

6th July 2003 - Magny-Bores - The French GP

The French Grand Prix has been held yet again at Magny-Bores, the folly of the late President Mitterand who decided that politics would better decide the location of the circuit to host the Grand Prix, rather than character, soul and track layout. It's the flattest track of the year, with the teams being able to trim their cars out to run at their absolute lowest, maximising the ground-effect downforce which they can generate. Gone for this year though was the chicane before Lycée – the track had been reprofiled from Château d'Eau to the start/finish line in order to “improve” the racing. Did it?

The final chicane is not as fiddly and cumbersome as before, but then it would have been very difficult to make it worse. It was always a case of taking as much kerb as possible, with Ayrton Senna one time taking it to extremes by taking so much speed through the chicane that he knew he would be thrown into the wall. But the timing beam was just on the exit, and he crossed it while crashing – in pole position. Today the kerbs are lower and the corner is much less sharp, and the cars could power right through it.

But to answer the question – did it hell! There was not one extra overtaking manoeuvre as a result of the changes. There was also a lot of extra tarmac on the run-off areas, but all this did was to create extra track for the drivers to use, some of them getting the entire car onto the “run-off” area to get a better line into the corner. This needs to be changed – there really should be a penalty for going off the track, not a benefit.

What was obvious this race was how bad the Sauber chassis is. With Barrichello on a recovery mission after his spin at the final chicane, the speed differential between the Ferrari and the Sauber on the run up to the Adelaide hairpin was enormous, in cars with basically the same engine, albeit the Sauber being a revision or two behind. At the beginning of the year, Peter Sauber was saying how much of a difference his new wind tunnel was going to make – it isn't. I suggest that they re-examine the figures that they are getting from it.

The race still hasn't changed my opinion of Ralf Schumacher – he still only wins when he is in front and not under pressure. He never seems to win if he has to overtake to win, and in the last two races he hasn't been put under any real pressure. Earlier in the year, he twice made mistakes under pressure to drop down the finishing order. He will do the same again if anyone gets consistently on his gearbox. He hasn't answered the questions which resurfaced after Canada, and he won't until he wins by racing.

Something also needs to be done about the refuelling rigs. This race again had problems, with Button running out of fuel due to a malfunctioning rig, and Coulthard leaving with the rig still attached as it wouldn't disconnect properly. His two refuelling mechanics were knocked to the floor, and were lucky to escape unhurt – indeed, they were more concerned about getting Coulthard out of the pits quickly than themselves, waving him out while on the ground. Perhaps we ought to accept slower refuelling rates. In Champ Car racing, they use gravity fed refuelling hoses in which don't seem to create the same level of problems. The FIA should take a look at it.

Comment of the weekend has to go to Michael Schumacher after qualifying, during an interview with ITV. It went as follows:

Ted Kravitz, ITV Commentator: "Michael, how can you beat the two Williams ahead of you on the grid?"

Michael Schumacher: "Overtake them!"

13th July 2003 - Brands Hatch, SCV8's and Level Crossings

In the news this week was the fact that Octagon Motorsports was putting its group of UK circuits up for sale. What does this mean for the future of UK Motorsport? First, a potted history to set the scene.

Brands Hatch was first used in the 1930s, when it was a grass track oval run anti-clockwise for bike races. It was surfaced in 1950, with the Druids loop added in 1954. Run by John Foulston, the circuit was extended with the Grand Prix loop, and held its first Grand Prix in 1964. It became one of the centres of British motorsport, helped by its proximity to London.

The reigns of what became Brands Hatch Leisure Ltd were taken over by Nicola Foulston, the daughter of John, and by this time the company also owned Cadwell Park, Oulton Park and Snetterton. The company underwent a successful flotation on the London Stock-market in the 1990s, and was subsequently purchased outright by Octagon Motorsports, a subsidiary of Interpublic, an American promotions firm. More famous for managing tennis stars than motorsports, it decided to branch out into what it considered a growth industry, and switched its attentions to the UK. In a curious move, Octagon Motorsports purchased the rights to the British Grand Prix, even though they did not have a venue capable of staging the event, and had to lease Silverstone from the BRDC in order to host the event.

However, club level motorsport has never been a great money spinner, and both Octagon Motorsports and Interpublic started reporting losses, and as a result what was now renamed as Brands Hatch Circuits Ltd was put up for sale, either as a whole or piecemeal. As reported in Autosport, Julie Green of Estate Management firm Jones Lang LeSalle said "we are looking to maximise the value for the client".

What is likely to happen? We could quite possibly be waving goodbye to Brands Hatch. New housing estates have been built next to the Grand Prix loop, and complaints about noise are a perennial problem. To me, this is completely unfair. It is not as though the new residents when they moved in did not know that they would be living next to a race track, and they should have considered the fact when they moved in. If the race track had been built after they had moved there, then I would have some sympathy. But this is quite clearly not the case. It's a classic case of Nimbyism, with a few spoilsports and pettifoggers out to ruin the enjoyment of others because they think everything should change to suit them. If they want to live somewhere quiet, why not go and move to Scotland and live next to a golf course instead? Only then they would complain about golf balls going astray.....

