have been complaining about everything since testing, the main reason being their cars are not particularly quick...

They were given an open-goal opportunity to bash the rules, and none of them missed it.

It is true that there may be a massive speed differential between cars that are racing each other, not because one is significantly faster than the other around the lap, the gap between first and last in Q1 was 3.005s, but because they are harvesting and deploying energy at different parts of the track.

So if you are massively quicker than your rival in one section of the track, you will be massively slower somewhere else around the track.

Fans over 50 will remember that, for example, in 1987 turbocharged and naturally aspirated engine-powered cars cohabited on the track, as they did between 1977 and 1985 and again from 1987 to 1989.

That year at Suzuka, the gap between first and 10th on the grid was 10.17s. Yes, you read that right, more than 10 seconds, and that was common in those days.

What a Williams-Honda would do on the straights was massively quicker than an AGS-Ford Cosworth could achieve, for example, but no one complained that the racing was dangerous. You just took that speed differential into consideration, anticipated your moves and passed the slower cars when it was safe.

I do agree there are some silly things in these rules, like making it impossible for drivers to be flat out around a lap in qualifying.

I mean, I was on the edge of my seat watching Charles Leclerc's magnificent Q3 lap and was cursing the rules when a beautiful controlled slide out of Spoon resulted in his engine assuming it was time to drop some battery power, making him lose 0.6s until 130R and a sure place on the front row of the grid.

But let us not react too hastily to what was, by his own admission, a driver mistake, a very small one, but with important consequences, as they are all learning how to race these new cars.

Knee-jerk reactions always come at a cost, and given there is more than a month until the next Grand Prix, let us hope cooler heads prevail and the Prophets of the Apocalypse calm down.

Hold your horses, ladies and gentlemen, let us think with our heads, not with our hearts, and certainly not by using an accident to improve your competitive chances...

Nigel Mansell in the Williams Honda needed to pick his time to pass Pascal Fabre in an AGS with a Ford-Cosworth engine that was massively under powered in comparison, and everyone survived. Image: GettyImages





Bearman's wrecked car tells the story, a high-speed misjudgment amplified by massive energy deployment differences and nowhere left to go at Suzuka.

Image: GettyImages

# BEARMAN LUCKY TO WALK AWAY

**OLIVER BEARMAN** was lucky to walk away from a high-speed crash midway through Lap 13 as he approached the Spoon Curves.

The Haas driver was caught out by a massive speed differential to Franco Colapinto's Alpine as they went around the flat-out right-hander that links the Hairpin to Spoon, moved sharply left to avoid hitting the back of the A526, but went onto the grass and became a passenger from then on.

Suffering an impact of 51G, the young driver limped out of his car as he had hit one knee hard, but was already able to walk unaided by the end of the race.

Reflecting on the crash, Bearman admitted that "it was a scary moment out there, but everything is OK, which is the main thing. The adrenaline is wearing off a bit, so it's going to be a long trip home, but I'm absolutely fine. The car is a bit worse for wear, but we now have a month to reset, but I can only apologise to the team because it's a lot of work."

The Ferrari protégé explained that "there was a massive overspeed, around 50km/h, which is a part of these new regulations, and we have to get used to it, but also I felt like I wasn't given much space, given the huge excess speed I was carrying."

He then admitted that "we need to be a bit more lenient and a bit more prepared, as unfortunately this was the result of a massive delta speed which we've not seen in Formula 1 before."

His team principal, Ayao Komatsu, made a point of fully exonerating Colapinto from any responsibility in the accident, stating that "he was always doing something consistent in that part of the track. It's not his fault at all, but it's just that we are deploying more through there than he was. Even with normal laps, we had a 20km/h advantage."

Explaining his driver's move, the Japanese engineer added that "because we were so much quicker in that part of the track, that's why Ollie wanted to go for that, and he used the boost button, but then that meant the speed delta was 50km/h."

He then said that "I'm sure you guys saw on the onboard, the closing speed was massive, and then he just misjudged it. So it's one of the things we talked about with this regulation; the closing speeds could become an issue.

"Unfortunately, that was one of those incidents. Of course, Ollie is kicking himself; he's saying, 'I should have done better, there's no excuse, but you look at it, that 50km/h difference in closing speed is massive. So it's a lesson."

# DRIVERS BLAME RULES FOR BEARMAN'S CRASH



After a disastrous start to the season, World Champion Lando Norris has come out as a strong critic of the new cars.
Image: GettyImages

**OLIVER BEARMAN'S** high-speed crash at Suzuka set alarm bells ringing among the Formula 1 community, with some of the most experienced drivers firmly pointing a blaming finger at the new technical regulations and the lack of relevance given to their opinions.

Bearman had been around 20 km/h quicker than Franco Colapinto around the long right-hander that leads from the Hairpin to the Spoon Curve, and sensing he had a good chance to pass the Alpine driver there, hit the boost button, gained another 30 km/h, but was then caught out by the surprisingly high closing speed to the car in front. With the Argentinian going slightly wider than in previous laps, Bearman's avoiding action took him to the grass, and from then on, he became a passenger in his own 50G crash.

Pointing out that "I've not seen the incident", World Champion Lando Norris, after being explained the dynamics of the crash, told us that, "it was just the sort of thing that's been warned about, closing speeds and drivers getting a full attack."

Speaking of his own race, where he had to recover positions, the McLaren driver admitted that "there was a fair few" scary incidents, adding that this happened "even with Lewis at the end." Feeling he's said all he can say about the new regulations, the McLaren driver concluded that "I've said everything and I don't need to say any more, my comments are the same as they have been the whole year, same as certain other drivers, I don't need to keep going on about it."

Colapinto's teammate, Pierre Gasly, was first concerned about Bearman's condition, telling us that "I saw him and it looked really bad. I heard he's OK, but I'll review exactly what happened."

The veteran explained drivers are faced with "something which is quite new, that we didn't have that in the past, because there are quite different strategies between all the Power Units in terms of harvesting and deployment."

The Frenchman added that "I think we all agree that the whole thing needs a bit of a review," concluding that "I'm sure in this four or five weeks' break everyone is going to make the best of it to try to get Formula 1 in better shape."

A huge critic of the new rules, Max Verstappen commented on the crash, saying that "it's what you get with these things; one guy is completely stuck with no power, basically, and then the other one uses the mushroom bolt!"

Having been asked if things now could be treated as a safety issue, the Red Bull driver's eyes lit up as he said that "if it's all about safety, it's easy to fix things, because you can use safety for a lot of stuff. So, maybe we should use the word safety for it, to finally make some changes."

GPDA director Carlos Sainz explained in detail how the drivers feel, saying that "it was only a matter of time, the first big crash was going to happen."

Having not seen the crash, the Spaniard cautioned that "I don't know if Franco did anything stupid or not, so I cannot judge," before insisting that "independently of that, these kinds of accidents are going to happen a lot with this set of regulations."

Sainz added that "it is the problem when you listen only to the teams, that they will think the racing is OK because maybe they are having fun watching it on the TV, but from a driver's standpoint, when you are racing each other and you realise that there can be 50 km/h speed delta, that's actually not racing."

Insisting on this point, the Williams driver said that "there's no category I think in the world where you have this kind of closing speeds, because that's when big accidents can happen. It catches you by surprise, you defend late, it catches the guy behind out."

The veteran pleaded that "I really hope they listen to us and they focus on the feedback we've given them rather than only listening to the teams."

He then concluded that "I hope they come up with a plan for Miami that improves the situation and a plan also for the medium-term future of these regulations to keep improving it. Even if you cannot improve everything for Miami, do another good step in Miami and then a big step for next year or later in the season."

# ...AS TEAM BOSSES PROMISE SWIFT ACTION



Ayao Komatsu urges caution and is calling for a data-driven response to the troubled 2026 F1 cars.
Image: GettyImages

**BEARMAN'S 50G** crash in Suzuka caught the eye of all team principals and the findings of the investigation into his crash will be top of the 'to do' list at next week's Formula 1 Commission meeting, set for 9 April.

Some of the team principals insisted this had now become the main subject to be discussed before the Miami Grand Prix, while others said caution should be exercised to avoid knee-jerk reactions that could do more harm than good.

Being very non-committal about it, Mercedes' Toto Wolff said that "it's something which we need to look at clearly, to decide what needs to happen in the future."

The Austrian pointed out that "the regulations are there in a very immature way and I'm sure the FIA and us teams, we're going to analyse the accident very carefully to see how we can avoid these things."

McLaren's Andrea Stella clearly thinks Formula 1 needs to react swiftly and accurately to make sure there's no repeat of Bearman's crash, pointing out that "today something happened and we have a responsibility to put in place the actions that, especially from a safety point of view, should be implemented."

The Italian engineer detailed that "we have to look at the data in terms of teams sharing information in terms of what was going on on Colapinto's car and Oliver's car. In general, the reason for adding a 350 kW super clip is that we would like to avoid drivers having to do a lift and coast, because if there is a lift and coast, there is an even bigger speed differential with the car that is following."

The McLaren boss added that "it is a case that should be studied with a certain level of analytical approach. I don't think a simple solution exists, but we have the expertise, the engineers, the variables to put in place some actions. And I think this will be something that will be looked at in the meetings that will happen during the break between the FIA, the teams and Formula 1."

He then insisted that "this should jump to the top of the agenda," but declined to offer possible solutions, saying, "it's difficult for me to say that we should do this in a simple way, because it may be a combination of things that are required and not a simple one."

Haas team principal Ayao Komatsu warned about rushed decisions, stating that "we really got to be careful about sporting versus safety and we shouldn't be using safety as an excuse for changes, but at the same time, safety should be obviously paramount. You just got to be very careful looking at creating enough data set."

With his engineer's hat fully on, the Japanese manager detailed that "we've done three events, we had one incident, and then I don't know what the solution is just yet, but we just have to be calm and discuss it all together as a Formula 1 community, which I'm happy actually we're doing."

Praising his peers, Komatsu concluded that "every time we have meetings with all the team principals, with the FIA and Formula 1, nobody's really pushing to get a sporting advantage, so I think, as a Formula 1 community, we are discussing in the right manner."

Hours after the incident, the FIA issued a statement with the goal "to provide clarifications." The sport's regulator stated that "since their introduction, the 2026 regulations have been the subject of ongoing discussions between the FIA, teams, power unit manufacturers, drivers and FOM. By design, these regulations include a number of adjustable parameters, particularly in relation to energy management, which allow for optimisation based on real-world data."

The Fédération then noted that "it has been the consistent position of all stakeholders that a structured review would take place after the opening phase of the season, to allow for sufficient data to be gathered and analysed," adding that "a number of meetings are therefore scheduled in April to assess the operation of the new regulations and to determine whether any refinements are required."

In conclusion, the FIA stated that "any potential adjustments, particularly those related to energy management, require careful simulation and detailed analysis. The FIA will continue to work in close and constructive collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure the best possible outcome for the sport and safety will always remain a core element of the FIA's mission," before warning that "at this stage, any speculation regarding the nature of potential changes would be premature."



Max Verstappen takes some time post-race to check out Lando Norris' McLaren.
Image: GettyImages

# VERSTAPPEN JOKES 'MY MOTIVATION IS LIKE MY BATTERY!'

**RELEGATED TO** the midfield in China and Japan, it's clear Max Verstappen is not enjoying his time in Formula 1 in 2026, with speculation about a possible retirement spreading. The Dutchman remained critical of the new regulations, the way drivers need to operate their cars and the way battery power is deployed, but after a hard-fought battle with Pierre Gasly, decided in the Frenchman's favour, he was more open in explaining his situation, even joking about it.

On a serious note, the four-time World Champion said that "in qualifying you don't want to have this kind of lifting stuff, but there are a lot of other rules. It's not only about lifting, there are also a lot of other rules where you can't go flat, or you have to lift, or not be close to flat and then put in a lift. I mean, it's so confusing, everything."

He then made it clear that, from his point of view, "that's not how it should be. It's all super sensitive. In qualifying, to go faster, you need to basically go slower, like less throttle and everything. And it's just not how it should be to go fast."

Commenting on the challenge that has been removed from faster corners like Suzuka's 130R, Verstappen explained that "we all go flat out around it, but we have no battery deployment there, so you just slow down. It's still flat, but you're going much slower than in the past because you're not using battery power there."

Asked about what kind of challenges Suzuka still presents, the Red Bull driver said that "I still enjoy Suzuka, it's still a beautiful track, but it is unfortunate that now it's not as enjoyable to drive. But it's still a fantastic track."

Asked if he could still motivate himself to continue racing when the challenge is largely gone, Verstappen joked that "my motivation is like the battery on these cars. Every morning I wake up and convince myself it's going to be a great day driving these cars, I'm pumped up working with my team and then I get in the car and go. That's when the motivation goes the same way as the battery, it starts full but you run out of it pretty quickly…"

Having had the possibility of racing against a Mercedes-powered Alpine in both Shanghai and Suzuka, Verstappen believed that "we were a tiny bit faster over a lap," before explaining that "you can pass, but then you have no battery the next straight. I tried one time just to have a look. I passed him into the chicane, but then I have no battery the next straight, so I waved to Pierre and said 'see you later.'"

Comparing his Red Bull Ford power unit with the German V6, the Dutchman stated that "our deployment was good. That's also not our biggest problem to be honest." He then detailed that "from the engine side, yes, there's a few things we can do better, like correlation and a few things, calibration, but actually, in terms of pure power, it's not our worst thing for sure. We're not like Mercedes. They're super strong, but we have a lot more work to do. Definitely a lot more work to do on the car."



The two most recent World Drivers' Champions, Lando Norris and Max Verstappen, are not happy with the driver's lack of control over the new systems on the 2026 cars. Image: GettyImages

# NORRIS, VERSTAPPEN BLAST LACK OF CONTROL

**THE DRIVERS** who have won the last five Formula 1 world championships have blasted the "lack of control" they have over their cars' battery systems, claiming it leaves them feeling like passengers in key race situations.

Lando Norris and Max Verstappen were not alone in their criticism, with Carlos Sainz and Pierre Gasly also calling for greater driver control, arguing that while the racing may look exciting from the outside, it is anything but from inside the cockpit.

After a race-long battle with Lewis Hamilton for fifth place, Norris offered a blunt assessment of the current package.

"I didn't even want to overtake Lewis when I first did, but it's just my battery deployed, I don't want it to deploy, but I can't control it, so I overtake him and then I have no battery, so he just flies past. This is not racing, this is yo-yoing, when you're just at the mercy of whatever the power unit delivers," he said.

Norris insisted that "the driver should be in control of it. We just want to go flat out, I don't want to be lifting on the back straight so that I'm not losing 60 km/h from 130R to the last corner. If I deploy more than Lewis, I have to lift, otherwise I'll drive into him, and I'm not allowed to go back on throttle, because if I go on throttle, my battery deploys, and I don't want it to deploy because I want to save it for the pit straight. There's nothing I can do about it, so there's just not enough control for a driver, and that's why you're just too much at the mercy of what's behind you, and that's just not how it should be."

He added, almost laughing, that "most other categories have a higher top speed than us," before concluding that "the racing can look great on TV, but the racing inside the car is certainly not as authentic as it needs to be."

Verstappen, who faced similar issues battling Gasly, agreed.

"In Suzuka you have a long straight and then only a little chicane, and then a long straight again. If you deploy in one straight, you have nothing on the other. So when you want to go for an overtake, there's only one corner to charge and then a long straight again. That makes it basically impossible to use the battery, because it's completely inefficient to do that," he said.

Sainz pointed to the complexity of the systems, suggesting even those who understand them are still being caught out.

"My group of engineers and myself, we've done a very good job over the winter to understand it and I feel like we're doing a very good job on understanding it and driving it. I think I'm 90–95% close to understanding everything, but there are definitely surprises that come now and then," he said.

He added that the key issue lies in how drivers must override instinct.

"It's more how disciplined you want to be with your driving, because when your natural instinct kicks in in a Q2 or Q3 lap, how much you're going to upset the system and the system is going to backfire on you."

Gasly struck a more measured tone, but still acknowledged the core issue.

"I think honestly there is a bit too much negativity around it and I don't like that," he said.

"But I really think that we take too much away from the drivers. When you're driving in Sector 1 and you've got a certain grip, it doesn't really matter. The battery and all these things, you've still got to be at the limit of the grip you get given, but without the battery power there, it's not the challenge it used to be."

He concluded that "I definitely agree with what others are feeling. I think we all agree, we all see the same stuff, we all speak the same language. We all want the sport to be as good as it can be. I'm sure we'll do what's best. I believe in Formula 1 and the FIA."

# ALPINE TAKES A STANCE AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE




Not all the fans have been so kind to Franco Colapinto, and Alpine is calling out some of the online behaviour. Images: GettyImages

**FRANCO COLAPINTO** has been in the spotlight after every Grand Prix this season, with some of his Argentinian fans being very abusive towards drivers who get in his way on track. After the Japanese Grand Prix, the boot was on the other foot, with the Alpine driver becoming the target of significant online abuse for his alleged part in Oliver Bearman's high-speed crash.

The Enstone-based team decided enough was enough and issued a long statement to condemn the abuse, both current and past, and to deny claims that accused the team of sabotaging Colapinto's season. Alpine stated that "we feel we owe it to our fans to address certain points and questions being raised, and also once again speak out against the hate and abuse being aimed at not just one of our own drivers but also towards our racing counterparts and other members of the Formula One family."

The French squad added that it has "previously taken a strong stance condemning any hateful behaviour, abuse, threats or bullying online and on social media, issuing statements to not only condemn it but also encourage people to enjoy social media responsibly and follow community guidelines. Our stance on this hasn't changed and remains the same. Social media should be a place to bring people together, share in experiences and encourage healthy debate."

That is why Alpine stated that "the team condemns the hateful messages aimed towards Franco after last weekend's race in Japan, in the same way it condemns the abuse and threats that were aimed towards Esteban Ocon following a collision between the two cars at the Chinese Grand Prix.

"The two drivers were racing hard and fighting for position and Esteban took full responsibility and apologised to Franco, actively seeking him out in the media pen and also apologising on social media. "

The resulting abuse that followed was not in the spirit of the sport and it was an oversight not to call it out sooner.

"Abuse of any kind towards all drivers is unacceptable and it was especially disappointing that it came from a minority of fans of the team towards a driver who has given so much to the team in the past and is a Grand Prix winner for Alpine."

On the incident in Japan, the team "condemns the hateful behaviour towards Franco following the incident with Ollie Bearman at Suzuka. First of all, the most important thing is the safety and wellbeing of the drivers and thankfully Ollie is OK. The closing speeds are a characteristic of these cars and, as stated by the FIA, it is something that will be closely reviewed in the coming weeks."

Addressing speculation about differences between its cars, a theory pushed on social media in Argentina, Alpine stated that it would "like to clarify the concern of some fans regarding parity between both our cars. The team endeavours to put the two fastest cars on track and provide equal opportunity for both drivers to be competitive and score important points for the team in the championship."

Colapinto's team then explained that "in some instances, given the need to fast-track parts and carefully manage the manufacturing process, the team is only able to bring select parts or upgrades to some events.

"However, that is never the intended or desired approach, as if the part is a performance upgrade as we hope and intend, then we want it available on both cars immediately. This has remained the case this year and both Pierre and Franco have been running with the same equipment, barring some small low-performance impacting parts in China due to switching gearbox components."

In conclusion, Alpine made it clear that "any questions about sabotage or not giving Franco the same car are completely unfounded, which is why the team felt the need to speak out.

"There might be times this year when pushing in the development race that upgrades come to one car first, which the team will communicate and be completely transparent about. That being said, the aim will always remain to bring upgrades to both cars where possible.

"It's absolutely not in the team's interests to not score points and any suggestion of self sabotage isn't conducive to that ultimate end goal. From the opening races, the team finds itself in a strong position and the team is not resting on its laurels and is staying grounded.

"At the last two races, the team has been the fourth fastest car and we know we have to work incredibly hard to stay there and have two cars regularly in with a chance of scoring points."



Has the surprise long break come at the wrong time for George Russell and Kimi Antonelli? Image: GettyImages

# MERCEDES DUO RUE LOOMING BREAK

**GEORGE RUSSELL** and Kimi Antonelli admit the timing of Formula 1's extended break is far from ideal, with Mercedes holding strong momentum after the Japanese Grand Prix.

With Bahrain and Saudi Arabia cancelled due to the situation in the Middle East, the championship faces a five-week gap.

Russell, currently leading the championship, acknowledged the interruption but remained pragmatic.

"I don't think it's going to hurt us, but if you're the team on the front foot, like we are, you want to do as many races as possible," he said.

"I would have loved to have been racing every weekend, but we've still got things we need to improve on."

Antonelli echoed the sentiment.

"It is never good to have a break, especially when you have such momentum," he said.

"Talking with the team members, they would like to have many races in a row, especially now that we have the momentum."

However, he pointed to the upside.

"With a break, you need to look at the positive side, which is you get time to reflect and analyse where you need to work on."

Both drivers stressed that the broader context outweighs sporting concerns, with hopes that the situation in the Middle East improves quickly.

# FRUSTRATED VERSTAPPEN HOLDS KEY TO DRIVER MARKET

**MAX VERSTAPPEN'S** future is shaping as the defining factor in the Formula 1 driver market, with the Dutch driver holding significant leverage despite being contracted to Red Bull until the end of 2028.

Performance clauses in his deal could allow him to exit as early as 2027, and given Red Bull's current struggles, those clauses are increasingly relevant.

While Verstappen has hinted at the possibility of stepping away from Formula 1 altogether, few in the paddock believe he would walk away from the sport at his peak.

Red Bull team principal Laurent Mekies remains focused on performance.

"We certainly focus on the competitive picture," Mekies said.

"We are having zero discussions about those aspects and we have a lot of work to do."

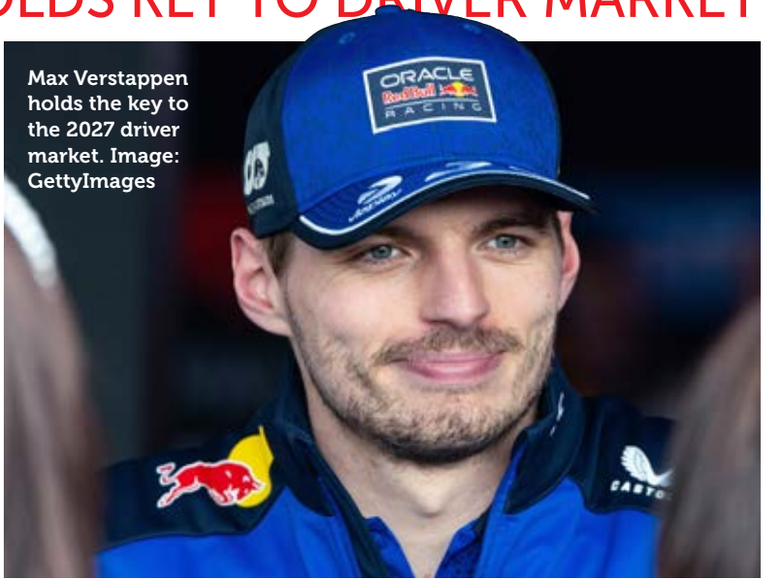
He added that a competitive car would change the narrative.

"By the time we give him a fast car, he will be a much happier Max."

Mercedes boss Toto Wolff continues to keep a close eye on the situation.

"We are perfectly happy with the drivers we have and our priority is to support them," Wolff said, while acknowledging Verstappen's status as a potential target.

Ferrari could also emerge as an option, with Lewis Hamilton's contract expiring at the end of the season and uncertainty surrounding its future line-up.



Max Verstappen holds the key to the 2027 driver market. Image: GettyImages

If Verstappen becomes available, few teams would ignore the opportunity to sign one of the sport's defining talents.




Andrea Stella has been looking for answers and feels that McLaren has already made some big steps. Image: GettyImages

# STELLA DETAILS McLAREN'S MASSIVE PROGRESS

**MCLAREN JOINED** Mercedes and Ferrari in the battle at the front in the Japanese Grand Prix, the world champion team performing a significant turnaround after two difficult weekends in Australia and China.

Given the MCL40 was not vastly modified since the start of the season, with only a handful of small changes made, team principal Andrea Stella said it was "our better understanding" of the complexity of the Mercedes power unit systems and "a much better utilisation of our own tools" that led to the increase in performance.

Playing down the gains, the Italian admitted that "there's a trend whereby we seemed to, from a competitiveness point of view, have made a little step forward.

"At the same time, I will expand as to why, possibly we have made the little step forward. And we think that the step forward has to do definitely with the exploitation of the engine."

Stella recalled that "we talked about this topic in Australia, and we realised there that there were certainly a lot of opportunities.

"We have worked on these opportunities together with colleagues at HPP. There's been also further work in having even the tools that are required and the simulations that are required to optimise the behaviour of the power unit."

He added that "from a power unit exploitation point of view, I don't think that we have left much unexploited, and this is possibly a reason why we are closer to Mercedes having the same power unit."

Nevertheless, Stella believes Mercedes still has a better chassis, and possibly why "we are closer or same performance as Ferrari."

He made clear that "we haven't brought many upgrades at all in these first three races, but I think there's been a bit of improvement in terms of understanding how you want to set up the car, ride heights and some other aspects about balance and tyre preparation.

"Still, I think there's still quite a lot of work to do."

If the speed of the MCL40 in Suzuka validated the team's belief that the car had untapped potential in the opening rounds, reliability remains a concern.

Lando Norris needed to fit a third ERS on his power unit to take part in FP3 and qualifying, leaving him on the brink of a grid penalty.

Stella explained that "the problem we noticed before the start of FP3 was on the same power unit component, the ERS module, which includes the battery, but there's some other electronics inside, but it's a different nature.

"So, it was to do with something different, and the only way was to remove the pack to investigate it."

He added that "once investigated, we realised that it would take time to attempt a repair, so we needed to give Lando the possibility to do the session.

"So, we introduced a third battery pack, but we hope that we are going to be able to repair the battery pack we took out and that we have not lost another component of the three allowed in a season, because the one that had the fault in China, that one is lost."

# WOLFF DOUBTS HORNER'S COMEBACK

**TOTO WOLFF** has cast doubt on Christian Horner's chances of making a full-time return to Formula 1 in the near future, suggesting the former Red Bull boss's actions may have lasting consequences.

Speaking to Associated Press, Wolff said Horner "has broken quite a lot of glass," and admitted he is "in two minds" about a potential return.

"These things have repercussions in our microcosm," he said.

Wolff acknowledged Horner's long history in the sport.

"That is what he has done all his life, and that is what he knows best."

He also dismissed suggestions that Mercedes' interest in an Alpine stake is linked to blocking Horner.

"That idea is made up. It would be quite sad if that was a consideration."

Reflecting on their rivalry, Wolff noted the impact of Horner's presence.



Don't let the smiles fool you, there's not much warmth between Toto Wolff and Christian Horner. Image: GettyImages

"The sport is missing personalities and his personality was clearly very controversial and that is good for the sport."

He added, with a hint of humour, "I said to Fred that Formula 1 needs 'the good, the bad, and the ugly.' And it is now only the good and the ugly left. The bad is gone."

Despite past tensions, Wolff struck a measured tone.

"Even your worst enemy has a best friend, so there must be some goodness," he said.

"I don't wish him bad. There are not many team principals who have done what he has done."

He concluded that "whatever happens, whether he comes back to Formula 1 or not, I am at ease with it."

## RACING BULLS YOUNG DUO BENEFITING FROM MARKO'S EXIT

**LIAM LAWSON** and Arvid Lindblad appear to be benefiting from Helmut Marko's removal from the Red Bull system, with both drivers delivering strong performances without the intense scrutiny that previously defined the program.

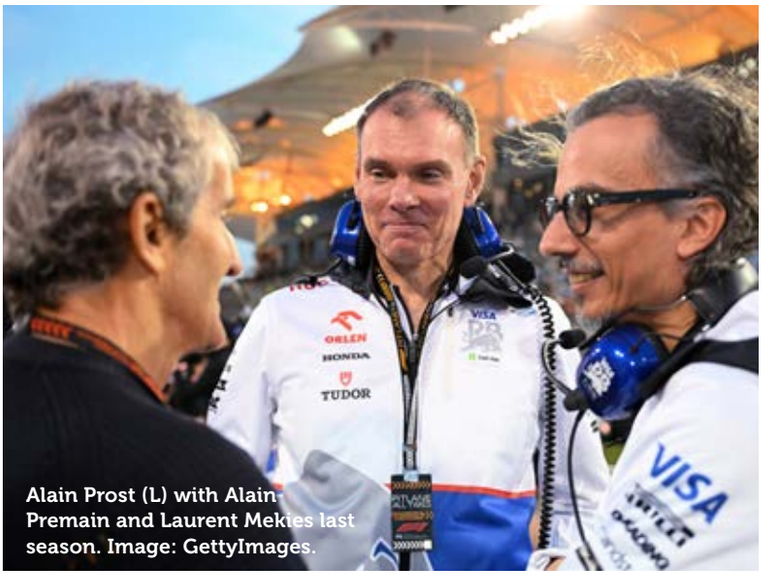
At Racing Bulls, Alain Permane has taken on a central role in managing the young drivers, with team principal Laurent Mekies also closely involved.

Permane's more measured approach contrasts with Marko's reputation for blunt feedback and high-pressure tactics, and it appears to be paying dividends.

Lindblad's manager Oliver Rowland praised the teenager's maturity.

"The day I met him, when he was seven, he was already beyond his years," Rowland said.

"Every time I see him, the guy is maturing beyond his years, and I'm really proud of him."



Alain Prost (L) with Alain-Premain and Laurent Mekies last season. Image: GettyImages.

Rowland downplayed external influence on Lindblad's development.

"Me or Red Bull, I don't think we have any influence. He's him," he said.

However, he acknowledged the current structure may be beneficial.

"The grounding from myself and Red Bull probably helps, because we're focused on trying to mature him, and Red Bull has done an incredible job with him, but it's mainly down to him."

Lawson has also thrived in the environment, delivering consistent results without the pressure that previously followed every session.

F1TV commentator Jolyon Palmer believes Marko's absence has made a difference.

"He was a big presence that could be really hard on young drivers coming through, but he was also a benefit to those who could thrive and become a world champion," Palmer said.

"Liam obviously saw the brunt of that last year, but it did remind me of the resilience that he's got."

Palmer pointed to Lawson's response to early-season pressure.

"It would have been easy for him to say, 'Oh no, Lindblad's here, he's getting all the credit,' but he drove really well in China, getting points in the sprint and the Grand Prix, and it will settle him down for the year."

# AUSTRALIA'S OTHER McLAREN RISING STAR

Oscar Piastri is not the only young Australian making an impression at McLaren, with Jayden Kelly rapidly rising in the GT world.

STORY: THOMAS MILES | IMAGES: SUPPLIED, GETTYIMAGES

**REPRESENTING MCLAREN** on the global GT stage and living the dream is what Jayden Kelly is doing at a young age.

Within the space of three years, Kelly has gone from finishing school to karting against the best in Europe, to getting on McLaren's radar and representing the famous brand at GT World Challenge level.

He is fresh from being crowned champion in the McLaren Winter Series and has already made the transition to GT3.

In 2026, Kelly faces a significant opportunity as he steps into the Silver class in the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup, steering a McLaren GT3 for Greystone alongside Tommy Pintos, Josh Rattican and Zack Meakin.

He is doing all of this as one of 16 drivers in the McLaren Motorsport Factory Driver program.






Having only started karting full-time in 2021, Kelly admits it is difficult to comprehend his rise to racing with McLaren.

"Being able to say I am a part of the McLaren family is still shocking to think about. I have been a fan for so long, I have loved the team, the brand and the cars," Kelly told Auto Action.

"For years I've looked up to their drivers across the various forms of racing and through history and they have always stood out.

"Being a part of that legacy is already a dream come true for me, although I do hope that one day my name will carry as much weight as McLaren's."

Kelly put himself on McLaren's radar by taking on the demanding European karting scene.

After three months of training, he spent a year in X30 Seniors in the CEK in Spain before progressing to the shifter KZ karts.

Kelly admitted the early stages were a steep learning curve, but one that accelerated his development.

"The European karting scene is brutal," he said.

"I competed in Spain in the CEK, where the top drivers are some of the best karting drivers in the world.

"I got my ass kicked in the first year, but spending the time in such a high-level environment definitely allowed me to develop quicker to try and adapt."

Those lessons proved vital as Kelly made the even bigger leap from karts to sportscars.

He arrived in the McLaren Trophy Championship in 2024 and made an immediate impression, claiming the Driver of the Weekend award at his first event.

Kelly followed that with a podium and race lead at Misano, before breaking through for his first pole position and win at Spa-Francorchamps in July.

However, the transition came with challenges, both on and off the track.

"I believe it was the mental aspect," Kelly said of his biggest hurdle.

"Being able to be composed and consistent in any format of race was my biggest challenge.

"Going from karting to GT cars brought a lot more variables into a race weekend, such as car set-up, costs, data review, pitstops and strategy.

"Learning that year how to keep my head by going through so many tough situations where I made some good and bad decisions has been detrimental to my development as a driver.

"My first year was one filled with mishaps and learning, which is understandable due to the large jump from national karting to international GT racing.

"And at the end of year one I was told I needed to be better in the car. So I have worked week in and week out to find the extra tenths of a second that matter on the track with physical training, sim racing, studying, mental preparation."

At the same time, Kelly was balancing racing commitments with his education.

"When I was in high school, I promised my parents that school would come first as I needed an education," he said.

"So for a couple of years, it was a difficult balance of homework on weekdays and race cars on weekends.

"It was a lot to deal with, and I struggled to dedicate myself fully to either.

"But after finishing high school in 2025 I was allowed to take a year to




**Jayden Kelly and Michael O'Brien celebrate victory on their way to McLaren glory.**

**LEFT: Jayden Kelly pushing his McLaren 720s GT3 EVO to the limit at Catalunya.**

**BELOW LEFT: He is a proud member of the McLaren Motorsport Factory Driver program.**

fully focus on my racing career.

"I am very grateful to my parents for making me finish my education, but even more so for now allowing me to prioritise my passion."

Those performances earned Kelly another opportunity in the McLaren Trophy Europe season, this time with Greystone GT alongside Michael O'Brien in the Pro class.

The pair dominated the season, claiming five wins across Brands Hatch, Monza, Nurburgring and Paul Ricard to secure the championship by 15 points.

"I would say it was important to my career, but I believe it was even more important for myself," Kelly said.

"To win a race is very special and is always memorable but to win a championship meant we had to be on our A-game every time we were out there to get every last point available to us.

"That amount of pressure for a prolonged period of time was tough but allowed me to grow as a driver and now that the championship is sealed, it is an accomplishment that will stand the test of time and forever be a major development year for my career."

The title opened further doors, with Kelly stepping into the final three rounds of the GT Open and GT World Challenge Europe campaigns in 2025.

He claimed a class podium on his GT3 debut and secured a drive in the GT World Challenge Europe finale at Barcelona.

"It was a big step for me and it definitely was tough. Competing against the F1 equivalent in GT cars is a weekend-long chess match," he said.

"Now although I'm not gifted at chess, I did feel quite comfortable in the GTWC paddock.

"There were moments where I had to take it in and feel the massive show, however in the car I felt prepared after all the learning I had taken from McLaren Trophy and a bit of GT Open.

"As well, competing with a team and driver lineup that I was already familiar with made the weekend feel all the more homely.

"My Trophy Artura had more horsepower than any GT3 car but when I stepped into a GT3 car, the gain in lap time was made up all through corners so learning how to trust something with so much more downforce and grip was strange.

"I had to learn to hustle the car a lot more and get it on the edge to extract the most out of it.

"After enough practice it now feels as comfortable as the trophy car, however I know there is always more lap time to come."

Sportscars have always been the priority for Kelly and, while his trajectory points towards Le Mans, a homecoming remains high on the list.

"That is one of my dreams along with all the other amazing endurance events like Daytona, Le Mans and Nurburgring," he said.

"But Bathurst would stand out for me as it is one of the most unforgiving tracks, where the margins for dominance and disaster are centimetres apart. For that I love it. Coming home to race would be so special.

"There's something about Australia that has always made me feel different, to me it is the best country on earth."

# DOOHAN HEADED FOR ELMS

**AFTER NEARLY** two seasons on the sidelines, Jack Doohan has secured a race seat alongside his reserve duties with the Haas F1 team.

The former Alpine Formula 1 driver will compete in the ACO European Le Mans Series, driving LMP2 ORECA 07 machinery.

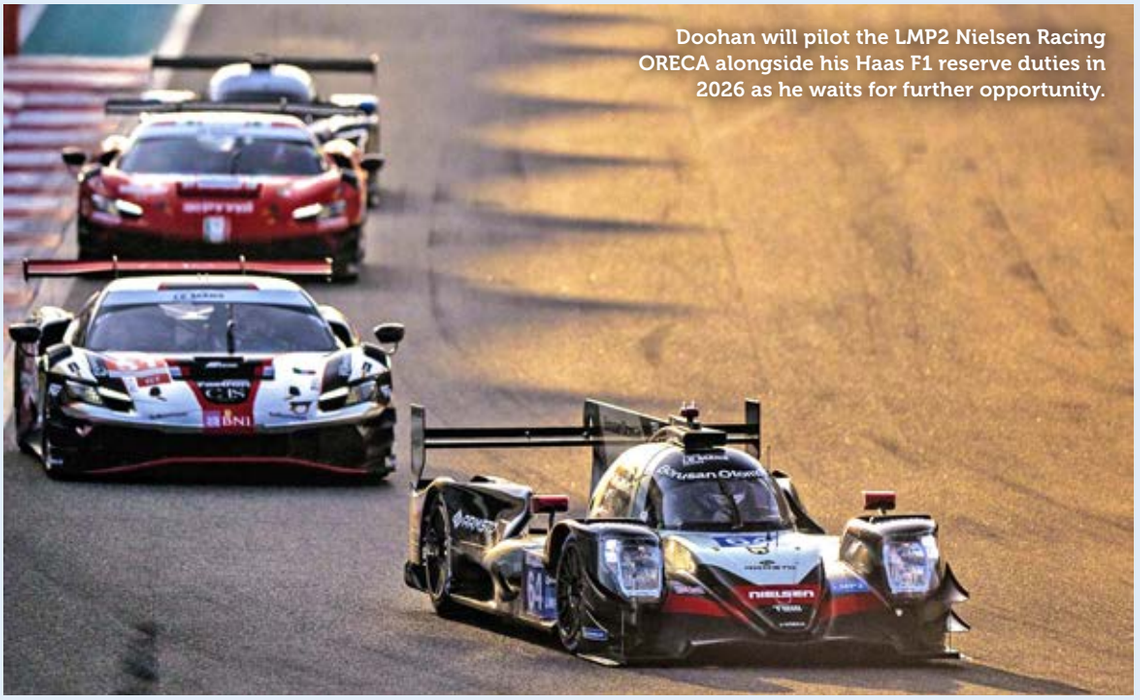
Joining British outfit Nielsen Racing, Doohan will co-drive the P2 class #24 entry alongside Israeli Roy Nissany and Brit Edward Pearson. He will also share the garage with fellow Australian James Allen, who is competing in the Pro Am class.

Initial signs, before linking with the Toyota-aligned Haas team, pointed to a potential move into Japanese Super Formula, however that deal ultimately fell through for a range of reasons.

While his value as a Formula 1 reserve driver has remained clear, the key gap for Doohan has been track time.

"I'm very excited to be back racing, it's almost going to be 12 months since my last race," Doohan said.

"Amazing to do it with Nielsen Racing and to make this transition into sports cars. There's a lot to learn, and it's extremely important to get some seat time, but we will get acclimatised quickly, having a great team around me to do so, and I can't wait to get started."



Doohan will pilot the LMP2 Nielsen Racing ORECA alongside his Haas F1 reserve duties in 2026 as he waits for further opportunity.

Before stepping into a full-time F1 role in 2025, prior to Alpine opting for Franco Colapinto under the leadership of Flavio Briatore, Doohan had been linked to an LMP2 programme.

Although he has completed limited mileage in the Gibson V8-powered prototypes, he is embracing the differences the category presents.

"Obviously, the first thing was a roof over my head and some obstructions in view, but nevertheless, it's a nice variation in the driving style, obviously multiple stints meaning more than one driver and a bigger picture taken to play for," he said.

"All in all, it will help and be a massive experience gain for wherever my career goes past here."

The ELMS prologue will take place on 6–7 April, with the opening round at Barcelona scheduled for 12 April.

***TW Neal***

# GILL PUTS IN THE MILES AHEAD OF CROATIA

**THE FIGHT** for Taylor Gill and co-driver Dan Brkic to stay on the radar of the FIA World Rally Championship continues, with the pair securing funding for another WRC2 start at April's Rally Croatia.

Operating on a shoestring budget while based in Finland, where they take on mechanical and building work to stay afloat, every Euro remains critical. A single WRC2 entry sits well north of €100,000, placing constant pressure on funding.

After completing a vital tarmac test in Italy in their hired WRC2 Toyota Yaris, the team will undertake a 3000km road trip to Croatia, towing the car themselves.

"It is the cheapest way to do it, and that is the main thing obviously," Gill said.



Gill puts the power down in the GR Yaris at Sweden on snow and ice, but the coastal tarmac roads of Croatia will present a very different challenge.

"In a normal case, you would pay someone to drive the car down, and we would fly to the rally, but this is the most efficient way, driving the car down ourselves... Dan and I are quite invested in what we are doing, so it is just part of what has to happen."

The pair impressed at Rally Sweden, finishing fourth in WRC2, and face another must-deliver outing in Croatia.

Gill told Auto Action the challenge will step up significantly.

"It's going to be a stronger field than what we were up against in Sweden with more factory teams being there, and the usual crew, and it will be flat out from the word go," Gill said.

"It won't be easy because about 70% of the stages are new this year, and that probably helps us get some quality footing going in.

"The Yaris is also well developed on the tarmac with a few seasons under its belt, and we've got no doubt in its ability."

Following Croatia, the focus will shift to another funding push to compete at Rally Finland in July.

***TW Neal***




Proudford-Nalder powers his Tatuus to an outright podium at Barcelona in the Formula Winter Series despite limited seat time in open-wheel machinery. Image: AKM Motorsport

BELOW: Ahead of his FRECA debut, Ninovic completed testing at Paul Ricard in the Pirelli-shod Tatuus T-326 for Rodin Motorsport. Image: Rodin Motorsport

# YOUNG AUSSIES PREPARE FOR EUROPE BLAST

As the European junior formula circuit gets ready to rev into action, there's a cohort of strong Australian talent preparing to continue their open-wheel journey, while in British F4, there appears to be a name to watch.

***Timothy William Neal***

**THE BEVY** of FIA satellite series across Europe is a strong breeding ground for open-wheel talent, and as usual, there's a host of Australian hopefuls looking to make their mark.

Across UK soil in the British F4 and GB3 championships, these competitions have traditionally been a strong jumping-off point for homegrown drivers, and 2026 is no exception.

Last season saw an Aussie one-two in the GB3 title race, as Alex Ninovic and Patrick Heuzenroeder took those honours respectively. The former is heading to the FIA Formula Regional European Championship with Rodin Motorsport, while Heuzenroeder, who made a splash with his fill-in FIA Formula 3 debut in Melbourne with Campos, will compete in EuroCup-3 with GriffinCore Campos alongside Gianmarco Pradel, who also finished fourth in GB3.

The extremely promising Ninovic continues his push to the top at the Red Bull Ring on 24–26 April, while Heuzenroeder and Pradel will launch their campaigns at Paul Ricard on 1–3 May.



As for this year's GB3 crop, Noah Lisle (Hitech), Dante Vinci, Peter Bouzinelos (Hillspeed) and Jack Taylor (Fortec Motorsports) will all take up the Tatuus MSV GB3-025 machinery as they look to continue the recent Australian success in the category.

There is also a new name in the FIA-sanctioned F4 scene this season, and that is 16-year-old George Proudford-Nalder from Orange, NSW.

Graduating from KA3 karting, Proudford-Nalder competed in last season's Ginetta Junior Championship in the UK, steering his Ford Zetec-powered entry to seventh in the standings.

The young driver now moves into British F4 with Virtuosi Racing, a team with a strong record of developing race winners.

Through testing, Proudford-Nalder has shown encouraging signs in his transition to open-wheel racing.

"Winter testing has gone really well," Proudford-Nalder said.

"The car feels great, the team vibe is amazing, and I can't wait to keep building on this momentum into 2026.

"I've always wanted to compete in single-seaters, and I am really looking forward to getting started."

In addition to testing, he competed in the Spanish and Portuguese Formula Winter Series with AKM Motorsport, recording three rookie podiums and an outright podium, along with five top 10 finishes overall.

Virtuosi Racing team manager Mark Salmon said the young Australian had already made an impression.

"George has carried out several tests with us at the end of this year, consistently demonstrating impressive potential, a strong work ethic, and outstanding speed.

"I am looking forward to seeing what the year ahead will bring. With George as part of the team, we are confident in the results we can achieve together."

His campaign will begin at Donington Park on 18–19 April as the sole Australian in the field, while he will also contest an intercontinental round at Zandvoort.

Elsewhere on the continent, 2025 AU4 champion Noah Killion has linked up with US Racing in the FIA Italian F4 Championship and the E4 Championship.

In preparation, the 15-year-old Sydneysider recorded five top 10 finishes in the Formula Winter Series, building on a nine-race winning run in Australia, and will take to the track in Italy at Misano on 8–10 May.

Go, you good things!

***TW Neal***




Peter Sauber, 2005, midway through a Formula 1 journey that spanned three decades and redefined what a Swiss privateer team could achieve.

# PETER SAUBER TELLS HIS STORY

After 33 years on the Formula 1 grid, the Sauber name bows out—not with drama, but quiet acceptance, as Peter Sauber reflects on a journey that began by chance and ends with his life's work passing into a new era. Before stepping away, he sat down with our man in F1, Luis Vasconcelos, for one final, revealing conversation.

STORY: LUIS VASCONCELOS | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES, WIKI COMMONS

**THE SAUBER** name is gone from the Formula 1 grid after 33 consecutive years as an integral part of the World Championship.

When Audi announced it was buying the Swiss team from its last private owner, Swedish billionaire Finn Rausing, it was obvious the manufacturer was going to go racing under its own banner. That is why Peter Sauber knew his name would be gone from the field and accepted it with grace and his usual logical realism.

With Formula 1 preparing a tribute to the Swiss in Abu Dhabi, Peter and his wife Christiane attended the last Grand Prix of the season to see 'their' cars start a Formula 1 race for the last time. A courtesy meeting to say goodbye to the great man turned into a nearly one-hour conversation, when Peter decided to tell me how his unlikely story started when he became a university dropout.

Always careful with his words but firm with his opinions, Sauber explained in detail his long road to Formula 1, praised those who helped him at different stages of his career, but did not hold back when it came time to criticise those who let him down.

I have to say that of all the interviews I have done in my life, this was one of the easiest, if not the easiest of all, as Peter Sauber explained, with great chronological precision, how the last 55 years unfolded for him and his team.

He even wrote down in my notebook the names of those who helped him early in his career to make sure I got them right, "because nobody knows about them", confessing that "it's crazy to do Formula 1 from Switzerland" and revealing that his only emotion in Abu Dhabi did not come from knowing his name would vanish from Formula 1, but from something much closer to his heart.

> It's crazy to do F1 from Switzerland!




The Sauber C5 turned BMW power and Swiss precision into a class-winning Le Mans weapon.

**LV:** You haven't been the owner or shareholder of the team you founded, but the Sauber name has remained in Formula 1 until now. How do you feel about the Sauber name disappearing from the grid in 2026 and Audi taking over the whole group and now running the team under its own brand?

**PS:** Well, let's start off by saying that I've had one year to prepare for this and, therefore, it's not a shock to me. You mention the Sauber name, of which I'm very proud, but I knew this day was coming, so I've had the time to get used to this natural transition. But what is really sad to me is that it's not only the Sauber name that disappears from Formula 1, the car's name will lose the C that we've carried from the start, from the C1.

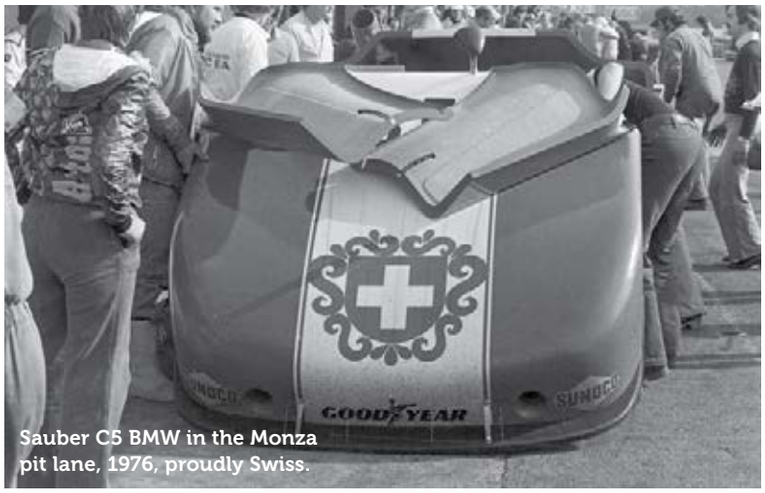
**LV:** Ah, yes, when you named the car C1, it was a tribute to your wife, Christiane, right?

**PS:** Yes, and now it's gone. Audi will name the cars within their own heritage, so this year's car will be the R26 and that's the end of an important part of the story for me. So, we're not just talking here about the 33 years Sauber was in Formula 1, we're talking about the 55 years the company has been involved in motor racing, from the time I decided to build my first car.

So, it's like I have this pain but, on the other hand, for me, the most important thing is that the company will continue to go forward. At the moment, they have 800 people in Hinwil and they'll all keep their jobs. But they are expanding the team, they are buying additional land and will be erecting new buildings, so under the Audi name the team will move up, they'll have all the means to move up. So, I believe and I hope they will have a beautiful future. You see, with a manufacturer owning the team, they have like a guarantee.

Of course, you remember, I remember and we all remember what happened with BMW when they bought the team, but this time I feel it's different. You see, Gernot Döllner, the Audi CEO, did a very intelligent thing and put together a very intelligent system, because he put himself on the board of the Sauber Group and I think that's an important signal, not only to the outside world, but also to the entire company, because perceptions are sometimes important.

And when I read his interviews, it's clear, for him, that Formula One is a part of Audi's future strategy, the future marketing strategy of Audi, and I'm




Sauber C5 BMW in the Monza pit lane, 1976, proudly Swiss.





> I wasn't even interested in motor racing ...

MAIN: Eugen Strähl and Peter Bernhard in the Sauber C5 BMW M12, Le Mans 1977.

INSET FROM TOP: Sauber C5 BMW Le Mans in 1977 was running strong before retirement.

In 1978, at Le Mans the Sauber C5 BMW Marc Surer, Eugen Strahl and Harry Blumer didn't run enough laps to be classified as finishers.

sure that Audi will benefit from it, both in terms of image but also financially, because nowadays Formula 1 teams can be very profitable.

Also, they took a very important and intelligent step by bringing their Qatari shareholders into the Formula 1 team. This means there's a very wealthy and developing state invested in the Audi Formula 1 program and, for me, this was a very important step and I see it as a guarantee for the company's future. That's why I'm absolutely sure they will do that very well.

## THE VW BEETLE THAT STARTED IT ALL

**LV:** The Sauber name will no longer be in Formula 1, but looking back at what you achieved, you've got to be extremely proud of everything you and the team achieved. I'm sure you remember that when you started this Formula 1 team in Switzerland, everybody was saying, 'forget about it, in two years, he's out of here,' and you proved it can be done from Switzerland. At the end of 2025, Sauber was the fourth-longest standing Formula 1 team, only behind Ferrari, McLaren and Williams. I'm sure that was not at all in your mind when you started competing with your own VW Beetle, so could you have ever imagined how things would turn out?

**PS:** Personally, I never did, because maybe sometimes I'm a dreamer, but in terms of business decisions I'm not a dreamer, I'm a very realistic person. You know most of my story as we've talked about it in the past, but let me tell you how it all started, because there are a lot of details almost no one knows about.

You see, when it all started, even before we built the C1, I was not a motor racing fan, never, I knew nothing about cars and wasn't even interested. So, why did I have a go at racing? Because I was studying to be an electrical engineer, but I never got to finish at the engineering school in Winterthur, so after that came a period in which I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. And it was a difficult period for me.



The Sauber C3 laid the groundwork for everything that followed.






And it was completely by accident, 100% by chance, that I came into contact with motorsport. As you know, I had bought myself a Volkswagen Beetle, not to go racing, but simply to move around, to go from A to B.

ABOVE LEFT: Sauber C5 BMW at Le Mans, 1978.

ABOVE RIGHT: Sauber SHS C6, the BASF 'cassette tape' car, was sidelined in the night at Le Mans, 1982.

I was getting my car serviced by a guy called Otto Blanc, who was an amateur Swiss racer as well, and he tuned Beetles for his customers. At that time, I decided to buy a new Beetle from him, so I gave him the old one, but he was a very good salesman and offered me a deal.

He told me he could tune the new Beetle and give it five extra bhp, so that I could join the Swiss Automobile Club and enter some slaloms and hillclimbs, saying it was going to be fun. So, I thought, 'why not?' and I accepted his offer, got the engine tuned a little bit and decided to enter slaloms at first, and then a small hillclimb competition. And I immediately enjoyed what I was doing, of course.

But, of course, when you start competing in something, you want to do well, you want to win, so it was immediately clear that to have success we needed to make this Beetle faster. But, as I said, I knew nothing about cars, so the only way I could see that I could make my car faster was to reduce the weight. And you don't have to be an engineer to find ways to reduce a car's weight.

And with the Beetle it was quite possible to reduce the weight, so the first thing we did was to make some new parts in polyester. We made new front and rear wings in polyester, something you could only do with a Volkswagen Beetle. So, we changed all four wings, also did the big front boot and the much smaller engine cover in the rear, in polyester. We got really into it (laughs), so I removed the side windows in glass and replaced them with plastic ones.

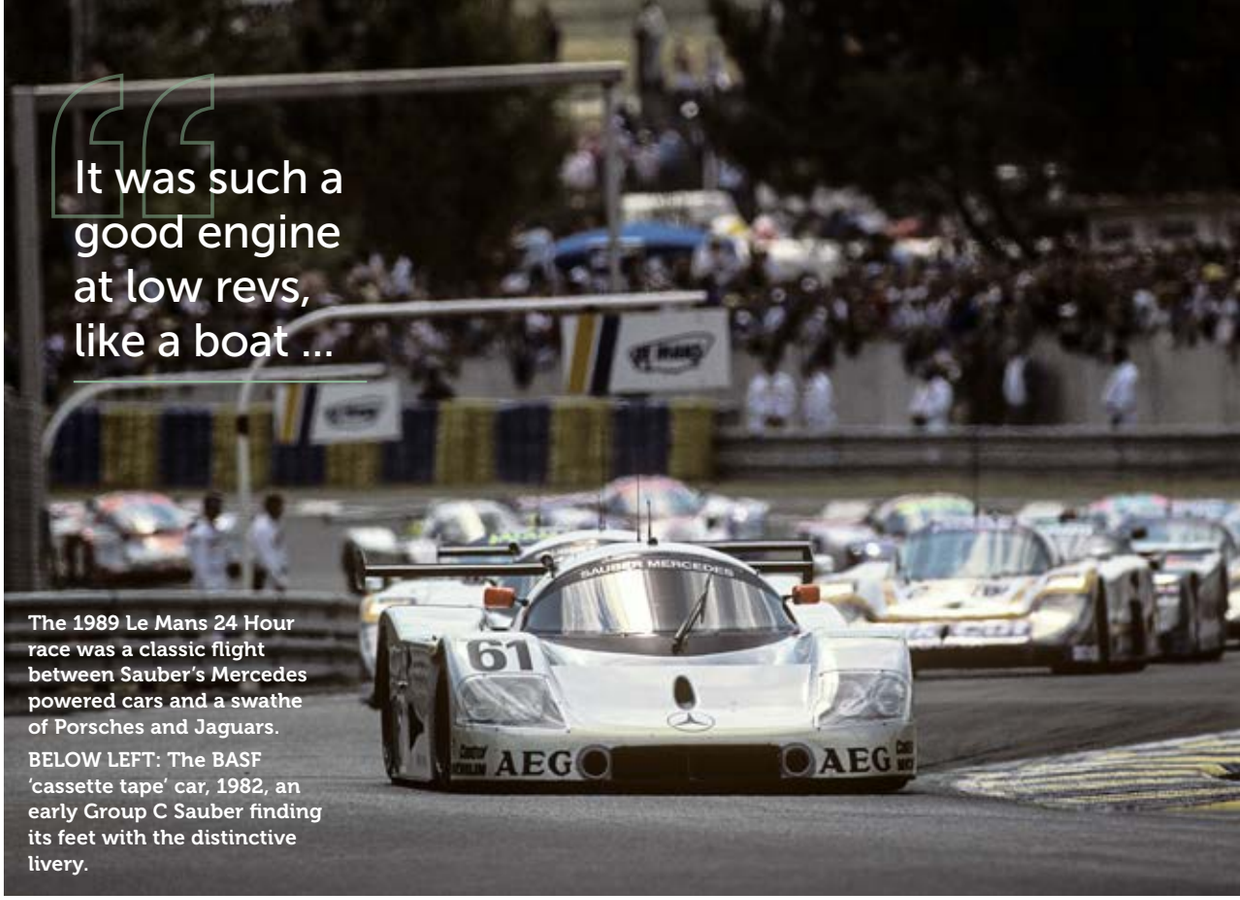
Frankly, it was all a bit crazy, but as we reduced the car weight by quite a lot, it was going faster and faster, so I started taking part in bigger competitions and my results kept improving, so it was becoming a lot of fun. But it was also the right time to take a step forward.




**LV:** Now, that's the time you go from amateur racer turned tuner, to making your own bodywork and that's how



The Le Mans one-two was a defining day in the history of Sauber Motorsport.




The 1989 Le Mans 24 Hour race was a classic flight between Sauber's Mercedes powered cars and a swathe of Porsches and Jaguars.

BELOW LEFT: The BASF 'cassette tape' car, 1982, an early Group C Sauber finding its feet with the distinctive livery.



The Sauber-Mercedes C9 in 1989 was the year it all came together.

the C1 was born. So, how did that come about?

**PS:** Well, there was only one way forward, and that was to completely remove the bodywork of the Beetle and build a new one, with a shape more suited for racing, which the Beetle didn't have, so we did something different before we went further and did the C1. We shaped the bodywork around the Beetle mechanical parts like the Can-Am McLaren that was winning everything back then and painted it yellow. One of my friends looked at it and nicknamed the car "the piece of cheese" (laughs). And this car was fast, because we did a few more things to it. I changed the front axle and copied what the Super Vee cars had and that was good.

So, the car was fast, but now I had to drive it against sports cars, or prototypes, as we called them back then, in proper club racing. That was in 1969 and by then I had a group of friends helping me and we had this stupid idea of building a proper two-seater racecar. But, of course, none of us knew anything about suspensions or all the other things, so I went out and bought two old Brabham Formula 3 cars, BT16 or BT17, something like that [Ed, they were BT16A chassis].

We then removed all the bodywork and with a colleague of mine, we actually made the car that turned me into a constructor. Sadly, nobody knows his name these days when they write my story, but his name was Ruedi Siegfried and he had also done his own funny car, like my old 'piece of cheese.'

At the time we had the idea of building a two-seater sportscar, Ruedi was working in a company that made ski lifts, so they had some experience with tubular frames and we took inspiration from the Maserati Birdcage, which also had a tubular frame.

Now, this Ruedi, he had a lot of experience with this kind of frame, as he had built many important parts for his company using that technique, so it was him that effectively built our first two-seater chassis.

We kept the front and rear suspensions of the Brabham, of course, but the problem was the Formula 3 car used a spaceframe and we had built a full tubular frame. I remember we got it down to more or less the same weight as the Formula 3 and the good thing was that we didn't need to test it, because we knew the mechanical side worked well.

So, we put it down on its wheels and it was immediately fast. Same engine, same gearbox, the only problem being it had only four gears, not ideal for some races, but it was very easy to drive and the bodywork was efficient. I have to say the C1 was a nice car, I think aerodynamically it was OK.

**LV:** That's at a time there were no wind tunnel testing or anything, so how did you fare against the more established competitors?

**PS:** Oh, we had some very strong competitors. There were the English Merlyn cars, the Italian Abarth 1000, but the strongest one was the Ginetta and there were some quick drivers there too. I was not too slow myself but I was not a huge talent either, so I got the Swiss hillclimb champion, Hans Kunis, to drive for us and that was the end of my racing driver career at the end of 1971.

Kunis had won with a Porsche Carrera, with the Abarth 1000 and won the hillclimb title with the Abarth, so he was quick and he had experience, which I obviously didn't. But even back then, even in Switzerland, people were telling me it was not a good idea to try and make racing cars from our country so, as you see, some things never changed (laughs).

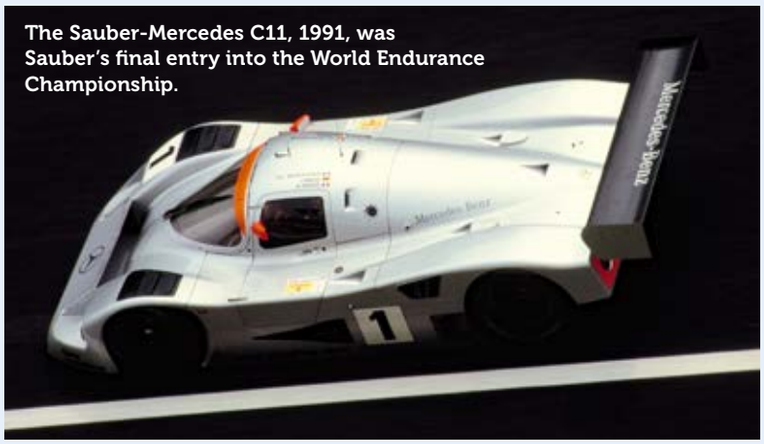
## EARLY SUCCESS FUELS AMBITIONS

**LV:** By then, however, you had found your path, but it was a long, long way to Formula 1 and you spent many years building your team in sportscars. How do you remember that journey?

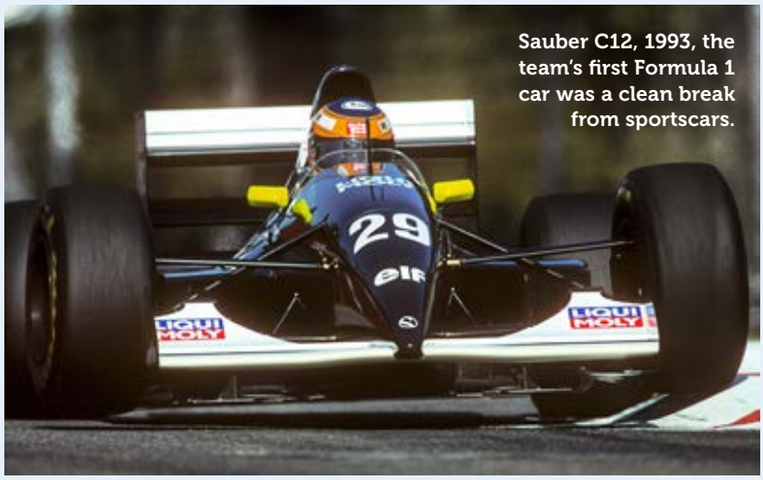
**PS:** Well, the C1 had been a one-off project but then Hans Kunis commissioned us to build a brand-new car for him and that's how the C2 was born. This time we bought a two-year-old March and did the same thing we had done with the Brabham.

Now, the March was a pretty good car, also built on a spaceframe platform, that we modified to make it a tubular frame, as we'd done with the Brabham and then we did our own bodywork again and, like the C1, it was quite OK. In this car we could fit a 1.8-litre Cosworth engine, the BDA, and it was a good, strong engine and very reliable.

With this car, Kunis won some nice and important hillclimb races against established drivers who were racing cars from big manufacturers, like Lola, for example.




The Sauber-Mercedes C11, 1991, was Sauber's final entry into the World Endurance Championship.




Sauber C12, 1993, the team's first Formula 1 car was a clean break from sportscars.

**LV:** By then was it all starting to make business sense for you?

**PS:** No, not at all, it was not a business because I was not selling the cars. We built two C2s, and Kunis paid for it, and then we built three C3s, so we could make a bit of money from the sale, but never enough to recover the investment.

The big jump came with the C4, that was the first monocoque chassis we did, and it was built by a Swiss mechanic that had a lot of experience, Eddie Wiess. We kept the bodywork from the C3 but the tubular frame was gone and with a monocoque we had a much better mechanical baseline.

## THE MOVE TO INTERNATIONAL RACING

**LV:** With the C4, Manfred Schurti got some good results before going on to be a Porsche works driver, but you were already moving up from 2L sportscars into Group 6. I guess the cancellation of the European 2L sportscar championship forced your hand, how did that progression go?

**PS:** Well, we'd done three C4 cars and could sell two, but there was a growing market in Group 6, so we built the C5 and ended up producing five chassis, making our debut in the Le Mans 24 Hours and we were fast. When we put Marc Surer in the car, he was faster than the Osella works cars, so it was clear it was a good car and Herbert Muller won the Interseries and that was very important for us.

It was a good car, it was quick and reliable, but we were still not able to make a business out of it.



> Best sponsors save the team ...

I was spending too much money to build the cars and I didn't make enough money from selling chassis to pay it off. And that's when I decided that I had to stop. We were a very small company, so we had to be careful with our money and that's when I decided to try a different approach.

For 1979 I leased three Formula 3 cars, unfortunately not the best ones, as they were Lolas from Heini Mader, who was the European importer for them. So, we did the Swiss Formula 3 championship




Heinz-Harald Frentzen, 1995, was Sauber's rising star with early Red Bull backing as the team found its feet in Formula 1.

Karl Wendlinger leads the pack at Spa, 1993, Sauber C12 on the charge in Sauber's debut Formula 1 season. The team finished 7th on the Constructors' Championship out of 13 teams.

BELOW: Heinz-Harald Frentzen in the Sauber C13, 1994, Mercedes-Benz influence still shaping the concept in the team's early Formula 1 years.

with three Swiss drivers and we won the title with Beat Blatter and also placed the other two cars in second and fifth place. It was very successful from a sporting point of view, I didn't lose any money and that was already a good step forward, so just servicing cars was a good way for my small company to operate.

The first BMW connection

**LV:** However, by 1980 you were back in sportscars and this time it was all done with backing and you started your way up, so how did that start?

**PS:** Do you remember Dieter Stappert? Yes, he was the new man in charge of BMW's sports program, but I knew him from way back. As I did know Jochen Neerpasch, who had helped me a little bit with engines and then called me to say BMW had a Swiss customer in Nussbaumen that needed a race team to take part in the




Procar Series.

**LV:** Now, that was already a step into Formula 1, as that was a championship that raced as support for the European Grand Prix with some Formula 1 drivers taking part as guests. How successful was Sauber in Procar?

**PS:** So, following Neerpasch's contact, we serviced the car from the customer in Nussbaumen but I also decided to buy a BMW M1 myself, to enter the series and I got Marc Surer to drive it. Marc was, by then, a Formula 1 driver with ATS but, unfortunately, he had a big accident in practice for the South African Grand Prix and was out for a while, so for the first three races of the Procar Series we had Manfred Schurti in the car.

The car was fast, even though it was my first touring car, I immediately saw what we could do a little bit better. We were very fast both with Schurti and with Surer, we led two races but in Hockenheim, with Marc leading the race, Pironi pushed him out going into the first corner, as he'd done before in another race.

Still, it was a good year for us and by the end of the year, a Swiss bodywork manufacturer, Seger & Hoffman, ordered two Group 5 cars from us. Actually, they ordered one but I built two. One of them was for the GS-Sport team from Germany, for Hans Stuck to drive it.

## THE 'CASSETTE TAPE' CAR

**LV:** Ah, yes, the car that was sponsored by BASF...

**PS:** Yes (laughs), we called it the cassette tape, because we painted it like the BASF logo they had on the cassette tapes they were selling at the

time and the name stuck. The car was good, we worked in close cooperation with Seger & Hoffman, as we did the mechanical part and they took care of the bodywork.

That was a Group 5 car, a beautiful car that was also fast, but it was the last one where I was involved in building it, as it had a tube frame and I was making them myself. I was doing it all by myself, cutting, bending, welding, assembling, I could do it all. But, of course, the suspension geometries and all that were from BMW and the car was immediately fast. You know, it was a very light car, the bodywork was in kevlar and made by Seger & Hoffman.

GS-Sport did the whole season with it, racing the 'cassette tape' car with Stuck, and we used the other car for ourselves, entering it in Le Mans and maybe another one or two races. And that was a very important car for us, because at the end of the season Seger & Hoffman were so happy with it that they commissioned me to construct a Group C car for 1982, when the new categories were replacing the old ones.

That was very important because by myself I wouldn't have been able to do it, as it would have been too expensive. It was then that I had the first connection with the Mercedes engineers. BASF remained as the sponsor, so we had a second 'cassette tape' car and that was the car with the crazy rear wing, mounted on a central pillar.

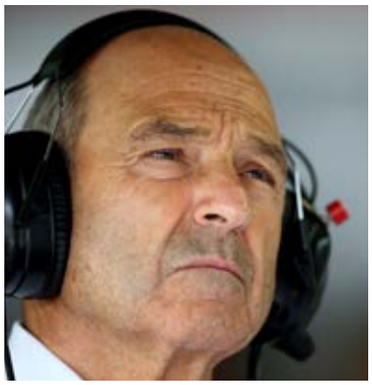
We built two cars, we called it the C6, Seger & Hoffman named it SHS, as they were the ones who had commissioned it and I still think that with a good engine the car would have been fast. We were using the 3.9-litre Cosworth and its vibrations were so violent that in Le Mans the works Fords retired even before we did, maybe some 10 laps before and before it was night time.

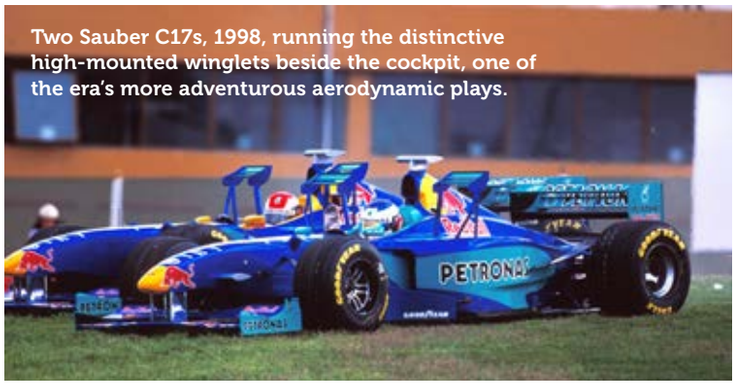
We had made it a monocoque, like in Formula 1, with the engine being a structural part of the car, so the vibrations were affecting everything and even the engine couldn't take it anymore, so we lost it. Well, it was breaking everything else.




Johnny Herbert in the Sauber C16, 1997, leading the team into its next phase with Petronas-branded Ferrari power.

BELOW: Peter Sauber at the 2014 Italian Grand Prix.






Two Sauber C17s, 1998, running the distinctive high-mounted winglets beside the cockpit, one of the era's more adventurous aerodynamic plays.

## MERCEDES OPENS ITS DOORS... SLOWLY

**LV:** You mentioned Mercedes, so how did that link start and then grow?

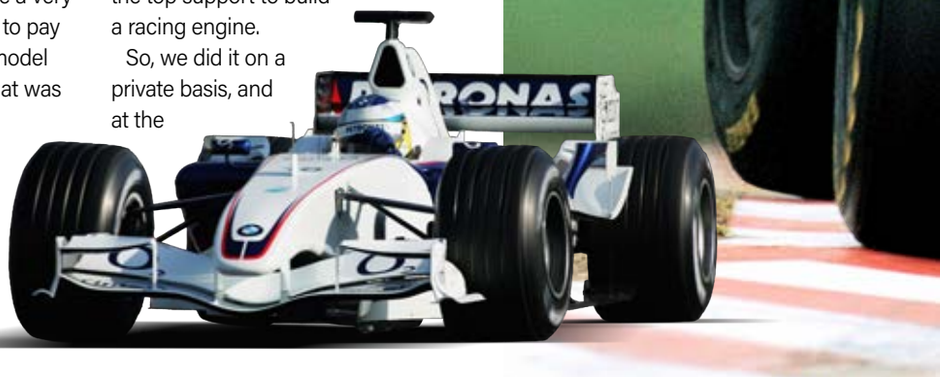
**PS:** Well, the good news after that season with the C6 was that we now had one foot in Group C. That meant that with some support from Heini Mader, I could build the C7 with a BMW engine. BMW was very nice to me, they gave me the engines for free and I only had to pay for the rebuilds.

And I also had to pay for the company that was doing the bodywork for us. They gave me a very good deal, because I only had to pay for the bodywork, not for the model they had to make before, as that was the really expensive part.

Then we had the BMW engine, we were in Group C and we finished ninth in Le Mans. We were between 12 Porsche, so we were the only non-Porsche inside the top 10. Of course, in Switzerland no one talked about it, but at the international level that was a breakthrough for us, and we got a lot of praise.

That helped build the relationship with Mercedes. It started slowly, it progressed very slowly but it was all done on a private basis, because they had no plans to return to circuit racing in an official capacity. And that's when I had an idea, a crazy idea, because Mercedes had obviously the technology and the means, but not the top support to build a racing engine.

So, we did it on a private basis, and at the



Heinz-Harald Frentzen's Sauber C14, 1995, with Ford power spits flames in Argentina 1995.

BELOW: Nick Heidfeld on track for BMW Sauber, Barcelona testing 2006.

time the Mercedes engineers had never done a racing engine. You know, they had not been allowed to do any project in racing for 30 years but they had slowly been allowed to support customers.

So, I told them I'd like to commission a five-litre engine from their production cars, I'll put it in my sportscar and then you can help me. Eventually they agreed, but it was not so easy.

Then, we weren't even in contact with the technical department, they were not allowed in this kind of project, so they had a very good director of R&D and they had built engines for beating world records at the Nardo track with road cars and so on, so they had the know-how.

We took the five-litre engine to them, they put a turbocharger in it, so we had to change all the inlets, and we built the airbox by ourselves in Switzerland. We made this big airbox for all eight cylinders and it worked very well, with two butterflies, to the turbo. And we also had to build the dry sump for them, as they had not done one for racing. Actually, we got a V8 Chevrolet engine from Heini Mader, so the architecture was the same and we could do a one-piece dry sump for Mercedes, built in aluminium. So, that was Mercedes' first racing engine.



Pedro de la Rosa, Peter Sauber and Kamui Kobayashi at the BMW Sauber C29 launch at Valencia, 2010.

**LV:** Given Mercedes hadn't done racing engines for so many years, how did that first model evolve?

**PS:** Oh, that first engine we changed a lot, because the normal revs for this engine was about 6500rpm and we didn't need a lot more...

**LV:** Because you had so much torque, anyway...

**PS:** Yes, we got a bit more revs, a little bit from the turbo, a little bit from the compression ratio and when we started the engine had close to 700bhp. But at the end, with the C11, we drove with 900 horsepower and it was incredible. And the sound was like a motor boat, it was beautiful.

**LV:** That huge torque helped you win at the Nurburgring, with Mike Thackwell and Henri Pescarolo...

**PS:** Yes, it was such a good engine at low revs, like a boat (laughs)...

## TWO WINS THAT CHANGED SAUBER'S COURSE

**LV:** How did that win, the first for Mercedes at World Championship level, change the relationship with them?

**PS:** In fact, that relationship didn't change much, things remained the same for a while, but what really changed everything was when we won a race in the ADAC Supercup in 1987. Again, it was at the Nurburgring and it was going to be the last race for Porsche as a works team in sportscars, because they were retiring, so they took Hans Stuck and gave him a nice new car.

But it was our team, with Schlesser, that won the race, beating Stuck, and that was the click for Stuttgart, because it was Stuck, it was Porsche, so that caught their attention. So, for 1988, it was our first year as a works team with money from Mercedes. But we didn't have a lot of money, because we were still a small team.

**LV:** There was a lot of success for you under the Mercedes name, because you won consecutive titles in 1989 and 1990, so the next step was an obvious one, Formula 1. How did that come about?

**PS:** The problem was... yes, why did we go to Formula 1? We went to Formula 1 because that was what was on the minds of the Mercedes people. Also, as you say, because we won the World Championship twice and we won Le Mans, so what else did we have to do in sportscars?

Also, the sportscar championship was going down again, as it always happens, and both things combined





Peter Sauber and Christiane Sauber, Abu Dhabi 2025, back in the paddock for a final farewell.

gave us the idea of going to Formula 1. Unfortunately, it was a difficult period on the commercial side for Mercedes. On one hand, we had Jurgen Hubbert, but the big boss was Werner Niefer and he was clearly behind me, so I had full support from Mercedes. But the boss of the whole group was Edzard Reuter and it was him that stopped the Formula 1 plan when we were already fully invested in it.

Still, in the minds of the people we were working with, especially Norbert Haug, it was clear that Hinwil, us, we had to go to Formula 1. So, Haug pushed Hubbert to go ahead with us, but it was impossible to get access to their money and become a works team.

So, Hubbert told me that they would support us in our first year in Formula 1 with the Ilmor engine. But today, when you speak with Mario Illien, Mario says 'yes, Mercedes asked me to build an engine,' that's bullshit...

Why would Mercedes go to an English engine builder? That is crazy. So that created a lot of hard work for me, because we had to convince Mercedes to give us the money when we were building the cars in Switzerland and the engines were being designed and built in England.

So, nothing was from Mercedes and they didn't understand why they should pay for it. It was so hard for me to convince them to go ahead, to hook them into it. The catch was to convince them that we could start with this Ilmor engine and then make the switch to our own Mercedes engine. I argued that would help us start from a good baseline and, in the end, that was the reason that Mercedes also gave me money for the second year, for 1994.

## LEFT BEHIND BY MERCEDES

**LV:** That's when things changed for good, and you found yourself on your own. How did Mercedes end up going with McLaren and not with you?

**PS:** Yes, what happened is that during the second year they stopped the support, and they told me, very clearly, that they would stay with us in the future, but I would have to find sponsors by the middle of the 1994 season and that was not so easy. They told me, "we support you with the engine, we put the Mercedes badge on the Ilmor engine", but I would have to look for the money to run the team. It was happening so fast and it was not possible.

And then, two excellent possibilities came about. One was Red Bull, the other one was Petronas, both are huge companies... well, not Red Bull at the time, at the beginning, with the first sponsorship deal, it became difficult for Dietrich Mateschitz to pay, it wasn't easy for him, but it was OK. And Petronas was at another level.

But during 1994, Haug spoke with Frank Williams. So there were some rumours out there that Mercedes was going to work with Williams and we would be left out, so it was impossible for me to find sponsors with these rumours going around. Norbert Haug was a disaster for us.

But then Frank Williams told him he wanted Mercedes, but not with the Ilmor engine. He had seen that we had lost some engines in 1994, when he was winning races and championships with the Renault engine. So, he said no to Haug. But that was a mistake on his part.

So now Norbert Haug had to go to Ron Dennis. And Ron broke his contract with Peugeot and that created a lot of noise in France. It went all the way to the top and it created a huge problem for Peugeot, even at government level. That didn't change the fact that for me, with no engine deal in place and now no support from Mercedes, it was really impossible to get sponsors. Then, when I got sponsors, it was already too late, because Mercedes had already done a deal with McLaren, so Sauber was out. It was too late, so what could I do.





Now I had two sponsors for Formula 1, who ended up being two of the best sponsors in Formula 1, Petronas and Red Bull, who are still in Formula 1, I brought them, that was 100% a Sauber deal.

So, for 1995, we did a deal with Ford and we stayed with them for two years, 1995 and 1996. Let me tell you that the deal was for three years, but then Jackie Stewart came and Jackie Stewart was a Ford man. And some of his friends at Ford told him that "you can go with your own team to Formula 1 and you'll get support from Ford". And so, Ford went away from us...

**LV:** Yes, first they built the team for him, paid for everything and then, three years later, he sold the team to them and it became Jaguar. The best deal anyone has ever made in Formula 1...

**PS:** Yes, yes (laughs), and then he sold to Jaguar. I think he got the money twice or three times, so well done him.






Peter Sauber in the Stake F1 Team Kick Sauber garage, Imola 2025.
BELOW LEFT: Gabriel Bortoleto on track in the Kick Sauber C45, Abu Dhabi 2025 – the final C car.

**LV:** The partnership with Ferrari came later, lasted before and after the deal to become BMW's works team, until Audi bought Sauber. But that's recent history, everyone knows it. Now, when you look back, what do you think was the biggest risk you took? What makes you think, "how did I do that?"
**PS:** Everything. Every time, I thought like that. Don't forget, we are based in Switzerland and it's crazy to do Formula 1 from Switzerland. I would say that the most difficult time was when I bought the company back from BMW, that was really mission impossible.

Impossible because without strong partners, you can't do that. But if I didn't take back the company, they would have closed it, 100% certain they would close it. They were talking to other people, nothing was coming out of it and I waited right up to the last moment to buy it, just to avoid it closing down. But for me, the price was a disaster. The price was not too high, to be fair, if you think they were selling a Formula 1 team, but for me it was a huge amount of money.

So, it was very difficult and the last good year we had, while I ran the company, was 2012. That was a very good year, we got four podiums, three with Pérez, one with Kobayashi. On two occasions we finished second, in front of the Ferrari that was supplying us with engines and gearboxes. That was fantastic.

**LV:** From then on, though, things became quite difficult and eventually you sold the team to Finn Rausing. Looking back now, where did it start to go wrong?
**PS:** Yes, maybe we made some mistakes, maybe. At the end of 2012, I sort of gave the company's steering wheel to Monisha [Kaltenborn]. Maybe it was the wrong decision [Peter stops for quite a while, choosing his words very carefully.] I don't know. It was difficult, for her, it was very, very difficult [another long pause as he clearly doesn't want to speak much about it].

Then, as you said, we were very lucky, with Finn Rausing coming up and buying the whole team. Very lucky, again, lucky. But when you get the luck, you have to grab it, you cannot throw it away, that's very important.

**LV:** As the Sauber name leaves Formula 1, how proud do you feel about what you achieved?
**PS:** Proud? I'm not a big fan of the word proud. I'm thankful, I'm grateful, yes, that's the right word, grateful. I'm very, very grateful that I can be here today. I'm very grateful that the team is still here. And I have left no debts behind. Nobody, never, ever lost money, even one Swiss franc, with me.

Not all the stories of team principals can have that said about them. Personally, I have enough money to live a good life, I don't need boats and planes and expensive cars, but I live a very good life with my wife. And also, our sons can live a good life. I don't need anything more.

**LV:** You're a happy man?
**PS:** Yes, I'm very, very, very happy. And also the situation with Audi now is, for me, it's beautiful. Everybody's future is secure and that is the most important thing for me.

Time had flown by. People were lining up to have a quick chat with Peter Sauber, his PA was frantically trying to wave that he had other things to do, so I thanked him for his time and the great memories I'll cherish forever.

We laughed at some unpublishable moments we shared over the last 33 years, shook hands and went our different ways. There will be more opportunities to reminisce in the future, but away from the circuits and on a strictly 'off the record' basis.

# RICHARD PETTY: RACING'S RELUCTANT KING

Whether you call him The King or the GOAT, there is no doubting Richard Petty's standing in the NASCAR world, which was all built on the back of a love of car racing.

STORY: ANDREW CLARKE | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES, ANDREW CLARKE

**RICHARD PETTY** doesn't talk like a monarch. He talks like a man who's spent his life with grease under his nails, and who never stopped loving the smell of gasoline and the sight of a dirt track on a Sunday afternoon.

"My problem was I loved to drive race cars," he says. "Whether I was winning or losing, I just loved to be in the race car. I think it's the only time that I… I could kind of control myself. Without somebody telling me 'turn here, turn there, put on brakes.' I was able to make the decision. That's the only situation I've ever been in where I had the most control over myself. Kind of weird, but anyhow."

It's not weird at all. It's the essence of Petty's career, a man born into the sport who never thought of doing anything else. He didn't.

Life in Level Cross, North Carolina, was as basic as it came.

"We lived on a dirt road about a mile off the highway. No running water, no electricity. A little three-room house. So, anything we did was new to us.

"There was no TV, didn't get a newspaper, didn't have a radio. So, you just lived that life. At 12 or 14 years old, the only thing you did was go to church on Sunday and go to school on Monday. That's the only places you went. You didn't go on vacation. You didn't go to the beach or to the mountains or any of that kind of stuff. You just lived a very simple life."

Racing opened a window on a wider world. His father, Lee, was one of NASCAR's first professionals, not because he had a sponsor or an engineering degree, but because he stopped moonshining and made racing his full-time job. "Racing got my dad out of the moonshine business. He figured it was safer on the racetrack than it was running up and down the road at night with a load of liquor."

Lee was known for consistency, not flash: "He knew he had no sponsorship. He lived off the money he made on Saturday or Sunday whenever they raced. So, he took care of his equipment. A lot of guys would get in and outrun him and because he had a little six-cylinder Plymouth, he just puttered around.

"But he finished the races. They'd lap him or get way ahead, but they'd have trouble because they'd use their cars up. He was known as Mr Consistency. If they'd run a race, he always finished it. By the time the end of the race came, he was close to the front."

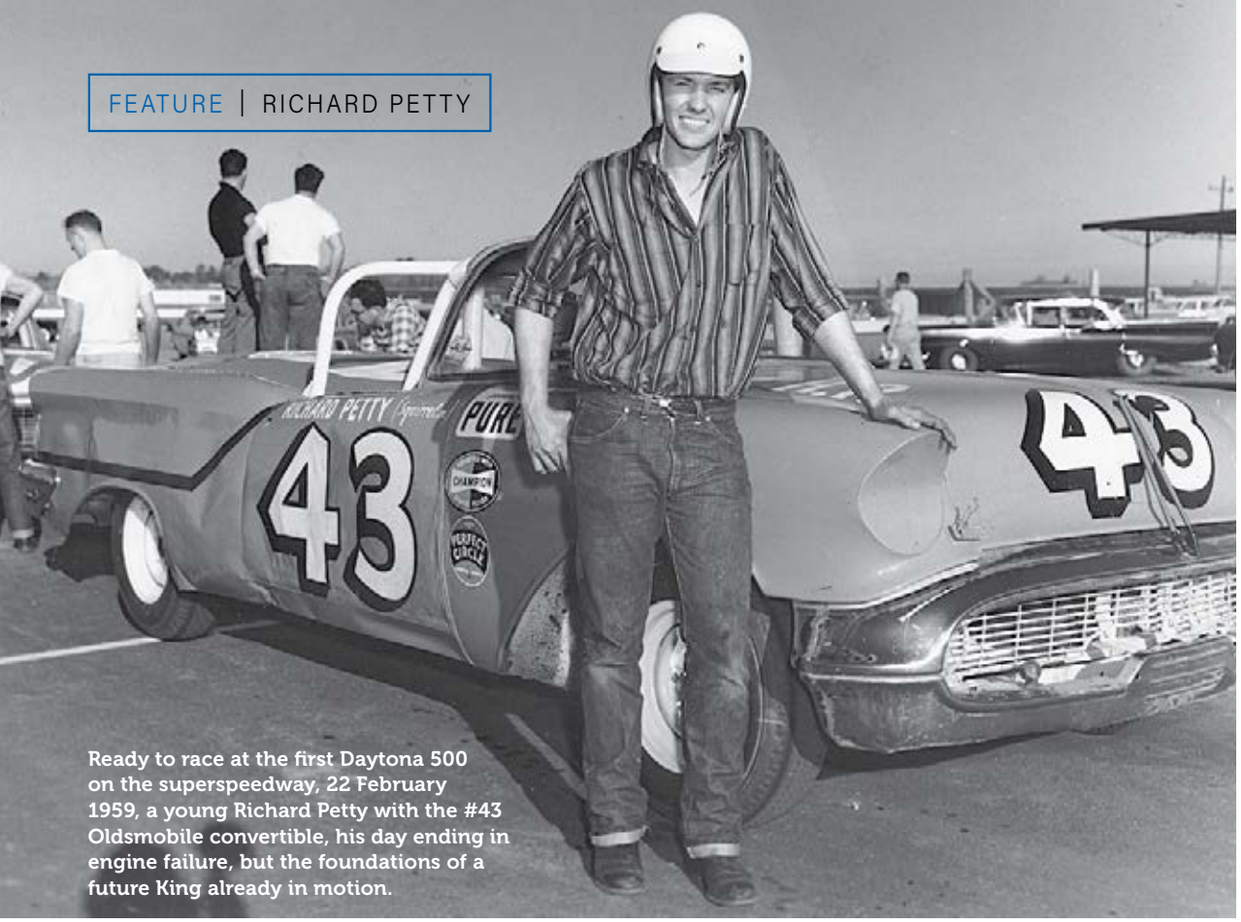
That lesson, finish first by finishing, shaped Richard. "My dad always said, 'Win the race as slow as you can.' There's no need, if you outrun people, to just run it into the ground.