The fact of the matter is that Brands Hatch has excellent connections to the motorway network, and is close to London, and is thus much more valuable as a piece of real estate than as a race track. What with Mr Prescott's assertions that more houses must be built in the south-east of England, I don't see any way at the moment that Brands Hatch will survive.

Cadwell Park, Oulton Park and Snetterton are more likely to survive as circuits. Snetterton is in the middle of nowhere (otherwise known as East Anglia), and is not

threatened by redevelopment, and the other two are also in the countryside. The only possible problem here is planning permission – do they have the permission to host extra race meetings to take up the slack from Brands Hatch? This though may be a blessing in disguise. If they do not have permission, it might force several of the already far too weak club series to merge together in order to be able to get their races in. So there might just possibly be one good outcome from this otherwise sad saga after all.

SCV8's

SCV8's is the latest Touring Car Championship planned for the already crowded British National racing scene. The cars will have the same chassis, identical 550 bhp V8 engines, but will be clothed in different manufacturer's sheet metal. Already confirmed for the series are Peugeot with its 406, and Jaguar with its X-Type. Can the UK scene take yet another championship? At the top end of national saloon car racing, we already have ASCAR and Super Touring. ASCAR is an exclusively oval based series using American ARCA cars with V8 engines. Super Touring use standard road saloons with 2 litre engines, and are predominantly front-wheel driven (except for BMW). Where does it hope to sit between the two? The series organisers claim that it won't compete with Super Touring, and that they will set their race calendar so that their races do not clash.

But take the example of Germany. At the beginning of the 1990s, they had the DTM for larger saloon cars, in which the likes of Opel, Mercedes and Alfa Romeo competed with tubular chassis based cars reinforced with carbon fibre. Alongside ran the German Super Touring championship, which was quite successful, although not on the scale of the DTM. The DTM went international and priced itself out of the market, and Super Touring reigned supreme until the late 1990s, when the DTM was revived. At the same time, a new series called V8 Star was set up. It used V8 engines, with tubular chassis and the body kits from various manufacturers, such as the Jaguar X-Type. Then what happened?

Super Touring in Germany is now virtually dead. They do have the German Touring Cup, but this is largely based on Super Production rules, rather than the full Super Touring rules used in the premier class in the BTCC, and is a minor series in comparison to the DTM and the V8 Stars.

I don't see both series surviving as large national series. It is quite possible that SCV8's will win out, as large, powerful, rear-wheel driven cars are likely to be far more spectacular to watch than relatively low powered, front-wheel drive machinery. However, they need to establish presence, and with Alan Gow back at the helm of the BTCC, who masterminded the rise of Super Touring the first time around, they will have a hard time. Especially considering the economics of the times, I don't see there being enough budgets around to support both. The worst of all would be if we ended up with two separate and poorly supported series.

Level Crossings

On Saturday's Tour de France stage between Lyon and Morzine, the entire field except for four break away riders came to a complete halt for 30s or so, as the barriers at a level crossing came down and blocked the road for an oncoming train. Unusual perhaps, but not unique for a racing event. From 1953 to 1968, the Longford track in

Tasmania also featured a level crossing in the middle of the lap. Races were timed according to the train timetable, so that the cars weren't running when a train was due!

20th July 2003 - Overtaking galore in a week tinged with sadness

The British Grand Prix at Silverstone, where at the beginning of the year the FIA had promised that traction control would be gone. Did we get to hear the sound of V10's at full throttle without the effects of the electronic strangulation that is traction control? No. The FIA had caved in, Minardi got their money from the "fighting fund" and didn't make the protest that they promised, and the public wasn't listened to. Life as normal then.

Watching the race on ITV, it was quite obvious what a balls-up commentator James Allen was making after the first couple of laps. He didn't notice Alonso having a go at Schumacher, didn't notice Montoya overtaking him, and then immediately afterwards said that Alonso was having a go at Ralf Schumacher, when it was Montoya, and he was pulling away. Make one or two mistakes by all means, but this was a touch on the inept side.

Talking of the manoeuvre that Alonso tried on Michael Schumacher, how ruthless does he think he needs to be? Alonso tried going down the inside down the Hangar Straight into Stowe, and Michael just kept moving over until Alonso put both wheels onto the grass in order to avoid the accident. But no-one seems to either notice or care. I find it completely hypocritical. Michael is the first person to complain if anything is remotely unsafe, and is responsible for many a poxy chicane, yet he is quite prepared to put someone in the position of having an accident. If Alonso hadn't gone on the grass, there would have been an interlocking wheels situation, with the potential for Alonso to barrel roll out of the race. Perhaps Michael should take a good look at himself first when it comes to increasing track safety.