"Back then, before you ever thought about winning, you thought about making the car finish. Then you tried to blend speed and consistency and taking care of your equipment all in one thing."

> They'd lap him or get way ahead, but they'd have trouble because they'd use their cars up …



Richard Petty didn't look for a crown, the name simply fit, and as he put it, "if my name had been Joe, it wouldn't have been King Joe."




Ready to race at the first Daytona 500 on the superspeedway, 22 February 1959, a young Richard Petty with the #43 Oldsmobile convertible, his day ending in engine failure, but the foundations of a future King already in motion.

## FIRST STEPS INTO THE SPORT

**PETTY NEVER** really considered life outside racing.

"When I was growing up, my brother and I worked in the shop and did whatever my dad wanted us to do. Daddy was winning races and championships, and for a long time, you never thought about him growing old or quitting racing. You never looked that far ahead.

"I just always liked to work on cars, build cars and stuff. When I was old enough, or so I thought, I asked Dad when I was 18. He said, 'Come back when you're 21. You'll learn a lot from 18 to 21.' He did the right thing for me."

He chuckles at the comparison to today's teenagers climbing straight from go-karts into Cup rides.

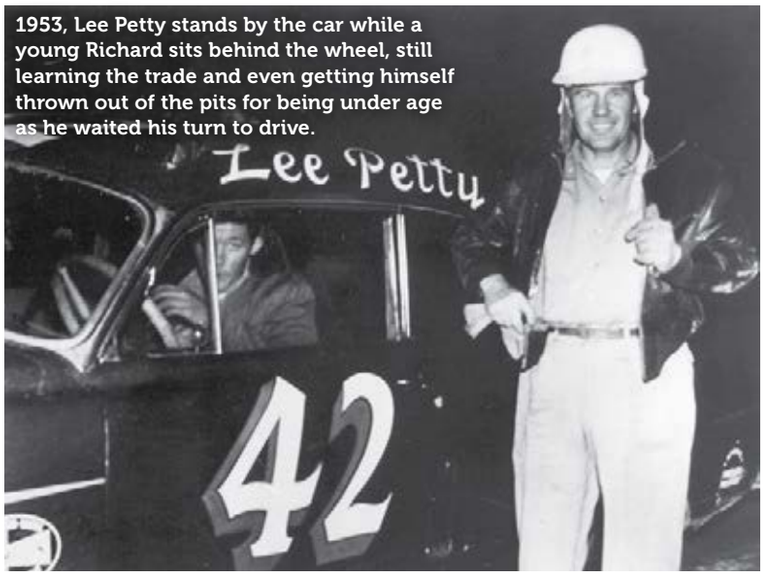
"Now the kids, at 18, 20 years old, they have eight or 10 years of experience because they've been running all kinds of go-karts. The majority of the drivers back then, by the time they got to stock cars, were 25, 26 years old. Now they come in at 18. It's just different. Society's different."

Richard's official first win at the top level came in February 1960 at the Charlotte Fairgrounds dirt track. But in truth, his "first" was the one he lost.

"We'd run a race at Atlanta. They flagged me the winner, and Daddy went second. So, he protested and he wound up winning the race. That was the first time I got a checkered flag. In fact, we got the flag stand over here at the museum. I got the first flag.

"Then in 1960, we ran a dirt track at Charlotte at the fairground. We wound up winning that. So that was my first win in a Cup race."

That father-versus-son protest told him more about the business of racing than any textbook could. It wasn't about sentiment; it was about survival.




1953, Lee Petty stands by the car while a young Richard sits behind the wheel, still learning the trade and even getting himself thrown out of the pits for being under age as he waited his turn to drive.

## TAKING OVER AFTER THE CRASH

**THE CAREER** and life turning point for the father and son racers came in 1961, when Lee suffered a near-fatal crash at Daytona. Richard and his brother Maurice suddenly had to run the family operation.

"See, when Dad got hurt, he was in the hospital for four months. We had two race cars. I crashed and he crashed. So, when we came home, there was nothing. No sponsors. We didn't have any race cars.

"But my dad told me to go to town and buy a new car, get ready and start racing again. My mother always kept a book, so she knew if we had any money or not. So, my brother and I came home and started with nothing.

"I was 22, maybe 23. He was a year younger than I was. My dad had always said, 'Do this, do that, do this.' So, we had on-the-job training. We had some experience from what we had been taught, and then we had to learn the rest.

"It took us a little while to get squared away. It happened in '61, and we struggled that season. Might have won a race or two, but then by '62, we had the organisation together. By '63, we wound up winning 13 races. So, we got everything back in style."

It was the first taste of dominance, but not the last.

## THE NUMBERS THAT MADE THE KING

**RICHARD PETTY'S** career isn't a haze of 200 wins. It's specific races, each with a story that illuminates how he became "the King."

### 1963 SEASON – 13 WINS

**THE POST-CRASH** rebuild bore fruit. Thirteen wins signalled that Petty Enterprises wasn't just back,




"Back then, we were running three, sometimes four times a week ...

it was building momentum. "By '63, we wound up winning 13 races. So, we got everything back in style."

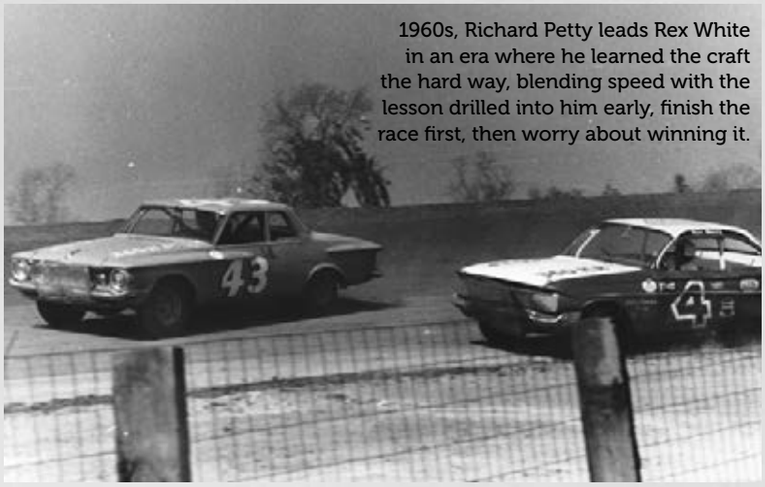
## 1967: THE SEASON THAT CAN'T BE REPEATED

**WHEN RICHARD** Petty looks back on 1967, he doesn't sound boastful; he sounds almost bemused.

"We just had everything together," he said. "The cars stayed together, the crew didn't make mistakes, and I didn't make mistakes. Every now and then, you hit one of those streaks where everything lines up, and that's what happened."

He won 27 of 48 races that year, including a streak of 10 straight that still boggles the mind.

"Back then, we were running three, sometimes four times a week... Short tracks on a Wednesday night, superspeedways on a Sunday. You didn't have time to sit around and enjoy a win. You'd get home, wash the car, fix what was broken, and haul it to the next one. And we just kept winning. It wasn't like, 'hey, let's go win 10 in a row.' It was just the next race. By the time you looked back, you'd won a whole summer."



1960s, Richard Petty leads Rex White in an era where he learned the craft the hard way, blending speed with the lesson drilled into him early, finish the race first, then worry about winning it.

Petty laughs at the idea of anyone matching it now. "Ain't no way. Different world. Cars are too equal, schedules are too tight, sponsors won't let you run wild like that. That record's safe."

## DARLINGTON 1970 – THE CRASH THAT CHANGED SAFETY

**PETTY STILL** remembers coming halfway out of the car in his crash at Darlington. It was so graphic it accelerated the introduction of window nets, which were soon copied at every level of the sport globally.

"We started, and a few people started, putting nets in them. Then NASCAR said it's going to be a rule. Then if you looked around, all the Saturday night racers, people all over the world started using them. So, it really started with NASCAR."

## DAYTONA 500s – SEVEN OF THEM

**FROM HIS** first in 1964 to his last in 1981, Daytona was Petty's stage, much like in Australia, Bathurst was Brock, or in Formula 1, it was Senna and Monaco. Dominating the crown jewel always elevates a driver.

He won seven times at the iconic season opener, including the 1979 race which transformed NASCAR's national reputation, with the first live flag-to-flag broadcast, a last-lap crash and fistfight, and Petty winning as cameras rolled.

Looking back on the races, not all his strongest memories are of wins, such as 1976. Ask him about the race, and the grin spreads across his face.

"Me and Pearson had been going at it all day. I got the lead down the backstretch on the last lap. I thought



**Wendell Scott leads Richard Petty and Rex White on the first lap at Occoneechee Speedway on 2 April 1960, part of NASCAR's rough-and-ready early years where Petty was still finding his feet, learning the balance between speed, survival and finishing races.**

I had it. Then we came off four, and he was right there. We touched, we spun, and I slid down into the grass. He hit the wall but kept it running. I'm sitting there, can't get my car to start, watching him drive past at about 30 miles an hour to win the race."

Petty still calls it the one that got away. "I had that race won. But that was Pearson. He never gave up, never let you breathe. He was smart enough to keep his car rolling when mine quit. People talk about rivalries, that one finish says everything."

The image of Pearson limping home while Petty's car sat silent in the grass became one of NASCAR's enduring photographs. "It hurt at the time," Petty admits, "but looking back, it made the sport. People still talk about it. That's how you know it mattered."

But what about 1979? If 1967 defined Petty's dominance, 1979 was about NASCAR's arrival as a national sport as the first Daytona 500 that was televised flag-to-flag, and a snowstorm had trapped millions of Americans indoors. What they saw was pure theatre.

Petty remembers it with the relish of a storyteller.

"We were running third most of the day, watching Donnie Allison and Cale Yarborough go at it. Last lap, they get together, wreck down the backstretch. I sneak through and take the lead and the win. Next thing I know, there's a fight in the infield, those two rolling around. The cameras are on them, the crowd's going crazy, and I'm up front taking the win."

That race carried NASCAR out of the South and into the American mainstream.

"Up to that time, it was a Southern sport," he says. "They [R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company with the Winston brand, and TV] helped take it all over the United States.

"Before that, we were still kind of a regional thing. After that, people in New York and Chicago knew what NASCAR was. They might not have known the rules, but they knew there was a fight at Daytona and some fella named Petty won the race."

Even now, drivers call it the most important race in stock-car history.

By 1984, Petty's career had already spanned three decades. He wasn't just a driver anymore; he was an institution. Win number 200 at the mid-season Daytona race felt like destiny.

"We'd been chasing that number for a while," he said. "Cale Yarborough had the car to beat that day. I got by him with a few laps to go. He came back at me, and we were side-by-side, swapping the lead. I just edged him out at the line."

What made it iconic was the presence of President Ronald Reagan, who watched the race from Air Force One and joined the celebrations.

"That was wild," Petty said. "To have the President there, eating fried chicken in the press box, then

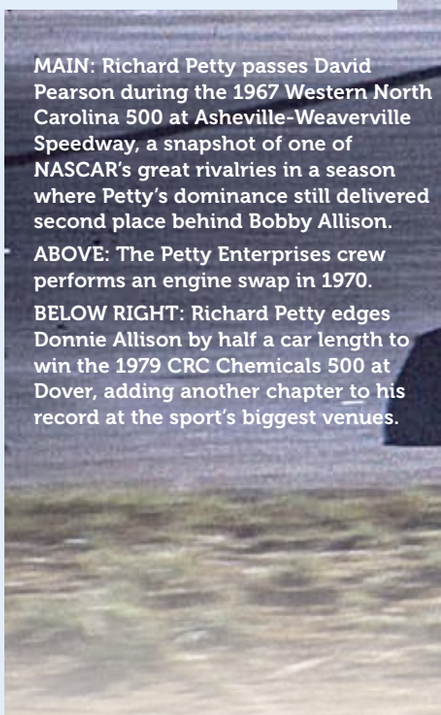


Martinsville, 18 October 1970, Richard Petty leads LeeRoy Yarbrough on his way to victory Martinsville Speedway.





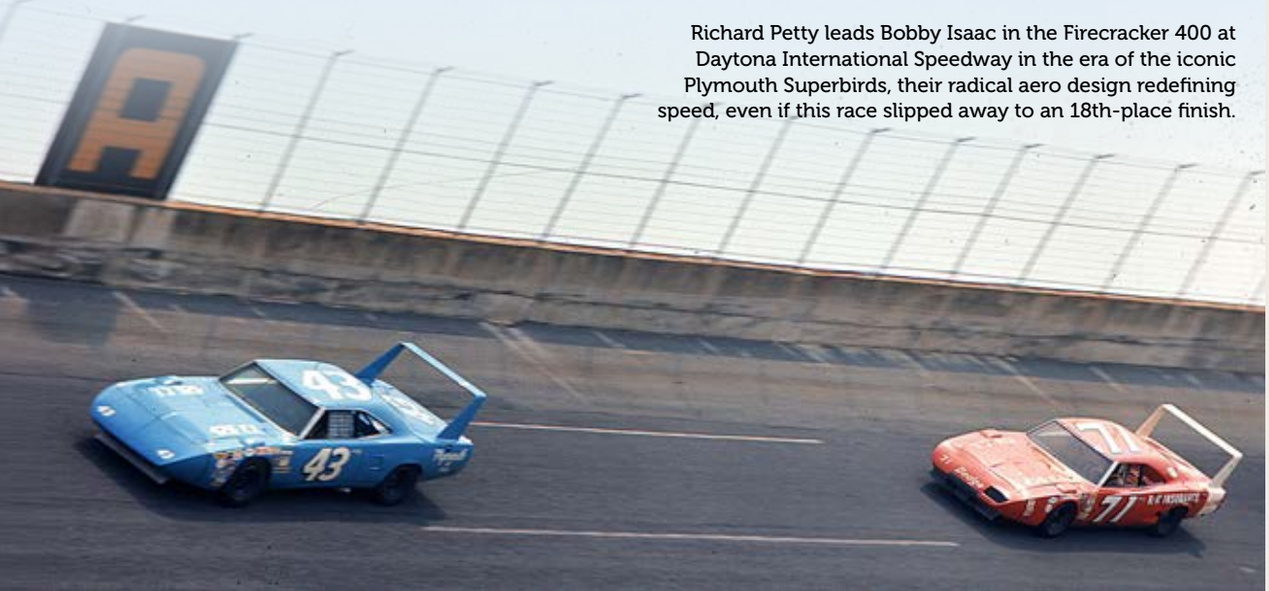

Richard Petty leads the field away at the start of the Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway, controlling the race on his way to victory.



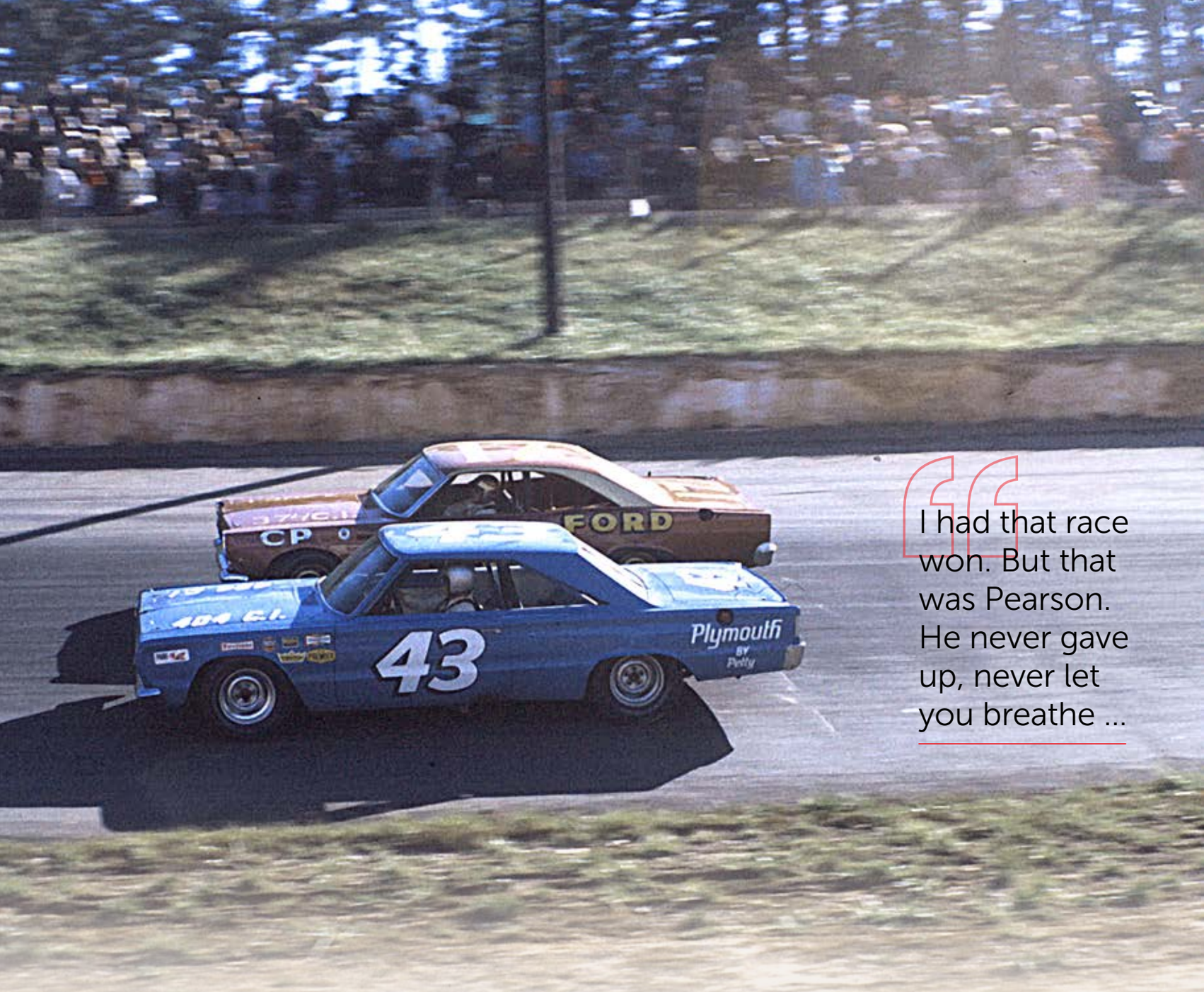
MAIN: Richard Petty passes David Pearson during the 1967 Western North Carolina 500 at Asheville-Weaverville Speedway, a snapshot of one of NASCAR's great rivalries in a season where Petty's dominance still delivered second place behind Bobby Allison.

ABOVE: The Petty Enterprises crew performs an engine swap in 1970.

BELOW RIGHT: Richard Petty edges Donnie Allison by half a car length to win the 1979 CRC Chemicals 500 at Dover, adding another chapter to his record at the sport's biggest venues.



Richard Petty leads Bobby Isaac in the Firecracker 400 at Daytona International Speedway in the era of the iconic Plymouth Superbirds, their radical aero design redefining speed, even if this race slipped away to an 18th-place finish.




> I had that race won. But that was Pearson. He never gave up, never let you breathe ...

coming down to Victory Lane. That was the day NASCAR really stood up in front of the whole country. If there's ever been a day when we were put in the spotlight, that was it."

By the early '90s, Petty was more symbol than contender, but he wanted to go out on his terms. The 1992 Hooters 500 at Atlanta provided the perfect stage: Petty's farewell, Jeff Gordon's debut, and a championship battle for the ages.

"It was something," Petty said. "We had a fire early in the race, burned the car up pretty good. The crew patched it together, and we sent it back out, because I wasn't going to end my career in the garage. We finished the laps. That was the main thing."

The symbolism wasn't lost on him.



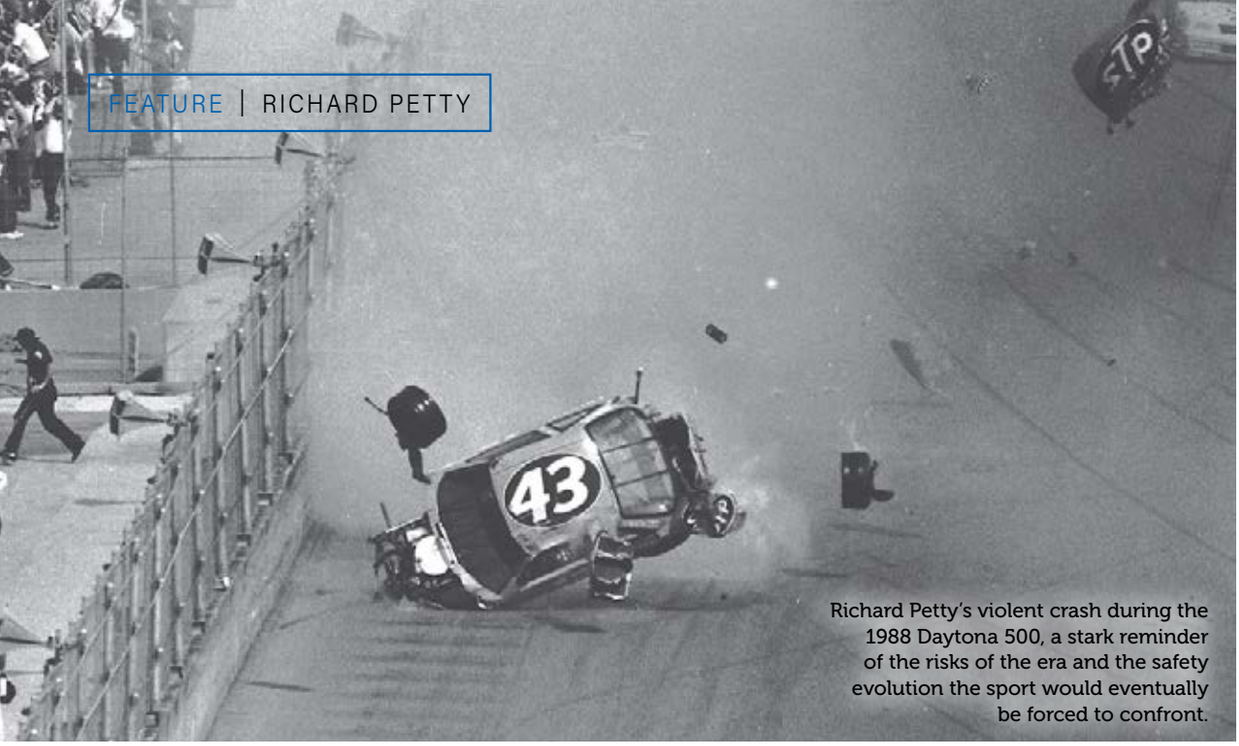

"Jeff Gordon's first race, my last. That's NASCAR. One group leaves, another comes in. I'd seen it before, Fireball, Pearson, Allison, Waltrip, Earnhardt. Now it was Jeff's turn. That's how the sport keeps rolling."

## RIVALRIES AND FRIENDS

**RICHARD PETTY'S** greatness is best measured against the men who tried, and often succeeded, to beat him. He thrived in rivalries, and his career spans enough of them to map the entire growth of NASCAR.

If Richard Petty is the King, David Pearson is the rival who refused to bow. The statistics tell the story: they finished one-two 63 times with an almost even split of wins, Pearson ahead by three. The King and The Silver Fox was a running battle that stretched across short tracks, superspeedways, dirt ovals, and road courses.

"I probably ran more races against Pearson than anybody," Petty says. "We ran first and second 60-something times. But where




Richard Petty's violent crash during the 1988 Daytona 500, a stark reminder of the risks of the era and the safety evolution the sport would eventually be forced to confront.



The aftermath of Richard Petty's Daytona 500 crash sits battered in the paddock.



Pearson was so good was that he was steady, and he was good on the road course, short track, dirt track, superspeedway. It didn't make any difference. Of all the people that I probably raced against, he was probably the best driver who didn't have to extend himself. He was just a natural talent. The rest of us had to work for it."

Pearson was the perfect foil: calm where Petty was relentless, calculating where Petty was aggressive. "He was just a natural," Petty says again, in admiration. "Some of us had to work at it. Pearson didn't. He just drove the wheels off anything."

Bobby Allison's career was defined by stubborn independence, something Petty both admired and shook his head at.

"There was no more determined person than Bobby Allison, but Bobby was his own worst enemy. He'd get to running good and then he'd decide he didn't like to work with these people. He'd go out on his own, go broke again, have to go back.

"He'd have won a lot more races if he just stayed with a couple of good owners. But he always played himself as the underdog. He had, I wouldn't say an inferiority complex, but he just felt like everybody was against him, or he was against everybody."

Petty respected Allison's grit but knew it cost him. "He'd have been right up there in wins if he'd stuck around the right teams. But Bobby wanted to fight his own fights."

Their battles in the 1970s were often bruising. Allison brought short-track intensity to the superspeedways, and he never gave an inch. Petty called him "determined," but what he really meant was that Bobby Allison was willing to spend himself, and sometimes his career stability, to prove a point.

Cale Yarborough was the blunt instrument in Petty's era, and Richard loved and loathed him for it.

"Cale raced for money. He'd win a race and jump out and say, 'How much money did I make?' He was fairly hard on equipment because he felt like he had to run as hard as he could every lap. No strategy. Except what Junior [Johnson] told him.

"But he was one of the top two or three hardest chargers we ever ran against. If he was 10 laps behind, he was still trying to get to the front. He'd never give up. No matter whether he had three wheels or four, it didn't make a difference. He was probably one or two of the toughest drivers that were out there physically and mentally."

Yarborough's relentlessness forced Petty to adapt. Against Pearson, Petty had to be clever. Against Allison, he had to outlast. Against Yarborough, he had to withstand brute force.

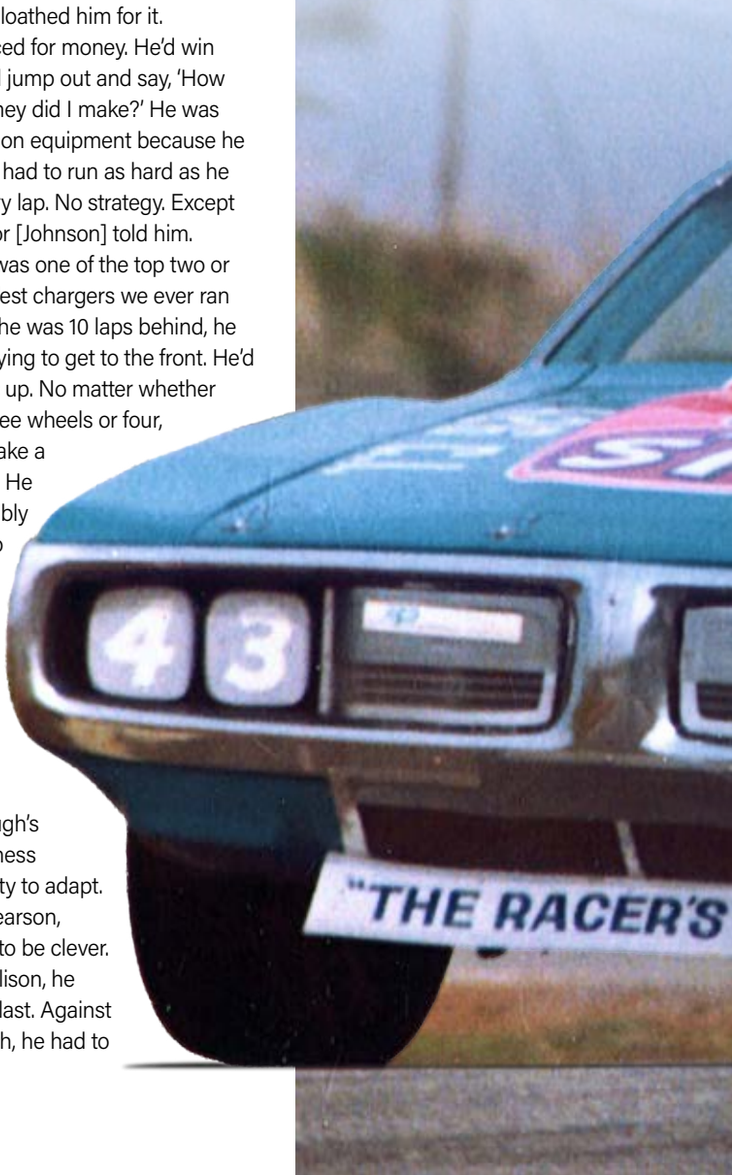
The 1979 Daytona 500 crash that gifted Petty the win was pure Yarborough, says Petty: "That was Cale all over. If he was going to lose, he was going to go down swinging."

By the late '70s and early '80s, NASCAR was moving into its television age, and Darrell Waltrip was the brash, quotable, sometimes abrasive driver who became Petty's new foil.

"We've always had phases," Petty says. "About every 10 or 12 years you got a new group. To begin with, you had Fireball (Roberts), Daddy and Tim Flock. Then you had Pearson, Allison, (Buck) Baker, Yarborough and myself.

"We lasted longer than anybody. Then Darrell comes in at the end of that crowd. He kind of bridged it to the Earnhardt era.

Waltrip was different. "He was a thinker," veteran PR man Drew Brown, now with Trackhouse Racing, adds. "Darrell understood the business of NASCAR. He could entertain, he could talk to the CEO



or the high school kid, and he could give you feedback on a car that was gold. Back then, our telemetry was the driver. Darrell got it. He was one of the best."

Petty, for all his old-school bluntness, respected Waltrip's savvy. He also knew Waltrip's style, brash on track, louder off it, was the forerunner to Earnhardt's rise and Gordon's corporate polish.

There are three seven-time NASCAR champions: Petty, Dale Earnhardt and Jimmie Johnson. Johnson was a different era, racing when Petty was a team owner. There was a little cross over with Earnhardt on the track, one starting an era the other ending.

Petty's appraisal of Earnhardt is cold but fair.

"Dale was rough. He grew up on the short track, beating and bashing, and he was crude from the standpoint of whatever it took. When he got to somebody, he didn't mind knocking them out of the way instead of really racing with them.

"He wound up winning the seven championships, but he only won the 78 races or something. If he hadn't won those seven championships, he wouldn't be as far up in the totem pole. But the seven championships put him there. His big accomplishment was winning championships."



He pauses, then adds: "He didn't care what people thought. He didn't care how he got it done. That was different, and it worked for him. He wasn't a cookie-cutter deal. He did it his way."

Drew Brown remembers how Earnhardt thought differently even about life outside the car. "We were looking at stocks one day," Brown recalls. "Earnhardt said, 'That's the problem with you son of bitches. You ain't got no debt. Debt's what motivates you. You need to be in debt, that means you work hard.' Everyone else said eliminate debt. He said take on debt so you fight. That was Dale."

Earnhardt's death at Daytona in 2001, coming just a year after the death of the King's grandson, Adam Petty, during a practice session at New Hampshire Speedway, underscored to Petty how much the sport had changed. By that time Petty had seen too much death in the sport he loved, and he embraced the changes that came.

But he had also seen too much death behind the wheel to be sentimental. From the 1960s onward, drivers he raced against — Joe Weatherly, Fireball Roberts, Tiny Lund — were killed in crashes that

> By the late '70s and early '80s, NASCAR was moving into its television age ...

Richard Petty guided the STP Dodge through Riverside in the mid-1970s, showcasing the adaptability that defined his era.

ABOVE: Richard Petty edged Cale Yarborough before a late caution sealed his 200th NASCAR Cup win.

FAR LEFT: Richard Petty stepped into popular culture alongside Garfield, reflecting his reach beyond the sport.



looked at head restraints, seat belts, roll bars. Before, they'd just look at the one thing that caused the death. When this happened, they just started looking at everything."

For Petty, who had seen the sport evolve from Hawaiian shirts and lap belts to full-face helmets and fireproof suits, Earnhardt's death was a necessary shock to the system. "Dale brought it to the forefront" wasn't just a comment; it was an admission that NASCAR had reached its breaking point.

Drew Brown, who worked inside the sport in that era, echoed the same thought. "His death made us commit to a safety that had never been committed to before," he said. "We'd had Tony Roper, Adam Petty, and Kenny Irwin all get killed. We'd had pretty serious head injuries with Steve Park, Jerry Nadeau, Jeff Purvis. It wasn't safe. It was damn near dangerous. Dale's death was the final straw. It was the watershed moment of our sport."

In the years that followed, NASCAR installed SAFER barriers at tracks across the country, mandated HANS devices, redesigned seats and cages, and introduced the "Car of Tomorrow" with energy-absorbing structures. Drivers who once climbed in with little more than courage now sat in steel cocoons.



The original workshop was reconstructed at the Richard Petty Museum on its original site, preserving the roots of the Petty legacy.

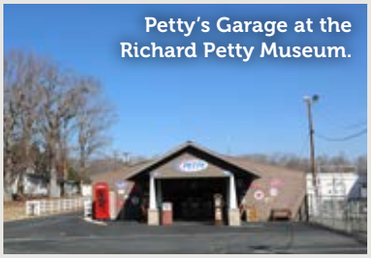
Petty, who had once raced bare-armed in short-sleeved shirts, didn't begrudge the changes. He'd earned every scar of the old days, but he knew the next generation deserved better.

"It wasn't anybody's fault," he said of Adam's death. "It was just meant to be. But NASCAR learned. And sometimes you've got to lose people you love before the lesson sticks."

## THE BUSINESS OF BEING PETTY

**PETTY ADMITS** Petty Enterprises fell behind when NASCAR became a corporate arms race.

"Progress and technology just went right past me. That was one of the



Petty's Garage at the Richard Petty Museum.

downfalls of Petty Enterprises. We were way over here. Everybody else was doing all the technology. We were still doing everything off the seat of our breeches. A piece of paper, setting it down. Financing kept us from expanding.

"Then you had people like Hendrick, Penske, Roush. They reversed it so that it wasn't just winning races, but also advertising. That knocked out the Woods Boys, Bud Moore, Petty Enterprises, and Junior Johnson. The racers went out, and NASCAR then became a business. It went from being a racer's race to a showtime race."

He shrugs at the inevitability of change.

"Name me one thing that's not changed. Some changes are probably for the good. Some are not. But everything changes. You don't realise it until you look back three years and say, 'Damn, three years ago I was doing this, working for those people, living in a different place.' It's progress."

## THE KING'S AURA

**DREW BROWN,** who worked with Petty at Richard Petty Motorsports, remembers being stunned by how universal the King's image was.

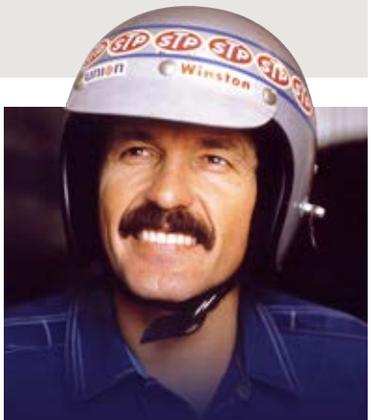
"We landed in Manhattan, and we had to walk a block or two. The number of people who recognised the hat and the sunglasses; they all said, 'King, King.' That was pretty cool. He's the King."

What struck Brown most was the contrast between the cartoonish image and the reality.

"What people don't know about Richard Petty is how well-read he is. He reads a lot. He can talk to you about politics, economics, and history. I thoroughly enjoyed him.

The workshop at the Richard Petty Museum was partly decorative while still operating as an active shop.





## RICHARD PETTY BY THE NUMBERS

**BORN**
July 2, 1937 (age 88)
Level Cross, North Carolina, USA

**CUP SERIES RACES**
1,184 races run over 35 years

**FIRST RACE**
1958 Jim Mideon 500 (Toronto)

**LAST RACE**
1992 Hooters 500 (Atlanta)

**TITLES**
Seven (1964, 1967, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1979)

**WINS**
200

**TOP 10s**
712

**POLES**
123



Richard Petty with author Andrew Clarke (C) and his original crew chief Dale Inman (R).

"If you got in trouble, those glasses would come down a little, and he'd look over those sunglasses, and that long finger would come out at you. You always remembered it."

For all the talk of stats and nicknames, Richard Petty insists he never set out to be anything more than a working racer.

"It was just my life," he said. "The difference between me and you is that I happened to be a racer. I happened to be with people who made it work for me. But you're just a human being. You just got a different job. My job was to drive a race car and make a living for my family."

As for the "King" nickname, he shrugs. "If my name had been Joe, it wouldn't have been King Joe. Richard just fit. Plus, we were winning everything at the time. People started calling me King Richard, and it stuck. I'd rather be called King than some of the other names I've been called, that's for sure."

## LEGACY

**RICHARD PETTY** left his race car for the last time in 1992, but he never really left NASCAR. His team evolved, his role changed, but his presence endures. Today, rooms go quiet when he walks in; he is treated with the reverence a King deserves. I heard that in the media centre at Daytona that when he walked through, journalists and photographers talked about a moment with him, such as a selfie or a handshake.

These seasoned professionals, accustomed to dealing with the likes of Kyle Busch, Joey Logano, and Kyle Larson, who join Petty in The Immortals of NASCAR, were nonetheless in awe.

The numbers are unassailable, which is always a big call in sport, but it seems impossible in a strictly controlled parity era that they will be challenged: 200 wins, seven championships, seven Daytona 500s, 27 wins in a single season.

But the true measure of the King is cultural. He spanned eras, from moonshiners and dirt ovals to billion-dollar TV deals, without losing his place at the centre.

And he never stopped loving the act of racing. "I still love being around," he said. "I love the people. I love the atmosphere. And I guess the deal of not knowing until it happens, that's always right there. You want things to happen, sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. But you still show up."

That's why he's the King.

***Andrew Clarke's book The Immortals of NASCAR (Gelding Street Press) is out now.***






Richard Petty's iconic 1974 STP Dodge.

## MUSTANG CUP AUSTRALIA'S FIRST STATEMENT

# A NEW RUNG IN FORD'S RACING LADDER

Ford's Mustang Cup Australia debut isn't just another one-make series — it's the foundation of a genuine driver pathway, blending young talent and experienced racers in a factory-backed, cost-conscious category built around accessibility, real racing, and a clear ladder to GT and global competition.

STORY: BRUCE WILLIAMS | IMAGES: FORD RACING, BRUCE WILLIAMS

**IT'S TEMPTING** to see a new one-make series as just another name on a busy race weekend, another grid, another trophy, another set of drivers to remember. But Mustang Cup Australia's debut at Phillip Island felt different. This wasn't just another race, it was Ford making a statement, laying out a plan that brings emerging talent and established names into the same racing ecosystem.

The strength of the field underlined that intent. Current Supercars drivers Aaron Cameron and James Golding lined up alongside experienced hands James Moffat and Jack Perkins, yet it was young gun Cameron McLeod who turned heads by beating them, a result that reinforced exactly what the category is designed to do.

From Ford's side, the intent is explicit. Chris Ward, Ford Racing's Global Manager, Customer Racing, describes Mustang Cup Australia as the foundation of a pathway that allows rising drivers to measure themselves directly against proven competitors, while building a documented progression through the ranks into higher-level international machinery.

"Mustang Cup forms, if you like, that foundation level of our sports car racing ecosystem," Ward says. From there, the steps are clear: "Followed, then, up the pyramid, if you like, with GT4 and then GT3." And sitting above it all is the long-view ambition: "We're all looking forward to 2027 with our hypercar program and the World Endurance Championship."

That's the official line. But what really stood out at the first weekend was how everyone close to the action – drivers, team owners, the people actually running the cars – kept coming back to the same points. The car is fun to drive, the support is genuine, and the whole thing feels






Chris Ward outlines Ford's long-term vision, positioning Mustang Cup Australia as the foundation of a global customer racing ladder.




Race 1 start at Phillip Island, the Mustang Cup field launches into its first competitive laps in Australia.

accessible. The ladder isn't just talk; it actually feels real. Even with a small field, as Andrew Miedecke pointed out, the first round proved the idea works.

"I think we're very happy," Miedecke says. "Ford are very happy and I'm happy to see the series up and running."

## TWO AUDIENCES, ONE CAR

**WARD DOESN'T** beat around the bush about who Mustang Cup is for. It's not just a junior class with a token spot for older drivers. Ford wants both ends of the spectrum in the mix.

The first end is the classic feeder-series target: "We have the Dark Horse class, which is really for those young up-and-coming, aspiring sports car drivers." The second end is equally intentional: "In Mustang Cup Australia competition, we have the Dark Horse Legends category. So, for drivers over the age of 40, maybe they've gone off and been successful in their businesses and enterprises and want to either return to sports car racing or indeed discover it for the first time."

It's not just about age. Usually, young guns and older, busier drivers end up in totally different categories, with different budgets and different ways of doing things. Mustang Cup is trying to break down those walls. The idea is simple: both groups get to race the same fast, loud, modern car, with real factory backing and a brand everyone knows.

Ward leans on the Mustang itself as the emotional hook and the practical anchor. "The world's best-selling sports car," he says, "now an icon, not only on the racetrack, but of course, on the road." And in a market like Australia, where V8 noise still means something to the crowd, he expects it to land immediately: "Particularly in this market, where they love the sound of a roaring coyote V8, it's going to be an instant fan favourite."

That's a big deal, because it changes how the car is pitched to racers. It's not some engineering headache – it's ready to go. The more 'turnkey' the experience, the more likely privateers, family teams, or returning drivers will jump in, without worrying they're signing up for an expensive arms race.

Ryan McLeod, who ran four cars across the weekend, echoes that the category does not feel like a technical trap. "You don't need to carry a heap of spares-Ford take care of that aspect" McLeod says. "It's not an engineering exercise. It's a lot of just basic car setup." That framing is important. In many categories, the real cost is not just the purchase price or the entry fee, but the creeping complexity of setup, spares, data systems, and staff required to run a car.

McLeod's view is that Ford's involvement changes that equation because so much of the "how" is shared. "You get the fastest lap data," he says. "Ford gives you a setup guide for each event." The effect is that the performance ceiling still exists, but the performance floor is higher. Drivers and teams can arrive at a baseline that is credible, safe, and competitive without building an engineering department.

## A YEAR IN THE MAKING

**WARD MAKES** it clear that the Australian expansion was not a late add-on or a licensing exercise. "It's been a year in the making," he says. "It was a year ago, almost to the day, that I was here at Phillip Island to meet with Motorsport Australia with our partners Driving Solutions and of course SRO and Shannon Speed Series to try and find a home for Mustang Cup Australia."

That list of partners isn't just for show. It takes a real team effort to launch a series that's more than just




Keith Kassulke in the Legends class, one of the over-40 drivers adding depth to the Mustang Cup grid.

another national championship – it's part of a bigger, international plan.

Ford clearly paid attention to how things work in Australia. Getting a 'home' for the series isn't just about booking a track. It's about the right sanctioning, the right paddock vibe, the right TV deal, and making sure there's a clear path for drivers to move up.

Ward is clear about the weekend: he's thrilled they kicked things off at Phillip Island. That's the official line, but the real story is in the details. Ford isn't just putting its name on the series – they're actually sending people out here to make it work.

"We actually brought four staff from the United States to train up some of the Ford Racing personnel here on the platform," Ward explains. And crucially, he defines that as both internal capability-building and customer service: "At this first race weekend, but beyond that, also to show the level of support to the customers that are committed to this championship."

McLeod frames the same point from the paddock side, and it is even more revealing because it is not promotional language; it is the language of someone who has seen too many series launched with good intentions and thin follow-through.

"It's fantastic," he says. "It's great to have such a direct involvement from Ford. You know, there are five people out here from Ford Racing in the States. The local contingent of people as well, and that really makes it a Ford factory racing championship."

Calling it a 'factory racing championship' is a big statement, but it sums up what teams are getting: a series where Ford is actually there, not just a logo on the cars.






Aaron Cameron won the first race of Mustang Cup Australia and leads the championship.

## THE LADDER IS REAL

**A ONE-MAKE** series only becomes a "pathway" if the next step is tangible. Ward's strongest evidence is not theoretical. It is the story of Cameron McLeod's rapid rise, used as a case study in what Mustang Cup can do when the stars align.

Ward points back to the Le Mans Invitational: "The young Australian driver, Cameron McLeod, who showed up there having never been to the racetrack, sat in the car before and did a really outstanding job against 39 other drivers." Ward describes the transition from that experience

Cameron McLeod charges to victory in Race 2, beating a field that included current Supercars drivers and experienced campaigners.