Ralf Schumacher yet again made a mistake under pressure. Pressured by Rubens Barrichello, who was closely followed by Montoya, Ralf went into a chicane, and Rubens simply drove around the outside. Now with Montoya all over the back of him, Ralf went wide in Copse and onto the grass, Montoya shooting through. Shortly afterwards, Ralf pitted as a barge board had fallen off and the resulting debris was sat in his radiator, heating up the engine. It probably fell off as a result of his accident. This demonstrates to me why he will not be world champion this year – he only wins when he is leading and not under pressure. Put him under pressure, and he makes mistakes and ruins his race. Mind you, on joining the race again he did pull off an aggressive overtaking manoeuvre, but this was on Fisichella in a decidedly slow Jordan. Why can't he show such aggression when racing the front guys?

Barrichello drove a very good race, with some excellent overtaking (notice how I have managed to use this word more than once in this article. We had loads of overtaking, and the nature of the circuit meant that there was more than one place to pass. Note to the FIA: What the hell are you thinking of when threatening to take the Grand Prix away from Silverstone? You keep going on about wanting to spice up the show and create more overtaking, but then keep threatening to leave one of the few tracks which allows it. I still don't know why the FIA permanently complains about Silverstone, having been to Interlagos, Spa and Imola). He seems to have some kind of strange karma, having now won twice when there have been track invasions.

There was also some excellent defensive driving, and special mentions should go to Jacques Villeneuve and Ralph Firman. For lap after lap Villeneuve managed to frustrate Michael Schumacher, managing to get his car into just the right place to block the obviously much faster Ferrari – you could almost feel the sense of frustration building up inside Schumacher’s cockpit. Similarly for Firman, when in eighth place, he kept a train consisting of two World Champions (Villeneuve and M.Schumacher) and two Jaguars behind him, and didn’t make one mistake. He keeps getting better with increasing track time, and it is up to him now to impress during the last few races of the season.

By the way, you will have noticed that I haven’t commented on the complete idiot who decided to take a jog down the Hangar Straight. I refuse to give him the publicity that he was obviously trying to get.

Quote of the week

“Junkie” [Bruno Junqueira] said that he was going to make me crack. I thought, ‘I’ll show him what crack means – I’ll show him the crack of my ass all day’ – from Paul Tracy after winning the Champ Car race at Toronto.

SCCA Pro-Rally Series

Tragedy hit the US based Pro-Rally series this week, with British driver Mark Lovell (the 2001 Pro-Rally Series Champion) leaving the road in his Subaru Impreza within a minute of the start of the first stage of the Oregon Trail. He hit a tree, killing himself and his co-driver Roger Freeman. Condolences to both families.

27th July 2003 - When is a Ford not a Ford?

Indy Racing League – When is a Ford not a Ford? When it's General Motors.

General Motors may be last years winning engine supplier, but this year they are nowhere, being comfortably beaten by newcomers Toyota and Honda. They had only led a race once all year, with Sam Hornish briefly leading at Nashville. Something had to be done, but rather than redesigning their own engine, they decided to do something more radical – they are buying one from Cosworth, and will rebadge it as the Gen VI Chevrolet.

How embarrassing is this for General Motors? It's not only the fact that they have had to admit that their engine is not good enough, they have gone to their greatest rival, Ford, to solve the problem. How is this going to look in their marketing spiel? Ford and GM go head to head in NASCAR, with the rivalry hyped up – how will accepting help from the enemy be seen there? With Toyota gearing up for an attack on the NASCAR Craftsman Trucks series, with the ultimate aim of entering the NASCAR Winston Cup (shortly to become Nextel Cup) series, things are looking bleak indeed for GM. Ford isn't a direct competitor in the IRL, but it is in NASCAR. I can't see Ford being so willing to help out GM then.

The Tour de France

What a race! It may have been won for the fifth year in a row by the American rider Lance Armstrong, but what a win, and under what circumstances.

Take the penultimate stage in the Pyrenees. Armstrong was attacking the main group and was leaving second placed Jan Ullrich behind. Going around a corner, his handlebars got caught in a child's bag, pulling his bike suddenly rightwards, with Armstrong coming off his bike, ripping up his elbow. The following rider, Iban Mayo, collided with the fallen bike, and also came off. Up Armstrong got, calmly pulled his chain back on to the front cog, and remounted. In the meantime, Jan Ullrich and Tyler Hamilton decided to follow one of the unwritten rules of cycling – do not take advantage of one of the lead cyclists falling. They annulled the race, not attacking while they awaited the return of Armstrong to the group. Did this cost Ullrich the race win – we will never know, but it was a welcome show of sportsmanship which is often sadly lacking these days.

But the stage wasn't finished there. While Armstrong was trying to rejoin the group and was pedalling hard up the mountain, his foot came out of its foot clamp. He almost came off again, his manhood coming very close to being removed by the crossbar. In a flash his foot was back in the clamp, and off he went and rejoined the group. He was only there for a minute or two, before he attacked the group again, pedalling off alone into the distance, winning the stage by a minute. It showed guts and determination. You hurt badly enough cycling up roads only fit for goats, without falling off and injuring yourself in the process.

Take also American rider Tyler Hamilton. He fell on the first stage, breaking his collarbone, but elected to continue onwards. Despite so much pain that he couldn't stand on his pedals, or walk properly, Hamilton not only finished the race, but won a

stage by two minutes, having broken away from the peloton and raced in the lead on his own for 170 km. He finished 4th overall.

And then there was British rider David Millar. Suffering from bronchitis, he somehow managed to get through the mountain stages inside the top 60. On the penultimate day's time-trial, he fell, but got up, pedalled hard, and still managed to win. After crossing the finishing line he was interviewed, and could hardly talk for coughing. How the hell he managed to even finish, let alone win a stage, I'll never know. After finishing 53rd in Paris, he had this to say to ITV's Gary Imlach: "It's been crazy – a fairly crap three weeks really!"

However, you have to hand it to Armstrong's US Postal Service team – they know how to celebrate. They still had all nine riders in the final stage to Paris, and shortly after the start, they broke out the champagne. Proper glasses were handed out as they cycled along, and in the champagne went. Then there was the surreal site of nine riders cycling along quaffing glasses of bubbly. A fitting end to the centenary year of the Tour de France – one which has to be one of the best races ever.

3rd August 2003 - The German GP, IRL, Club Racing and Hizzie.

What the hell is the FIA playing at? Haven't they heard of the red flag? The British newspaper the Daily Mirror once said that the initials stood for Fools In Action, and the reconfirmed that interpretation yet again within 30 seconds of the start at Hockenheim.

It was caused by Ralf Schumacher, who drifted leftwards across the track off the start. Rubens Barrichello was on his left, and on Barrichello's left was the fast starting Kimi Raikkonen. Still Schumacher kept coming left, hitting the right front of Barrichello, who was then forced into Raikkonen, Raikkonen was spun around, hitting both Barrichello and Ralf Schumacher. By this stage most of his wheels had been knocked clean off, and he disappeared into the tyre barrier. Behind, all hell broke loose, with Ralph Firman, Heinz-Harald Frentzen, Jacques Villeneuve and Justin Wilson all being caught out behind.

Once the rest of the field had moved off, the debris field scattered across the track and run-off area could be surveyed. There were shards and lumps of carbon fibre everywhere, and it was on the racing line. You would think that the FIA would not want to risk the cars running over this mess, with the consequent risk of puncture, but obviously they think differently to the rest of us, and brought out the safety car, which meant that the entire field had to drive through the mess at least once, until the marshals could clean up the circuit.

Given the paranoia at times on safety, I still can't understand how the FIA can condone such a course of action, and it is not the first time that they have done this. Carbon fibre shards are exceedingly sharp, and have caused accidents in the past, so why does the FIA risk it? One day, an accident will be caused because of this – it might even have been the cause of Ayrton Senna's accident in 1994 – and the FIA will be forced to answer for their actions.

After the race, Ralf Schumacher was penalised for not paying attention to the cars around him, and will start the next race ten places lower than the place he would have started from. This does strike me as a touch unfair. He made one move, and Barrichello did have the option of braking, as Barrichello at least knew that he had Raikkonen on his left hand side. We have had similar accidents in the past where no action was taken, not least at Hockenheim, so some kind of consistency is needed. Would we have seen the same penalty applied if this was the result of one of Michael's "one move" manoeuvres off the start line? Perhaps that is an unfair question, but since the FIA introduced such an allowance, we have been waiting for such an accident to occur. It's just ironic that it wasn't Michael that caused it, but his brother instead.

The race though, after lap 1 until about 5 laps from the end, was a slightly dull affair, and it was almost two separate races – Montoya and the rest. Montoya just disappeared off into the distance, and won the race a whole 65 seconds ahead of second placed David Coulthard. We haven't seen such dominance by one team at any point so far this year, and it bodes ill for the other teams.

The last five laps were "interesting", to say the least. Michael Schumacher managed to overtake Jarno Trulli for second place, but was run wide into a run-off area in the process as Trulli tried to maintain position. A lap later, Coulthard was through too,

and it looked like being a job too far, until Michael's left-rear tyre suddenly deflated, probably a victim of track temperatures in excess of 55 C, and a very long second stint. Coulthard was through into second, and Michael was lucky to salvage seventh.

This could well be the turning point of the season. Williams are looking increasingly dominant, and Montoya is now second in the championship. It will be an interesting final few races.