ABOVE: Keith Kassulke strapped in and ready, tackling the physical demands of the Dark Horse R across a full race distance.

RIGHT: Close-up detail of the Mustang Dark Horse R, a turnkey platform designed to keep costs controlled while delivering real performance.




**Aaron Cameron and Chris Ward trackside, reinforcing Ford's hands-on factory presence in the category**



to racing at home as proof of the platform's credibility: Cameron then "showed up here and raced against V8 Supercars drivers."

The punchline is not just performance, but consequence. "We're delighted to have Cameron as part of our Ford Racing Driver Development team," Ward says.

That becomes the hook for the incentive structure in Australia's Dark Horse junior category. The prize is not a vague "opportunity." It is a defined trip and a defined evaluation process: "The winner of the junior category, which is for drivers under the age of 21... will then receive a paid-for by Michelin trip to the United States to our Charlotte technical center where they'll undergo a rigorous simulator assessment program, physical assessment program, media training assessment, with the view, then, to being invited into the Ford Racing Driver Development Team program."

In that level of detail, 'driver development' can sound like just another buzzword, but when you start talking about the Charlotte Technical Center, simulator sessions, fitness tests, and media training, it feels like a real pathway.




Joe Fawcett, winner of the junior round, makes clear that this kind of pathway is precisely why he showed up, even on short notice. "To us, it was really attractive in the Ford driver development program," Fawcett says. "The plan is to try and get into that and progress through the Ford program that way."

Put simply, for him Mustang Cup isn't the finish line – it's the entry ticket.

## PRIVATEER CREDIBILITY

**WARD AND** Ford can talk about big-picture plans all day, but Joe Fawcett brings it down to earth. It's one thing to talk about ladders and pathways. It's another to show up with a car in a trailer that you barely had time to prep and still come away from the weekend feeling like you've got something to build on.

Fawcett's weekend began with a brutally common reality in entry-level racing: not enough time. "It was a pretty last-minute deal," he says. "We got the car the week before this round, so we didn't really have a lot of time to prepare it." That is not how most polished programs want to launch. But it is exactly how real privateer careers often start.

And the key is that it did not break him. "We managed to figure out the car by the end of the weekend," Fawcett says, "and I think we have a lot of pace that we can build on for the next round."

He also makes the transition story concrete: moving from lighter formula machinery into a heavier, more powerful, more demanding car. "It was definitely a shock jumping into this from a Formula 4," he says. "There's sort of a lot to learn with the weight and how the car behaves." But he also frames his preparation as broader than the category itself: "Formula Ford prepared me really well for being able to jump into this car and get onto



the pace relatively quickly."

The real test for Mustang Cup's accessibility is what happens behind the scenes. Fawcett spells it out: 'Yeah, myself and dad will prepare it between events.' That's the whole business model in a nutshell. If the series only works for big teams with engineers and trucks, it won't last. But if 'me and my dad' can run a car alongside the pros, then it's got a future.

Miedecke's comments connect to the same point from a different angle: he sees the category as attractive not only for drivers, but for prep teams looking for a sustainable program. "It's a great opportunity for drivers and even… a motorsport preparation team to look at a category like this to get involved in," he says.



The field disappears into the Phillip Island mist, conditions adding another layer of challenge to the opening round.

## THE CAR'S PHYSICAL REALITY

**THERE'S ANOTHER** point that comes out in McLeod's comments: you can't fake this kind of training. Simulators and data are great, but nothing replaces wrestling a big, heavy V8 on slicks in real heat, racing for real. That's where you find out who's ready and who still has work to do.

McLeod recounts a comment from another driver to illustrate the learning value. "What I learned here today, you know, driving a race for 40 minutes… in a big, fast, heavy car. Coping with the heat, managing the slick tyre. And still trying to race," the driver told him. McLeod's conclusion is simple: "How could you replace that?… It's been a fantastic experience for those guys."

If Mustang Cup wants to be a real stepping stone, it needs races long enough to test tyre management and focus with cars that punish mistakes, and a field strong enough to push everyone to lift their game.

If Mustang Cup Australia really wants to be both a stepping stone and a destination, it has to give the Legends something real too. They're not chasing a path to GT3 or hypercars or anything else. What matters is a great car, proper racing, and the feeling that the series actually values them being there.

Keith Kassulke's weekend is almost comically honest, which is exactly why it lands. "It was excellent," Kassulke says. "I thoroughly enjoyed it." And then he immediately admits the kind of mistake that only shows up when you are actually doing the work: "Due to my own fault, I didn't get the water sorted out in the car. I got quite dehydrated and exhausted in the race."

No sugar-coating, no excuses. These cars are tough to drive, and the racing is the real deal.

Despite that, the verdict is enthusiastic. "It's a fantastic car," Kassulke says. "I love the category. I love the cars." And importantly, he took away exactly what the Legends class exists to provide: competitive recognition and a sense of belonging. "I got on the podium, the old guys, the legends, so I got a trophy for that, that's a good start."

For him, it's not about climbing the ladder. It's about having a championship to look forward to. Next up is The Bend in a couple of months, and he's keen to see how things go. He reckons the category is good now and will only get better.

That's how you build a stable grid. Young drivers come and go – budgets shift, careers change. But the Legends can give the series some real staying power, as long as they're having fun.

## THE MONEY SIDE

**YOU CAN** have the best story in the world, but if the numbers don't stack up, the series won't last. McLeod gets this – he's the one who actually has




Joe Fawcett in action during the opening round, the junior standout showing strong pace on limited preparation.

to make the budget work each weekend.

He frames the Mustang Cup car as close enough to GT4 pace to feel serious, while being significantly less expensive to run. "These cars are a fraction of the cost to run of a GT4 car," McLeod says, "but they're doing basically the same time. Like, they're only within... [a] second of what the boys did in the GT4 car."

Then he puts a number to the weekend, with a caveat that matters: it depends on running it "sensibly." "If you did it sensibly, you know, you'd be able to run one of these for $25,000, $30,000 a weekend with everything covered," he says. He backs that up by listing the hardware that justifies the value: "It's got big Brembo brakes, it's got motorsport ABS, it's got slick tyres... and they're going around here fast."

That mix – proper gear, real pace, and a sensible way to run – is what brings in both hungry young drivers and older racers who want to go fast without burning cash. It also gives prep teams something they can actually sell.

Miedecke points to another cost-smoothing factor: the presence of parts and infrastructure. "They can just walk over the truck and pick up the parts," he says, describing the support model that reduces the panic cost of crash damage or mechanical issues. He also makes the local footprint clear: parts and cars in Melbourne, "in Croydon at MPC."





Cameron McLeod leads Aaron Cameron and James Moffat over Lukey Heights, a snapshot of youth taking on experience in identical machinery.

It's not glamorous, but this kind of support is what keeps a series alive. One-make racing lives or dies on whether you can get parts, fix things quickly, and know your weekend won't fall apart over a missing bolt.

## THE "FORD FACTORY" FEELING

**A LOT** of people keep coming back to the same feeling: this isn't just a third-party series with Mustang stickers. McLeod says what really got him excited was seeing Ford's hands-on involvement. For him, it's simple – they're not just partnering with a supplier, they're actually racing with Ford.

Ward sees it the same way from Ford's side. Sending staff to train locals and support teams isn't just about building skills – it's Ford showing they're serious. If Mustang Cup is going to be the base of a global ladder, it has to feel the same everywhere.

One small but telling example is tyres. Ward is explicit that the tyre package is aligned with North America. "The Michelin H2 Cup tyre is the exact same tyre that we run in Mustang Challenge in North America," he says. Standardisation like that matters for credibility. It enables the idea that a driver can compare performance across markets, and it opens the door to international invitational events.



Joe Fawcett and Matthew Kiss battle through the field, showcasing the mix of experience and emerging talent.

## EXPANSION THINKING

**WARD IS** careful about what he promises, but he is open about direction. The series is not meant to be static or purely national. "We're looking at iconic circuits around the world," he says. He floats the kind of venues that carry global motorsport meaning: "Spa Francorchamps during the Spa 24-hour," "Daytona International Speedway," and, in the Australian context, "bring American customers to Bathurst."

Those aren't just marketing buzzwords – they're real events with big crowds and history. If Mustang Cup can get onto those weekends, it'll get taken seriously a lot faster.

Ward also signals that Australia and North America are only the beginning. "North America and Australia... are the two international geographies now," he says. "But again, watch this space. There'll be news on further international expansion, we hope, soon."

He also lays out the current North American structure in a way that hints at how Ford is experimenting with formats: "We have two championships in North America: Mustang Cup USA... and then also Mustang Challenge... an IMSA sanctioned series." The Mustang Challenge connection to IMSA weekends is especially relevant because it implies a route to larger audiences and more integrated motorsport ecosystems.

The context makes clear that there is appetite for a global 'world champion' concept, and Ward's response suggests that Ford has already been thinking along similar lines. The more standardised the cars and tyres, the easier it becomes to run international shootouts with limited variations.

Of course, this is still the honeymoon period. Every new series sounds great after the first weekend. The real test will be whether the grid grows, the weekends run smoothly, and the pathway actually delivers for drivers.

But one thing is already clear from everyone involved: Mustang Cup Australia didn't feel like a soft launch. It felt like Ford's first real step towards something bigger – here and maybe around the world. And at the heart of it all is what makes it work: a loud, iconic car, proper racing, and enough factory support to make privateers feel like they're part of something special.

# DRIVING WITH MR STILLWELL

It's not every day you find yourself on an idyllic road in the countryside in Le Mans, cruising down the famous D304, having a casual chat with one of the former leaders of one of Australia's most historic automotive empires.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: TW NEAL, GETTYIMAGES, MICHAEL STILLWELL

**IN 2025,** I was fortunate to get boots on the ground at the Le Mans 24-hour, where I rather crudely stuck my nose into the racing affairs of the McLeod family.

Indulging in such activities as hanging over the pitwall while Cameron McLeod stormed to a thrilling victory, drinking Cameron's podium champagne, cleaning bugs off Mustangs, to spending time with the family and crew while Peter McLeod let his endless anecdotes fly freely as we drove the tyre cart onto the world's greatest racing circuit.

That's also where and how I met Michael Stillwell for the first time, who was kind enough to drive me out to the legendary Hotel de France, down the D304, in a rare spare moment, a route well travelled by Le Mans contenders in the 50s and 60s, including Michael's own father, Bib Stillwell, at the 1961 Le Mans with Lex Davison.

Michael was there to offer support and advice to the young McLeod, who was also surrounded by other great




individuals, such as gentleman racers Keith Kassulke and Hadrian Morrall, as well as the late Tim Miles, David Wall, Andrew Miedecke and Tony Quinn, who occupied the adjacent paddock spaces.

While hanging about the paddock, between shifting petrol barrels, fetching tyres, chatting with Chris Archer and Tyler Mecklam while they got grease on their hands, and generally sniffing about for stories, I worked up the nerve to ask Stillwell if he could drive me out to the Hotel de France.

Now I'd love to say we jumped into a DB4 Zagato, or something along those lines, but the rental Volvo XC60 sufficed.

For Stillwell, it doubled as a bit of a pilgrimage to follow in the tyre tracks of his father, and with a 40-minute drive ahead of us, there was ample motor talk to be had.

This is where a writer shuts the hell up for once and just listens.

As it turns out, the roots of much of Stillwell's early family life have Le Mans at their beating heart.

Like everything in motorsport and life, interconnected stories flow out from a single source like many tributaries.

## THE DRIVE SOUTH

**AFTER 15** minutes of driving, we hit the scenic part of the D304, and I couldn't help imagining the straight-six of Bib and Lex's Zagato breaking the peace of the countryside.

As it turned out, an Aston Martin club was also sporadically making its way back from the Hotel de France, and the conversation turned to the Stillwell patriarch.

"This is very much a return to the roots trip," he began.

"He would have belted down here, and I don't think they would have stuck to any speed limits. A bit of



**The trip began down the famous D304, connecting Circuit de La Sarthe to the Hotel de France.**

**ABOVE: 64 years after his father was at Le Mans, in a return to his roots, Stillwell stands out the front of the modern Aston Martin garage.**

opening up of the engines, I would suggest.

"Bib and Lex were here in '61 driving for John Wyer's Aston team. And as for the Davison and the Stillwell kids, our backyard growing up was places like Sandown and Warwick Farm, so the families were always close.

"Unfortunately, they blew a head gasket four hours into the race, so that was the end of that. But for a bit of background, my mother passed away when I was a teenager, and my father remarried a girl named Gillian Harris, who was actually the race secretary for Wyer.

"So they met when he was here… to come here and relive that is pretty special. I'm reminded of the pictures we have of Gillian sitting on the pitwall doing the lap times and timekeeping.

"But it was a one-off trip for dad in the end, although Lex returned. It was the only significant racing dad did here in that era.

"After he won the Gold Star again in 1965, he retired. Unfortunately, when Lex was killed at Sandown that year, there was a loss of enthusiasm for the sport at that point. So his focus turned to business, and Stillwell Aviation was also taking off at that point.

"However, when he went to the US in the late seventies and brought a BMW dealership in Tucson, Arizona, which my brother Chris ended up running, that was his entry to start historic racing."

The chat then turned to a special GT40 that had its complex roots running through the garages of Bruce Spicer from the UK to Hawthorn, Jim Shepherd in Vermont, Jeff Dutton and finally Bib, who then took it back to Tucson, where it eventually ended up in the hands of John 'Horsebox' Horsman.

Horsebox was the aerodynamic race engineer for Wyer Automotive and the 917 Mirage program, and so the tale of the GT40 also had its full-circle story, in a way.

"Bruce, a Jaguar man in the UK, brought back a GT40 in pieces and spent years putting it together," he continued.

"It then sat in the front window of Shepherd's panel shop in Vermont, but when Bruce passed away, the family gave the car to Jeff Dutton to sell. Anyway, I rang dad to tell him, and he bought it and took it all the way to Tucson to turn it.

"As it turned out, Horsman was the current service manager of the BMW dealership, who had come to him from a Ferrari dealership in Scottsdale.

"He took one look at it and said, 'Let's turn it back into a real one.' So they got the close-ratio ZF gearbox, the race uprights and the race brakes, etc, and dad ended up racing it in the historics for years, the highlight of that being at Watkins Glen.

"They did a 40-year reunion of the Le Mans win there around 1989, with Steve Earle as his co-driver. Dad and Earle blew everyone away… we still have that trophy at home.

"But I'm telling you this because last night, Jacky Ickx brought it up…"

At that point, I looked at Michael and said something like, "What do you mean, Ickx brought it up?"

It turns out that Stillwell and the McLeods spent the previous night conversing with Derek Bell and Ickx at the Hotel de France.

Just another casual night at the hotel, apparently.

"Last night after dinner, Bell and Ickx were sitting there, and Ickx saw me and said… 'Bib?… Stillwell?'








The rebuilt GT40 that traversed the globe – Bib leading the way, steering the storied machine at Watkins Glen.

ABOVE: Gillian Harris (Stillwell to be), a pioneer for women in motorsport, in the Aston Martin Le Mans team in 1959 alongside (L to R) Reg Parnell, Stirling Moss, and Jack Fairman.




The terrace of the iconic Hotel de France, where many a tale has unfolded over a wine or two.




This Triumph TR3 was one of many beautiful machines parked outside the hotel.

"That's my dad, I replied, then Ickx yelled... 'I remember in the GT40, ja, ja."

As it turns out, Stillwell can do a pretty sharp Belgian accent.

"Then at some point, Peter McLeod bailed Derek Bell up and said, 'Well... you didn't win Bathurst, and I did!' It was a good bit of innocent banter, but amusingly, I thought to myself of all the things Peter hadn't won, like five or so Le Mans."

For the record, Bell's best finish at Bathurst in five appearances was third in 1981, with Alan Moffat in the RX-7, but he did win five Le Mans, three Daytona 24s and two World Sportscar Championships.

## THE HOTEL DE FRANCE

**WE DROVE** into the small town of La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, where the surroundings of the Hotel de France were once turned into an outdoor garage for Wyer's Aston Martin and Porsche Le Mans efforts.

It had also housed Steve McQueen when he was making his 1971 love-letter film about Le Mans.

It's a town of small winding roads that meandered through its old buildings that time had largely forgotten, with picturesque stone bridges perched over the Loir River that flowed through it.

It was hard to imagine the DB4 GT sounding off in this environment, let alone the devilish cacophony of a 917's flat-12 disturbing the tranquillity.

However, I could imagine McQueen walking by the Loir with a cigarette and a bottle of wine in the dead of night, contemplating why he'd spent his life savings on a film that no one wanted him to make... and then deciding he didn't give a damn.

That day, the sun was shining down on the hotel terrace that was full of drinkers chatting merrily and clinking glasses, with a car park full of classic machines spread out before them.

I distinctly noticed the Porsche with the number plate 'BELL', a collection of Triumphs that included a gorgeous pastel-blue TR3, some modern Ferraris, vintage MGs and more Porsches than a car park in Zuffenhausen could muster.

Inside the hotel, built in 1905 by the Pasteau family and renovated and restored by a Brit named Martin Overington from 2013, the bistro, bar and dining rooms had an inviting classic French presence, with the French bar doors opening onto the terrace, while the hotel rooms were situated upstairs.

The back bistro had a fantastic wall-to-wall collection of Le Mans photos and vintage shots from the hotel's heady garage days.

On coming across a photo of Vern Schuppan, Stillwell said, "Remind me in the car to tell you how I first met Schuppan."

As we only had about an hour at the hotel before needing to return to the track, we headed for the bar.

And who should have been standing there but Derek Bell, tall, whimsical and still full of the British fighting swagger.

Michael and he shared a common acquaintance in Kevin Bartlett, which got them talking about Bathurst.

That got Bell onto the subject of eating some 'classic' Bathurst oysters.

"...the night before the race I ate six oysters and a steak, and threw up all night and all day," Bell recounted.









"And I remember going down through the Esses from the top of the mountain and suddenly thinking... 'ohhhh god'... then I spun out. It was wonderful, actually," he sarcastically quipped.

I guess if you could brave the old-school Mulsanne Straight, you could brave a Bathurst oyster.

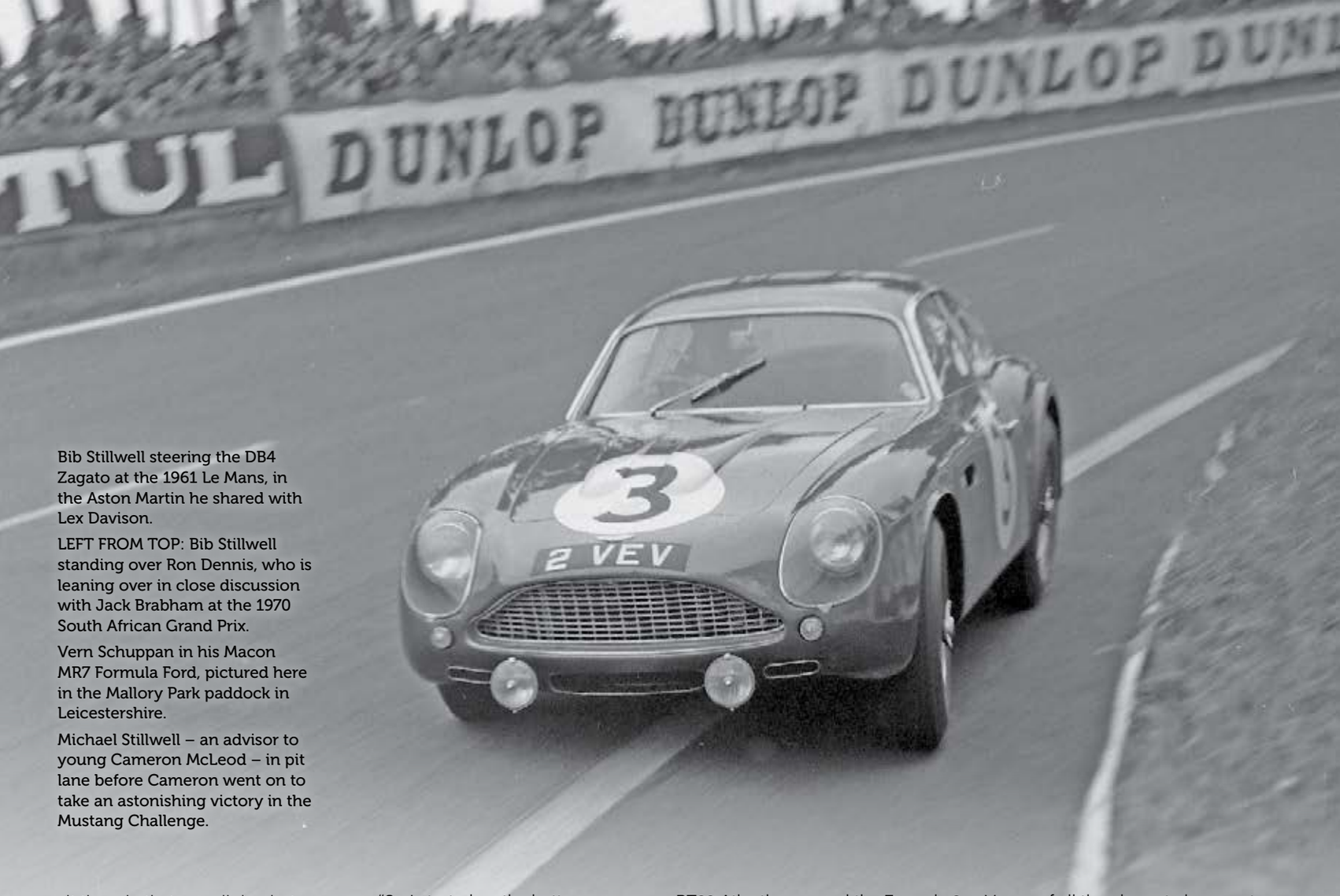
On the subject of Bartlett, Bell asked how he was, and Stillwell said that he'd been running the driving standards school for the historics back in Melbourne.

"Well, when you see him next," Bell interjected, "tell him, how could he honestly justify giving anybody guidance on how to drive!"

After a fine chat with Bell and a pint of beer on the sunny terrace with Stillwell, mainly discussing the career trajectory of Cameron McLeod, as well as Cameron's grandfather's fondness for Citroëns, we had to hit the tarmac.

## RETURN TO CIRCUIT

**I WAS** sad to leave La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, it felt like we could




Bib Stillwell steering the DB4 Zagato at the 1961 Le Mans, in the Aston Martin he shared with Lex Davison.

LEFT FROM TOP: Bib Stillwell standing over Ron Dennis, who is leaning over in close discussion with Jack Brabham at the 1970 South African Grand Prix.

Vern Schuppan in his Macon MR7 Formula Ford, pictured here in the Mallory Park paddock in Leicestershire.

Michael Stillwell – an advisor to young Cameron McLeod – in pit lane before Cameron went on to take an astonishing victory in the Mustang Challenge.

sit there in that sun all day, but we both had duties at the Circuit de La Sarthe to attend.

As we got out of the town and turned north on the D304, the imaginings of old race engines faded into the past and we silently watched the rolling fields of mustard seed and red poppies go by.

I reminded Stillwell that he had a story to tell me about meeting Vern Schuppan.

Like any good yarn, he started from the beginning of the journey.

"I'd finished year 12, and I failed English, which back then was a prerequisite," he started.

"However, I maintain that the main reason I failed was that I spent the entire year reading my father's enormous library of motoring books... unfortunately, that subject wasn't examinable.

"What next I thought. School holidays? Not a chance.

"Instead, I was put straight into the Ford dealership in Kew with a pair of starch-white overalls and a broom. I did get a promotion though... straight into the lube pit.

"So I started on the bottom rung, taking sump plugs out, draining oil, changing oil filters..."

At this point, I was enjoying the chat, but I didn't expect the next bit of information.

"After 12 months of that, Dad came to me and asked if I wanted to spend a year with Jack in England in 1970," Michael said.

"Jack Brabham?" I replied.

"The same... in his last year of Formula 1. Anyway, I obviously told him I'd love to. So I met them at the Tasman Series, and we went straight to Johannesburg, which he won, driving the BT33."

For the record, that was his last ever win in Formula 1.

"Anyway, my first job was to go into engine developments, run by John Judd, before he went on to make the Judd engines, and Australian racer Brian Muir was also there, who was a successful touring car driver in the UK at the time.

"Amongst that, Brabham made a move from the Repco V8 to the Cosworth, and at the works factory in Byfleet, we started assembling the BT29 Atlantic cars and the Formula 2 Brabham cars, as well as getting out to all the Formula 1 races with the team that year.

"But on one of those days in the UK, I was driving to Surrey and stopped to fill my car. And I couldn't help but notice this big old English van with a race trailer on the back of it, and a Formula Ford car.

Then I saw an Aussie sticker on the back door.

"So I obviously had to go say hello. I've gone up to the fella and said, 'Oh, hello mate, who are you?'

"...the name's Vern Schuppan," he said. "I'm from Adelaide, and I'm out here driving Formula Ford this weekend."

"So I offered to help him out that weekend, which then turned into a whole season, and that's when Vern had just got his start.

"Then he went and won the British Formula Atlantic Championship in '71 driving the Palliser Ford, which was built by a fella named Palliser who was a British Airways pilot, before he then got his gig with Lotus.

"So that's how I unexpectedly met Vern... of all the places to have met. It was quite the year."

The conversation jumped from everything to Alan Jones, when his father was supporting him through Formula 3 in the UK, to Ron Dennis, who was Brabham's mechanic at the time, and how he started rocking up to races in a silver E-Type.

By this stage, we were pulling back into the Circuit de La Sarthe, where he went straight to the Michelin tent to exchange some tyres for Cameron's race the next day.

As much as I love being a motorsport journalist, it can often feel like you are missing out on being directly involved in special moments, watching on from afar and furiously trying to file copy while the world unfolds in front of you.

Chained to the chair, so they say.

You don't always get to soak it in.

But it's completely unexpected moments, like a Loire Valley countryside drive in northwestern France with Michael Stillwell, that stick fast.

Also, happy 75th birthday Michael.




# MITSUBISHI FORMULA CARS

## THE AWAKENING OF A SAMURAI

**Long before rally dominance and road car credibility, Mitsubishi quietly built one of Japan's most formidable single-seater programs. It started with imitation, evolved through persistence, and ended with a machine capable of beating anything on home soil.**

STORY: LORENZO BAER, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE FUJI MOTORSPORT MUSEUM
IMAGES: THE MITUBISHI ARCHIVES, HIDETOSHI KOTOKU, THE FUJI MOTORSPORT MUSEUM, MGPOC

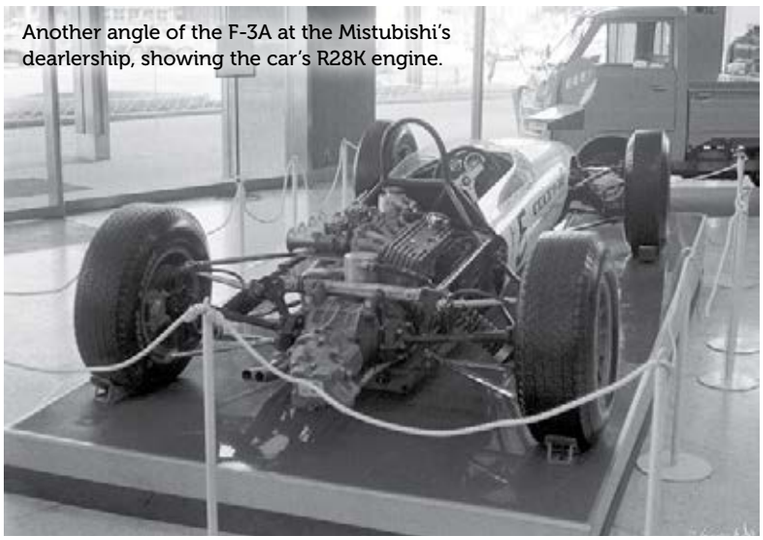


The two ends of Mitsubishi's Formula Colt lineage: its eldest son, the F-3A, sits alongside its 'bigger' brother, the F2000.

> Perhaps the main fruit of the JAF's efforts was attracting Mitsubishi into its sphere of influence ...



The Colt F-3A on display at a Mitsubishi dealership in Tokyo, circa 1966.



Another angle of the F-3A at the Mistubishi's dearlership, showing the car's R28K engine.



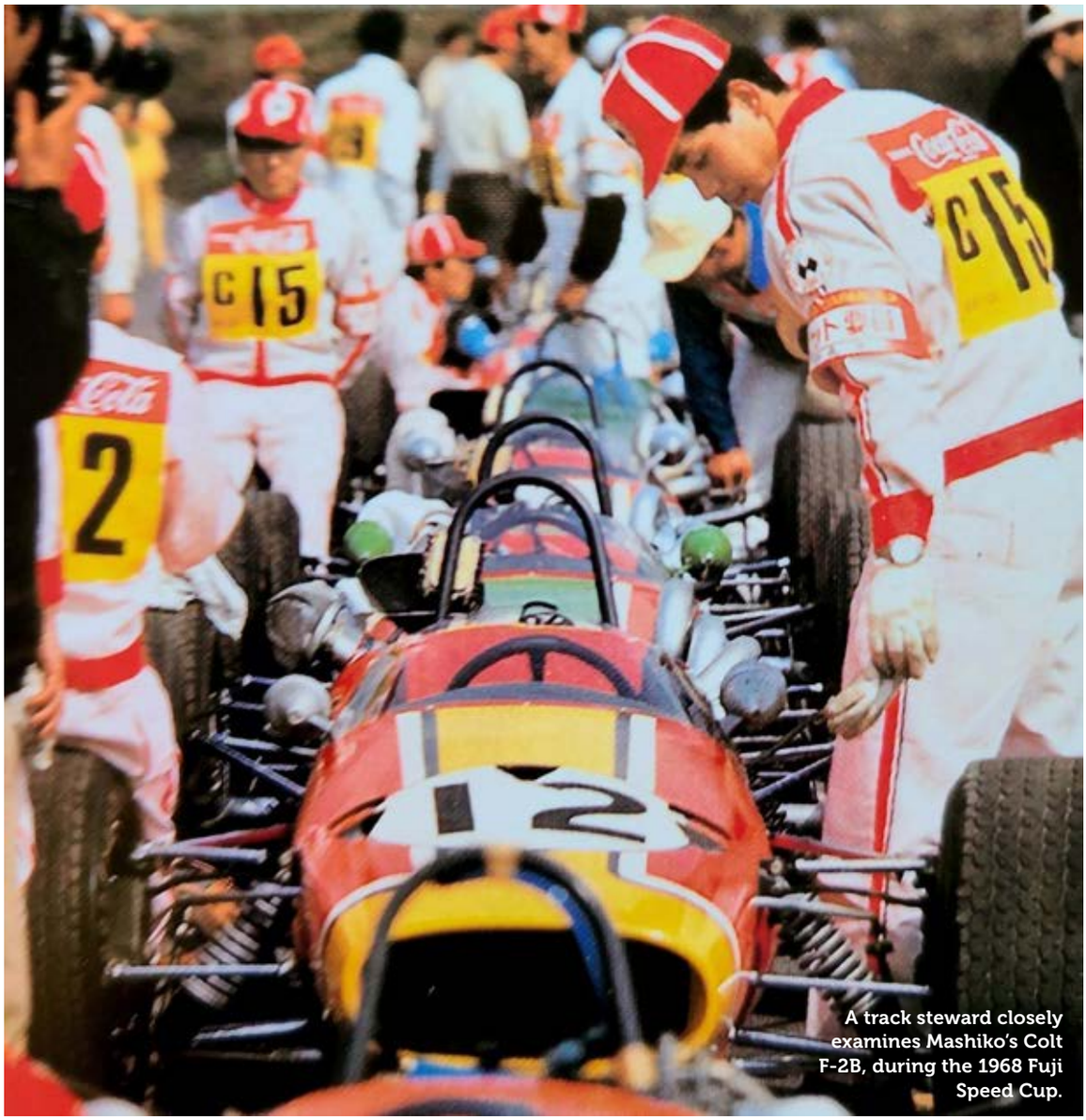
The Colt F-3A was also Mitsubishi's stand centerpiece at the 1966 Tokyo Motor Show.

**WHEN WE** think of the history of Japanese single-seater cars, any motorsport enthusiast will almost automatically think of Honda. From 1964 to 1968, the company founded by Soichiro Honda became synonymous with the remarkable evolution of Asian motorsport in the 1960s, becoming the first Japanese manufacturer to enter the Formula 1 World Championship as a full works team and a pioneer engine supplier in Formula 2.

However, despite these significant milestones, one of the sport's most enduring myths is the notion that the Tokyo giant single-handedly led the consolidation of Japanese single-seater motor racing. That would reduce a far more complex situation to a simple issue. A curious fact that is rarely remembered is that the first Japanese single-seater chassis to compete in an FIA-sanctioned race was not a Honda-powered machine, but rather three DEL Hino Contessa MkIs, which raced in the II JAF Trophy in May 1964.

Thus, it can be said that DEL's pioneering move, more so than Honda's own, served as a pivotal factor in attracting other Japanese companies to open-wheeler racing, as the Japan Automobile Federation, JAF, sought to foster interest among domestic manufacturers in the segment. This effort would soon pay off, as within a few years, Datsun/Nissan, Isuzu and Subaru would join the ranks of Japanese formula racing through works teams or very serious privateers.

However, perhaps the main fruit of the JAF's efforts was attracting Mitsubishi into its sphere of influence, with the company gradually becoming the dominant force in Japanese single-seater motorsport by the late 1960s. But carving out this success would be




A track steward closely examines Mashiko's Colt F-2B, during the 1968 Fuji Speed Cup.

> To be called the Sports Colt, the general outline of the project called for a simple and reasonably powerful machine ...

a journey of trial and error, culminating in some of the manufacturer's greatest missteps, but also some of its greatest triumphs across its 150-year history.

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, COLT FORMULA 3A

**OUR STORY** begins in October 1964, when Mitsubishi started to draw the outlines for its first thoroughbred sportscar. To be called the Sports Colt, the general outline of the project called for a simple and reasonably powerful machine, with a new design inspired by European sportscars. Early development was split between Shin Mitsubishi Works, Nagoya, responsible for the design and general details of the program, and Mitsubishi Technical Centre No. 1, Kyoto, in charge of the mechanical aspects of the project.




This joint effort enabled a rapid prototype development cycle, which by mid-1965 was already at the full mock-up stage and ready for its first wind-tunnel tests. In Kyoto, the project was also making steady progress. To



MAIN: Different from Ikuzawa's Colt, Masuko's F-2C was equipped with a nose-cone/high-rear wing configuration.

LEFT: Tetsu Ikuzawa's Colt F-2C in 1969, with a high double-wing configuration.

ABOVE RIGHT: Masuko proundly poses for a photo next to the F-2B, during the 1968 Macau Grand Prix.



cut costs and time, the team led by Kazuo Hashimoto, manager of the transmission centre at the plant, and Hirokazu Nakamura, manager of the design section, opted to simply tune a standard four-cylinder Colt KE43 OHV engine for the new design.

The result could not have been better, producing a compact, reliable and powerful air-cooled 997.6cc engine that received the project code R28K. Retaining the pushrod configuration of the original KE43, this powerplant differed from the standard Colt in that it featured new twin Solex-Mikuni 40PHH carburettors.

However, not even these encouraging prospects could save the machine from an unexpected twist in late 1965, when the whole project was halted due to a major recession in the Japanese automotive industry. While representatives from the Nagoya branch were inconsolable about the decision, Hashimoto, Nakamura, and the company were unwilling to back down and accept the losses.

Thus, the Kyoto engineers soldiered on with the engine's development, completing it in early 1966. Dynamometer tests indicated that the R28K could deliver 63kW (85bhp) at 8000rpm, impressive figures for the Japanese automotive industry at the time, and that would not go unnoticed by the company's top management, which now saw an opportunity to repurpose these assets while facing one of its main rivals.

Honda's success in Formula 1 was beginning to cause some unease among key Mitsubishi executives, as Soichiro's company gained increasing traction and influence on the global motorsport scene. However, the real alarm sounded when Honda announced in October 1965 its desire to establish a more consistent foothold in its domestic formula scene, importing a batch of Brabham BT16As for this purpose. Fitted with Honda S800 engines, these machines were destined for the Suzuka Racing Service Club (RSC) program, with the aim of boosting the sport's popularity

in the country.

This aggressive move prompted Mitsubishi to deploy a set of countermeasures, including launching its own formula program. The mission seemed extremely ambitious, given Mitsubishi's non-existent know-how regarding the construction of single-seaters and the tight project deadline, as the machine had to be ready by the time of the 1966 JAF Grand Prix in May. For obvious reasons, the Kyoto Technical Centre became the epicentre of the entire operation and the base for the newly created Colt Motor Sport Club (CMSC) squad, with former driver Kazuo Togawa entrusted as the team's manager.

## COPYING TO COMPETE, LEARNING TO WIN

**DUE TO** the technological limitations involved in developing a car from scratch, Mitsubishi blatantly copied the Brabham BT15/16 design. Based on a spaceframe chassis with dimensions very similar to the Brabham model, length 3460mm, width 1650mm, height 860mm, wheelbase 2260mm, the car was finished with a fibreglass body that did little to hide its 'bastardised' lineage from the British manufacturer's models. In the powertrain, the R28K engine had undergone further refinements, increasing to 67kW (90 bhp) and earning the nickname 'Colt Speed.'



The Colt F2D-II with its distinctive 'zebra' livery at the 1970 JAF GP.

Scraping together all the resources available, the CMSC team performed a superb feat in presenting Mitsubishi's first formula car, the F-3A, to the public in mid-April. Two Colts were entered in the III JAF Grand Prix: Osamu Mochizuki, pit manager Shinichi Tsuchiya, and Masayoshi Matsunaga, pit manager Seiichi Ando. However, due to technical issues, Matsunaga did not line up in the race, with Mitsubishi placing all its hopes on Mochizuki.

The move would pay off in the end, with the driver sweeping the 10-lap exhibition race. The experience gained at the event would prove invaluable for Mitsubishi, demonstrating that the company was on the right track. Thus, for 1967, the CMSC prepared for an even more ambitious assault on race meetings around the land of the rising sun.

## GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE GAME, COLT FORMULA 2

**EVEN WITH** this excellent result, Mitsubishi knew that its rivalry with Honda would not be settled by an isolated triumph. More resounding performances were needed to cement the brand's importance on the national Japanese single-seater scene, which was set to undergo a major overhaul in 1967.

Moving away from the old one-litre formula, the JAF positioned itself at the forefront of open-wheeler single-seater development in 1967, becoming one of the first federations in the East to adopt the new FIA 1600cc regulations. This represented a significant leap in the prestige and importance of the event, aligning with the 'return to power' philosophy of the rebranded Formula 2.

To this end, members of the Kyoto Technical Centre returned to the




With its sleek and elegant lines, the Colt F2D-II introduced a certain air of modernity to the 1970 Grand Prix.

drawing board to design a new engine-and-chassis combination that could be homologated for the new formula.

Once again, the team decided to play it safe, updating the F-3A design. The major difference lay in the engine: a brand-new OHV 1598cc R46K powered the car. Based on the KE45SS engine of the Colt 1500SS, this powerplant had been enlarged for racing purposes, producing approximately 120kW (160 bhp) at 8000rpm.

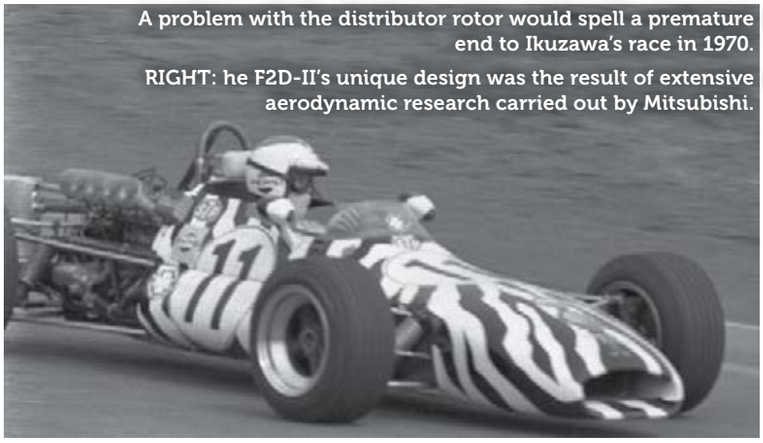
With time to develop the project, Mitsubishi managed to put together a formidable team for the 4th JAF Grand Prix, comprising two new Colt F-2As, to be driven by Osamu Mashiko and Osamu Mochizuki. The lack of entries for the new 1600cc formula, however, prompted the JAF to also accept older single-seaters under the FL-I banner. This decision also worked in Mitsubishi's favour, allowing CMSC to enrol the two older Colt F-3As in the race for Sohei Kato and Hiroshi Hasegawa.

The event would prove to be a triumphant march for Mitsubishi, with Hasegawa taking an easy win in the FL-I category, while Mochizuki took home the overall trophy, followed closely by Mashiko.

The 1966–67 one-two finishes meant that Mitsubishi's project was really building momentum and, under Togawa's watchful eye, CMSC was already aiming for a third consecutive victory in 1968. To achieve this, the manufacturer would deploy the Colt F-2B, a refined version of the F-2A. Despite an incredible, or even suspicious, resemblance to the Brabham BT18, the car was in a class of its own, thanks to its new engine.



No secrets between rivals: Yoshio Nakamura (Honda's head of competitions) and Tetsu Ikuzawa (Mitsubishi driver) chat during the 1970 JAF GP.



A problem with the distributor rotor would spell a premature end to Ikuzawa's race in 1970.

RIGHT: he F2D-II's unique design was the result of extensive aerodynamic research carried out by Mitsubishi.



> This aggressive move prompted Mitsubishi to deploy a set of countermeasures ...

## FROM IMITATION TO INNOVATION

**WHILE RETAINING** the same 1598cc displacement and general features of the R46K, the company's engineers developed the R39K. The main differences between the powerplants were the adaptation of a newly developed DOHC, four-valve cylinder head to the engine and a new carburation system, which replaced the complex electromagnetic accelerator pump with a newly developed port-type fuel injection pump created by Mikuni, Solex. These and other minor modifications had a dramatic impact on the car's performance, which could now deliver 165kW (220 bhp) at 9000rpm.

The manufacturer assembled an impressive line-up to compete in the Fuji Speed Cup, held alongside the V Japanese Grand Prix. The team consisted of four cars, all F2Bs, distributed among Osamu Mochizuki, Osamu Mashiko, Sohei Kato and Hiroshi Hasegawa. With this strong contingent, Mitsubishi could even afford to use some of its machines as testbeds. For example, Mochizuki's and Mashiko's cars were fitted with magnesium front hub carriers and rectifier plates on the nose cowl, while Kato's and Hasegawa's cars were configured to 'standard' variation, without aerodynamic devices and with cast-iron carriers.

However, defying the brand's predictions, it would be the rookie Kato who would take Mitsubishi to the top step of the podium, followed by Mashiko. However, Mitsubishi's adventures in 1968 would have some extra chapters, so to speak, first at the end of June, when Mochizuki once again led Mitsubishi to victory at the All-Japan Suzuka Speed Cup. In November, the CMSC also took part in the XV Macau Grand Prix, but this time with disappointing results, as both Mitsubishi bids for the race, represented by Mochizuki and Mashiko, failed to cross the finish line.