Indy Racing League

The new Chevworth Engine (Sorry, Gen VI Chevrolet, nee Cosworth) proved itself last weekend at Michigan, finishing second in what was the fourth closest finish ever in IRL history by 0.0121s. Sam Hornish, in his Panther Racing Dallara-Chevworth ran a good race, leading for 21 laps, but the drive of the race came from race winner Alex Barron. Barron was a substitute driver for the injured Felipe Giaffone, and was in his second race for the Mo Nunn Racing team. He was tapped into a spin in the latter third of the race after a touch from Tomas Scheckter, which brought out the yellow flags. He pitted for new tyres, rejoined the race, and then worked his way up through the field, overtaking Hornish on the final lap, indeed in the final two corners. He certainly deserves the seat for the rest of the season.

Club Racing

Bored of the processional nature of International level motorsport? Want to see some overtaking? Then get along to your local track and watch some club level motorsport.

For the English readers, you have a good selection of tracks to visit. But take a hint from me: ignore the BHL circuits, and even Silverstone and Mallory Park (too few races during a meeting). Instead, make your way along to the family owned tracks of Croft and Castle Combe. You'll get ten races during a day, plus overtaking – you won't be disappointed.

Take Castle Combe this weekend, and the Castle Combe Saloon Car Championship. Watch the Subaru Impreza WRX – lap after lap he was coming out of Camp corner in a lovely four-wheel drift, just edging the rumble strips. Until the race that is, when the driver got ever so slightly out of line. The back end of the car stepped out, and he headed off on to the grass. With a four-wheel drive car, you do not lift of the accelerator when sliding, or the car will snap away from you and deposit you in the barrier. So he planted the accelerator to the floor instead. The engine revs rose, and the tyres were spinning away, throwing up lumps of grass which then implanted themselves in the higher parts of the catch-fencing. Still he kept it planted, eventually regaining the tarmac, whereupon the car snapped the other way. A brief bit of opposite lock and the car was on its way again, the crowd giving the driver a round of applause.

And there is also the Special GT Championship, which features two-seater open sportscars which can hit speeds of 180 mph. They also overtake. The atmosphere at the circuit is friendly, you get a close view of the action, and you can see most of the circuit from the spectator banking. Try it – you might just enjoy it.

Hizzie

The world of Superbike racing this week mourned the death of Steve Hislop, killed in a helicopter crash near Hawick, in Scotland. A mercurial talent, if the mood took him, no-one could live with him, and he held the outright bike qualifying record at Oulton Park, breaking Valentino Rossi's Grand Prix lap record on a bike which was 25% less powerful. But he also had his off days.

Hislop broke his neck in 2000, but returned to win the British Superbike championship in 2002 for a second time, having previously won it in 1995. He also won 11 races at the Isle of Man TT. He was an approachable man, and will be sorely missed.

10th August 2003 - British F3 and the lack of a Rallying ladder

British Formula 3 and Rockingham

Last weekend the latest British F3 round was held at Rockingham, on a combined road oval circuit. It provided for some excellent racing, the wide expanses of the oval track allowing drivers to out-brake each other into the tighter corners leading onto the road circuit.

Luckiest driver of the race has to be Katherine Legge, a former karter and Formula Renault driver. Entering the first very fast chicane off the oval circuit in race 2, she cut the right hand apex too much, and hit a bump on the rumble strip. This knocked her car up in the air a little, and it came down, hitting a further bump. This knocked the front of the car further in the air, and the combination of flat-bottomed car and air did the rest, the car then acting as a wing. Up it went, the front of the car rotating through the air until it went past the vertical, the car coming down on its roll-hoop. It then bounced again, landing on its wheels, with surprisingly little damage occurring to the car. Katherine got out under her own steam, and climbed the retaining barrier, looking shaken but otherwise OK.

The other surprising thing about the meeting was that there were 44,000 people there, although this still looks small in somewhere the size of Rockingham. How did they manage this for what is not a premier event, and for a set of races which can attract as few as 3000 people at some venues? The answer is by looking after the family. They realise that people want family days out, and that sitting on a bank all day is generally not that appealing for wives or children. So they go to great lengths to provide alternative entertainment, so that if a particular race is boring, the young children can go off and be entertained by something. They also laid on a music event after the races, featuring the Sugarbabes. How many people were there to see the music rather than the motor-racing I do not know, but it got more people through the gate, and raised the profile of Formula 3 and GT racing amongst the ordinary non-specialist public. This can only be a good thing, and other circuits should take note.

In addition to this, SEAT also subsidised the ticket prices, so that if you bought the ticket in advance, it only cost you £1. This is clever marketing by SEAT. They run the single-make SEAT Cupra Sport championship at the same race meetings as the F3 and GT championships. Single-make championships are common, but normally raise nary a blip on the radar. Remember the VW Vento Championship? Exactly! Manufacturers pump in substantial amounts of money to these championships, but for very little publicity in return, so they stop the funding after a couple of years and you have a clutch of cars with nowhere to race. By subsidising the tickets, SEAT got many more people through the gate to watch its product who otherwise would not have done. There are certainly more people now who know about the SEAT championship than ever knew about the VW Vento version.