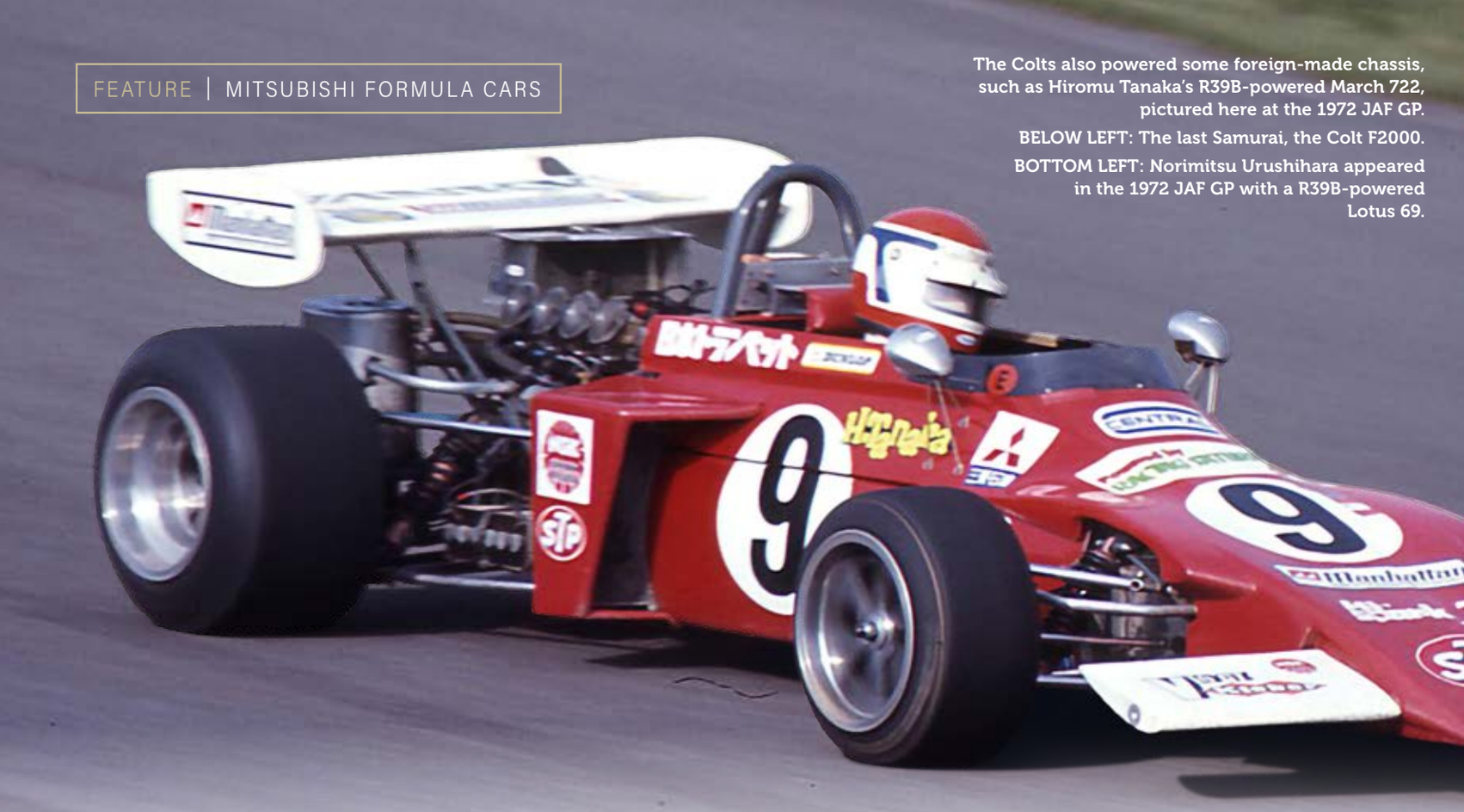
## BEATEN AT HOME, FORCED TO EVOLVE

**NINETEEN SIXTY-NINE** would prove to be a critical year for Mitsubishi's single-seater program, as the category now amassed its own loyal Japanese motorsport fanbase. Thus, for that year's JAF Grand Prix, the team soldiered on with their Colts, now in F-2C specification. The CMSC took part in the race through two official entries for Mashiko and Kato, while a third F-2C, built over a modified Brabham BT23 chassis, was listed as a semi-works bid by Tetsu Ikuzawa. No two F-2Cs were identical, as chassis

The Colts also powered some foreign-made chassis, such as Hiromu Tanaka's R39B-powered March 722, pictured here at the 1972 JAF GP.

BELOW LEFT: The last Samurai, the Colt F2000.

BOTTOM LEFT: Norimitsu Urushihara appeared in the 1972 JAF GP with a R39B-powered Lotus 69.



configuration, oil tank and cooler size, nose cowl shape, wing shape and mounting method, plus many other small details, varied from car to car.

However, even with this strong line-up, Mitsubishi had to accept its first major defeat on home soil, as Australian Leo Geoghegan, in a Lotus 39T, took home the victory. Another disappointing result at that year's Macau Grand Prix, with Kato saving the team's honour with a third-place finish, did nothing to ease the situation.

Thus, Mitsubishi spared no effort in developing the F2D for 1970, which, in reality, would involve two completely different chassis. The first would be the F2D-I, built entirely at the company's facilities and based on a multi-tubular spaceframe chassis. The machine sported a beautiful, extremely aerodynamic body with side opened radiators, specially optimised by the company for Fuji.



The Colt F2D-II, however, had a story of its own. To test the performance of the Mitsubishi engine in a foreign chassis, the company purchased the Brabham BT30/2 chassis and re-registered the car as a Mitsubishi. Unlike the F2D-I, which would be entered as a works CMSC entry, the Brabham/Mitsubishi would be entrusted to Racing Mate, founded by former driver and businessman Sokichi Shikiba.

Despite the differences, both cars were powered by the new R39 Mk2 unit, a refurbished version of the 1.6-litre R39, which now delivered 180kW (240 bhp). With a formidable line-up, featuring drivers Kuniomi Nagamatsu, F2D-I, and Tetsu Ikuzawa, F2D-II, the team hoped to tackle the onslaught of foreign entries in the 1970 JAF Grand Prix on equal terms. But reality would prove bittersweet for CMSC.

Despite an excellent performance from Ikuzawa's BT30/F2D-II during practice, the driver would be forced to retire on the race's seventh lap due to mechanical problems. On the other hand, Nagamatsu, in the more complex F2D-I, put in an excellent race, snatching a well-deserved third place for Mitsubishi. But that was not enough for a team accustomed to standing at the top of the podium, and to stage a comeback, it was necessary to return to the drawing board.



## THE MASTERPIECE, COLT FORMULA 2000

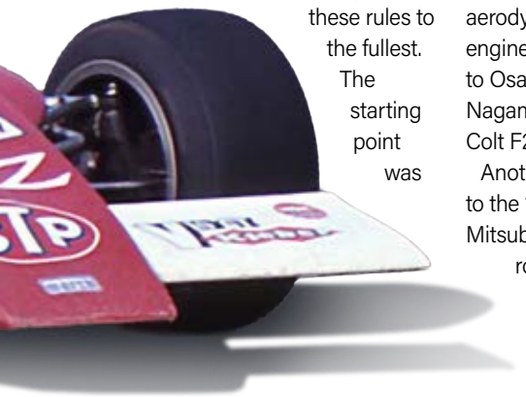
**NINETEEN SEVENTY-ONE** would prove to be the swan song for the manufacturer's formula racing efforts, yet it was at this very moment that the company would demonstrate, more than ever before, the genius of its engineers, developing one of the most unique formula cars of the 1970s, the Colt F2000.

The encouraging performance of the F2D-I in 1970 had demonstrated the potential of Mitsubishi's indigenous chassis, although certain shortcomings, particularly regarding downforce and engine cooling, had left gaps for future improvements. Thus, the company decided to build upon the fruits of this endeavour, developing the ultimate Mitsubishi formula car.

Starting with the bare F2D-I spaceframe chassis, the company refurbished most of the car's mechanicals. A new front suspension featured a wishbone-and-coil-spring setup, while the rear suspension had links, radius arms, and coil springs. The brakes, which also suffered during

the 1970 Grand Prix, were replaced with a new disc system with Ferodo pads.

The mechanical changes did not stop there; a new engine drove the entire system. With the promise of revised regulations allowing powerplants of up to 2000cc for the 1971 JAF Grand Prix, Mitsubishi set about developing a machine that could exploit these rules to the fullest. The starting point was the Saturn 4G32 platform, which powered the performance versions of the Mitsubishi Galant. Made of cast iron, this 1597cc powerplant delivered approximately 75kW (100 bhp) at 6300rpm.



However, two Mitsubishi engineers, Hidemi Oya and Kanji Nagoya, achieved a true feat of engineering, transforming this engine into a true beast in just seven months. With a new NGK transistorised ignition and a refreshed Mikuni fuel injection system, the result was the R39B, informally known as the 'Speed Demon.' The four-cylinder, inline DOHC engine was also enlarged to 1994cc, now producing 210kW (280 bhp) at 9000rpm. The drivetrain package was completed with a five-speed Hewland FT200 gearbox.

A constant airflow was needed to feed the engine, and, to achieve this, the company came up with a creative solution: a side pod mounted just above the valves, which helped to maintain a steady air pressure and flow without choking the engine. The cooling system, however, drew on the side radiators from the F2D-I, which had proven their worth in the hot 1970 race. The updated car was finished off with new fibreglass and plastic bodywork, featuring more aggressive lines and much more pronounced aerodynamic elements than the previous model.

The lengthy development period of the F2000 meant that only one chassis would be ready by the time of the 1971 JAF Grand Prix. However, to have a stronger presence in the race, Togawa decided to reclaim the BT30/2, Colt F2D-II chassis loaned to Racing Mate in 1970 for CMSC, modifying the car to an 'F2000-pattern', fitting a new, more aerodynamic bodywork and the R39B engine. This car would be entrusted to Osamu Masuko, while Kuniomi Nagamatsu would drive the official Colt F2000.

Another interesting factor relating to the 1971 event is the fact that Mitsubishi began to delegate a greater role in representing the brand to privateer entries, giving the first sign of the brand's future distancing from the discipline. For example, Team Magnum entered one of the old Colt F-2C chassis for Kenjiro Tanaka, while another Mitsubishi-powered Brabham, BT30/23, was entered by Hiroshi Kazato.

Be that as it may, the 1971 race unfolded entirely in the brand's favour, with Nagamatsu setting the pace and reclaiming the JAF Grand Prix crown for the manufacturer after nearly three years of disappointment. This resounding result was confirmed, with Masuko coming in a close second. In the sub-class reserved for cars up to 1600cc, Kazato also made his contribution, claiming the top spot in the division's standings.

## EXIT, AND A DIFFERENT LEGACY

**THESE SUCCESSES** marked a perfect wrap-up to Mitsubishi's official history in single-seater racing, as, in mid-1971, the company announced the closure of the CMSC operations. This decision was based primarily on economic factors, in particular the unviability of maintaining the costly project that was technically focused on just one race, the JAF Grand Prix. Other sporting factors also contributed to the decision, including the team's shift towards rallying, which proved far more profitable and aligned with the brand's objectives during the 1970s, as well as the scaling back of the brand's rivalry with Honda and other Japanese manufacturers in formula racing.



One of the most gifted Japanese drivers of his generation, Tetsu Ikuzawa was a regular presence at the JAF GPs – most of the times, at the wheel of a Formula Colt.



In the cockpit of the F2000, Nagamatsu swept the 1971 JAF GP.

But the brand's legacy in its single-seaters was to be extended in another way, as over the following two years, part of the company's formula operation would remain active at the Kyoto plant, with Mitsubishi becoming an engine supplier to several Japanese teams that now required powerplants adapted for F2000 regulations.

With its proven and reliable R39B, the company would enjoy a strong market for such engines in the years that followed, particularly with the introduction of the All-Japan Formula 2000 Championship in 1973.

By 1976, that too had faded, replaced by more powerful European engines.

What remained was a short, sharp chapter in Japanese motorsport history. One that started with imitation, evolved through persistence, and finished with a car good enough to win on its own terms.

Not bad for a program that was never supposed to exist in the first place.

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# GREAT ALPINE RALLY MAKES IMPACT

**THE INAUGURAL** Great Alpine Rally has made an immediate impression with all the elements from snow to sunshine challenging competitors.

Across two days, 24 stages and more than 300km of action in the Falls Creek region, Australian Tarmac Rally drivers had to contend with snow, sun and everything in between.

Outright honours were claimed by Michael Harding / James Thornburn in their Subaru WRX STI, delivering a dominant and consistent performance to secure victory. Jonathan Moir / Darragh Lynch (Ford Mk2 Escort) followed in second, finishing just 1:54.2 behind, with Justin Waterhouse / Adrian Bryant (Mitsubishi Evo X) completing the outright podium in third after a strong and steady run.

At the front of the Rally Challenge field, Ben Watkins / Peter Hellwig in their Subaru WRX STI. Behind them, David Currow / Kate O'Donnell pushed hard in their Fiat AC.

In Modern Super Rally, it was a masterclass from Michael Harding/ James Thornburn, who pieced together a near-flawless run to take victory. Dean Lillie/Samantha Stevens



Michael Harding and James Thornburn won the first-ever Great Alpine Rally. Image: Supplied

stayed within striking distance but ultimately settled for second, while Jason Wright/Fiona Wright muscled their Nissan R35 onto the podium after a hard-fought campaign.

The Modern AWD category saw a tight, high-pressure fight, with Craig Haysman/Jasmine Haysman emerging on top in their Subaru WRX STI. Consistency was king here, edging out Jason Killen / Andrew Thompson (Audi TTRS) and Greg Burrowes / Rhonda Burrowes (GR Yaris) in a battle that never truly settled until the final stages.

In Modern 2WD, Laura Rogers / Gavin Rogers drove with precision and composure to secure victory in their Porsche Cayman GTS, holding off Jennifer Kim/Rhys Llewellyn in a clean, calculated drive.

The Early Modern AWD class delivered one of the most competitive fights of the event. Justin Waterhouse / Adrian Bryant came out on top in their Evo X, but the margins told the real story with Michael Mansey / Julie Winton-Monet and Allan Hines / Kerry Hines pushing relentlessly right to the end.

In Early Modern 2WD, it was a razor-thin margin that defined the podium. David Blunden / Greg McDonald edged out victory in their R33 Skyline, holding off Roger Lomman / Annie Bainbridge by just seconds after an all-out battle across the stages.

The classic machinery didn't hold back either. In Classic Super Rally, Jonathan Moir / Darragh Lynch piloted their Mk2 Escort to victory, fending off a charging Mick Downey / Jarrod Akker in the Group C Commodore, a duel that felt like a throwback to rally's golden era.

And in the Classic field, Peter Gluskie / Samantha Winter stood tall in their BMW E30, delivering a dominant performance to close out the weekend, with Hugh Feggans/James Callahan and Robin Lowe / Peter Lowe rounding out a hard-fought podium.

***The next ATR event is the Snowy River Sprint on 12–13 September.***

***Thomas Miles***

# VISSER WINS ROB ROY REVIVAL



Darren Visser dominated the Rob Roy Revival. Image: Chris Carter

**THE 2026** Rob Roy Revival was a "superlative" affair as 89 drivers took on the famous Australian hillclimb.

Leading the way was Darren Visser, who was the only driver to break the 50s barrier on the combined times of the long and short tracl.

Steering his Bates Cycles Cyclo 500, Visser nailed the long track in 27.19s and got his time to as low as 22.14s on the short track.

As a result, his combined time of 49.33s was in its own stratosphere.

It was a much closer battle for second with four drivers within the 53s bracket.

Sneaking clear by a slender 0.04s Robin Bailey overcame Laurie Bennett after a battle that went down to the wire.

Bailey's MGB GT V8 just eclipsed Bennett's Elfin 600B after a fluctuating battle throughout the weekend.

Also in the mix across the whole journey were Graeme Raper's George Reed Monoskate Special on 53.89s and Antonio Cafiso with 53.92s in the Penrite Elfin Clubman.

The leading lady was rising star Abby Wingett in her Elfin Ford Formula Junior.

Wingett posted the eighth-fastest combined time of the weekend with 55.42s.

She has recently been invited to drive the Elfin in this year's Goodwood Revival and is raising funds to help transport the car to England.

Organised by the MG Car Club Victoria, the Rob Roy Revival is also busy off the track with a festival, fashion show and live music also on display.

Australian Touring Car champion John Bowe was also in attendance as Event Patron and the festival was hailed as a great success.

"This year we celebrated Italian Automotive Excellence. The great marques including Alfa Romeo, Maserati, Ferrari, Lancia and Fiat were all represented and the car clubs got right behind the event", said MG Car Club Vice President Tony Lupton.

***Thomas Miles***

# SYDNEY STARTS UP

**THE NSW** Motor Race Championship kicked off at Sydney Motorsport Park on 14–17 March.

Supersports opened the round, with Mark Brame taking the win after penalties reshuffled the order.

Peter Paddon then took control, winning Races 2 and 3 with measured pace.

In Formula Ford, Eli Patten converted pole into a composed Race 1 win as William Liston retired late.

But Liston rebounded in Race 2, narrowly defeating Jason Liddell, as the third sprint followed the same pattern.

In Improved Production Under 2 Litre, Danny Castro Jnr swept all three races with commanding pace. Charlie Viola and Graham Bohm shared the remaining podium positions, while Matthew Wildridge, Travis Campbell and Benjamin Hanrahan were reliable top-five contenders.

In Over 2 Litre, Joseph Lenthall opened with a strong Race 1 win before Ben Algie and Trevan Spiteri split the remaining victories.



Graeme Holmes and Ben Turner lead the NSW Formula Open Championship field. Image: Riccardo Benvenuti

Formula Open produced three competitive races. Alex Macdonald opened with a decisive Race 1 victory ahead of Ben Turner.

Andrew Roberts responded in Race 2, holding Turner at bay.

Turner then edged Roberts in a tight Race 3 finish.

Production Touring opened with two short sprints, won by Simon Hodges and Josh Buchan in the Secure Wealth BMW M4.

The one-hour enduro defined the round, with Hodges and Buchan controlling the race from the outset.

Matthew Holt delivered a strong solo drive to second, while Leigh Burges completed a clean and consistent run to third.

Sports Sedans saw Steven Lacey take command with victories in Races 2 and 3 after Brad Shiels opened strongly in Race 1.

Timothy Leithhead and Simon Copping were regular frontrunners.

In Production Sports, Andrew Macpherson swept all three races ahead of Richard Gartner, with Helena Marras leading Class C throughout.

HQ Holdens delivered one of the most competitive categories of the weekend.

Luke Harrison completed a dominant clean sweep, converting pole into three composed victories.

Harber and Proglio remained constant threats, while Allan emerged as Harrison's closest challenger.

Gaudry again led Class B, consistently finishing inside the top group and pressuring several Class A runners.

Superkarts produced four fast, competitive races, all won convincingly by Brett Burvill. Paul Clark finished second throughout, while the 125 class delivered the closest action.

Laurie Fooks was the standout, taking multiple class wins and several outright podiums.

Formula Vee delivered three varied contests. Pym won Race 1 on corrected time after a fierce battle with Ogden, while debutants Klippan and Balk impressed.

Pace rebounded in Race 2 with a controlled win ahead of Ogden and Pym. Race 3 produced the closest finish, with Ogden narrowly holding off Pym as Cooke recovered to third.

Normoyle led the 1200 class across the round.

***Riccardo Benvenuti***

# WINTON RUMBLE

**THE VICTORIAN** Motor Race Championship burst to life with its first trip to Winton Motor Raceway of the year.

The BMW E30s and Victorian Tin Tops combined and were the first to go racing, and two days told two very different stories.

Saturday's races were swept by Ben Munro in the BMWs and Peter Ryder in the Super Tin Tops behind the wheel of a Nissan S13 Silvia.

However, on Sunday it was a different story as Alex Jory claimed the BMW races, while Barney Hogan's Audi RS3 won both Tin Top sprints.

Jory had a particularly interesting time, with one of his BMW wins coming by a slender three-tenths.

The big objective in the HERA Excel races was catching the #1 of Ethan Grigg-Gault, but no one could quite achieve that.

Grigg-Gault showed why he carried the number by winning three of the four races.

The first two wins on Saturday were comfortable, with Ryan Phillips and Jenson Teleskivi filling the podium on both occasions.

However, he was finally beaten by Teleskivi in Sunday morning's Race 3, as Grigg-Gault had to salvage fourth after dropping as low as 15th.

Grigg-Gault completed his impressive weekend by edging clear of Phillips in the finale.

The fight for Sports Compact honours was an arm wrestle between James Harris and Linda Devlin.

Devlin flew out of the gates and won the opening two races in impressive style behind the wheel of a Mini Cooper S.

But as Devlin slipped to third in Race 3, Harris turned the tables in the Nissan Bluebird.

After winning by 5s, it all came down to a tense finale where the two winners went head-to-head and Harris prevailed by four-tenths.




Ethan Grigg-Gault and Jenson Teleskivi clash fighting at the front of the Excels. Image: Neil Hammond

The Victorian V8s brought the Holden versus Ford rivalry back to the 'Action Track' at Winton.

The first race was a battle of attrition, with four Holdens failing to finish the 12-lapper.

But Aaron Wheatley's dominant drive ensured The General was still victorious, as Greg Lynch and Brett Lehmann made it an all-red podium.

The speed of Wheatley's VY was on full display again in Race 2, as he extended his margin of victory to 33s, while the leading Ford was Gary Finemore's XB Falcon.

However, Wheatley's dream run ended on Sunday morning when he could only manage eight of the 12 laps.

This opened the door for the 1999 Holden Racing Team tribute livery of Lynch, and he took it with both hands.

Back-to-back wins by big margins saw Lynch end the weekend on top, as Mark Kakouri and Lehmann wrestled for best of the rest.

***Thomas Miles***

# KARTING HISTORY MADE

**HISTORY WAS** made at the 2026 Penrite Oil Australian Kart Championship opener in Coffs Harbour.

At 49, Kip Foster became the oldest ever winner of a multi-round Australian Kart Championship round after taking victory in KA3 Senior.

Foster pipped Declan Matthews and 17-year-old Zach Findlay, who led the majority of the race.

Luca Auriemma won a weekend-long battle against Reece Cohen in KZ2.

At one stage, it was a five-way fight until Cohen clashed with Jac Preston at the final corner.

The small Queensland town of Mundubbera was full of pride after Levi Doessel secured his maiden win in the KA2 Junior field.

Doessel dominated from start to finish, while fellow Queenslander Jack Larsen was next best, with Riley Harrison also on the podium.

The fight for X30 honours was always going to be a thriller, with five Australian champions racing for



Hudson Petta releases his emotions after tasting victory. Image: Pace Images

sheep stations.

Defending Australian X30 Champion Brodie Whitmore ended up winning the battle as he emerged 2.4s clear of reigning KA3 Senior winner Christian Estasy.

The top five was completed by title holders Isaac McNeill, Jace Matthews and Mika Lemasurier.

Former Cadet 12 Australian Champion Archie Bristow showed he is ready for the step up to KA3 Junior by taking his first win with a fine drive.

The Victorian overcame Queenslander Josh Williams and West Aussie Valentino Giorgella.

Giorgella's podium gave LenzoKart some silverware in its Australian return.

In a further strong return for the LenzoKart brand, new recruit Kiwi Kianh Burt crossed the line first in TaG 125, but did not hold on to the win.

He won a battle with two-time TaG Champion Harrison Hoey and Tim Colombrita.

There was some consternation during the race as officials deemed Burt had not slowed appropriately when the full course caution was displayed after a Lap 1 incident.

He was issued a five-second penalty post-race, handing Hoey the round win.

On a strong day for Kiwis, Max Gosling started the finals with his first win in Cadet 9 for Nick Percat's JND Parolin squad.

Gosling took the win by 1.2s over Hagan Moon and Harry Lack, as the trio were the class of the field all weekend.

In Cadet 12, Hudson Petta broke through for his first AKC round win and was elated after crossing the line 5.5s clear of Harlen Bell, who made a strong return after 18 months away.

***The next AKC round will be held at Ipswich in May.***

***Thomas Miles***

# BUCKLEY MAKES MOVE

**JUST LIKE** last year, the Buckley name leads the Toyota Gazoo Racing Australia Scholarship Series, but it is Ayce and not Alice.

The son of Nathan Buckley is making a name for himself with the backing of Walkinshaw TWG and Team Soutar Motorsport behind him.

Buckley had a tussle with Will Thompson that defined the opening round at Winton Motor Raceway.

This contest started in qualifying, where Thompson recorded the only 1m36s lap to claim pole.

But Buckley hit back with a strong start and did not look back, recording an emphatic win.

He opened a margin of nearly 2s as Thompson had his work cut out defending second.

Only half a second adrift was South Australian Darcy Heyne, who pushed hard but could not quite get close enough.

Josh Marsh held fourth, while Luke Rinaldo made a late move to secure fifth.

Late drama saw Lachlan Tapp and Kobe McInerney eliminate each other.

Boosted by his success, Buckley again drove clear of the field to take an emphatic 5s win.

All eyes turned to the fight for second, where Thompson again had his work cut out keeping Heyne behind.

The order remained unchanged, but by only four tenths, as Tyler Collins showed speed to rise to fourth.

One of Chaz Mostert's Method Motorsport runners, Buster Bailey, was an unfortunate retirement, alongside Antonio Molluso, who exited on the opening lap.



Ayce Buckley dominated the Toyota Scholarship Series opener.

Buckley's hopes of a hat-trick were denied by a fast-starting Thompson, who made it third time lucky.

Buckley stayed in touch but had to settle for second, just over a second behind.

Heyne completed a strong weekend with another podium, while Jenson Teleskivi and Holliday rounded out the top five.

It was an attritional finale as River Paterson, Tim Dore, Sam Simpson and Jr-Lung Hay-Bartlem failed to finish.

The championship now heads to South Australia at The Bend on 16 May.

***Thomas Miles***

# RISING UP THE MOUNTAIN



Danny Traverso won the Victorian opener. Image: Supplied

**PERFECT WEATHER** and road conditions greeted competitors for the 10th running of the Mitta Mountain Rally, which doubled as the opening round of the Victorian Rally Championship.

Danny Traverso and Anthony Carr headed the field on the road and in the results to take out Round 1 of the DRC 4x4 2026 Victorian Rally Championship.

Driving their Mitsubishi Lancer Evo 9, the pair won three of the event's six stages to claim the Mitta Mountain Rally by nearly eight minutes.

Held in the twisty, and at times bony, mountain ranges surrounding the Mitta Valley in Victoria's north-east, the first rally of the year again proved a survival test, with only 21 of the 52 starters making it to the finish unscathed.

The New South Wales pairing of Jake Bramble and Phil Bonser put in a strong drive in their Nissan Pulsar GTi-R to finish second, and take out the 4WD section of the East Coast Classic Rally Series, held across the eastern states of Australia.

Rowan Quill and Michelle Canning took the final place on the podium in their Nissan 180SX, finishing as the first two-wheel drive car home.

The Lancers of Russell and Jayden Hocking, and Dale Linaker and Craig Thomas, rounded out the top five, with Jeff David and Grant Geelan in their Porsche 911 finishing sixth and taking out the 2WD section of the East Coast Classic Rally Series.

After winning the opening stage, Brendan Reeves retired his Subaru Impreza WRX with a damaged radiator hose, getting his title defence off to the worst possible start. He rejoined in the afternoon, only for an exhaust issue to sideline him again.

Third seed Brad Luff was another early retirement after rolling his Subaru Impreza on stage two. Fellow top 10 seeds Warren Lee, Lancer Evo, and Wayne Stewart, VW Beetle, also retired, Lee with mechanical issues and Stewart after hitting a rock embedded in the road.

In the Victorian Club Rally Series round that ran alongside the main event, Andrew Taylor and Michael Stanbrough were the class of the field.

Their Datsun Stanza finished nearly four minutes ahead of the Subaru Impreza RS of Ray Garrad and Shane Walters, with David Lawrence and Darren Davison third home in a Datsun 1600..

# COMEBACK KINGS

**SCOTT PEDDER** and his Skoda pulled off a comeback for the ages to conquer the 2026 Rally of Bathurst.

Pedder and co-driver Glenn Macneall warmed up for their ARC campaign by winning the Bathurst Rally by 58s over Irish star Richie Dalton, in the event that takes competitors around the dirt roads surrounding Mount Panorama.

However, the margin of victory defied the journey Pedder had to take to overcome Dalton.

Their rivalry was established as early as the opening stage when Pedder pipped Dalton by less than 2s, while the likes of young Jackson Long and Darren Sweeney were also on the pace.

Dalton and Pedder traded stage wins and the rally lead across the first five stages until the eventual winner struck trouble.

An issue saw Pedder lose a massive 1m13s on Stage 5, but the ARC contender showed his class by not only overhauling that deficit, but turning it into a 58s victory after not dropping a single stage for the remainder of the rally.

Despite losing the outright win, Dalton was still rewarded with NSW Rally honours.

James O'Mallay and Jono Forrest finished sixth outright, which was enough to claim 2WD honours.

It was a strong performance that exceeded expectations for the Toyota 86 crew.

Dennis and Luke Stanford, in their Subaru, won the NSW Clubman Rally Series.



Scott Pedder was the king of the Bathurst Rally. Image: Roy Meuronen

Redhead Motorsport brought its Mitsubishi Evo to the rally and showed strong speed, only to be forced into retirement with brake issues.

The father-daughter combination of Sam Hill and Mikayla Cooling impressed on debut with 14th outright.

The next major event is the Rally of Heartland on 24–26 April, while the next NSW Rally round is the Narooma Forest Rally on 27 June.

The Queensland Rally Championship was also scheduled to open with the Blackbutt Rally, but it was washed out.

***Thomas Miles***

# RAPID RICE, WINNING WICKHAM

**THE HI-TEC** Oils Super Series roared into life at The Bend Motorsport Park, where early bragging rights were up for grabs.

The TA2 Muscle Car Series produced a thrilling opener, with four drivers battling for round honours before Jackson Rice emerged on top.

Tommy Smith set the tone by leading the opening race, but was handed the first-ever yellow card after jumping a restart, allowing Tyler Cheney to capitalise.

Smith responded by claiming the next sprint with a decisive move around the outside at Turn 3.

However, Sunday proved decisive, with Rice rising to the occasion.

After securing pole, Rice controlled the race and held off Cheney in a tense finish.

The finale was interrupted, but Rice maintained his composure to secure the round win, while Joel Heinrich impressed with a podium on debut.

The Australian Formula Ford Championship began its new era under AASA at The Bend, with Oliver Wickham making an immediate impact.

Wickham topped the first-ever Formula Ford Shootout, edging the field by just 0.0960s.

Robert Rowe took victory in the opening race after a fierce battle with Isaac Demellweek and Seth Burchartz.

Wickham responded in the next sprint, narrowly defeating Demellweek by 0.209s.



Stiaan Kriel and Cadel Ambrose battle for Formula RX8 honours. Image: Network R

Race 3 saw Wickham convert pole into victory, although Demellweek applied relentless pressure throughout.

After several near misses, Demellweek broke through in the finale following a four-way lead battle with Wickham.

Lee Stibbs made a strong start in the Australian IRC Racing Series.

He won the opener by 4s, getting the better of reigning champion Geoff Emery.

Stibbs extended his advantage in the 50-minute main event, finishing more than 10s clear.

Sunday brought drama when Stutterd spun into the concrete at high speed, forcing an early end to the third race as a fire ignited at the rear of his car.

The finale developed into a tense duel between Emery and Stibbs, with Emery holding firm under pressure to secure the win.

The Australian Drivers Championship began on Friday night, with reigning champion Damon Sterling setting the pace.

Sterling led the opening race from start to finish, edging Harry Strik by just three-tenths.

Strik showed early speed in the second race, but a mistake that saw him run onto the grass dropped him to fifth, allowing Sterling to take another win.

Sterling dominated Race 3, winning by more than 22s.

He appeared set to complete a clean sweep until an engine fire forced his retirement in the finale.

This opened the door for a first-time winner, with Bradley Smith leading as Strik attempted an unsuccessful move around the outside.

Lewis charged from third to first, but a spin at Turn 6 handed Smith the victory.

Legend Cars Australia delivered a packed schedule of seven races across three days, with five different winners emerging.

The action began on Friday, where Ruben Dan impressed with back-to-back wins, with just 1.2s covering the top six in the second race.

Saturday saw a shift in momentum when Dan lost his brakes two corners from home and became stranded in the sand.

Chase Tippett claimed victory in a hard-fought race, while a clash between Skinner and Pring dropped them from the lead group.

This allowed Dylan Thomas and Dean O'Brien to fight for the win, with Thomas prevailing by two-tenths.

The inverted top 12 race was controlled by Josh Thomas.

In Race 6, Skinner claimed a popular debut win after a late move on O'Brien.

Dan recovered strongly, charging from 13th to third before returning to challenge O'Brien in the next race, stealing victory at the penultimate corner.

South African driver Stiaan Kriel dominated Formula RX8, claiming four of the five wins across the weekend.

Cadel Ambrose was his closest challenger, while Sunday began with a major incident when James Dixon rolled, although he escaped unharmed.

***Thomas Miles***




Tommy Smith enjoyed a breakthrough TA2 win. Image: NetworkR




Nathan Herne dominated Trans Am. Images: Riccardon Benvenuti

# HERNE HAT-TRICK

**NATHAN HERNE** has stamped his authority on the 2026 Trans Am season by kicking off with a perfect hat-trick.

After a big battle up Mountain Straight, Hazelwood led the early stages before Herne reeled him in and pounced at The Chase.

Herne was at his dominant best in Race 2, while Hazelwood ran wide at Griffins Bend, and as he bounced back off the kerb, he collided with Moffat, which took Moffat out of the race.

The action parted the seas for Jack Smith to soar into second, only for him to throw away a podium place by having his own moment later on the same lap.

Hazelwood also clashed with Jarrod Hughes as James Golding took a podium. Golding and Elliott Barbour completed the podium.

## AUSSIE RACING CARS

**ANTHONY DIMAURO** won a hard-fought opening round in the Aussie Racing Cars at Mount Panorama.

Rossi Johnson won the opener after surviving a two-lap dash to the finish when Chad Chapman found the Forrest's Elbow wall.

Before the second race, Kody Garland withdrew from the entire weekend due to engine frustrations with the category. Diesel Thomas flew from sixth on the grid to glory in the second race ahead of Scott Andriske.

In Race 3 Andriske won a thrilling battle for victory with Boyd and DiMauro by three tenths.

DiMaurio rose to the occasion by nailing the final race as Andriske threatened until he had a sudden issue.



The big Aussie Racing Cars field jumps clear. BELOW: Graeme Draper takes flight in his Mini at The Chase.

## SALOON CARS

**SUPERCARS DRIVER** Brad Vaughan was in a league of his own as he dominated the Saloon Car Nationals.

Vaughan smashed them in his VT Commodore, winning both races ahead of fellow Holden driver Scott Dornan. He held off Dornan in both heats Dornan before the result was repeated in the decider.



Vaughan enjoyed an untroubled drive, emerging 6s clear of Dornan, who had his work cut out keeping Jackson Callo behind as nine cars failed to finish.

## EXCEL CHALLENGE

**THE BATHURST** Excel Challenge proved to be short but memorable as Tyce Hodge and Ian McMah won Trophy and Masters respectively.

The first race was stopped before a lap was on the board due to a massive crash at Griffins Bend.

Hodge won a thrilling battle with Zane Rhodes by 0.1609s.

The final race was again unfortunately cut short by an accident for Lachlan Harvey as Rhodes hit back.

## SUPER TT

**IN A** rare win for TCR, Harrison Cooper drove his Hyundai i30 N to the Super TT honours at Bathurst.

Cooper took pole, but was beaten by Charlie Khoury as he took the lead just before a race-ending Safety Car surfaced for a Graeme Draper engine fire.

Both Khoury and Draper dropped out of Race 2 due to mechanical gremlins.

This paved the way for Cooper to lead an all TCR podium filled by Will and Brad Harris as Myles Jones had a big hit at Reid Park after a clash with Glenn Townsend.

Brad Harris did not start the finale as Cooper dominated ahead of Will Harris.

***Thomas Miles***




Dayne Kingshott secured another Maddington Toyota Sprintcar Series title. Image: Richard Hathaway

# KINGSHOTT REIGNS SUPREME

**DAYNE KINGSHOTT** has once again been crowned champion of the Maddington Toyota Sprintcar Series, continuing his dominance in Western Australia.

Kingshott sealed the title in style, with a sixth win enough to secure the 2025–26 crown, his third career title and second in succession.

Victory at Kalgoorlie International Speedway on Saturday night put the championship beyond the reach of arch-rival Callum Williamson in the penultimate round.

With Williamson's third-place finish only enough to close to within 120 points, there was nothing he could do at the Grand Final.

It marked a deserved reward for Kingshott and the ever-professional Krikke Motorsport team.

The KMS hotrod has finished inside the top five on 15 occasions and in the top 10 in all but one outing, an impressive level of consistency.

After a trip to the country, the field returned to the familiar Perth Motorplex, where the Bella Modular Sprintcar Silver Cup was on the line and Nash stepped up.

Starting sixth, the third-generation driver stalked his rivals, using the track's low line to perfection.

He moved to fourth within a handful of laps before charging to second by Lap 19.

Nash then set his sights on longtime leader Williamson and, with seven laps remaining, made the decisive move.

A restart with five laps to go following a Taylor Milling crash did not stop Nash from charging to victory.

The Asphalt Recyclers Australia Gold Cup was contested 24 hours later at the same venue.

It proved to be a night dominated by Manders, who controlled the 30-lap feature from pole position.

Williamson made a strong start and led the opening 15 laps as Manders bided his time.

Manders began to apply pressure on the lower line but initially could not make it stick.

However, once lapped traffic came into play, Manders pounced, diving to the inside to take the lead and never looking back, delivering Dan Golding Racing a memorable result.

Kingshott started third but dropped back early before recovering, winning a tight battle with Daniel Harding to claim third in the closing stages and bank valuable championship points.

The feature endured a disrupted start, with Brooke Newson spinning before Brad Maiolo stopped with no rear push bar on the W77.

A red light followed after a heavy clash between Newson and Declan Minchin, while Mikey Green and Jack Williamson also made contact before the race settled into rhythm.

Kingshott's title-clinching performance came in the penultimate round at Kalgoorlie, run over 30 laps from the front row.

Despite briefly surrendering the lead to Williamson, Kingshott quickly regained control and was never headed.

Behind him, Manders and Williamson engaged in a fierce battle for the minor placings.

Manders eventually prevailed in the Dan Golding Motorsport entry, while Jason Pryde completed a quiet run to fourth.

Due to recent wild weather in Western Australia, the Speedway Grand Final has been postponed to 11 April.

Fortunately for Kingshott, the title was already secured.

***Thomas Miles***

# McFADDEN HAS 20,000 REASONS TO SMILE

**JAMES MCFADDEN** delivered a commanding performance to win the NuTrend Homes Red Hot Shootout, headlining one of the strongest editions of the event at Toowoomba.

Lockie McHugh again showed strong pace, but it was McFadden who made the decisive move early, throwing caution aside to sweep around the outside and take the lead.

After a series of restarts, the race finally settled into rhythm, with Ryan Newton pressuring McHugh, dropping to the inside and drawing alongside, while Goodyer mirrored the move as the pair fought over a podium position.

Amid the battle, Randy Morgan worked his way into third. Up front, McFadden was composed in traffic, weaving through the field with precision, while McHugh and Newton continued to close.



The sprintcar podium of runner-up Ryan Newton, winner James McFadden and third place finisher Lockie McHugh. Image: Supplied

McHugh reduced the gap as Newton launched a slider, just as Michael Stewart forced his way into the top five.

The race remained intense throughout, with Nick Whell climbing to seventh and Goodyer moving into fourth, applying further pressure to Newton as he chased McHugh.

Newton made another attempt and this time completed the move, only for McHugh to respond on the bottom line. The exchange continued as Newton brushed the wall before regaining second place by the finish.

Out front, McFadden delivered a masterclass, lapping the field to seventh place to secure victory in the 2026 NuTrend Homes Red Hot Shootout and etch his name on the Barry Waldren perpetual trophy.

In the Stan Burrows Stampede, which also served as the sixth round of the Heritage Series, Harry Stewart dominated the 15-lap dash to the chequered flag.

The Super Sedans also produced strong racing, with Sean Black and Todd Atkins sharing the front row.

Black led the early laps as intense battles unfolded deeper in the field.

With Black committed to the bottom line and Atkins building momentum on the outside, the pressure mounted.

Black was delayed in lapped traffic, allowing Atkins to capitalise, take the lead and secure the win.

***David Budden***

# ONE FAST FAMILY

**THE THORNE** family is rapidly taking over the Street Stock racing scene, with the trophy cabinet filling at an impressive rate.

Twin brothers Nathan and Heath Thorne are in dominant form, collecting multiple titles and establishing themselves among the fastest in Australia.

The pair stunned the speedway world by recording a crushing family one-two in the Australian Street Stock title.

It was a historic occasion, with Nathan Thorne joining fellow South Australian Anthony Beare in the exclusive club of drivers to claim three consecutive Australian Street Stock titles.

With his twin brother finishing second, the result carried even greater significance, as the Thornes became the first family since the Oldfield brothers in 2005 to secure a one-two in the nation's biggest race.

To cap it off, the result came at their home track of Murray Bridge.

The success did not stop there, as the brothers continued their winning run the following weekend.

Heath Thorne secured a title of his own by winning the South Australian Street Stock championship.

Nathan then returned to victory lane by claiming the Victorian Street Stock title at Horsham for a third consecutive year.

While it was not another one-two finish, Heath still secured a place on the podium with a strong third.

The family rivalry defined the 40-lap battle for the Australian #1 plate at Murray Bridge Speedway, and it was far from straightforward.

Starting from pole, Darren Brumfield led the early laps, with Shane Roycroft and Jake Koivumaki moving past Nathan Thorne in the opening exchanges.

Roycroft's move to the high line proved decisive, sweeping around the outside to take the lead from Brumfield, with Thorne following through.

Meanwhile, Heath Thorne faced a tougher task from 12th on the grid, charging into the top five before half distance.

At the midway point, Roycroft held a narrow 0.325s advantage over Nathan Thorne, while Brumfield began to lose touch.

Nathan Thorne made his move around the outside on Lap 22 and took the lead decisively.

A lap later, Koivumaki slipped underneath Brumfield to move into third.



Nathan Thorne celebrates another Aussie title. Image: Stephen Pickering

Roycroft remained glued to the rear of Thorne but could not find a way through, while a mistake from Koivumaki allowed Brumfield to reclaim position, with Heath Thorne following him through.

The battle was interrupted by a caution for the stranded Matt Hammond.

Following a spin for Brad Warren, the fight for the Australian title intensified in a dramatic closing sequence.

Koivumaki attempted to pass Roycroft on the restart but could not complete the move, opening the door for Heath Thorne to move forward.

Contact between Roycroft and Thorne further compressed the field, with the top seven bunching tightly.

Heath Thorne capitalised, surging into second to lock in the family one-two.

No one could break the brothers' grip on the race, as a crash for Morris Ahearn at Turn 2 brought the event to a conclusion under yellows, with several others caught in the incident.

It completed a dream result for the Thorne family and reinforced South Australia's dominance of the event, with Croweaters holding the Australian #1 plate for a decade.

The big question will be if that can be broken when next season's title is decided at Kingaroy Speedway in February 2027.

***Thomas Miles***



Blake Watson and Stuart Barnes battle door to door.

# STILL DELIVERS THE LOT, ON AND OFF THE TRACK

STORY: BRUCE MOXON | IMAGES: VHRR/REVVED PHOTOGRAPHY

**I RECKON** if you only go to one race meeting a year, the Phillip Island Classic should be on your short-short list. Why? That is hard to answer. The easy way out is to say 'there is something for everyone.' And there is, but what are those things?

## THE PLACE

**THE ISLAND** is a magical place. Not just the racetrack, but the whole environment. Clean air, stunning views, penguins, geese, great food in town. And the circuit itself is one of the best facilities in the country.

As a photographer, I look forward every year to those shots that show the proximity of the track to the water. I make a point of getting that blue stuff in the background as much as I can. There is a rise and fall to the track you can use too. Shooting from Lukey Heights, you have most of the circuit laid out in front of you, then the water behind.

## THE CARS

**OF COURSE,** the cars. More than 350 of them this year. The competing field ranges from pre-World War 2 homebuilt specials, production cars and thoroughbred racers, through to superannuated Supercars from a comparative handful of years ago. While this year's crop of the really old cars was a bit thin, there were still enough for the old farts, including myself, to gawk over.



Hung Do driving his Datsun 240Z out of Siberia.





And then there are the cars you never expect to see. This year, the Cooper Monaco-Ford 'King Cobra,' built by Carroll Shelby no less, with a Ford 289 shoved in the back to make glorious noises and provide thrills courtesy of the driver, Bill Bellinger.

You get the odd proper Formula 1 car too. This year, Guido Belgiorno-Nettis was back with his matched pair of Ferrari 156/85s. Seriously fast cars. Missing, however, was one of the pre-event drawcards, the Hesketh as driven previously by James Hunt. It never cleared customs, so someone did not dot an 'I' or cross a 'T.'

There was a big field of Heritage Touring Cars, of course. These brought old me and young boys to the fences, although two of their scheduled four races did not happen. Still, Elliott Barbour had a perfect weekend in Carey McMahon's Mazda RX-7. I did the media for this car in 1984 at Bathurst and I can assure you, it was not as good a car then as it is now.