Rallying

In Formula 1, there is a reasonably well established route to the top, despite the intrusion of one or two upstart championships in recent years. But what is the route for rallying? Most people who know a bit about Formula 1 will know that junior formulae exist, but rallying? It suffers from a real lack of public understanding, and

this can only make the young rally driver who is looking to make it to the top wonder what they should do.

Racing on the same rallies as the WRC cars are Super 1600 cars. These are full rally prepared cars with 1600cc engines. Sebastien Loeb, fresh out of the French Rally Championship, raced these cars before getting his WRC drive. But S1600 is not the most popular of classes, and most other rally championships are still led by old WRC machines.

The next level is formed from various national and regional championships, the largest of which is the FIA European Rally Championship. This championship, consisting of 53 rallies, takes place in various European countries, from Madeira to the former Eastern-Bloc countries of Lithuania and Bulgaria (strangely though, there are no rallies from the UK in the series). As it would be impossible to enter all 53 rallies, especially as some take place on the same weekend as each other, each rally is assigned a co-efficient. The top rallies (of which there are ten) are assigned co-efficient 20, which means that these rallies have a higher points value than any other rallies – the aim of the FIA is that if you enter only these rallies, then you should be able to win the championship. The next level of rallies, of which there are nine, are co-efficient 10 – the rest of the rallies are assigned co-efficient 5 or 2. In reality, the richest driver wins – if you aren't doing so well in the co-efficient 20 rallies, then you can enter several co-efficient 10 ones in order to catch up. However, the European Rally Championship appears to be a dead-end if you want to make it to the WRC – it seems to be populated by drivers who never make it, or drivers who didn't last at the top level.

Other regional championships include the FIA Asia-Pacific Championship, the FIA Middle East Championship and the FIA African Championship, but it is rare for a driver to come from the ranks of these. Instead, you need to look to the national championships, such as the British Rally Championship, in which Scandinavian drivers often compete. This suggests that the hierarchy of rallying is wrong.

Strong national series are needed, but these should be feeder series to the regional series. Thus you still need the British, French and German Rally Championships, plus all of the others. But the cream of the drivers from each championship should then move into the European Championship. The European Championship should be severely cut down, to between 10 and 14 rounds, taking in the best rallies from all of the European countries, with no more than one rally in each country. This top rally should also be part of that country's national championship – in this way the national drivers could gauge their competitiveness against international competition.

As well as the European Championship, the other regional championships should be upgraded in importance, as there are some very good drivers in these series (such as the late Possum Bourne) who never make the WRC. Once you have served your apprenticeship in these series, then you should be ready to move into the WRC.

This would form an understandable ladder in the world of rallying. You would still have the confusion of the various classes, but this could be dealt with later. I simply don't see the point of having such a gigantic European series where the winner simply doesn't matter, and where the winner simply won't make it to the top level. A ladder of progression has served the single-seater world well, and the same thing could

happen in rallying. It has to be better than the current mish-mash of championships, some of which exist purely due to historical accident.

17th August 2003 - What is needed for good racing?

While watching the Moto GP race at Brno in the Czech Republic this weekend, it dawned on me what we really need for good racing in F1 – wide tracks. The Brno track is enormously wide, and it allowed multiple lines to be taken through the corners. But think of the good races this year in F1, and the usual overtaking places. What have they all got in common? Multiple lines and wide entries.

Think about the end of the start/finish straight at the Nürburgring – it has a very wide entry, and a very wide exit. So if you try and defend the inside, then you can simply take a wide entry to the corner, and exit tighter, and vice versa if you defend the outside. Think about Silverstone – corners such as Stowe have several entry lines, which allow cars to run side by side onto the next straight without suffering an undue performance penalty. Too many tracks are excessively narrow, barely allowing cars three abreast, so it is all too easy to defend by driving down the middle of the track. The Americans have cottoned on to this with airport tracks such as Cleveland, which have always featured masses of overtaking, with Emerson Fittipaldi and Nigel Mansell driving side by side and overtaking each other four times in the space of one lap back in 1993. So, less of the Tilkedromes please, and more proper wide racing circuits where you can take different lines around the corners.

Penalties

Strangest penalty of the month occurred in the Finnish Touring Car round at Alastaro on the 3rd August. VW driver Olli Haapalainen qualified on pole position for race one, but was disqualified and sent to the back of the grid – for wearing socks that were not made from a fireproof material!

The Racing Ladder below F1

Last week we mentioned the racing ladder needed for Rallying, but lets consider the series directly beneath F1.

F3000

The traditional feeder series for Formula 1, but it has had had a serious problem providing world champions – too many drivers have gone from F3000 championship winners to F1 mediocrity. It has had a much better success recently in providing Champ Car drivers, although with differing degrees of success. Juan Pablo Montoya and Bruno Junqueira have all been race winners, but Nicolas Minassian sank without trace (now there's a mercurial talent – race winner in junior formulae, but nowhere at the top. Also famous for being suspended from the British F3 championship for throwing stones at a passing car which had knocked him off the race track).