Another fascinating car was Jacob Khouri's XE Falcon. This was the car Dick Johnson ran on Sunday at Bathurst in 1983 after his own was demolished. It has been beautifully restored to a condition far better than original and is much less of a dog than Johnson said it was on the 1983 telecast. Sadly, there were only a couple of big Fords this



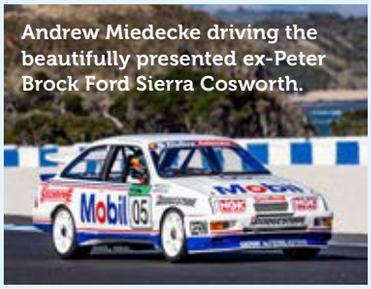
The colourful field of Group A touring cars roar off the line in front of a big crowd.

FAR LEFT: Chris Stillwell brought Marcos Ambrose's last V8 Supercar back to Phillip Island.

LEFT: Beautiful classic cars such as this MG of Peter Cundy were on track.


The striking 1964 Ford Falcon Sprint of Craig Allen.


Norman Falkiner's Elfin Mono leads the M and O Sports and Racing field.


Andrew Miedecke driving the beautifully presented ex-Peter Brock Ford Sierra Cosworth.

time. Where are all the other XA to XE Falcons?

There were plenty of BMWs, with David Towe's JPS car the most successful over the weekend, supported by others from Super Touring and Group A.

There were lots of Commodores. The Commodore and the RX-7 were the most accessible Group C cars, you could buy a used car and turn it into a racer relatively simply, with factory or semi-factory support. So ,we had Commodores from VH to VL Walkinshaw models, with nearly everything in between.

Sadly, Adrian Allisey damaged his VL heavily in qualifying. Particularly sad in this case, as the car was unrestored, with original paint and signage.

At the other end of the scale are the Nehrebecki brothers, Meon and Jerome, with their pair of Mercedes-Benz 190s. Meon's is Klaus Ludwig's DTM car and Jerome's is the Franz Klammer and Volker Weidler ETCC car that came here in 1986 for the Bathurst 1000 and simply stayed, like a backpacker. It went to Phil Ward for a long time, and Meon has overseen a major restoration to its current immaculate state.

## THE CARPARK

**NO, REALLY.** The main car park, along the front straight, is full of car club displays all weekend. And honestly, you could happily spend the day just wandering there. I fell in love with a Ford Galaxie over the weekend, and that was only the start. How about a BMW 323 JPS, itself a collector's item, towing a BMW 700 coupe?

Or what looked like the Aston Martin club, with a DB4, DB5, a Vantage and one of the new SUVs. Endless Toranas, Falcons, a lovely Mk1 Capri GT in dark green metallic. Jaguars parked on the grass without drip trays under them, near the Lotus club's area.

Even outside the organised displays, plenty of people bring very cool cars for the trip to the Island. There was a late-model Falcon liveried as an MFP car, as in Mad Max, appropriate given the fuel issues of late. Porsches of all types, a Torana hatchback painted as Brock's 05.



# LOTS TO TAKE AWAY

**THE GT** World Challenge Australia season started with some familiar faces dominating at Phillip Island.

Reigning champions Brad Schumacher and Broc Feeney were flying in the #1 Audi, while Jayden Ojeda and Paul Lucchitti were untouchable in their Mercedes on Sunday.

With some of the big-name and manufacturer combinations not quite hitting their straps, the form guide is still far from set.

During the early stages of the weekend, it felt like the round was going to be one-way traffic with Audi leading the way.

That remained the case on Saturday as Schumacher and Feeney controlled the opener.

Having taken pole by more than 2s, no one could touch them until the closing stages.

"It's awesome to come back and stamp our authority in the first race of the year," said Schumacher post-race.

"Brad makes it easy for me," Feeney added. "He puts me up front and we were able to get a bit of a gap on to the guys behind. To start the year with a P1 is fantastic!"

Young GT rookie Oscar Targett impressed by pushing his Mercedes from fourth to second.

This gave co-driver Shane Smollen a platform to push, and he reduced the deficit to just seven tenths, but fell short as Schumacher was cruising home.

Thomas Randle made the most of his unexpected drive to secure a podium alongside Mark Rosser.

It was an impressive comeback as Rosser had started his race by being sent into a spin.

Brendon Leitch made a welcome return to GT World Challenge Australia by pushing hard with new co-driver Sergio Peris to fourth in the Mercedes, leaving Ferrari pair Jaxon Evans and Elliott Schutte to settle for fifth after starting on the front row.

There was early drama as the Safety Car was required straight away due to a three-wide clash between Paul Lucchitti, Steve Brooks and Renee Gracie. Lucchitti ended up the loser as he was beached in the gravel.

He was far from the only one to spin in the wet conditions as Geoff Emery and Pires also rotated.

The clouds disappeared and the sun arrived on Sunday, and so did the Mercedes of Ojeda and Lucchitti.

The Tigani Motorsport duo produced an even more emphatic performance.

After Ojeda nailed the start, the #66 Mercedes was never headed and completed a commanding 3s win.

At the first turn, Ryan Wood and Will Davison ran wide at Doohan and found the gravel, which led to the latter retiring the Ferrari.

Josh Buchan was the third car to find the gravel after a moment at Stoner Corner, and with the Luke Youlden Porsche also stranded after a separate spin at Southern Loop, the Safety Car was required.

The race then settled down until the stops, with Feeney's failed attack on Leitch the only major flashpoint.

After a scary moment at pit entry, Sergio Pires in the Leitch Mercedes took aim at Elliott Schutte's Ferrari and snared second at Miller Corner.

He immediately drove away from Mark Rosser and Steve Brooks.

Behind them, Shane Smollen and Schumacher were fighting and got too close.

Schumacher's move on the inside at Southern Loop sent the Smollen Mercedes beached into the gravel.

The incident not only brought out the Safety Car, but ended Schumacher and Feeney's hopes of a follow-up podium, as a post-race penalty saw them fall from third to ninth.

This set up a four-minute dash, and more late drama not only caused a headache but also ruined Tigani Motorsport's hopes of a memorable one-two.

Schutte and Rosser were nose to tail for third, and the Audi driver made a big lunge on the Ferrari at Miller Corner.

However, he went too deep and found the infield grass, which sent him on a collision course with Pires, who appeared safe in second and was minding his own business.

Significant contact was devastating for Leitch and Pires as they were taken out on the spot, while penalties demoted Randle and Rosser to 10th.

This opened the door for Evans and Schutte to snare second, while Wood and Brooks quietly secured a podium ahead of new combination Valentino Astuti and Dean Currie.

Young rookie Alex Gardner and Lee Stibbs secured Trophy honours.

Through it all, there was one combination a cut above the rest.

"[Lucchitti] was doing an awesome job before the Safety Car, just managing the race," said Ojeda. "Doing super good lap times and driving his fastest race.

"Then the pressure came with the Safety Car and he handled it like a boss. [He's] showing how far he's really come!"

***GT World Challenge is back at The Bend in May.***

***Thomas Miles***



Jayden Ojeda shoots clear as Josh Buchan tours the gravel. Image: Supplied

BELOW: Brad Schumacher and Broc Feeney enjoyed a perfect start to life in the #1.



Brought to you by Wade Motorsport

**GT WORLD CHALLENGE STANDINGS**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1: B. Feeney/B. Schumacher | 30 points |
| 2: J. Evans/E. Schutte | 28 |
| 3: J. Ojeda/P/ Lucchitti | 26 |
| 4: R. Wood/S. Brooks | 23 |
| 5: O. Targett/S. Smollen | 18 |

# WINDS OF CHANGE

**THE GT4** Australia opener had a little bit of everything, with new and old drivers performing and drama unfolding on and off the track at Phillip Island.

With the grid ever growing, the hype was as significant as ever when the GT4 field arrived at Phillip Island for the traditional opener.

The expanded fleet of Ford Mustangs had a fast start on Friday, but reigning champion Tom Hayman showed why he is a leading light in the McLaren Artura by beating Cameron McLeod to pole by 0.02s.

When it was the co-drivers' turn, solo competitor Daniel Frougas stunned the field by pushing his Toyota Supra to pole by a healthy seven tenths.

Both races ended up being heavily impacted by post-race penalties.

Multispares Racing expanded to two cars and their strength was on full display on Saturday.

From the start, there was drama in Silver Am as Caleb Paterson and Kent Quinn retired on the opening lap, while reigning champions Aaron Seton and Jason Gomersall also had to come to the garage early.

Leading the way from start to finish was the new Multispares Racing Mustang of Cameron McLeod and Mason Harvey.

Both youngsters were in complete control to ensure the #227 was never headed as it took the chequered flag.

However, they were unable to enjoy the fruits of victory as they received a 10s penalty for a Balance of Performance change and fell to second, 4s back.

Fortunately, the sister Multispares Racing entry was there to pick up the pieces and ensure the team still took the win.



Multispares Racing was fast, but it ended in disaster for Mason Harvey and Cameron McLeod. Image: Auto Action

Starting fourth, Aaron Cameron made early moves to rise to second and be in position to ensure he and Lochie Dalton could claim the win.

Behind the Multispares Racing one-two was the impressive Frougas, who stayed ahead of Hayman and Murray.

Dominating Silver Am was the BMW M4 of Ryder Quinn and Dan Julesen, finishing a comfortable 25s and five positions ahead of nearest rivals Lachlan Mineeff and Jacob Lawrence.

Am was also one-sided as Nathan Callaghan and Chris Lillis led the way.

On Sunday, Cameron and Frougas fought for the lead into Doohan Corner, with the Multispares Mustang emerging clear again.

Things were looking good for the Multispares team, with Harvey also charging through the field, climbing from seventh to third within a handful of laps.

The next car in his sights was Frougas, and the pair ran nose to tail for multiple laps.

It all came to a head on Lap 9, beginning at Siberia, where Harvey unsettled Frougas with a bump at the corner exit.

This brought the pair side by side until they went for the same piece of track at Hayshed.

Contact sent Harvey, who had been attempting to go around the outside, spearing head-on into the tyre barrier in a similar manner to John Bowe and Craig Lowndes in 1996.

Thankfully, after a heavy impact, Harvey walked away, but the Mustang sustained significant damage across all four corners.

It was the latest blow for Harvey and McLeod, who had two genuine chances at victory dashed.

The Safety Car drama did not end there, as the majority of contenders pitted at the earliest opportunity.

Many cars, including the #25 Method Motorsport McLaren, followed the Safety Car into pitlane.

It allowed several to make significant gains, with Hayman and Murray emerging 3s clear and appearing to be easy victors to kick off their title defence.

However, when the chequered flag fell, the result was far from clear as only one member of the top 10 was not under investigation for pitting too early.

Despite receiving a 20s penalty, Hayman and Murray retained the win by a margin of just half a second.

Having finished fifth on the road, George Miedecke and Blake Tracey were promoted to second as the only car in the original top 10 not to pit on Lap 12.

Also making a significant gain was new third-place finisher Jensen Shearer.

Those who originally stood on the Silver podium, Will Exton and Jack Johnson, along with Sam Paley and Jack Wallis, dropped to sixth and 20th respectively.

There was also a notable change in Silver Am Cup, with Cameron Crick and Dean Campbell finishing seventh before being promoted to the class win.

Glenn Walker was also promoted to the Am Cup win after Ryan Sorensen was penalised.

Having led early, Dalton and Cameron lost significant time in the pits and dropped to 23rd.

***Monochrome GT4 Australia now has a six-week break before returning at The Bend on 8-10 May.***

***Thomas Miles***

Brought to you by
Wade Motorsport

**GT4 AUSTRALIA STANDINGS**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1: T. Hayman/J. Murray | 38 points |
| 2: B. Tracey/G. Miedecke | 26 |
| 3: A. Cameron/L. Dalton | 25 |
| 4: C. McLeod/M. Harvey | 18 |
| 5: J. Shearer | 16 |

Tom Hayman and young Jett Murray showed ominous form.



# STRONG START

**THE MOTORCRAFT** Ford Mustang Cup Australia arrived with a bang at Phillip Island as some big names put on a show.

The new one-make series, built around the Mustang Dark Horse R, attracted Supercars stars, young teenagers and experienced veterans.

With it being a new challenge, experience in the car gave Ford development driver Cameron McLeod an early advantage.

He dominated practice, but qualifying told a different story as Aaron Cameron unlocked the car to take pole.

Joining him on the front row was BRT Supercars teammate and fellow Garry Rogers Motorsport driver James Golding, with the pair putting on a show.

When it was time to race, rain arrived, although the track dried as the race progressed.

Cameron led early ahead of James Moffat and Golding to complete a Garry Rogers Motorsport top three.

Jack Perkins featured in the top five, but what turned into a weekend ruined by mechanical drama ended early with gearbox issues.

As the race developed, Golding slowly reeled in Cameron and made his move on Lap 15 to take the lead with three laps remaining.

However, the fight was far from over as Cameron launched a late counterattack.

The pair went side by side through the final corner, delivering a dramatic finish to Mustang Cup's first race.

Cameron took the inside line, while Golding committed to the high line he had used throughout the race.

In the end, Cameron edged ahead to win by the ridiculous margin of 0.0066s.

"To get the first win in Mustang Cup is great, but having such an awesome race with Jimmy was the best. I didn't want the race to end," said Cameron.

"On that wet, drying track, we had so much fun. We were side by side, and to win by 0.006 is incredible.

"The racing was respectful and it was just a good time."

"I had a blast," Golding said.

"He ran the narrow line through the last corner and I was running the higher line, so I stuck with what I knew.

"For me to go narrow on the last lap was a risk.

"I just tried to keep the car as straight as possible.

"When I went in, I lost where he was, so I tried to cover, but by that point I wasn't going to cover him, so I would have been better off keeping it straight down the line, and maybe that would have been enough, maybe not.

"It was so close you never know."

Moffat won a hard-fought battle for third to complete a Garry Rogers Motorsport podium sweep.



ABOVE: Cameron McLeod added Phillip Island to Le Mans in his growing list of Mustang Cup wins.

Keith Kassulke was victorious in the Dark Horse Legends category ahead of Ben Dunn.

With the Ambrose Cup on the line on a sunny Sunday, McLeod rose to the occasion.

Cameron defended the lead from pole on the inside, while McLeod held onto second after contact with Moffat.

By the time the field reached Siberia, McLeod was on the attack and completed the move at Hayshed.

Cameron held on for second, while a late charge from Tyler Everingham secured him a podium place ahead of Moffat.

"To get the win here against such high-level drivers is something that I race for and I only did it because these guys were competing," said McLeod.

"I wanted to do my best and see what I could do around them, so it's good to finally pull a good result together for the Ford crew.

"The GRM boys didn't make it easy and so they shouldn't. To have the raw pace of the RM Racing Cars Ford Mustang Dark Horse R here to pull away like that has made it worthwhile."

Despite a trip through the gravel, Kassulke completed a clean sweep of the Dark Horse Legends class, while Joe Fawcett won the juniors.

Perkins did not start, while Imogen Radburn failed to finish due to mechanical problems but still classified on the juniors podium.

Mustang Cup returns at The Bend alongside the rest of the SpeedSeries.

***Thomas Miles***




Aaron Cameron steals the Mustang Cup win from James Golding in a thrilling finish.

# NEW YOUNGSTERS STAND UP

**A NEW** Porsche Sprint Challenge Australia season fired up at Phillip Island with new names showing speed.

Across a competitive weekend, Kiwi Hunter Robb made the biggest impact with back-to-back wins to take overall honours.

Representing Jones Motorsport, Robb emerged as the driver to beat, converting pole into victory in a breathless opener.

The Kiwi led every lap of the 30-minute race and excelled in greasy conditions where others struggled.

Kamal Mrad won a fierce fight for second, which featured four position changes across the race.

Lincoln Taylor held second early and went side by side with Hayden Haikal until the Malaysian ran wide into the Doohan Corner gravel.

Kobi Williams surged from fifth to third, only to spin at Turn 12.

That promoted Taylor back into position, before Mrad snared second two laps from home.

There was a scary moment when Ruari Avern speared across the infield from Turns 3 to 4 and remarkably avoided contact with other drivers.



Xavier Avramides and Kobi Williams fight for the lead in Porsche Sprint Challenge.

Robb went back-to-back in a Safety Car interrupted affair on Sunday morning.

On this occasion, he had to hold off a charging Taylor, who closed to within six-tenths.

The first intervention came when Dean Wanless hit the Hayshed wall.

There was further drama at the restart when contact saw Eric Constantinidis hit the wall at the rear of the field.

Having won the opening Pro Am race, Anthony Gilbertson completed a clean sweep after a late spin for Lachy Harburg.

Robb's bid for a hat-trick ended early in Race 2 when a clash with Taylor left him stranded in the Turn 1 gravel.

That triggered a five-car battle for the lead, which Daniel Quimby won with a decisive move at Turn 4.

He controlled the race until the penultimate lap, when a right-rear puncture ended his chances.

Williams, having just taken second from Avramides, inherited the lead and held on over the final lap to claim a dramatic maiden victory.

While viewers on Fox Sports 507 missed the race due to Formula 1 coverage unless they switched to streaming, the result still gained national attention.

On ABC radio, former cricketer Brad Hodge proudly called the race while commentating the Sheffield Shield Final, highlighting his nephew's performance.

***Gilberton completed an impressive clean sweep in Pro Am with the next round at The Bend on 8-10 May.***

***Thomas Miles***

# INTERNATIONAL FIELD DELIVERS CHAOS AT PHILLIP ISLAND

**WITH AUSTRALIAN,** Kiwi, Japanese and Austrian drivers on the grid, the Ferrari Challenge Trofeo Pirelli Australia was a global affair at Phillip Island.

A number of drivers showed strong speed in a fluctuating opening round, headlined by a bizarre crash in the second race.

The international contingent set the early pace on Saturday, leaving the local drivers to respond.

Austria's Ernst Kirchmayr and New Zealand's Rick Armstrong were separated by just 0.07s in qualifying, while Antoine Gittany led the Australian charge.

At the start, Armstrong launched cleanly and quickly established control, building a margin of up to 10s.

Kirchmayr held second in the early laps as Jim Pollicina spun at Siberia.

Gittany continued to apply pressure and moved into second on Lap 9 after reeling in Kirchmayr.

Enzo Cheng and Pollicina completed the top five as the field reached the finish.

Race 2 was defined by a major incident under Safety Car conditions.

With Aemel Nordin stranded in the gravel at Siberia, the Safety Car was deployed.

Cheng and Gittany, leading the field, slowed in response to the intervention.

However, those behind did not react in time, with Armstrong making heavy contact with the rear of Gittany.

The impact forced Gittany into Cheng, sending both cars into the inside wall, with one briefly airborne.

Both cars were heavily damaged, but all drivers were able to walk away.

"It's very disappointing, just glad everyone's alright," Cheng said.

"For me, I started the race pretty well, and just came around and I see the Safety Car.

"I ended up slowing down and the Safety Car was halfway out of the pit exit, then I just felt this massive shunt behind me.

"We literally just missed the Safety Car by maybe like a car length."



Rick Armstrong was in the thick of the action. Image: SpeedSeries

Following a lengthy red flag, the race resumed but further drama unfolded, with Kirchmayr, Damian Hamilton and David Trewern involved in another incident.

Pollicina ultimately emerged from the chaos to take victory ahead of Masahiro Taguchi.




STORY: XXX | IMAGES: XXX

# BATHURST SIX-HOUR DELIVERS AGAIN

The Bathurst Six Hour continues to grow year on year, a race that draws heavily on the Mount Panorama enduros of the 70s and 80s with its focus on production-based cars and multi-class competition. Bruce Moxon was on hand to capture the action.

**THOMAS RANDLE** put the BMW M4 he shared with Michael and Ben Kavich on pole with a 2m18.4879s lap, narrowly ahead of Cam Hill's 2m18.5297. Randle's time would have been good enough for third on the grid in the 1987 1000km race. He went on to outlast the field, combining with the Kavich brothers for a victory built on both pace and patience.

BMWs locked out the first four positions on the grid, with the best of the American coupes, Cam McLeod's Mustang, just over 2 seconds adrift.

Randle set the early tone, opening a lead of just under a second and breaking the lap record on Lap 2. Cam Hill followed across the line, ahead of Jayden Ojeda, Beric Lynton and Hayden Auld, all in BMW machinery. Drama struck early when the Trent Whyte Mustang failed and dropped oil at the entry to The Chase on Lap 2, sending four cars off and leaving two stranded, prompting the first Safety Car.

The clean-up period allowed the Compulsory Pit Stop window to open, with several front-runners taking the opportunity to stop.

The following hour ran without interruption, a rare stretch of calm in a race ultimately defined by repeated Safety Car periods. Ojeda, Randle, Auld and Chris Lillis (Camaro) all pitted, handing the lead to Cameron Hill ahead of Ric Shaw's BMW.

Hill stopped on Lap 11, handing the lead to Shaw, while Hayden Auld climbed to 17th among the early stoppers. Shaw pitted on Lap 18, allowing Hadrian Morrall's Mustang to assume the lead. Morrall held the position until Lap 27, pitting just before the second Safety Car after building a margin of more than 10 seconds over Jason Gomersall's Mustang.

At the Lap 32 restart, Gomersall led,




having yet to stop, from Morrall, the Denyer/Quinn/Quinn Camaro and Auld's BMW. The Camaro was later hit with two drive-through penalties for refuelling before the CPS window had opened. Its race unravelled further after contact with another car, resulting in heavy damage and retirement after 71 laps.

The Hodges/Ojeda BMW also encountered trouble, losing six laps for repairs before recovering three through outright pace. Ojeda set a new lap record late in the race with a 2m18.1799s.

The V8-powered entries remained a constant presence near the front. The Keith Kassulke/Cameron McLeod Mustang ran strongly throughout and secured second place, capitalising when the Lillis/Muggleton/Bates Camaro ran wide at The Chase on the final lap. Muggleton was left devastated after conceding the position.

The Lynton/Leahey/Davison BMW endured a difficult race, battling a wheel-speed sensor issue, repeated airbox failures due to an incorrect clip and two rear tyre failures. "And that was our shit sandwich," Tim Leahey said.

In contrast, the Kavich brothers were surprised by their result, describing it as the payoff for five years of work. Running consistently inside the top 10, they moved into contention as others cycled through stops. By the five-hour mark they were fourth, with




those ahead still requiring a final stop. As rivals pitted, Randle moved into the lead on Lap 102.

Two late Safety Cars had little impact on the outcome, with Randle even allowing Cam Hill through due to a 15-second penalty hanging over the #24 entry.

The Dean Campbell/Hill car had earlier been penalised 15 seconds for exceeding the pitlane speed limit by just 0.4km/h, the penalty added to their compulsory 90-second stop, ending their chances.

The Morrall/Mecklem Mustang remained competitive throughout, finishing sixth, while the Alford/Alford/Slade Mustang quietly worked its way into the top five by the closing stages.

Best of the all-wheel-drive entries was the Lancer driven by Oliver and Liam Loaiocono with Alex Holtzl, finishing seventh.

Class honours were as competitive as ever. The Kavich/Randle BMW claimed Class X, Kassulke and McLeod won A1, while the Loaiocono/Holtzl Lancer took A2. Class B1 went to the all-female Buccini/Prince/Ambrose BMW.

The Worrell/Walker/Luff Kia Stinger led early before brake and crash issues dropped it to second in class.

Class C honours went to the Keene family VW Golf R, while Class D was claimed by the McMaster/Hazelton/Buttrose BMW 125.

In the smallest class, victory went to a unique combination of youth and experience, with 16-year-olds Rueben Dan and Ashton Sieders joined by 76-year-old Calvin Gardiner.

MAIN: Thomas Randle (right) overcame Cameron Hill (left) in a tight race-long battle for Bathurst 6 Hour glory.

BELOW: Cameron McLeod and Keith Kassulke drove a Mustang to the podium.

ABOVE RIGHT: The all female team of Karlie Buccini, Courtney Prince and Tabitha Ambrose took B1 honours againß.



# ANTONELLI SHOWS HIS METTLE

Kimi Antonelli secured his first Grand Prix win in Shanghai at the end of a memorable weekend for the Italian, who became the youngest ever pole-sitter after beating George Russell on Saturday. The young man from Bologna became the first teenager to start a Grand Prix from pole position and made the most of it to secure his first victory and show Mercedes and Russell he is in the fight for the World Championship as well.

STORY: LUIS VASCONCELOS | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES

**A WIN** and a display of talent and considerable maturity rewarded Toto Wolff and Mercedes for their faith in him and for the risk they took by putting him in one of their cars at the age of 18. There were a few rough times for Antonelli last year, and there will be more coming this year for sure, but it is clear the Italian is the real deal and that Russell will have to work hard to guarantee he remains the leading Mercedes driver this season.

And yet, the weekend had not started in the best possible way for Antonelli, as he was beaten by his more experienced team-mate in Sprint Qualifying, had a dreadful start to the short race, clashed with Isack Hadjar on the opening lap, and was handed a 10-second penalty for it. Even with the Safety Car working against him as he served the penalty in the pits, at least it put him closer to the leaders, four overtakes in three laps hauling him to fifth.



The Ferraris were again rockets off the line, and Lewis Hamilton led into Turn 1.

In qualifying, a technical issue on Russell's car opened the door for Antonelli to secure pole, and he duly took it as his team-mate recovered to second. Knowing the Ferrari would have a quicker start, the Italian covered Russell on the way down to Turn 1, was briefly in third place, but got Charles Leclerc back in Turn 3 and then set off after Lewis Hamilton, who had passed both Silver Arrows after having a much better launch.

By Lap 2, the natural order was restored, as Antonelli moved into a lead he would not lose again. As Russell also moved to second place on Lap 4, the battle was on, but until the Safety Car was sent out on Lap 10 to retrieve Lance Stroll's car, the Brit




Aside from the opening laps, Kimi Antonelli never looked under threat in China, and even in those opening laps it was just a matter of 'when'.



Kimi Antonelli became the second youngest winner in F1 history for his dominance in China.




If you ignore the Sprint Race in China last year, third place was Lewis Hamilton's first podium for the Scuderia.



While George Russell was left to scrap with the Ferraris, Kimi Antonelli broke clear at the front.

never got within striking distance and then lost time as Mercedes was forced to double-stack its cars when they changed to hard tyres.

On cold tyres at the restart, Antonelli kept the Ferrari duo at bay, while his team-mate struggled and dropped to sixth, having to pass Esteban Ocon and Franco Colapinto before attacking and passing Leclerc and Hamilton, something he only managed by Lap 29. By then, Antonelli was nearly eight seconds up the road, too big a gap for the championship leader to bridge in the remaining 27 laps.

For Antonelli, a lock-up into the hairpin with three laps to go was the only hiccup on an otherwise perfect afternoon, the teenager admitting "I gave myself a heart attack", while what he said in Italian to Stefano Domenicali in the cooldown room is not suitable for publishing.

Fighting tears as he was interviewed immediately after the race, the Mercedes driver explained that, "I said I really wanted to bring Italy back on top, and we did today. I gave myself a little bit of a heart attack towards the end with the flat spot, but it was a good race."

Looking back at the race, Antonelli explained that "the start is still our weak point, and to be fair, I didn't go with great confidence because my two previous starts were really bad, so I didn't know what to expect. Obviously, I covered a little bit too much on the inside and left too much space on the outside," but that worked out for him as Russell was his only real rival for the race win.

With his father making the trip to China after being unable to reach Melbourne because of the war in the Middle East, the 19-year-old admitted that "it's been great to have him here, to share this moment with him because he's been part of this whole journey since karting," before adding that, "also Bono and Toto; Toto took me in the team in 2018 and brought me all the way to Formula 1. He gave me the opportunity last year to put me in the car, and then again this year," concluding that "it's been a great journey so far. But of course there's still a long way, but we're on a good path and I've been enjoying a lot the time with Mercedes, with the whole team. Just looking forward to the future."

Showing a level of maturity well beyond his years, the race winner played down his title chances, saying that "George is an incredible driver, he's very strong in all aspects, so it's going to take a lot to beat him. But it's such a great opportunity to be working with him as well, because I've been learning a lot from him."

He then made it clear that "looking forward to the rest of the season now, I always focus race by race and then we'll see where we end up at the end of the year."

Russell was more circumspect after being unable to match Antonelli's pace on the hard tyres, paying the price for the laps spent trying to get by the two Ferraris, but he graciously said, "huge congratulations to Kimi because it's always very special to win your first race, and obviously he's been driving really amazingly this year and this weekend especially." He then explained that "we both had really bad starts again and the Ferraris shot past, but at the end of the day, getting the one-two again is all we could ask for."




The Ferrari drivers entertained themselves and us with a thrilling battle, Lewis Hamilton eventually coming out on top.

## REALITY CHECK FOR FERRARI

**IF THE** Australian Grand Prix had given Ferrari hope of quickly catching up with Mercedes, Sunday's race in China showed there is still a considerable gap between the two teams, as Hamilton, securing his first podium for the Scuderia, finished 25 seconds behind Antonelli. Once again, the SF-26 had a much better start than the front row cars, Hamilton taking the lead while Leclerc settled for third after a brief tussle with Antonelli.

By Lap 4, though, the two Mercedes were through and were just starting to pull away when a Safety Car period came to the Scuderia's rescue. As the marshals removed Stroll's stranded Aston Martin, those who started on the softer compounds pitted for hard tyres, so at the restart they were all over the back of Russell's car as they all dealt with Colapinto, Ocon and Arvid Lindblad, who had started the race on the harder compound.

On cold tyres again, the red cars were flying, with Russell struggling badly and by Lap 16, they were only behind Antonelli and pushing him hard. But once the Mercedes youngster got his tyres into the best operating window, he checked out, leaving Hamilton and Leclerc to fight it out between themselves before he was eventually passed and quickly dispatched by Russell.

The battle between the two Ferrari drivers was one of the highlights of the race, as they passed and repassed each other many times. Fred Vasseur explained that, "it would have been unfair to freeze the positions," while openly admitting that "you're always a little worried because something can always happen, but it's also very difficult to lock in positions on the track."

The drivers seemed to enjoy the battle, Leclerc even saying so on the radio as Hamilton started to pull away, while the veteran admitted, "we had a small contact, a little kiss," but was clearly delighted with his first podium in red.

For the rejuvenated Hamilton, "this is the best racing that I've ever experienced in Formula 1. Of course Mercedes are pulling past us at crazy speeds, but it's great that we have the good start at the moment and hopefully that stays the same through the year."

He then detailed that "given that they've gone for a different option where they have more power, we've got to figure out how we can improve our straight-line speed," before insisting that "I hope it was

an exciting race to watch, because it was awesome in the car. It felt like go-karting, back and forth, back and forth, and you could really position your car in a nice way where there was a thin piece of paper between us sometimes, but we didn't exchange any paint. I think that's down to great drivers and respect."

## RACING BULLS BEATS ITS BIG BROTHER

**RED BULL** had a rough time in Shanghai, leading Max Verstappen to shoot down the new technical regulations in no uncertain terms, and the team lacked pace and reliability as well. In perfect contrast, its junior team scored solid points in both the Sprint and the main race, with Liam Lawson finishing seventh twice.

Right from the start of the weekend, it was clear the RB22 was not competitive at this circuit. Verstappen was only eighth quickest in Free Practice and Sprint Qualifying, 1.7 seconds away from Russell, and a terrible start dropped him to 14th. The fact that he could only recover to 11th place showed that this weekend, Red Bull was firmly in the midfield battle, while Hadjar was hit by Antonelli on the opening lap and, with a damaged car, finished only 16th.

Things did not improve in qualifying. Verstappen narrowly beat the Frenchman for ninth place on the grid, with another dreadful start putting the four-time World Champion down the order and recovering to 12th place on the opening lap. Hadjar took himself out of contention with a spin as he battled Oliver Bearman, but on the soft tyres, both drivers were struggling. Pitting just before the Safety Car, the Dutchman lost out and was down in 13th for the restart.

Then, on the same tyres as his rivals, Verstappen managed to get ahead of Pierre Gasly and passed those still on the hard tyres they had started the race with, but the Frenchman was catching up when the Red Bull Ford ERS cooling system failed, leading to an inevitable retirement.

At the end of the race, Verstappen was frustrated with his start, saying that, "it was expected, but again the start was a big problem, the same as yesterday. I had no battery in



Neither McLaren made the start of the race with sepaeare Mercedes Power Unite problems ground the Papaya.

The intra-Racing Bulls battle was as entertainming the Ferrari fight, Arvid Lindblad looked good early, but Kiwi Liam Lawson won that battle.

Max Verstappen is wheeled into retirement.

Melbourne, and here the two problems were the same. I just have no power, no power. As soon as I release the clutch, the engine is not there."

He then explained the lack of pace, stating that "the rest of the race was again the same as yesterday, just a lot of graining, can't push, terrible pace, terrible balance, like yesterday. So just a very bad weekend for us. We were slower this weekend, so we were fighting Haas and Alpine the whole race," before proceeding to blast the rules.

With some of his rivals losing out in the pits as they had to double-stack, Hadjar moved into contention for the points and finished eighth, the first time he has scored for Red Bull. But the fact that he dropped well behind Lawson after an interesting 15-lap battle showed the junior team did a better job than the senior team in Shanghai.

The one area where the Faenza-based team struggled was one-lap pace, as Lawson and Lindblad never made it out of Q2 in either qualifying session. An inspired choice of hard tyres for the Kiwi in the Sprint was rewarded with two points after the Kiwi was the best of those who did not pit for softs during the late Safety Car period. Lindblad spun on the opening lap and damaged his clutch while trying a quick doughnut, and was later

# KEY MOMENTS

**KIMI ANTONELLI** got his priorities right and his defensive move against team-mate George Russell as they headed down to the first corner of the Chinese Grand Prix was the cornerstone of his first Formula 1 victory. By opting to defend against the British driver, the teenager effectively opened the door for Lewis Hamilton to take the lead, but the Italian knew he had more pace than the veteran and, therefore, it would be just a matter of time before retaking first place.

What was crucial was keeping Russell behind and, with the more experienced Mercedes driver dropping to fourth behind Charles Leclerc, things looked even better for Antonelli. By Lap 4, however, the pair was running first and second, with the Italian keeping Russell out of overtaking range by a couple of tenths each lap, appearing in control.

The Safety Car period, to allow Lance Stroll's Aston Martin to be removed from the track, effectively sealed the result, as Russell had to wait for Antonelli to change tyres before making his own stop, dropping into traffic and giving Antonelli a clear run to his first Grand Prix victory. Had the English driver got ahead at the start, the roles would likely have been reversed, so by getting his priorities right the youngster made the decisive move of the race.

## UP - KIMI ANTONELLI

**KIMI ANTONELLI'S** first Grand Prix win was a long time coming in a sense, but it arrived at a crucial point of the season for the Italian youngster. With Mercedes holding a clear advantage over Ferrari and a comfortable margin over the rest of the field, the championship fight, for now, sits between its two drivers.

Until the start of qualifying in Shanghai, Russell had the upper hand after dominating in Melbourne and in Saturday's Sprint race. Antonelli, for his part, had salvaged second place in Australia after a heavy crash in FP3 and was only fifth in the Sprint after contact with Isack Hadjar and a subsequent penalty. A defeat in the Grand Prix would have put Russell firmly in control of their intra-team battle, and Antonelli knew it.

A degree of luck helped, with Russell losing his first Q3 run to a technical issue and only managing second on his final attempt without proper preparation. On Sunday, though, Antonelli controlled the race, even when Hamilton briefly led after the start, and won on merit. His pace on the hard tyre was clearly stronger than Russell's, who had to work through traffic early, and apart from a late lock-up into the hairpin three laps from the finish, Antonelli delivered a faultless drive.

## DOWN - MCLAREN-MERCEDES

**THE HIGHLY** successful partnership between McLaren and Mercedes over the past two seasons is showing signs of strain. Already in Melbourne there were complaints from the reigning World Champion team about a lack of information regarding developments to the German power unit, which impacted preparation, set-up and overall management. Andrea Stella also conceded there was more to come from the chassis side, as Oscar Piastri and Lando Norris struggled to match the cornering performance of their rivals.

A double points finish in the Shanghai Sprint race confirmed McLaren as the third-fastest team in China, but still some way behind Mercedes and Ferrari, and also dealing with higher tyre degradation than both.

However, a double DNS on Sunday represented the worst possible outcome. Electrical issues related to the power unit kept both cars in the garage when it was time to race.

McLaren made it clear the problems must be resolved in partnership with Mercedes High Performance Powertrains in Brixworth, signalling that answers are required. If the situation is not addressed quickly, cracks will begin to show in the relationship. The concern for McLaren is that it has no viable alternative power unit option in the short term.



There were great battles up and down the field in China, here Fernando Alonso, Valterri Bottas and Sergio Perez go side-by-side through Turn 2.

told to retire by his team.

A great start on Sunday put Lawson up to seventh with Lindblad quick on his heels, but on the medium tyres, the New Zealander struggled and lost time battling his team-mate. An early tyre change backfired, dropping him in positions, but the Safety Car came at the right time to neutralise his losses. After those who started on hards stopped, Lawson moved up to eighth, opened a gap to Hadjar and scored valuable points for the team. Lindblad had another spin and finished 12th, showing he still has plenty to learn after his impressive Grand Prix debut in Melbourne.

A delighted Lawson commented that, "for the speed we had this weekend, it's very, very positive. We definitely didn't expect to have two points finishers after Sprint Qualifying and qualifying yesterday especially." He then added that "in Melbourne we were quite quick, but we definitely weren't quick this weekend. We salvaged a great result out of pretty average weekends on pace. So going forward, once we find some speed, I think we should be in a great position."

It was also a positive weekend for

**SPRINT QUALIFYING**

| Pos | Driver | Time |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | George Russell | 1m31.520s |
| 2 | Kimi Antonelli | +0.289 |
| 3 | Lando Norris | +0.621 |
| 4 | Lewis Hamilton | +0.641 |
| 5 | Oscar Piastri | +0.704 |
| 6 | Charles Leclerc | +1.008 |
| 7 | Pierre Gasly | +1.368 |
| 8 | Max Verstappen | +1.734 |
| 9 | Ollie Bearman | +1.889 |
| 10 | Isack Hadjar | +2.203 |
| 11 | Nico Hulkenberg | +2.115 |
| 12 | Esteban Ocon | +2.119 |
| 13 | Liam Lawson | +2.194 |
| 14 | Gabriel Bortoleto | +2.254 |
| 15 | Arvid Lindblad | +2.528 |
| 16 | Franco Colapinto | +2.807 |
| 17 | Carlos Sainz | +3.241 |
| 18 | Fernando Alonso | +4.061 |
| 19 | Lance Stroll | +4.631 |
| 20 | Valtteri Bottas | +5.858 |
| 21 | Sergio Perez | - |
| 22 | Alex Albon | +3.785 |

**RESULTS SPRINT 19 LAPS SHANGHAI**

| Pos | Drivers | Make | Laps | Margin | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | George Russell | Mercedes | 19 | 33m38.998s | - |
| 2 | Charles Leclerc | Ferrari | 19 | +0.674 | ▲4 |
| 3 | Lewis Hamilton | Ferrari | 19 | +2.554 | ▲1 |
| 4 | Lando Norris | McLaren | 19 | +4.433 | ▼1 |
| 5 | Kimi Antonelli | Mercedes | 19 | +5.688 | ▼3 |
| 6 | Oscar Piastri | McLaren | 19 | +6.809 | ▼1 |
| 7 | Liam Lawson | Racing Bulls | 19 | +10.900 | ▲6 |
| 8 | Ollie Bearman | Haas | 19 | +11.271 | ▲1 |
| 9 | Max Verstappen | Red Bull | 19 | +11.619 | ▼1 |
| 10 | Esteban Ocon | Haas | 19 | +13.887 | ▲2 |
| 11 | Pierre Gasly | Alpine | 19 | +14.780 | ▼4 |
| 12 | Carlos Sainz | Williams | 19 | +15.753 | ▲5 |
| 13 | Gabriel Bortoleto | Audi | 19 | +16.858 | ▲1 |
| 14 | Franco Colapinto | Alpine | 19 | +16.393 | ▲2 |
| 15 | Isack Hadjar | Red Bull | 19 | +16.430 | ▼5 |
| 16 | Alex Albon | Williams | 19 | +20.014 | ▲6 |
| 17 | Fernando Alonso | Aston Martin | 19 | +21.599 | ▲1 |
| 18 | Lance Stroll | Aston Martin | 19 | +21.971 | ▲1 |
| 19 | Sergio Perez | Cadillac | 19 | +28.241 | ▲2 |
| NC | Nico Hulkenberg | Audi | 12 | -7 Laps | ▼9 |
| NC | Valtteri Bottas | Cadillac | 12 | -7 Laps | ▼1 |
| NC | Arvid Lindblad | Racing Bulls | 11 | -8 Laps | ▼7 |



Isack Hadjar finished eighth in his Red Bull after dealing with Arvid Lindblad in the Racing Bulls entry.

Carlos Sainz and, in a way, Williams, as the Spaniard finished Sunday's race in ninth place even though he lacked outright speed. A great start, perfect strategy, good tyre management and the misfortunes of others gave the veteran the kind of opportunity he rarely misses, and he grabbed it with both hands.

Alex Albon, on the other hand, had a weekend to forget; the set-up never worked even after changes before the Sprint race, before accompanying the McLaren duo and Gabriel Bortoleto as non-starters on Sunday.



Esterban Ocon came of of the pits and then spub while trying to pass Franco Colapinto.

## QUALIFYING RACE 2

| Pos | Driver | Time |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kimi Antonelli | 1m32.064s |
| 2 | George Russell | +0.222 |
| 3 | Lewis Hamilton | +0.351 |
| 4 | Charles Leclerc | +0.364 |
| 5 | Oscar Piastri | +0.486 |
| 6 | Lando Norris | +0.544 |
| 7 | Pierre Gasly | +0.809 |
| 8 | Max Verstappen | +0.938 |
| 9 | Isack Hadjar | +1.057 |
| 10 | Ollie Bearman | +1.228 |
| 11 | Nico Hulkenberg | +1.290 |
| 12 | Franco Colapinto | +1.293 |
| 13 | Esteban Ocon | +1.474 |
| 14 | Liam Lawson | +1.701 |
| 15 | Arvid Lindblad | +1.720 |
| 16 | Gabriel Bortoleto | +1.901 |
| 17 | Carlos Sainz | +2.253 |
| 18 | Fernando Alonso | +3.139 |
| 19 | Valtteri Bottas | +3.372 |
| 20 | Lance Stroll | +3.931 |
| 21 | Sergio Perez | +3.842 |
| 22 | Alex Albon | +2.708 |

## RESULTS RACE 2 56 LAPS SHANGHAI

| Pos | Drivers | Make | Laps | Margin | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kimi Antonelli | Mercedes | 56 | 1h33m15.607s | - |
| 2 | George Russell | Mercedes | 56 | +5.515 | - |
| 3 | Lewis Hamilton | Ferrari | 56 | +25.267 | - |
| 4 | Charles Leclerc | Ferrari | 56 | +28.894 | - |
| 5 | Ollie Bearman | Haas | 56 | +57.268 | ▲5 |
| 6 | Pierre Gasly | Alpine | 56 | +59.647 | ▲1 |
| 7 | Liam Lawson | Racing Bulls | 56 | +1:20.588 | ▲7 |
| 8 | Isack Hadjar | Red Bull | 56 | +1:27.247 | ▲1 |
| 9 | Carlos Sainz | Williams | 55 | +1 Lap | ▲6 |
| 10 | Franco Colapinto | Alpine | 55 | +1 Lap | ▲2 |
| 11 | Nico Hulkenberg | Audi | 55 | +1 Lap | - |
| 12 | Arvid Lindblad | Racing Bulls | 55 | +1 Lap | ▲3 |
| 13 | Valtteri Bottas | Cadillac | 55 | +1 Lap | ▲5 |
| 14 | Esteban Ocon | Haas | 55 | +1 Lap | ▼1 |
| 15 | Sergio Perez | Cadillac | 55 | +1 Lap | ▲6 |
| NC | Max Verstappen | Red Bull | 45 | +11 Laps | ▼8 |
| NC | Fernando Alonso | Aston Martin | 32 | +24 Laps | ▼1 |
| NC | Lance Stroll | Aston Martin | 9 | +47 Laps | ▲3 |
| DNS | Oscar Piastri | McLaren | 0 | -56 Laps | ▼14 |
| DNS | Lando Norris | McLaren | 0 | -56 Laps | ▼16 |
| DNS | Gabriel Bortoleto | Audi | 0 | -56 Laps | ▼5 |
| DNS | Alex Albon | Williams | 0 | -56 Laps | - |

## CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER RACE 2

| Pos | Driver | Points | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | George Russell | 51 | - |
| 2 | Kimi Antonelli | 47 | - |
| 3 | Charles Leclerc | 34 | - |
| 4 | Lewis Hamilton | 33 | - |
| 5 | Ollie Bearman | 17 | ▲3 |
| 6 | Lando Norris | 15 | ▼1 |
| 7 | Pierre Gasly | 9 | ▲3 |
| 8 | Max Verstappen | 8 | ▼2 |
| 9 | Liam Lawson | 8 | ▲4 |
| 10 | Arvid Lindblad | 4 | ▼2 |
| 11 | Isack Hadjar | 4 | ▲9 |
| 12 | Oscar Piastri | 3 | ▲9 |
| 13 | Carlos Sainz | 2 | ▲2 |
| 14 | Gabriel Bortoleto | 2 | ▼5 |
| 15 | Franco Colapinto | 1 | ▼1 |
| 16 | Esteban Ocon | 0 | ▼5 |
| 17 | Nico Hulkenberg | 0 | ▲5 |
| 18 | Alex Albon | 0 | ▼6 |
| 19 | Valtteri Bottas | 0 | - |
| 20 | Sergio Perez | 0 | ▼4 |
| 21 | Lance Stroll | 0 | ▼4 |
| 22 | Fernando Alonso | 0 | ▼4 |

# GOOD DAY FOR HAAS AND ALPINE

**WITH RED** Bull clearly out of position, there were points available for the leading midfield teams even before both McLarens were forced to park as the rest of the field formed up on the grid. That was a godsend for Haas and Alpine, which were clearly faster than their direct rivals in Shanghai, and both teams took advantage of the opportunity.