Pros: It races on the F1 European calendar, so the drivers do get noticed by the F1 team managers.

Cons: It is too expensive, and many drivers simply cannot raise the sponsorship. From 40 cars attempting to qualify for the grid three years ago, we now have only 18. The cars are also too different to those in F1 – they race slick tyres, spec engines, and can't do much in the way of car set-up and tuning.

Dallara-Nissan World Series

World Series? Don't make me laugh, unless you consider the world to consist of Portugal, Spain and Italy. The cars themselves have a lot going for them, with spec chassis and spec engines, but with plenty of power. The series grew out of the oddly named Open Fortuna by Nissan championship, which had less power and was a rival to Formula 3.

Pros: It has full grids, with ex-F1 drivers on its roll, including current F1 test drivers such as Marc Gene, and Justin Wilson raced in the series in 2002. It has more races than F3000, and many professional teams who have raced before in F3000 and F3.

Cons: Who knows about it? It is largely based in Spain, with rounds in Portugal and Italy, so as little promotional appeal outside of those markets, and is largely unknown to the wider world. It may have ex-F1 drivers and F1 test drivers competing in it, but that is also its main problem. It could rapidly be perceived as a career car-park for those who cannot cut it in the big time. It also suffers in the same way as F3000 in being too different to F1. One further point – if the field can be dominated by Ricardo Zonta as it was in 2002, is it really any good?

Euro-F3000

This formula uses old F3000 chassis, and races predominantly in France and Italy, growing out of the Italian F3000 series. It uses many of the circuits which the old International F3000 series used to use before it exclusively followed the F1 circus, such as Enna-Pergusa. As it uses second-hand chassis it is cheaper than the FIA series to race in. This was also the series from which Felipe Massa graduated.

Pros: It is cheap, and it uses F3000 chassis, so you get used to using such power and handling without the pressure of the full International series. It is also good preparation for an assault on the International series.

Cons: The depth of field. Massa came straight from Italian Formula Renault into this series, and there are very few recognised top level drivers in the field to compete against. The fields also are not large, with around 15 cars competing, and it is limited mainly to Italy, so suffers from the same lack of coverage problem as the Dallara Nissan series.

Champ Cars

Are you kidding I here you ask? No I'm not, and take a few moments to consider things. One Bernie Ecclestone is taking an interest in the series, and may take an equity stake. Frank Williams has sent two drivers he has under contract to race in the series – Juan Pablo Montoya and Bruno Junqueira – and he would not have sent them there if he didn't consider it worthwhile. The series has a large number of road and street tracks, and together with the oval tracks encourages a good engineering background.

Pros: Uses large, powerful cars which are also aerodynamically sensitive. The cars highlight driver ability, and you only have to see the two years which Montoya spent there to see how useful it can be.

Cons: It is not the recognised route, and you have to rapidly dominate the series to stand any chance of getting back to the F1 fold. The series itself is also in danger – Champ Cars is itself a publicly quoted company, with its shares quoted on the New

York stock exchange. It is losing cash, and faces competition from a revitalised IRL, which is itself considering road courses for 2005. It might not be around for that long.

14th August 2003 - The 2003 Hungarian Grand Prix

Bernie Ecclestone is either in league with the devil, or on very good terms with the Almighty. Faced with a Grand Prix which might have poor attendance figures, and with no driver of its own to support, Bernie miraculously manages to get a Hungarian F1 driver into the field (note that I have explicitly said F1 driver. Hungary has had a Grand Prix driver in the past, with Ferenc Szisz winning the 1906 French Grand Prix, although by that time he had moved to France and was often known by his Frenchified name of Francois).

This turn of affairs came about due to a horrific accident which befell Ralph Firman in practice. Minding his own business while driving down the straight, the rear wing decided to part company from the car. Gary Anderson, chief designer at Jordan, explained afterwards that there had been a crack at the end of the lower wing element, and the forces involved caused the lower surface to peel away. This allowed the element to fail, and as it came apart, it took the rest of the wing with it. Shorn of a huge amount of downforce, it was only a question of time. Turning into the next corner, the car swapped ends, and at unabated speed careered across a gravel trap, and sideways into a tyre barrier, scattering the photographers. Firman was briefly knocked unconscious by the force of the accident, but the response of the marshals was atrocious – they basically stood around not knowing what to do, and it took the arrival of the F1 medics before Firman was attended to.

Firman was airlifted to hospital, and it was clear that he wouldn't be able to race the next day, despite not suffering any broken bones. It just so happened that during the Friday free practice open to teams which don't practice anywhere else, Jordan and fielded the Hungarian driver Zsolt Baumgartner. A fairly mediocre F3000 driver, Baumgartner did his 20 or so laps and expected that to be that. Instead, he was drafted into the full team for qualifying, and did well not to qualify last. Attendance and television figures for the race were automatically guaranteed to be higher – more gelt for the pockets of Bernie. Just a shame that Baumgartner went out with engine failure.