Oliver Bearman's opening lap was fraught, clashing with Isack Hadjar before the Frenchman spun in front of him, forcing the Haas driver to take evasive action and lose four places in the process. Once he settled into the race, however, the young English driver showed impressive pace, overtaking his direct rivals with the confidence of a veteran and keeping Max Verstappen under control before the Red Bull driver eventually retired.

Finishing fifth, Bearman was delighted, saying the incident with Hadjar "was unfortunate, but we didn't crash the car, which is great. I went back very far, managed to overtake some cars again." The Haas driver added that "luckily, the Safety Car timing was good, so I think with the bad luck on Lap 1 and the Safety Car timing we equalised it. After that I just had a good race. I managed to overtake and the car was really quick. So, smiley face."

Alpine recorded its first double points finish since the 2024 Brazilian Grand Prix, although this time Pierre Gasly did not need rain to shine. The Frenchman was seventh quickest in both qualifying sessions and, while a poor start compromised his Sprint race, he drove a clean and disciplined Grand Prix.

Avoiding unnecessary risks, Gasly lost position to Bearman when they caught a group of drivers who had started on hard tyres and did not pit during the Safety Car period, but he still secured eight valuable points for the team.

Franco Colapinto also scored his first point of the season. The Argentinian qualified well in 12th place and looked capable of finishing higher than 10th before being spun around by Esteban Ocon late in the race when a stronger result had appeared within reach.

# TO BE CHAMPION YOU NEED TO BE LUCKY

Kimi Antonelli's Suzuka win turned on a perfectly timed Safety Car, but the teenager still had to deliver, and did so with authority, as McLaren emerged as Mercedes' closest threat while Red Bull slipped into the midfield fight.

STORY: LUIS VASCONCELOS | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES, RED BULL CONTENT POOL



**THERE'S NO** world champion without a bit of luck coming his way sometime during a season. Some drivers seem to get all the right breaks, some feel they are almost cursed, being hit by bad luck at crucial moments of their championship campaign. After winning the Japanese Grand Prix, Kimi Antonelli admitted he was lucky with the timing of the Safety Car and there was no one in Suzuka who would disagree with him. But it's how you handle the good and the bad luck that shows a sportsman's strength and, very much like in Shanghai two weeks before, Kimi Antonelli drove like a veteran, while team-mate George Russell made small but costly mistakes when he was under pressure.



Kimi Antonelli benefited from perfectly timed Safety Car on the way to victory at Suzuka.

A catastrophic start dropped pole man Antonelli to sixth place by Turn 1, but he made quick work of Lewis Hamilton, passing him on Lap 2. However, Lando Norris resisted until Lap 11 and by then the Italian was 4s behind Piastri and 3.3s behind Russell, so he would have to do a lot of work to even catch them. Leclerc proved impossible to pass until, reacting to Norris' attempted undercut, Ferrari changed tyres on Lap 17. By then Piastri was 5.7s up the road, with Russell holding a 3.9s advantage over his team-mate.

The Italian was gaining on Russell when Mercedes called the then championship leader for a tyre change, having lost the chance to undercut Piastri a couple of laps earlier, so Antonelli found himself in the lead as the three cars in front of him stopped for tyres.

Half a lap later Oliver Bearman suffered a massive accident entering the Spoon Curves and




Kimi Antonelli, with a little bit of luck, left Suzuka as the youngest driver to ever lead the World Drivers' Championship.

LEFT: Has Kimi Antonelli just unleashed his signature victory celebration with a Shooting Arrow?



Oscar Piastri led early at Suzuka, but a Safety Car swing helped deny a shot at victory.

INSET FROM TOP: Arvid Lindblad was caught out by Safety Car timing and slipped out of the points in Japan.

Carlos Sainz made a routine stop as strategy shaped the Japanese Grand Prix.

Esteban Ocon was looking good in the Haas…

BELOW RIGHT: Oscar Piastri's second place was "as good as a win" as McLaren claimed its first podium of 2026.

the Safety Car was quickly sent out, handing Antonelli, as well as Hamilton, Gasly, Verstappen and many others, a free stop. Like he'd done in China two weeks before, once the young Italian found himself in the lead, he didn't put a wheel wrong, judged the restart to perfection and pulled away from Piastri with ease to win by 13s.

Having made life difficult for himself at the start, Antonelli got a helping hand to return to the front, with Russell having every right to feel aggrieved by the hand he was dealt. To be champion you also need to be lucky and now Antonelli has five weeks to enjoy being the new championship leader, the youngest ever, at 19 years, seven months and four days.

## FOUR POOR STARTS OUT OF FOUR

**HELPED BY** the timing of the Safety Car, Antonelli shouldered the blame for his fourth poor start in as many races, three Grands Prix and China's Sprint, saying: "I think I dropped the clutch a bit too deep, deeper than what I should have, and obviously the tyres were also a bit colder, so obviously I went beyond the grip that was available and just lost a lot of places."

The championship leader made it clear that "today was completely my fault", but added: "Together, me and George, we've been struggling a bit more than what we would have anticipated since the start of the season, and today the McLaren got a really good start, so they're clearly doing something better, for sure also on driver input. In this case Oscar did much better than me because, I cannot say the word, but I 'effed' it up pretty badly!"

From then on, though, Antonelli drove a perfect race, didn't get frustrated behind Norris or Leclerc, and never tried a 'do or die' move, showing a maturity way above









Piastri took the lead after jumping the front row Mercedes as he finally started his first race of the year. He said later it would have been interesting without the Safety Car, which jumped Antonelli into the lead.



his age. The way he judged the restart was perfect and he then controlled the pace with the same precision seen two weeks before in Shangh

In fact, start apart, the teenager drove like a champion in Suzuka, but he's insisting the title is not yet in his sights. The Mercedes driver said: "I'm not thinking too much about the championship", but admitted that "of course it's great, but it's still a long way to go and [we] need to keep raising the bar." Wary of the enemy within, the Italian pointed out that "George is very quick and for sure he's going to be back at his usual level", before concluding that "also, the competitors eventually will get closer", warning that "I think we need to keep our head down and keep raising the bar."

Out of the podium for the first time this year, Russell rued the timing of the Safety Car, as he'd just pitted when Bearman crashed, but also admitted the start and some power unit issues got in his way. Summarising his afternoon, Russell said: "Our start was normal, poor, then Safety Car, one lap difference and we'd have won the race." He then added: "It's sort of part of racing, but thereafter everything was just issues after one another. I couldn't recharge my battery at the restart, so Lewis just flew by me. And then I had the issue later in the race with Charles and the battery where I just had no speed and he passed me. So, just one thing after another."

## GLASS HALF FULL FOR PIASTRI

**FINALLY ABLE** to start a Grand Prix in 2026, Oscar Piastri clearly didn't need a lot of practice to perform a perfect getaway and get by the two Mercedes before Turn 1. He quickly pulled a gap over Leclerc but, when Russell returned to P2 at the start of Lap 4, everyone expected the Mercedes driver to breeze past the Australian. That, however, never happened, apart from a brief moment between the end of Lap 8 and the start of Lap 9, when Russell used up all his battery before the chicane to get the move done, but then had nothing to defend from the McLaren driver on the run down to the first corner.

Piastri was extending his lead when, wary of a possible undercut from Leclerc, the team pitted him for hard tyres at the end of Lap 18. Resuming behind Verstappen, the Melburnian passed the Red Bull driver with ease just before the Safety Car stopped play. That handed the lead to Antonelli, who was the leader of those still on medium tyres, so, in a way, Piastri had every right to feel the win was taken away from him.

Asked if he thought he could have kept the Italian behind had there been no Safety Car, the McLaren driver smiled and said: "I would have loved to have seen how it

would have panned out…" On a more serious note, Piastri admitted that "I need to look back and see whether Kimi was quicker than George or similar pace", stating that "if he was the same pace as George then it would have been a pretty stressful afternoon because I probably would have had both of them right on my gearbox, but once Kimi had clean air, clearly, he was a lot faster than me. So, I'm not sure we would have won the race, but I certainly would have loved to have found out."

## McLAREN'S BIG STEP FORWARD

**HAVING LOST** a race he was leading with authority, Piastri has at least scored important points after being unable to take the start in Australia and China. Never one to blow his own trumpet, the young driver admitted that "I think this weekend was probably one of my best weekends in Formula 1. I felt like I hit the ground running in practice, qualifying, I think we did a really good job of getting the car into the window I was happy with on Friday and that I drove well in qualifying."

Then, focusing on the race, he said that "there wasn't anything more we could have done. We got a good start, the pace was good, I felt like I was strategic or smart with how I used the boost and how I managed that side of racing. Our strategy was good, we didn't blink too early. Obviously, the Safety Car was a shame, but I think as race weekends go we couldn't have done any better than that."

Team-mate Lando Norris had a torrid time in Suzuka, missing almost half of FP2 and more than half of FP3, so he was always going to be on the back foot.



**Charles Leclerc drove a measured race to finish on the Suzuka podium.**

**INSET RIGHT FROM TOP: An Aston Martin finally made the finish of a Grand Prix this year, one lap down and in 18th.**

**The pre-race build-up on the Suzuka grid ahead of the Japanese Grand Prix was entertaining.**

Charles Leclerc before the start of the Japanese Grand Prix.









The Ferraris were entertaining again as Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton were allowed to race each other.

Beating Hamilton in qualifying to start in P5, the world champion finished the race in the same position, after a great battle with the veteran in the late stages of the race.

Given the number of laps he was missing from practice, fifth place was good damage limitation for Lando Norris and now that McLaren seems to have a good grasp of the new rules and the characteristics and needs of the Mercedes power unit, he should be able to fight regularly at the front, as Piastri did from the start of FP1 in Japan.

## FERRARI DROPS TO THIRD FORCE

**FERRARI ALSO** had good reasons to be in two minds after the Suzuka race. On the negative side, the SF-23 was only the third quickest car all weekend, as McLaren upped its game. On the positive side, only Antonelli was completely out of reach for the on-form Charles Leclerc, who kept Russell behind all the way to the flag and was never more than 2.5s behind Piastri in the final stint.

The timing of the Safety Car also hurt his chances, but the way he battled Russell, repassing the Mercedes driver at the start of Lap

# KEY MOMENTS

**KIMI ANTONELLI** admitted he was lucky with the timing of the Safety Car and there was no one in Suzuka who would disagree with him. Down to P6 after yet another catastrophic start, the Italian only got free air from Lap 17, after Leclerc pitted, but by then Piastri was 5.7s up the road, with Russell holding a 3.9s advantage over his team-mate.

The Italian was gaining on Russell and maybe was keen to avoid a direct battle on track, so the Brit pitted, but half a lap later Oliver Bearman crashed in the Spoon Curve and the Safety Car was deployed. Handed a free stop, the Italian grabbed a lead he wouldn't lose again, for, like in Shanghai, he didn't put a wheel wrong, judged the restart to perfection and pulled away from Piastri with ease to win by a comfortable margin.

While Russell and Piastri had all the right to feel aggrieved by the timing of the Safety Car, Antonelli grabbed his chance with both hands. It's clear he's got what it takes to fight for the title and, in fact, the boot is now on the other foot, as it's Russell who seems to be feeling the pressure.

## UP - MCLAREN

**MCLAREN PERFORMED** far better in Suzuka than in the previous races, the British team showing it has kept the in-depth strength that helped it to two consecutive constructors' championships. Even without any data from the Shanghai race, McLaren arrived in Japan with a much better understanding of how to use its tools to get the best out of the Mercedes power unit and, with Piastri on top form, provided the only real opposition to the German team, both in qualifying and the race.

The way Piastri, who had only raced in China's Sprint, having two DNS in Melbourne and Shanghai, defended from Russell for nearly 50 laps, harvesting and deploying battery power at exactly the right places to frustrate the Brit, showed the young Australian and McLaren have a very good grasp of the requirements this new form of racing imposes. Without bringing significant chassis upgrades for this race, McLaren finally managed to extract all the potential the MCL40 has, meaning now there is a three-way battle at the front of the field and two teams capable of capitalising on Mercedes' small mistakes.

## DOWN - RED BULL

**BEATEN BY** Alpine in Suzuka, Red Bull Ford was the fifth quickest team in Japan and even Max Verstappen's brilliance was not enough to get the Dutchman ahead of Pierre Gasly after a long chase. Given the Austrian outfit's junior team has been able to match and sometimes beat the main team, it's clear the brand-new power unit is not Red Bull's main issue and Verstappen was quick to make that clear.

The RB22 is proving hard to understand for the team, every small change made to the set-up has much bigger and unexpected consequences than expected and Pierre Waché and his staff have not been able to put their finger on the main issue.

It's clear that the speed shown in Melbourne, where Hadjar qualified third and Verstappen drove through the field, gave Red Bull false hope, but falling into the front of the midfield battle in China and Japan has brought the team back to earth. There's clearly a lot of work to be done in Milton Keynes in this unexpected break in the calendar, but even with everything going the right way it's hard to imagine Verstappen will be fighting for wins between now and the end of the season.



Pierre Gasly starred again for Alpine, keeping Red Bull behind to finish seventh.




The Japanese fans are among the best in the world.

51 with a daring move around the outside into the first corner, proved that the Monegasque is a master in wheel-to-wheel battle and has also become quite an expert in managing the battery around the lap, to make sure he always has an answer to the drivers he's battling against.

If McLaren and Ferrari improve more than Mercedes in the next five weeks, we may have a fascinating three-way battle going forward and that's the best Formula 1 could hope for after fears the German team would simply run away with it.

Hamilton was out-raced and out-qualified by his team-mate, the Brit never finding a balance he would be comfortable with around this difficult and complete circuit. A great start was followed by being boxed in going into Turn 1, but the Safety Car period gave him a reprieve. Unfortunately for Hamilton, his pace on the hard tyres was not great, with Leclerc, Russell and Norris passing him in the last 11 laps, so P6 was the best he could do.

## ALPINE BEATS RED BULL

**BEHIND THE** three top teams, Pierre Gasly was again the star of the midfield battle, setting the seventh fastest time in qualifying before also finishing the race in P7. Able to open a gap to Verstappen on the medium tyre, the Frenchman wasn't helped by the Safety Car period and spent the last 30 laps with his mirrors full of the Red Bull RB22. Again, he didn't make the slightest mistake and frustrated the world champion to earn another eight valuable points for Alpine.

Verstappen was less frustrated than after qualifying, but was still not enjoying the way he has to drive the new generation of cars or how



Kimi Antonelli celebrated victory in Japan after controlling the restart and pulling away to win.

the PU management supersedes the driver as soon as he gets slightly off the throttle.

The Dutchman admitted that "it was impossible to pass Pierre because he had better top speed and didn't make a mistake". He added that "once I just decided to use the battery before the chicane, so I passed him, but I knew he'd pass me back on the pit straight, so I just gave him a little wave as he went by..."

Liam Lawson and Esteban Ocon were the last points finishers, but had opposite fortunes. The Kiwi, who was surprised to be shuffled back on the opening lap, got lucky with the timing of the Safety Car, while the Haas driver lost out after pitting in full race conditions, pointing out that "this makes it three out of three, as every time there's been a Safety Car this year I've pitted at the wrong time..."

**QUALIFYING RACE 3**

| Pos | Driver | Time |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kimi Antonelli | 1m28.778s |
| 2 | George Russell | +0.298 |
| 3 | Oscar Piastri | +0.354 |
| 4 | Charles Leclerc | +0.627 |
| 5 | Lando Norris | +0.631 |
| 6 | Lewis Hamilton | +0.789 |
| 7 | Pierre Gasly | +0.913 |
| 8 | Isack Hadjar | +1.200 |
| 9 | Gabriel Bortoleto | +1.496 |
| 10 | Arvid Lindblad | +1.541 |
| 11 | Max Verstappen | +1.484 |
| 12 | Esteban Ocon | +1.531 |
| 13 | Nico Hulkenberg | +1.609 |
| 14 | Liam Lawson | +1.717 |
| 15 | Franco Colapinto | +1.849 |
| 16 | Carlos Sainz | +2.255 |
| 17 | Alex Albon | +2.310 |
| 18 | Ollie Bearman | +2.312 |
| 19 | Sergio Perez | +3.428 |
| 20 | Valterri Bottas | +3.552 |
| 21 | Fernando Alonso | +3.868 |
| 22 | Lance Stroll | +4.142 |

**RESULTS RACE 3 53 LAPS SUZUKA**

| Pos | Drivers | Make | Laps | Margin | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kimi Antonelli | Mercedes | 53 | 1h28m03.403s | |
| 2 | Oscar Piastri | McLaren | 53 | +13.722 | ▲1 |
| 3 | Charles Leclerc | Ferrari | 53 | +15.270 | ▲1 |
| 4 | George Russell | Mercedes | 53 | +15.754 | ▼2 |
| 5 | Lando Norris | McLaren | 53 | +23.479 | - |
| 6 | Lewis Hamilton | Ferrari | 53 | +25.037 | - |
| 7 | Pierre Gasly | Alpine | 53 | +32.340 | - |
| 8 | Max Verstappen | Red Bull | 53 | +32.677 | ▲3 |
| 9 | Liam Lawson | Racing Bulls | 53 | +50.180 | ▲5 |
| 10 | Esteban Ocon | Haas | 53 | +51.216 | ▲2 |
| 11 | Nico Hulkenberg | Audi | 53 | +52.280 | ▲2 |
| 12 | Isack Hadjar | Red Bull | 53 | +56.154 | ▼4 |
| 13 | Gabriel Bortoleto | Audi | 53 | +59.078 | ▼4 |
| 14 | Arvid Lindblad | Racing Bulls | 53 | +59.848 | ▼4 |
| 15 | Carlos Sainz | Williams | 53 | +1:05.008 | ▲1 |
| 16 | Franco Colapinto | Alpine | 53 | +1:05.773 | ▼1 |
| 17 | Sergio Perez | Cadillac | 53 | +1:32.453 | ▲2 |
| 18 | Fernando Alonso | Aston Martin | 52 | -1 Lap | ▲3 |
| 19 | Valtteri Bottas | Cadillac | 52 | -1 Lap | ▲1 |
| 20 | Alex Albon | Williams | 51 | -2 Laps | ▼3 |
| NC | Lance Stroll | Aston Martin | 30 | -23 Laps | ▲1 |
| NC | Ollie Bearman | Haas | 20 | -33 Laps | ▼4 |

**CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER RACE 3**

| Pos | Driver | Points | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kimi Antonelli | 72 | ▲1 |
| 2 | George Russell | 63 | ▼1 |
| 3 | Charles Leclerc | 49 | - |
| 4 | Lewis Hamilton | 41 | - |
| 5 | Lando Norris | 25 | ▲1 |
| 6 | Oscar Piastri | 21 | ▲6 |
| 7 | Ollie Bearman | 17 | ▼2 |
| 8 | Pierre Gasly | 15 | ▼1 |
| 9 | Max Verstappen | 12 | ▼1 |
| 10 | Liam Lawson | 10 | ▼1 |
| 11 | Arvid Lindblad | 4 | ▼1 |
| 12 | Isack Hadjar | 4 | ▼1 |
| 13 | Gabriel Bortoleto | 2 | ▲1 |
| 14 | Carlos Sainz | 2 | ▼1 |
| 15 | Esteban Ocon | 1 | ▲1 |
| 16 | Franco Colaptinto | 1 | ▼2 |
| 17 | Nico Hulkenberg | 0 | - |
| 18 | Alex Albon | 0 | - |
| 19 | Valtteri Bottas | 0 | - |
| 20 | Sergio Perez | 0 | - |
| 21 | Lance Stroll | 0 | - |
| 22 | Fernando Alonso | 0 | - |

# TORRENTS OF AFRICA

The third round of the FIA World Rally Championship was pure carnage in Kenya's Great Rift Valley, but one of the field's most loved drivers finally broke through for much yearned-for victory as Toyota claimed a sixth straight win on the continent.

***By Timothy William Neal***

**THERE WAS** nothing subtle about this season's Safari Rally Kenya, with torrential rain leaving its mark in Naivasha as the 73rd iteration of the event played out in constantly changing conditions.

No machine went untouched, with suspension, wheels and bodywork flying everywhere, leading to mass Rally1 retirements and five WRC2 teams finishing in the top 10.

And as much as Kenya provides one of the best spectacles on the calendar, with locals turning out en masse, it will forever be remembered as Taka's rally.

Takamoto Katsuta wears his heart on his sleeve, carrying that unbridled Japanese passion that lends itself so well to world rallying.

After seven years, 91 starts and eight podiums, the man from Aichi



can finally call himself a WRC winner, alongside his long-term Irish co-driver, Aaron Johnston.

After Mitsubishi's Kenjiro Shinozuka in 1991–92, both in Africa, it was only the third time that a Japanese driver had ever climbed the top dais.

But like everyone in the field, he too had to survive mechanical and electrical setbacks, and his attritional maiden win will go down as a scrap for survival.

Some of his close calls of late have led to tears of frustration, but this time he broke down out of exhaustion, relief and joy, in one of the more moving post-race celebrations WRC fans are likely to see.

As for Toyota Gazoo Racing's World Rally Team heavy artillery, all of Elfyn Evans, Oliver Solberg and Sebastien Ogier were in the hunt, but Saturday's famous Sleeping Warrior stage speared the heart out of them all, vaulting Katsuta into a lead he had to protect across the final day.

The early rain also led to nightmares for the mud-clogged Hyundai radiators, but despite the setbacks, Frenchman Adrien Fourmaux outlasted the best of the best to give the i20N its first podium of the year, while Finland's Sami Pajari also survived to give the Toyota WRT2 team its second straight podium.

After all was said and done, Evans retained the title lead, but Solberg




**Apart from early comms loss and two punctured front tyres, "Taka" survived the Chaos of Kenya to take a maiden WRC win. Image: GettyImages**

**ABOVE: Fourmaux leaps under the iconic flat top Acacia trees as the local crowd watches on from the roofs of their cars. Image: Red Bull Content Pool**



Toyota's Evans drags his rear tyre and suspension through the mud before retiring roadside on Saturday. Image: GettyImages

BELOW: Robert Virves flys in the Rally2 Skoda, on his way to fifth in the outright amidst all the Rally1 carnage. Image: Red Bull Content Pool

cut it down to eight by taking the five Sunday points on offer, while Katsuta's efforts put him into third, only three behind the Swede, representing all the victors for 2026.

"It's such an amazing feeling to achieve this result. It's hard to describe how I felt when I crossed the finish line, it was just crazy," Katsuta said.

"There have been so many difficult moments, and these memories all went through my head. It hasn't been easy, but finally we are here. Thanks to Aaron, who has worked tirelessly with me, and to every single person on the team, who has always believed in me.

"Trying to manage today [Sunday] was really difficult, because you see every small rock and you try to avoid them. However, we managed to do it without any problems, so thank you to the team for providing me with such a strong car and strong support. We're here because we never give up, and we'll keep working hard to achieve more results like this."

## THROUGH THE MUD AND DUST

**IN THE** rain-hit opener, it was Solberg who led early, with the Swede retaining his record of having led every rally thus far in his four outings with the Yaris.

Naivasha was a muddy battleground beyond belief, with all three Hyundais suffering overheating problems as mud clogged the radiators.



Meanwhile, Katsuta settled into fourth behind Evans and Ogier, but had no radio communication with Johnston.

Friday's seven stages saw Solberg hold a slender 1s lead over Ogier by day's end, while the opening SS3 was cancelled, with rutting making things inaccessible for medical crews. Solberg also had issues with an off costing him 10s, while a later puncture brought Ogier within shooting distance.

Katsuta was confined to seventh heading into Saturday when he suffered a double puncture with no spares on board.

To that point, Toyota had held the top five, but tyres tearing up the bodywork was becoming a common sight, with many concealed obstacles.

For the M-Sport Ford crew, Saturday was also a nightmare day, with Armstrong and McErlean suffering a broken suspension arm and a terminal gearbox oil leak, as the i20Ns continued to overheat.

Katsuta emerged from the chaos on Saturday, despite not capturing any stage wins for the rally.

On the 31km Sleeping Warrior test, Evans was the first to fall with terminal suspension damage as both suspension and wheel dragged behind him, while it was the roads back toward the Naivasha camp where Solberg and Ogier went down with an alternator issue, with all three leaders out in the blink of an eye by SS14.

It was thanks to Katsuta's caution that he had the lead from Fourmaux, after direct time gains in the first four stages of the day.

Sunday was all about nursing it home, and his overnight lead of 1m25.5s turned into a 27.4s victory, resisting the temptation for stage wins as the field came home over the Oserengoni and Hell's Gate passes around Lake Naivasha, with Solberg taking advantage of the bonus points to remain within eight points of the title from Evans, finishing in 10th.

## CROATIA REBORN, AND SOME ANTIPODEAN RETURNEES

**NEXT ON** the calendar sees a return to Croatia, but not as we know it, with a move from Zagreb to the Adriatic port city of Rijeka.

It will offer a true seaside, tarmac hit-out, with high-grip coastal roads and mountain passes as that part of the continent upshifts into spring.

Hayden Paddon and John Kennard also return in the part-time Rally1 Hyundai, with his experience on European tarmac sure to hold the two-time ERC champions in good stead.

And on the Australian side of the equation, Taylor Gill and Dan Brkic also return in the WRC2 Yaris after finishing an impressive fourth in Sweden.

The former JWRC vice-champions have a point to prove, and have scraped hard to raise the capital.

They were victors on Croatia's slippery tarmac in 2025 in the JWRC, but these roads are new and offer far more grip than the broken-up countryside roads that they know.

They are also in the right equipment, with the Rally2 Yaris a strong performer on tarmac.

## WRC STANDINGS AFTER 3 ROUNDS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Evans/Martin | Toyota | 66 |
| Solberg/Edmondson | Toyota | 58 |
| Katsuta/Johnston | Toyota | 55 |
| Fourmaux/Coria | Hyundai | 47 |
| Pajari/Salminen | Toyota | 32 |



# GREAT BRITAIN BACK ON THE MAP

**IN HUGE** news for British rally fans, it was announced that Scotland will host a WRC event in 2027, marking the first time for a UK round since 2019, when Wales hosted.

The three-year deal will see an all-new gravel-based Rally Scotland event after seven years of Motorsport UK trying to negotiate a deal, with failed attempts regarding Wales and Northern Ireland.

The funding was recently secured through the Scottish Government, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, welcoming the new WRC27 regulations for its inaugural season.

With an autumn date expected, September to November, stages will run on closed gravel forest roads in Aberdeenshire in the country's north-east.

The event is expected to draw huge crowds, adding another WRC round that gives the category back its 'golden-generation' atmosphere, with Britain being one of the founding members of the inaugural WRC in 1973.

*TW Neal*




Porsche Penske triumphed for the second year straight at the 12 Hours of Sebring, its 20th outright win at the Florida track. Image: Lumen Digital Agency

# PORSCHE AND THE GREAT SEBRING IN-FIGHT

Porsche Penske has opened the 2026 IMSA Sportscar Championship with back-to-back endurance wins in Florida, but internal tension between its factory drivers has cast a shadow over its Sebring success. Timothy W Neal reports.

**THE FLORIDA** area code might as well be changed to 963/#7.

After trouncing the GTP field in the twice-around-the-clock 24 Hours of Daytona, the #7 machine prevailed again at the historic part-runway tarmac of Sebring.

In an action-packed final hour, Brazilian Felipe Nasr, alongside co-drivers Julian Andlauer and Laurin Heinrich, led home a 1-2 over the #6 machine by just 1.515s, as he and Kevin Estre locked horns for the right to be Porsche's 20th Sebring winner.

It was far from a harmonious celebration for the Mannheim and North Carolina collaboration, with the #6 team leader feeling a distinct lack of love from the sister machine after he had let it pass in the pits.

However, the favour, in Estre's words, was returned too late, costing them victory.

His teammates, Laurens Vanthoor and Aussie Matt Campbell, were somewhat more diplomatic in the press conference, where the disdain was evident.

For the viewer, there was no clear sign of which Penske machine would take the win until the final hour approached, with Nasr's bold dive on Estre at Turn 17, with 64 minutes remaining, the telling, yet controversial, move after a back-and-forth series of team orders and staunch radio chat played out.

So, while Estre was toothless on the track, trying to change the outcome despite having fresher Michelins, he was not shy about letting his opinions fly following the race.

While Porsche would be happy to have that problem, there is a fire to douse.

In winning its 20th Sebring outright, the statistics behind Porsche's last 36 hours in Florida are immense, as it also achieved a rare back-to-back Daytona/Sebring double after sweeping the 2025 events.

At the 12-hour, Porsche led a combined 273 of 343 laps, while in both enduros this year, it has led 749 of 1048 laps.

Add in the JDC Miller customer Porsche, and that figure rises to 840 of 1048.

After the late yellow, the Porsche 963s, as was the case all day, had too much race pace for the two Cadillac V-Series.Rs, with the #10 Wayne Taylor Racing and the late-fading #31 Whelen finishing third and fourth.

But post-race scrutineering found excessive camber on the #10, giving the pole-getting machine of Jack Aitken, Earl Bamber and Frederik Vesti its second straight podium.

GTP scraps, and the LMP2/GTD story

As for the best of the rest, Renger van der Zande, in the sixth-placed Acura ARX-06, said it best:

"It's so de-motivating to see those Porsches go off in the distance."

The #60 Acura took fourth after scrutineering and was the only other make outside Cadillac in the GTP field to show any threat.

In WRT's first Sebring appearance with the BMW M Hybrid V8s, it lacked any pace when the sun went down and only found advancement through




Kevin Estre pulls out of the pits in the #6 963 before the telling moment that led to a team in-fight.

Image: IMSA






Felipe Nasr let the champagne fly on the podium before Kevin Estre let the words fly in the pressroom Image: Lumen Digital Agency

ABOVE: Cadillac took pole via Jack Aitken, but it did not have the race pace to stick its nose into Porsche's affairs. Image: IMSA

BELOW: Prolific GT3 team Manthey took its first IMSA win in the iconic Grello 911. Image: Lumen Digital Agency

the pits, with a best finish of sixth with its #24.

Finally, among the field of manufacturers, the sole Aston Martin V12 Valkyrie finished 12 laps back after needing repairs earlier in the day.

In LMP2, another 1-2 team finish, led by the #2 United Autosports USA entry, took the class by 0.510s, with Antipodean Hunter McElrea sharing the dais with Phil Fayer and Mikkel Jensen.

In GTD, an 'angry' Ferrari factory driver, Antonio Fuoco in the #21 Ferrari 296, overcame three penalties in the final quarter of the race that put the car a lap down, then produced a heroic last-lap pass on the #27 Aston Martin Vantage.

In the third-placed machine, Aussie Tom Sargent also finished on the podium in the Wright Motorsports Porsche, alongside teammates Adam Adelson and Callum Ilott.

The final class winner delivered a first IMSA win for a famous GT3 team, as the iconic Manthey 'Grello' Porsche prevailed in GTD Pro.

Piloted by Thomas Preining, Klaus Bachler and Ricardo Feller, it took the premier GT3 class by 1.430s over the AO Racing 911, with the #4 Corvette Z06 in third.

Was a great feat blighted?

Across two years, Porsche has been indomitable across 72 hours of enduro action, and one of the common factors is Felipe Nasr.

The Brazilian has been at the helm of all four victories in the #7 and is the first driver to achieve that feat.

But despite what the Sebring win solidified, the press conference naturally swerved away from addressing the record, and he was instead left to fend off questions over Estre's annoyance regarding what he claimed was a clear defiance of team orders.

It started with the telling radio correspondence, and the defiance of Roger viewing the race from the seat.

His words to Penske were: "Do you want to win this race?"

Leading up to that, they had pitted together with Estre in front, but the #7 only needed fuel and the #6 fresh tyres. The longer stop meant Estre moved over in pitlane for the Brazilian to go first.

Nasr then refused to give the spot back, and the dirty air meant Estre was using up his tyre as he was forced to chase his factory teammate, who basically said over the radio that if he wanted the spot, he would have to catch him.

Estre's argument in that regard was that he needed to save fuel, which explained the race pace at that time.

There were 92 minutes remaining.

With 72 minutes remaining, Nasr let Estre pass before then pulling the move at the 64-minute mark, putting the #6 under huge pressure from the #31 Cadillac, while there was also heavy traffic to be navigated.

Despite the late yellow, which left a 16-minute dash to the end, Estre simply did not have the tyres.

"There was a call from the pit stand which was not respected," Estre said afterwards.

"...we had a shot, but somehow, one hour before the end, something happened, which was not too fair from my side. That's why we're all very frustrated, and it's not nice..."

Nasr's response was unapologetic, saying only that he was there to win.

"It's what I'm here for. I signed up for this program because I believe I can win for the program. I can win for the team," he said.

"There's always going to be all versions, right? My version, the team version, and the other drivers' version."

When pushed further, the Frenchman later replied:

"Felipe can say what he feels. I just know what I felt, what the rule was, and what the communication was. I think it was quite clear from both sides, from what I understood. But in the end, it didn't happen that way."

***Next is the 100-minute Grand Prix of Long Beach in California on 18 April, featuring GTP and GTD only.***




## IMSA GTP STANDINGS (ROUND 2)

| | |
|---|---|
| Nasr/Andlauer/Heinrich, Porsche | 755 |
| Aitken/Bamber/Vesti, Cadillac | 675 |
| Estre/Campbell/L Vanthoor, Porsche | 654 |
| Frijns/van der Linde/D Vanthoor, BMW | 606 |
| Van der Zande/Yelloly/Palou, Acura | 576 |



Marco Bezzecchi and Aprilia are soaring above the competition.

BELOW RIGHT: The unusual sight of a sinkhole on the main straight at Brazil.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Marc Marquez won a Sprint and crashed in the next one.

# BRILLIANT BEZZECCHI

The MotoGP season is starting to gather momentum, and it is already clear there is a new dominator on the grid in the form of the record-breaking Marco Bezzecchi.

STORY: THOMAS MILES | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES

**APRILIA HAS** taken over the mantle of MotoGP's leading force from Ducati, and the poster boy is the brilliant Marco Bezzecchi.

After winning the opener in Thailand, the Italian has extended his streak to five Sunday wins in a row after further successes in Brazil and America.

Not only that, he led every lap, which means his streak of 121 straight laps leading Grands Prix breaks a record held by Jorge Lorenzo with 103 laps set in 2015.

While the consistent teammate Jorge Martin ensures, Bezzecchi only holds a slim four-point advantage in the title fight, the Italian is the darling of the MotoGP world at the moment.

## BRAZIL

**BRAZIL MADE** a celebrated return to the MotoGP calendar for the first time since 1992, at the home of the first race, Goiania.

However, the conditions at times still felt stuck in the 20th century, which dampened the action.

Less than 24 hours before bikes hit the track, significant portions of the circuit were flooded.

Once racing started, the laps were then slashed minutes before the lights went out as a breaking-up track surface created significant concerns.

The race distance was suddenly truncated from 31 to 23 laps, with riders pelted by stones throughout.

The Sprint was delayed by more than 80 minutes due to the extraordinary a sinkhole that appeared on the main straight.

After repairs to the hole caused by a burst drain pipe, Marc Marquez opened his account for his title defence.

Fabio Di Giannantonio led from pole and controlled the majority of the race.

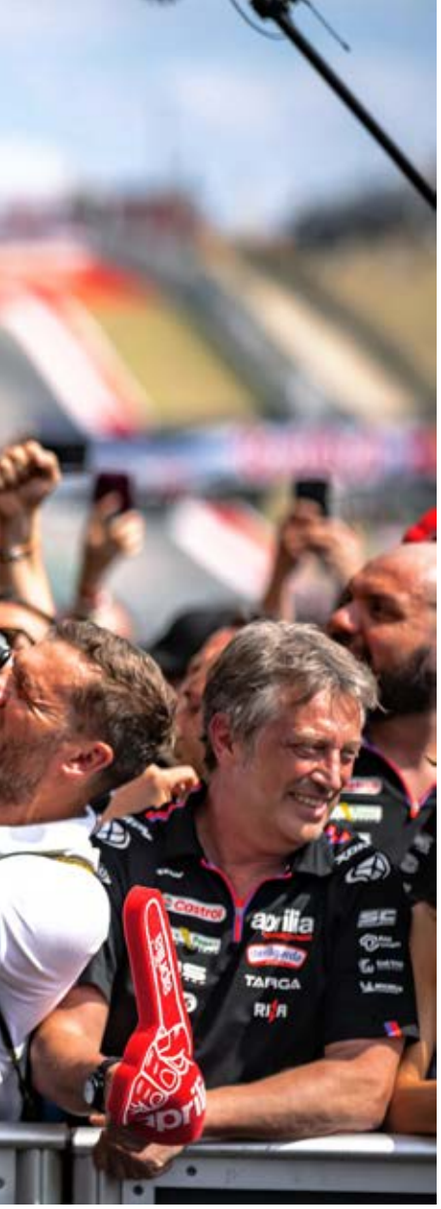
Helping his cause was Fabio Quartararo, who held up Marquez and restricted the #93 to third for a period.

But once the Ducati star was through, he set his sights on the VR46 rider 1.5s ahead, and it was game on.

The battle continued until Lap 13 of 15, when Di Giannantonio cracked under pressure and ran wide at Turn 13, allowing Marquez to take the win.

It was a tough race for Jack Miller, as his Pramac Yamaha was by far the slowest package, finishing last on track, only ahead of the crashed Maverick Vinales, Johann Zarco and Joan Mir.

Just like in Thailand, Marco Bezzecchi





blitzed the field when it mattered on Sunday.

Bezzecchi got a strong launch and flew past pole-sitter Di Giannantonio to immediately gap the field.

What helped his cause was Di Giannantonio running wide at Turn 1, which allowed Marquez through.

Jorge Martin and Pedro Acosta spent the early laps swapping positions until the 2024 champion had the final say.

Martin then moved into third after executing a double overtake on Di Giannantonio and Marquez when the VR46 rider lunged on the #93.

The contest between Di Giannantonio and Marquez continued until the closing stages.

The reigning champion attempted a move on Lap 19 and forced Di Giannantonio wide.

However, Marquez made a rare error and nearly crashed, losing the position.

With Bezzecchi cruising to a 3s win and Martin secure in second, Di Giannantonio claimed the final podium place as Marquez settled for fourth.

Despite dropping to 10th at the start, Trackhouse Racing's Ai Ogura charged to fifth after a final-lap move on Alex Marquez.

Pedro Acosta could only manage seventh, while several big names failed to finish.

For Australia, the first was Miller on the opening lap.

Former team-mate Brad Binder joined him three laps later.

Francesco Bagnaia and Joan Mir both crashed out on Lap 11.

## USA

**MOTOGP THEN** headed north to the Circuit of the Americas, where it was a similar story.

However, not everything went Bezzecchi's way as he suffered a major loss in the Sprint.

The Saturday race proved to be one of the most defining moments of the title fight so far as Bezzecchi endured his most significant setback.

Acosta got a strong start to rise from third, but Marc Marquez was in no mood for losing any ground.

As a result, their battle allowed Bagnaia to fly into the lead.

Di Giannantonio found himself in a fierce fight for Marquez for the minors, but it ended in tears.

The #93 made a big lunge at the end of the back straight, but it did not work as both crashed hard and fell down the order.

This helped Bagnaia pull clear over Acosta, while Martin was on the charge.

Bezzecchi was also in the mix, only to throw away his track position and points lead by crashing at the top of the hill at Turn 1.

Now all of Aprilia's hopes were mounted on the shoulders of Martin, and he delivered.

Out of nowhere, he slashed Bagnaia's lead to set up a grandstand finish.

Bagnaia had no answer for his former title rival's pace as Martin snatched the Sprint win with a last-lap move at Turn 12.

It was also enough for Martin to snare the championship lead, albeit briefly.



Jorge Martin's celebrations did not completely go to plan.

But it was not the perfect day as Martin crashed on the cooldown lap in bewildering fashion, being unable to land a wheelie.

On Sunday when the lights went out, Di Giantannio had pole, but Acosta had the best leap to take the lead.

Bezzecchi was smart from the second row to shoot from fourth to second, while Jorge Martin made it two Aprilias in the top three to demote Marc Marquez.

Acosta appeared in control, only to run wide at the Turn 11 hairpin, which opened the door for Bezzecchi.

The Italian tried to sneak through the gap, but the door closed on the corner exit, and the leaders clashed hard.

Despite the side-to-side contact leaving significant damage on the rear section of Bezzecchi's Aprilia, he got the job done in what was the defining move of the race and was never headed from there.

Acosta also shed debris, but the top two carried on and pulled clear of the pack.

Behind them, Di Giannantonio and Marc Marquez were also engaging in serious hand-to-hand contact.

The pair traded places at the end of the first lap and start of the second, and it was actually the #93 that lost the battle.

Both Di Giannantonio and Francesco Bagnaia pushed past Marquez, who soon lost further ground due to a long lap penalty.

He fell to seventh, but eventually recovered to fifth after getting back past his Ducati teammate.

Joan Mir went off track early in the Esses and ended up crashing from a top 10 spot, while fellow Honda rider Johann Zarco was also an early faller.

Maverick Vinales never made the start, while Ai Ogura saw a top 10 slip away due to a technical issue.

These incidents allowed Toprak Razgatlioglu to snare the final points place, having just held off Australia's Jack Miller and demoted him to 16th.

***The European MotoGP season now lies ahead with the Spanish Motorcycle Grand Prix at the famous Jerez on 24—26 April.***

## 2026 MOTOGP STANDINGS

| | |
|---|---|
| 1: Marco Bezzecchi | 81 points |
| 2: Jorge Martin | 77 |
| 3: Pedro Acosta | 60 |
| 4: Fabio di Giannantonio | 50 |
| 5: Marc Marquez | 45 |



# ANDRETTI'S GREAT HOPE

After the opening rounds in Florida and Arizona, IndyCar gave a glimpse into its future directional growth with the inaugural Grand Prix of Arlington, while after its visit to Alabama, the championship is tenuously close and ready to break open into any one of three directions.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: PENSKE ENTERTAINMENT

**FOUR ROUNDS** into the season, and the almost expected canter of Chip Ganassi Racing's Spaniard, Alex Palou, has been stymied, somewhat, as Kyle Kirkwood threw down the gauntlet in Texas.

The effects of the opening round, a record winning margin on the streets of St Petersburg for Palou, may have left the other 10 garages scratching their heads for solutions.

"What do you have to do to beat this bloke?" may well have been the prevailing thought.

The answer?

Be perfect.

Executing the perfect race is the only way to defeat Palou and his #10 Honda CGR team, and with four of the last five Astor trophies tucked away in their Woodland Drive, Indiana home, that might seem an impossible feat.

Not even the dragged-out saga of the Arrow McLaren vs Palou court case could derail his focus.

Last season, the task fell to one challenger after Palou's scintillating five-from-six start to the campaign, which culminated with a maiden Indy 500 win, before threatening the all-time win record.

That driver was California's Kyle Kirkwood, and although he fell away at season's end, it appears that North America once again rests on his shoulders.

The Andretti Global driver has found the required consistency needed to challenge for the title, even when faced with his Honda team's weak points, road courses.

Kirkwood has turned himself into a bona fide street specialist, while he is no slouch on ovals.

After starting the season with fourth and second places, the inaugural street event in Arlington saw him power home over Palou to lead the championship, before the Spaniard hit back at Barber Motorsports Park, recording yet another 10s-plus romp in what was a 'Barber beatdown.'

But in what could be counted as a moral win, Kirkwood stuck it out for a vital fifth place in a traditionally weak format for himself and Andretti Global.

Ahead of another street stoush at Long Beach, the laid-back surfer-turned-race driver still has a two-point lead.

And for Andretti, 'America's team' is also looking to snap a title drought that stretches back to Ryan Hunter-Reay's 2012 season, where the American snatched it by three points in the finale against Penske's Will Power.

But it is not just Kirkwood who appears to have the tools to compete with CGR, because this season, like last, the Chevrolet outfit Arrow McLaren still has the pace through Christian Lundgaard and Pato O'Ward.

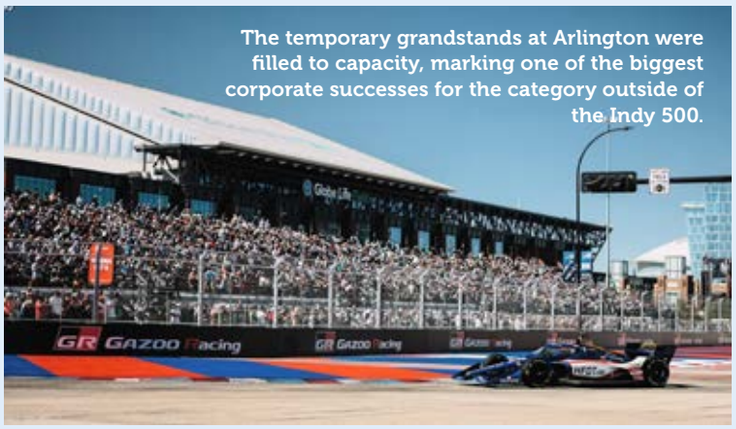
After last year's Nashville finale, it was O'Ward, after all, who finished as a distant vice-champion.

At the Barber outing, although the margin was 13.277s, a racy Lundgaard was thwarted by a stubborn right-rear Firestone.

Those 16 seconds stuck in the pitlane were greater than the eventual margin.

Once again, only perfection can topple the #10 Honda.

The Arlington glimpse



The temporary grandstands at Arlington were filled to capacity, marking one of the biggest corporate successes for the category outside of the Indy 500.





**INDYCAR STANDINGS (AFTER 4 ROUNDS)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Kyle Kirkwood (Andretti) | 156 |
| Alex Palou (CGR) | 154 |
| Christian Lundgaard (McLaren) | 121 |
| David Malukas (Penske) | 116 |
| Josef Newgarden (Penske) | 113 |

**MAIN: Kyle Kirkwood delivers at the Grand Prix of Arlington after chasing down Alex Palou to take the championship lead.**

**INSET TOP: All but one of Kyle Kirkwood's six career wins have come on street circuits, but he will need consistency on road courses to challenge Alex Palou**

**INSET ABOVE: Scott McLaughlin's Penske Chevrolet left the track during practice at Barber Motorsports Park.**

The Arlington street race was two years in the making as a joint venture between Penske Entertainment and the Dallas Cowboys, and the wait paid off.

As IndyCar hurtles toward a chassis and increased hybrid change in 2027, the challenge of attracting a bigger slice of the local and global audience has been a key factor.

Outside of the Indy 500, crowds have been sub-standard, and some new, more corporately attractive venues are needed.

The Grand Prix of Arlington provided that blueprint, with its nine temporary grandstands filled to capacity, and a 14-turn, 4.3km track that included a 1.6km straight that produced speeds second only to the Indy 500.

In the words of McLaren's O'Ward, it should be the "new standard on what IndyCar races should look like every single weekend."

From a driver's perspective, the day belonged to Kirkwood.

After what looked like another Palou romp, the #27 Honda found the speed to run the #10 down with an ambitious late-braking pass with 15 of the 70 laps remaining.

It forced Palou into a defensive manoeuvre and, in a race that ended under a late yellow flag, the first of the race, the alternative softs of Kirkwood's Honda were never going to be run down.

And in another boost for Andretti, Aussie Will Power scored his first podium for the team after his switch from Penske, following a horror start and multiple crashes in Florida and Phoenix.

The win gave Kirkwood a 26-point buffer.

Alabama slammer

The bespoke sculpture-filled Barber Motorsports Park looked like it was Palou's from the outset, while the day arguably belonged to an IndyCar veteran who reclaimed his potential with a drought-breaking podium.

The eventual winner took pole over Penske's David Malukas by 0.113s and immediately took control at the start of the 90 laps in a full green race.

At the end of the day, he led 79 laps and, aside from Lundgaard, would have been unchallenged.

There was also more drama for Power in qualifying, forced to start at the rear after a brake failure put him hard into the tyre barrier at Turn 5.

He fought back to finish 12th, and the signs are there that the 45-year-old still has the pace to contend.

He was not the only Antipodean to find trouble, with Penske's Scott McLaughlin suffering a more unusual moment, as his Chevrolet attempted to leave the park and head into the woods in practice.

After touching the grass at Turn 1, his car punched a hole through a fence after clipping the tyre barrier. It could have been much worse, but the Kiwi will fight another day with a clean bill of health.

In another surprise, Graham Rahal of Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing reminded the field how strong he can be, holding on for third place behind Lundgaard.

He was in second during the closing stages, but a lack of push-to-pass seconds saw the Dane run him down before Rahal resolutely fought off Malukas.

It was the 37-year-old's first podium in 41 races.

A terrifying clarity

Heading forward, for Kirkwood and for the papaya Chevrolets, the only answer is consistency.

If not for Palou's crash at Phoenix Raceway, he would have almost certainly finished on the podium, if not pushed Josef Newgarden for the win.

Andretti needs to keep maximising its improving road course package, and should lean on Power's experience to help push Kirkwood towards a maiden title.

For McLaren, it is about minimising errors and taking its chances. There always seems to be something that gets in the way, because its drivers are more than capable contenders.

Last season, Palou only finished outside the top 10 on two occasions, and it looks set to be the case again, barring any mistakes.

***After the Long Beach street race on 19 April, the season-defining 'Month of May' arrives once more, beginning with the Indianapolis Motor Speedway road course before the 110th Indy 500.***



Alex Palou dominated at Barber Motorsports Park and was never challenged, cutting into Kyle Kirkwood's lead with a flawless road course performance.




Hamlin leads the field in Las Vegas, eventually powering his way to another record-breaking win.

# THE SPEEDWAY STRETCH

The NASCAR Cup Series has entered the midst of its biggest speedway stretch on the regular season calendar, and after two more visits to Victory Lane for the rampantly tuned-up Toyota machinery, a Chevrolet entry finally stuck its nose into proceedings.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: GETTYIMAGES

**BETWEEN PHOENIX** Raceway and Texas Motor Speedway, it is an all-oval run of eight rounds that will define much of the pecking order as NASCAR charges toward the Cup Series playoffs.

It is no longer win and you are in, and consistency across formats now rewards the top 16 that reach the postseason.

If a driver cannot perform across intermediate tracks, short tracks and superspeedways, the top 16 is unlikely regardless.

After COTA and Phoenix opened March, Las Vegas, Darlington and Martinsville closed out the stretch before the Easter break.

Before the break, the action remained relentless.

Points leader Tyler Reddick and Michael Jordan's 23XI Toyota operation struck again at Darlington, but not before Joe Gibbs Racing's Denny Hamlin reminded the field at Las Vegas that he remains a force.

Career win number 61 elevated Hamlin to outright 10th on the all-time list, breaking a tie with Kevin Harvick.

At Martinsville, Round 7 ended the longest winless start to a season for Chevrolet and Hendrick Motorsports since 2018.

Chase Elliott delivered the breakthrough, securing his 22nd career victory and claiming the H. Clay Earles Martinsville Grandfather Clock.

## DICING IT WITH THE BEST OF THEM

**THE TRADITIONAL** villain of the NASCAR field continues to add to his tally after six wins in 2025.

Denny 'Dynamite' Hamlin has seen his public perception soften, particularly after the emotional toll of the previous season.

Las Vegas proved a turning point, as he wrestled control from William Byron and held off a charging Elliott by 0.502s to move to fourth in the standings.

"I knew it took a few weeks to feel like driving," Hamlin said.

"Over the last couple of weeks, I definitely regained my love of it,






Hugging the famously weathered paint at Darlington, Reddick delivers win No.4 of the season.



RIGHT: Jordan and his go-to shooter are making a habit of delivering strong post-race celebrations in 2026.

BELOW RIGHT: The granddaddy of all trophies, Elliott plants a kiss on his newest prize after opening Chevrolet's account for the year.



got refocused. These are great opportunities for us.

"...I feel very fortunate to be on the list. Those guys were far more talented than I ever thought about being.

"To this day, I work hard at my craft. Days like today certainly make me feel happy about where I'm at in the sport still and what I can still do."

## NASCAR BRINGS THE PACKAGE TO DARLINGTON

**MUCH WAS** made of introducing the new short track package to Darlington, a circuit that requires little assistance in producing drama.

The expectation was increased chaos, but the opposite eventuated, with only four cautions.

Drivers were able to adopt a more conservative approach rather than forcing overtakes on a track where passing remains difficult.

Statistically, passes increased from 2966 last year to 3216, while the race produced 12 additional lead changes.

Further evaluation is required.

Hamlin noted that "I just didn't notice that much," while Ryan Blaney said, "This is the first time I think in my Cup career that I would let a guy go," because he would "see him again in 20 minutes".

He added, "I don't know if that would have happened in the other package."

## REDDICK EXTENDS HIS ADVANTAGE

**DARLINGTON ALSO** saw Reddick extend his championship lead with another resilient drive.

The 23XI driver overcame a faulty cool suit, an alternator issue that required a battery change, and late-race contact to defeat Brad Keselowski and Blaney, stretching his lead to 95 points over the latter.

After six rounds, his 12th career win also marked the team's most successful season to date.

Reddick became just the third driver to win four of the opening six races, joining Dale Earnhardt in 1997 and Bill Elliott in 1992.

His late contact stemmed from a strategic call, as Chris Buescher received a late instruction to pit, resulting in Reddick making contact on the high line.

## AWAKE, THE BEAST OF DETROIT

**WITH FORD** breaking through at Phoenix, Chevrolet responded at Martinsville through Elliott and Hendrick Motorsports.

A short pitstop under caution handed the #9 Chevrolet track position with 68 laps remaining, which ultimately proved decisive.

Even heavy traffic could not halt Elliott's momentum as he secured victory and climbed to second in the standings.

For much of the race, Hamlin appeared set for another win, leading 292 of the 400 laps before settling short.

Martinsville also produced a strong performance from Shane van Gisbergen, who finished 11th and spent his most laps inside the top 10 on an oval to date.

However, a restart issue again cost him another potential top-10 result.

The current stretch of eight oval races represents one of the biggest challenges of his career, with Bristol, Kansas, Talladega and Texas still to come.

If he remains inside the top 16 by Round 12, Watkins Glen could present a significant opportunity.

## NASCAR TOP 16 AFTER 7 RACES

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Tyler Reddick | #45 Toyota | 353 |
| Ryan Blaney | #12 Ford | 271 |
| Denny Hamlin | #11 Toyota | 259 |
| Chase Elliott | #9 Chevrolet | 249 |
| William Byron | #24 Chevrolet | 238 |
| Ty Gibbs | #54 Toyota | 222 |
| Christopher Bell | #20 Toyota | 212 |
| Brad Keselowski | #6 Ford | 206 |
| Kyle Larson | #5 Chevrolet | 206 |
| Chris Buescher | #17 Ford | 206 |
| Bubba Wallace | #23 Toyota | 206 |
| Joey Logano | #22 Ford | 185 |
| Ryan Preece | #60 Ford | 180 |
| Shane van Gisbergen | #97 Chevrolet | 174 |
| Carson Hocevar | #77 Chevrolet | 171 |
| Daniel Suarez | #77 Chevrolet | 167 |

# PESCARA (COPPA ACERBO)

The long-lost Pescara circuit on Italy's Adriatic coast met its demise in 1961, but its roots date back to 1924, when it was a breeding ground for a nationalist celebration of a World War I hero. Enzo Ferrari is also deeply intertwined in both its early and closing chapters.

STORY: TIMOTHY WILLIAM NEAL | IMAGES: QUATTRORUOTE, GETTYIMAGES

**IN THE** historical motorsport canon, Pescara is most famous for its one-off Formula 1 Grand Prix in 1957 and for being the longest track ever used since the regulations began in 1950.

But in broader terms, it was much more than that, for it signalled the true end of a motorsport era as the last ever true grand prix road race.

Although racing on public roads continued afterwards, the notion of machines roaring from village to village came to an end with Pescara.

On that day, Stirling Moss in a Vanwall 254 outlasted Juan Manuel Fangio in his Maserati 250F after 460.42km of racing.

With a single lap lasting around 10 minutes, Moss set the lap record at 9m44.6s, across 25.5km and at an average speed of 157.5km/h; that race distance equated to just 18 laps.

In the scorching coastal hills of Abruzzo, drivers navigated through tight villages in the high passes and negotiated sharp hairpins with treacherous brick walls and gutters, tree-lined roads, and two mammoth 8km straights on roads that seriously tested the goodwill of a machine's componentry.

Only seven of the 16 starters finished.

All up, a race at Pescara passed through the main town, as well as three villages and some six hamlets.

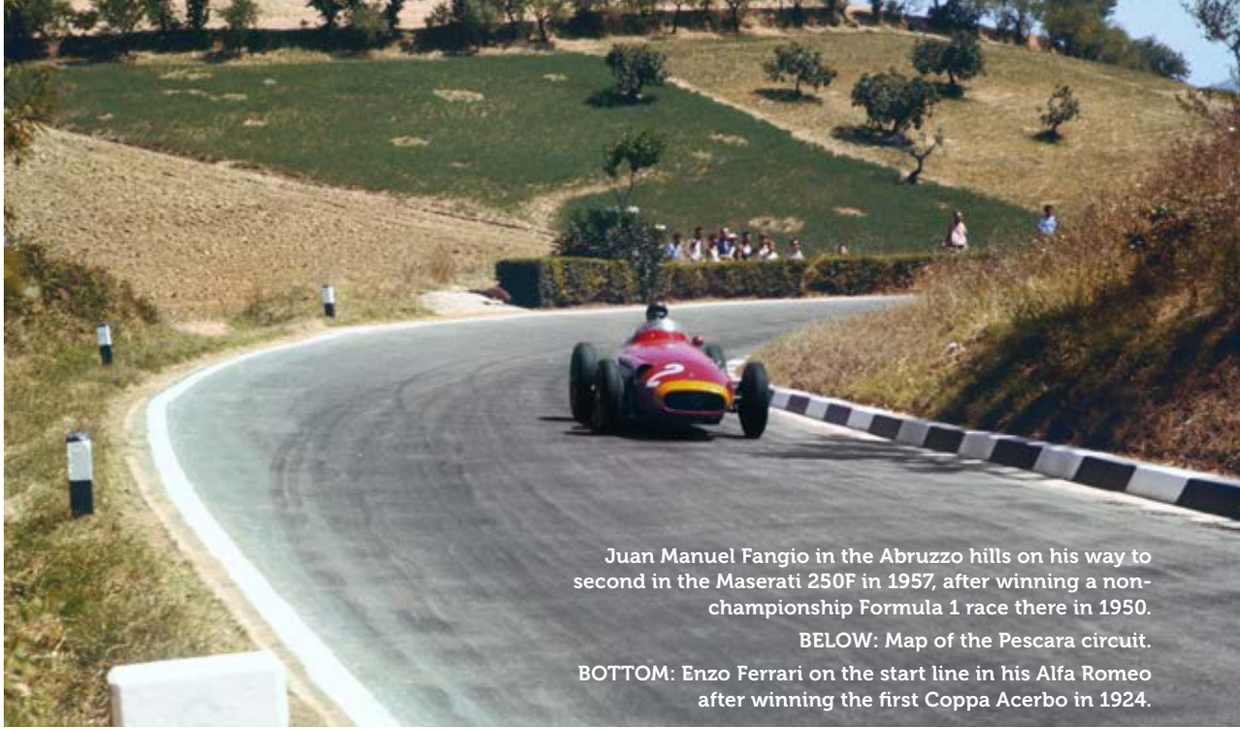
In the high-elevation areas, the twists and turns between the towns of Spoltore and Cappelle featured alarmingly narrow passages between buildings.

It was often compared to the Nürburgring, with the same axle ratios used in the Formula 1 race, only narrower and bumpier, and the straight leading down to the final turn at Montesilvano was a nightmare to navigate at speed.





The race and circuit were created in honour of fallen Italian war hero Tito Acerbo, whose brother Giacomo was a key political figure of the era.

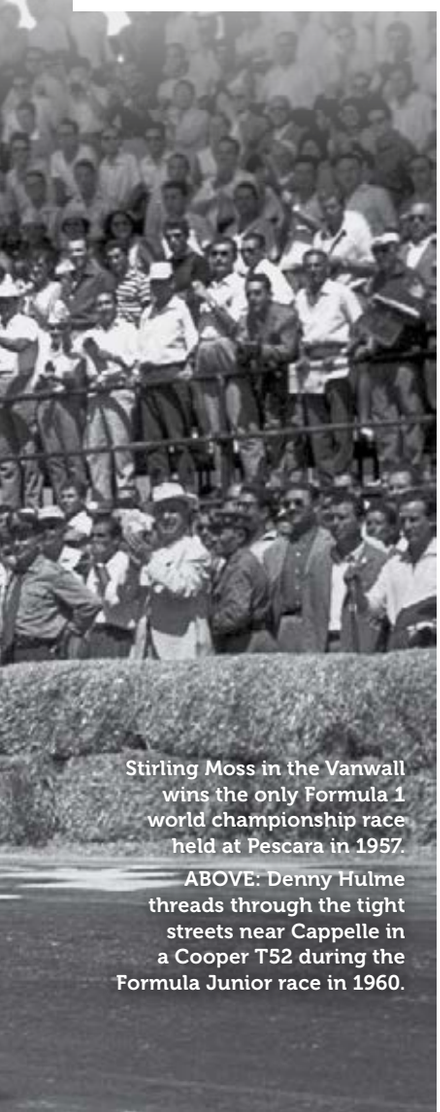


Juan Manuel Fangio in the Abruzzo hills on his way to second in the Maserati 250F in 1957, after winning a non-championship Formula 1 race there in 1950.

BELOW: Map of the Pescara circuit.

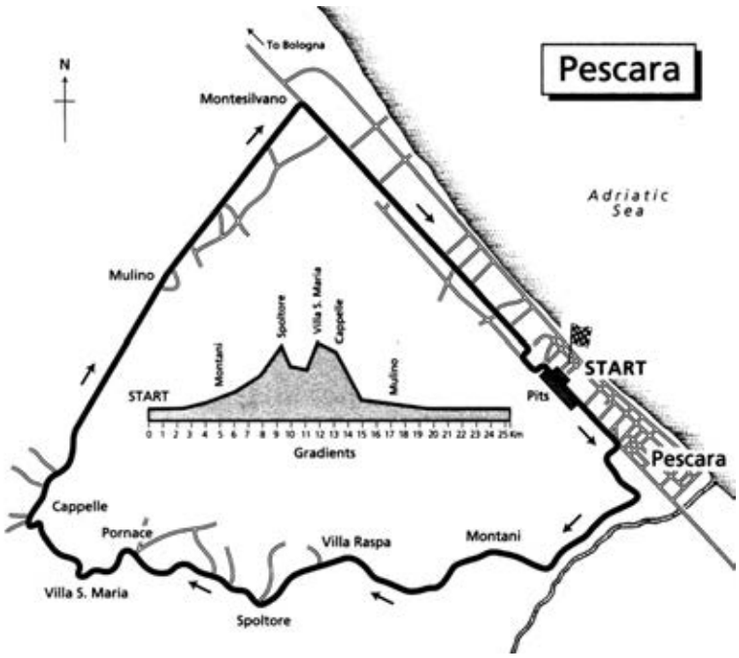
BOTTOM: Enzo Ferrari on the start line in his Alfa Romeo after winning the first Coppa Acerbo in 1924.





Stirling Moss in the Vanwall wins the only Formula 1 world championship race held at Pescara in 1957.

ABOVE: Denny Hulme threads through the tight streets near Cappelle in a Cooper T52 during the Formula Junior race in 1960.







Despite the danger, Fangio clocked 309km/h.

Jack Brabham, who was in a Cooper-Climax that day, said: "Those road courses were bloody dangerous and nasty, all of them. And Pescara was the worst."

On the other hand, Moss, buoyed by the win and the experience, referenced that it was a throwback to the golden years of grand prix racing before Formula 1.

"I thought it was fantastic. It was just like being a kid, out for a burn-up. A wonderful feeling. What racing's all about."

It's important to note that it was largely between Vanwall and Maserati that day, because Ferrari refused to bring the 801 Formula 1 V8 cars, citing that the track was far too dangerous to race on.

But in truth, there were political reasons behind it.

The government was on the verge of banning all racing on public roads after the Mille Miglia Ferrari incident just four months prior, and Ferrari was facing a potentially crippling lawsuit over 11 counts of manslaughter.

After his cars had been seized by police after the race, there were strong rumours he'd never race in Italy again, while rumours of possible jail time persisted in the media.

He also strongly resented the lack of support from the racing fraternity over the matter.

Besides, Fangio had already won the title by the Pescara round, after previously winning with Ferrari in 1956, and perhaps Enzo also didn't fancy the 801's chances on a course that was likely to test the tolerance of the machinery, in a winless season, and with a machine that was a new evolution of the successful D50.

## WHERE FERRARI MADE HIS NAME

**IN THE** end, it was telling that Ferrari wouldn't be at Formula 1's only



Jo Bonnier races through the town at Pescara in a Maserati, note the open electrical pole and lack of barriers as spectators stand trackside.

BELOW: The wreckage of Guy Moll's Scuderia Ferrari Alfa P3 against a house after the fatal 1934 crash.

FAR RIGHT: A 1938 public announcement poster warns of the dangers posed by racecars passing through the towns.

appearance in Pescara, for Enzo was the winner of the first-ever race there in 1924.

As a spectacle, it was perceived as a mini-Targa Florio.

In those years, it was known as the Coppa Acerbo, and Ferrari declared that it was "here, I made my name as a driver".

Driving an Alfa Romeo RL, the man who would become so iconic in motorsport, won his third straight and last ever grand prix just two months after Benito Mussolini solidified absolute power.

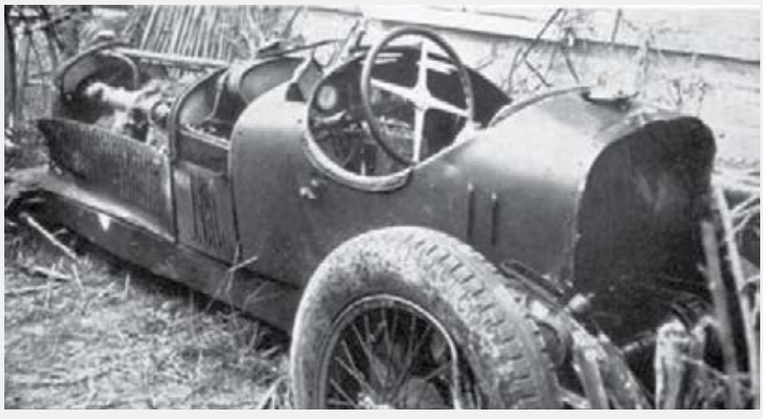
Why is that important?

Because that's how the track came to be in the first place.

By the late 1940s and the close of World War II, the Acerbo name had stinging implications toward the recent past.

And as every tale has a million threads, this one can start in 1918, close to the church of Croce di Piave near the city of Venice.

That's where famed Italian military officer Tito Acerbo died in the field defending the Piave River against Austro-Hungarian attackers.



Leaping forward to a politically divided Italy in 1922, the March on Rome resulted in the Mussolini-led National Fascist Party taking power.

Tito's brother, Giacomo Acerbo, an economist, politician, and right-hand man of Mussolini, eventually decreed the infamous Acerbo Law, allowing the party to take a two-thirds supermajority by the 1924 election, cementing it as an unopposed force for the next 23 years.

That same year, in celebration of his brother and in their birthplace of Abruzzo, Acerbo launched the Coppa Acerbo grand prix with a quick turnaround.

The foremost concern of the regime was quickly building industrial and mechanical growth, and that heavily included the automotive industry.

This would later be mirrored in Nazi Germany, which brought about the creation of Mercedes and Auto Union.

So, like most tracks that exist in Italy to this day, Pescara was born in this very atmosphere.

While Acerbo eventually split publicly with Mussolini over his alignment with Nazi Germany, he was thought







FROM TOP: Lorenzo Bandini, winner of the final race at Pescara, in the Ferrari 250 TR during the 1961 World Sportscar Championship round

Rudolf Hasse's Mercedes W154 steps out through a hamlet on the mountain climb.

Achille Varzi in an Auto Union blasts past pit exit on the straight, heading towards the right-handers that begin the mountain climb.




The danger of the track was a cornerstone of its promotions.

to be directly involved in the brutal murder of socialist opposition leader Giacomo Matteotti, only one month prior to the 1924 race.

Coupled with his actions in helping the party take absolute power, the Acerbo name had unwanted connotations following the war.

Acerbo was sentenced to death after the war for his connection to the murder, though he was eventually pardoned, as many Italian leaders were, except Mussolini, whose body was hanged upside down in Milan.

This is why the circuit was renamed the Circuito di Pescara in 1947, with the pit straight located in the town of Pescara, Abruzzo's most populous city.

In terms of the name change, Ferrari wrote in his memoirs:

"One might say it has been purged from it. This, I feel, is taking things a bit too far, for the race was actually named after the minister's brother, who was not a Fascist but a heroic soldier who was decorated for valour in the First World War."

After the initial event was deemed a success, Acerbo linked the race to Italy's national Ferragosto holiday and declared it a Manifestazione Automobilistica.

It became a festival in its own right, hosting four categories and becoming a popular event for Europe's manufacturers and best drivers to test themselves.

## 24 HOUR RACE

**BY 1934,** the Coppa Acerbo even held a 24-hour race for sportscars to emulate the success of Le Mans.

It was won by Franco Cortese and Francesco Severi in an Alfa Romeo, held once more in 1935, then reduced to a six-hour event, then 12 hours, and finally eight hours in its final year in 1938.

It had become a track of great fanfare, with a huge poster of Mussolini displayed on the pit straight, and commercial automotive signage everywhere, becoming one of the continent's most prestigious events with an average attendance of a quarter of a million across 15 editions of the Coppa Acerbo.

Of Acerbo's keen interest in motorsport, Ferrari noted:

"He had, for instance, an absolute mania for the maximum permitted number of cars on the start line, 24 for the grand prix and 60 for the 12-hour race. On one occasion, he rang me up only a week before the race to tell me he needed 11 cars to make up the quota. I was dumbfounded: wherever was I going to get 11 Alfa Romeos from? And yet I had to find them somehow. Acerbo was like that."

Although Ferrari was said to be apolitical, particularly after the war, he had close connections to Italy's fascist elite, as did much of the automotive industry during that period of industrial expansion.

In the golden era of grand prix racing and the advent of the 750kg formula, and up until the outbreak of World War II, the likes of Giuseppe Campari, Luigi Fagioli, Tazio Nuvolari, Achille Varzi, Rudolf Caracciola, and Bernd Rosemeyer all tasted success.

For those big and fast machines in particular, the track posed a high rate of carburation issues owing to variable speeds and elevations rising to more than 185m above sea level.

And with the speed of the new German machines, chicanes were installed on the straights to try to curtail major incidents, of which the track was notable for two in particular.

In 1934, young French-Algerian racer Guy Moll, a driver Ferrari believed could have been one of the greatest of all time, lost his life at just 25 in an Alfa Romeo Tipo B.

Through the flying kilometre from Montesilvano to the pits, which offered a cash prize for the fastest time, he lost control, hit a stone wall, was thrown from the car and died instantly, while the car continued into a house.

Then three years later, in a voiturette race in 1937, four spectators were killed when a Maserati 6CM driven by Pasquale Ermini rolled down a hill in the town of Villa Raspa at the infamous Curva del Mattatoio, with another five critically injured.

The last winner before the war was Clemente Biondetti, in a voiturette Alfa Romeo 158, in 1939.

After the war and its renaming to Pescara, the majority of events were sportscar races, until it became a non-championship round of the Formula 1 season in 1950 for two seasons, with Fangio the first Pescara winner in the new formula in an Alfa Romeo 158, and José Froilán González winning in 1951.

That González win also marked the first time that Ferrari triumphed at Pescara, in the 4.5-litre 375, just a month after registering its first Formula 1 victory at Silverstone with the same driver.

The Gran Premio di Pescara then became a 12-hour race for sportscars for the next two years, both of which Ferrari won with its 250S and 375 MM coupe.

Following the 1957 grand prix, which was a one-off replacement for the cancelled Dutch and Belgian rounds, the track and the Gran Premio di Pescara went into hibernation for two years, until 1960.

It returned with a round of the Formula Junior championship, won by Kiwi Denny Hulme in a Cooper T52, and noted as the 26th Gran Premio di Pescara.

Fangio presented the trophy, and a young Hulme gave the Argentine great his signature book, where the champion signed it: 'To the very clever winner of the Grand Prix of Pescara.'

The track was then finally added as a round of the 1961 World Sportscar Championship, and the season-ending 4 Hours of Pescara would be its last ever race.

It was won by Ferrari, with Lorenzo Bandini and Giorgio Scarlatti in a 250 TR.

Just as Ferrari won its first race, it was fitting that a car bearing his badge should see out Pescara, or as he would have preferred, the Coppa Acerbo.

In 1962, the ACI and FIA revoked the track's licence, condemning Pescara as unfit for racing.

TIME MACHINE

# THE GIANT SLAYERS OF GREEN HELL

The 1966 World Sportscar Championship is forever imprinted as the year that Ford overcame its bitter enemies from Maranello at Le Mans, but in the Group 6 championship, there was another machine that appeared briefly that season, and it conquered them both at the Green Hell.

*By Timothy William Neal*

**ONE COULD** forgive the legendary John Surtees if he had quizzically peered across the cars lined up opposite him at the 1966 Nurburgring 1000km, and perhaps thought to himself, "What in the F#@k is that next to my Ferrari P3?"

Standing next to him, ready to sprint, was Swede Jo Bonnier, who was co-driving with a pretty decent steerer by the name of Phil Hill, the 1961 Formula 1 world champion.

Bonnier was at the Le Mans-style starting line because he won a coin toss with Hill.

Hill had done a lap of 8m35.4s to earn second fastest, 3s short of Surtees, in a car with no experience in Europe, let alone the Green Hell.

Even one of the creators of this 'mysterious' car had looked at the 4-litre Ferrari pre-race, and hopelessly noted, "It could break just as easily as our car could."

This was only two weeks out from one of the most talked-about Le Mans 24 Hours in the storied history of the race.

But before that happened, 5 June 1966 had to be negotiated in front of 350,000 spectators.

To that point, Ford with its GT40 MkII, and Ferrari with its assortment of Group 6 and 4 250LM, Dino 206 and 330 P3 Barchetta, were level pegging at the top of the table through five rounds.

Surtees might also have thought to himself, as he prepared to leg it to his beautiful 330 with its exquisite and guttural V12 throb: "That thing's actually pretty sharp looking, but it ain't getting by me!"



In the Le Mans pits in 1966, the Chaparral 2D made its final appearance before the programme moved on. Image: GettyImages

But get on by it did, all the way to the chequered flag.

Two laps in, Surtees pulled into the pits, needing a new damper and spring unit, and what thundered past, with an actual Texas licence plate, was an aerodynamic and mechanically sound beast that no one had taken seriously.

It ran so well on the day that its only problem would be a malfunctioning windscreen wiper.

That machine was the 5.3-litre Chaparral 2D endurance coupe, built by American racing and engineering great Jim Hall and the Chaparral Cars racing team in the United States, powered by a Chevrolet V8.

But the win was no gift despite Surtees' eventual retirement.

The sole #7 Chaparral would take the win over two Group 4 Ferrari factory 206s, with the likes of Lorenzo Bandini following behind, 40 seconds in arrears.

So how did a privateer Midland, Texas-based builder take on the Ferrari factory at Europe's toughest circuit?

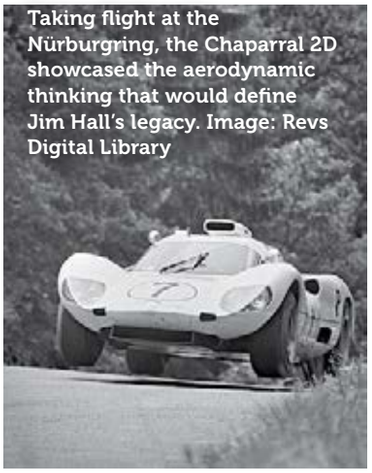
To be fair to Ford, it didn't enter a factory car that weekend, but there were still six GT40s on the grid, while 77 cars started, with only 32 classified teams surviving the distance.

If you think you've clocked the Chaparral name before, named after the roadrunner bird, which also conveniently combines the sound of the founders' surnames Hap Sharp and Jim Hall, that's because the Chaparral K 'Yellow Submarine' dominated the 1980 Indy 500 with Johnny Rutherford at the wheel, and a Chaparral 2G ended Hall's racing career in Las Vegas.

But Chaparral is best known for its revolutionary high rear-winged 2E, 2F, 2H, and the banned 2J 'vacuum car' that paved the way for ground effects. And for the 2G, which tried its best to kill him… but that is whole other story.

Some radical stuff came out of Hall's brain, and he's heavily credited with changing how the racing world thought about and approached downforce.

Yet, the more subtle 2D holds a special place for its 1966 victory.


Taking flight at the Nürburgring, the Chaparral 2D showcased the aerodynamic thinking that would define Jim Hall's legacy. Image: Revs Digital Library

## GAME CHANGER

**TO THAT** date, Chaparral cars had been racing in the United States in the Can-Am series, as well as taking its first shock win a year earlier at the Sebring 12 Hour in 1965, when an open cockpit 2A took victory with Hall at the wheel in a thunderous rainstorm.

That day, it overcame a factory GT40 driven by Ken Miles and Bruce McLaren, the same car that won the Daytona 24 that year, minus McLaren.

For some brief background on downforce history, when the ACO mandated full-height windscreens as a reaction to the 1955 Le Mans accident, what it didn't realise was that it created a low-pressure area to the cockpit, which also happened to suck exhaust gas into the cockpit.

As a reaction to this, Ferrari's Richie Ginther had a 3-inch-high 'fence' installed on the rear of a 246 SP.

It reduced his lap times by 2 seconds, ushered in the era of purposeful aerodynamic downforce, and opened the racing world to geniuses like Hall.



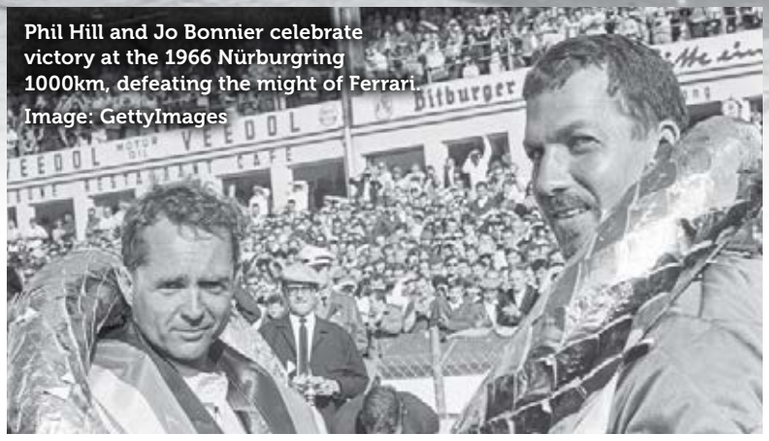
The Chaparral 2D at the Nürburgring 1000km in 1966, where the American-built prototype stunned the European establishment.

Image: GettyImages

He was a Caltech product and used his engineering smarts to apply logic and science to his Chaparral designs, building on these early, partly accidental discoveries.

When his first machine, Chaparral I, was experiencing excessive nose lift, he designed spoilers to counteract the negative force, and the journey to develop serious downforce began. He had even been shocked by the initial results.

"I know studying math isn't any fun. But boy, there's some stuff you can do with it," Hall once said.



Phil Hill and Jo Bonnier celebrate victory at the 1966 Nürburgring 1000km, defeating the might of Ferrari.

Image: GettyImages

## THAT BLOODY WIPER

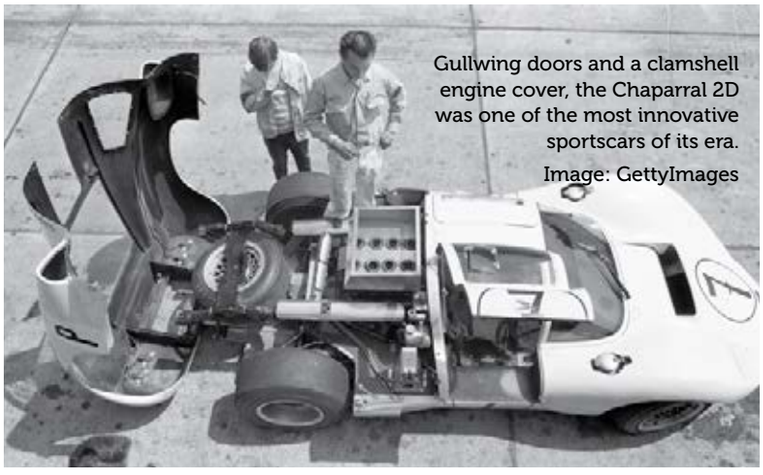
**IN BUILDING** the 924kg fibreglass semi-monocoque 2D, there was a great amount of experimentation in surface shapes to take full advantage of airflow, coupled with an automatic two-speed transmission to protect drivetrain wear and driver fatigue, left-foot braking for more controlled cornering ability, and, of course, the aluminium small-block, 327 cubic-inch V8.

It also featured a distinct intake snorkel that would crudely punch air onto the engine.

"We basically re-bodied our Chaparral 2 chassis with a coupe body and used our proven 327 cubic-inch aluminium block engine in addition to the closed cockpit, and we cleaned up the aerodynamic drag for increased top speed on high-speed circuits," Hall said about building the 2D.

Easy stuff.

When it was mentioned that the only thing that broke that day at the Nurburgring was the windscreen wiper, it was actually the thing that nearly destroyed the miracle.



Gullwing doors and a clamshell engine cover, the Chaparral 2D was one of the most innovative sportscars of its era.

Image: GettyImages

Towards the end of the race, and with a healthy lead of more than four minutes, the heavens opened.

Hill had to pull in for a lengthy pitstop for wet tyres, and the lead was only 90 seconds when he pulled out, partly exacerbated by the fact that the 2D also had five-bolt wheels.

Vitally, the 2D also had small, light gullwing doors that opened with direct access to the windscreen.

This came in handy because when Hill switched the wipers on, they fell forward and started wiping the car's bonnet while mud splashed up from the track, completely obscuring his vision.

"...I couldn't risk shutting off the engine because the batteries were so small that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get it restarted. And I could not stop the car because crunching it into gear when the engine was running was a definite no-no," Hill reflected.

With that, he slowed into first gear after the Foxhole, unlatched the door, pulled himself from the seat, and started making a small, clear patch on the windscreen with his hand, while still moving.

A TV camera actually caught the moment, and reports said that the 2D had broken down, and the driver had disembarked.

In fact, it had stormed on to victory.

The 2D would have only one more outing, at Le Mans, before Hall moved on to the 2E.

Hall himself admitted in his later years that he should have prioritised winning over his desperate search for invention.

That last outing was, unfortunately, a failure.

After qualifying 10th in an army of P3s and MkIIs, the next best make was a Porsche 906 in 22nd, a failed battery at midnight ended things after 111 laps.

With Hill retiring in 1967, he would finish his career with Chaparral, saying:

"It sure was nice to finish one's career in the winner's circle. The Chaparrals were the best race cars I ever drove."

And by the way, Surtees, who was the first to congratulate Hill and Bonnier, ended up racing Chaparrals in 1969, driving the wild 2H in Can-Am.

# 2016 - VOLVO COMMITS...FOR NOW

**IN WHAT** sadly proved to be a false dawn, Volvo appeared set to pledge its commitment to GRM and V8 Supercars into the future

After months of speculation, *Auto Action* believed a deal had been done for Volvo to stay in the Aussie series with two factory-backed S60s at GRM.

No details of the length of the deal were confirmed, but it was believed to be sealed for "at least two years."

"Volvo is staying V8 Supercars and will continue to compete with a V8 engine. AA can confirm a deal between the Swedish manufacturer, its Australian division and GRM has been agreed in principle," the report read.

The inaugural deal between the Swedish brand and GRM that started in 2014 was up for renewal at the end of the ongoing 2016 season.

It was a further boost for GRM and Scott McLaughlin, who were flying high after smashing their V8 Supercars rivals at the latest round in Phillip Island.

The timely performance was the most emphatic of the Volvo era, being a crushing, clean sweep.

There was also speculation surrounding McLaughlin's future as he was also out of contract at the end of 2016.

While the apparent Volvo renewal was good news for V8 Supercars, amazingly the Swedish brand backflipped within a month.

In the following month, a directive from Polestar saw Volvo withdraw factory support from GRM, meaning the much-loved S60S disappeared from the grid at the end of 2016 and was restricted to three memorable seasons in V8 Supercars.







## 1976

**COLIN BOND** stole the lead of the Australian Touring Car Championship with a fine win in round four at Sandown.

However, Peter Brock was still proclaimed as the hero of the day.

Driving his own Holden L34 Torana for the first time, Brock flew from the back of the grid to second place.

Even the leader Bond was well within his grasp at the finish before Brock had to back off as he was running low on fuel and slowed down.

Frank Gardner impressed in third, a position he inherited after the engine of early leader Allan Moffat blew up in spectacular fashion on the back straight.




## 1986

**THERE WERE** brief moments of glory for the Aussies in the World Touring Car Championship round at Monza. Two Aussie Commodores featuring the likes of Peter Brock, Allan Moffat and Allan Grice battled the Europeans for the first time and showed promise. Sadly, Moffat did not even get to drive as Brock's Holden Dealer Team entry retired after seven laps with a rare axle failure. Grice's virtually unsponsored car stole the show and even hit the lead early before a fuel pump failure arrived, and Ned Bailey found the gravel trap. The progress of an ambitious all-Australian Formula 1 team had slowed. In January, there were high hopes, but come April talks had faded with contacts stating divisions around how it would contribute to the technology of F1 surfacing.




## 1996

**AT 21,** Craig Lowndes had started his ATCC career in such an impressive fashion that Tom Walkinshaw had seen enough within three rounds to sign him up for the next decade.

Lowndes signed a 10-year management contract with Walkinshaw with the hope of getting 'The Kid' all the way to F1. The contract saw Lowndes exclusively drive TWR cars for any team anywhere around the world, opening up the UK F3 opportunity he would take in 1997 after the rookie ATCC crown. "It has been a long time coming, but it is a fantastic feeling," Lowndes said. "I am virtually getting paid to race cars for at least the next 10 years, which is pretty amazing." In the end, five years later, Lowndes left HRT and Walkinshaw to join Fred Gibson's 00 Motorsport in 2001.




## 2006

**THE 2006** Australian Grand Prix was a crazy affair and a story of what could have been for home hero Mark Webber.

During his second and final season at Williams, Webber found himself leading his home Grand Prix at Albert Park.

Having led before the cycle of stops, Webber was on track for a strong third and break the Australian Grand Prix curse.

However, he only lasted 23 laps before his gearbox failed.

"I think we had a lot of other people covered and a podium would have been reasonably straightforward," Webber said.

"But you need to get to the chequered flag. We have the pace, but not the reliability."

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