The race itself was really decided at the start. If you qualified with an odd grid position number, you were on the racing line and got away well. If you had an even number, then you were on the dusty line and your start was compromised. This set up Fernando Alonso (who is not the first Spanish Grand Prix winner, despite what your TV commentators may have told you. First Formula One winner perhaps, but not Grand Prix. Grand Prix have been conducted since the 1910's, and Ramon Bueno won the II Grand Prix du MCF in a Salmson in 1922), who disappeared into the distance as the rest of the field was held up behind Mark Webber. The first corner may have made overtaking marginally easier, but the rest of the track was still an overtaking free zone. To his credit, Alonso never once looked like losing his cool, and rubbed in his superiority by lapping his team-mate Trulli, as well as Michael Schumacher.

Montoya is a strange case. Yet again, for the third time this year, Montoya managed to spin while not under pressure (Australia and Canada being the other cases), although there was the suggestion that a slightly clunky gear-change helped to lock the rear wheels. He did manage to keep the engine running and rejoin the race, which demonstrated his quick reflexes, but I can't help but have a sneaky feeling about

Montoya – is he really quite as good as he should be? One spin is unfortunate, two slightly careless, but three?

The race result though has set the championship up wonderfully. Montoya is one point behind Michael Schumacher, and Raikkonen is one point behind Montoya, and we only have three races to go. The Ferrari is on the back foot, and both Raikkonen and Montoya are chargers. The next two races are critical, as Bridgestone are almost certain to have a decent tyre for their home race at Suzuka. Roll on Monza and Indy!

IRL

Controversy reigned this week after Sam Hornish won the Belterra Casino Indy 300 race at Kentucky Speedway with the new Chevworth engine – at one stage he had almost lapped the entire field. Toyota and Honda were just a mite put out, with Toyota Racing Development head Lee White in particular complaining about GM being allowed to introduce an engine mid-season. Tough! They could have said no to the introduction in the first place. A case of sour grapes at being beaten I think.

31st August 2003 - Back in the USSR

When the Formula 1 circus went to Hungary for the first time in 1986, much was made of the fact that capitalist motorsport was happening for the first time in an Eastern Bloc country. Certainly it was the first capitalist series, but the first motorsport? Not at all! There were already pan-Warsaw Pact country racing series (The Friendship of Socialist Countries Cup), and there was additionally the Soviet Formula 1 Championship.

Soviet Formula 1? Yes indeed, although it would be unrecognisable to us in the West. Running from 1960 through to 1976, with the odd year off in between, the series was only Formula 1 in name, and in reality was more of a Formula Libre series, with people racing whatever they brought with them.

There were real attempts at Formula One cars, the first of which was the HADI-8, which participated in the 1971 championship. The construction of the car followed F1 practice of the 1960s, but it was fitted with a 2 litre V8 engine which delivered only 340 hp at 6500 rpm. The second attempt was the MADI-01, which appeared in 1973. Built by S.Gess-de-Kalve, it followed the lead of the Lotus 72, only smaller. It used a Volga 3 litre engine, but it produced a very meagre 125 hp. Gess-de-Kalve won virtually all of the races he competed in, despite the lack of power.

The third attempt was a 1.5 litre Moskvich GD1, built in the MZMA factory in Moscow between 1963 and 1965, the engine only being finished in 1965. However, the switch from what were effectively Formula 2 regulations to the new 3 litre Formula 1 regulations in the World Championship meant that the car never made it to the world stage.

Although the championship started out in good faith, the rules were stretched further and further to keep a decent enough number of cars competing in the championship. From 1969, 7 litre sportscars were allowed to take part after the USSR sportscar championship was halted, which meant that 7 litre ZIL-112S sportscars were allowed to compete (ZIL are better known for their limousines which were used by the Soviet leadership). However, by 1976, the championship petered out, as it had become the home of any car which didn't fit into the Soviet Formula 3 or Formula Vostok (known as Formula Easter in the former East Germany) championships.

Although most of the cars were indeed Soviet built, not all of them were. In 1970, Yuri Andreev won the championship in a de Sanctis-Cosworth. Cosworth we all know, but de Sanctis was more famous for building Formula Junior and Formula 3 cars in the 1960s. By 1970 de Sanctis was in decline, and how one of their cars made it to the USSR is unknown.

The most successful championship was the Friendship of Socialist Countries Cup, which ran from 1963 through to 1990, although it ran to differing regulations over the years. It was established on the initiative of the Motorsport Union of Poland, and initially featured drivers from Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria, with Czechoslovakia participating from 1965, and Romania in the 1970s. Private teams were not allowed – only national teams, so teams representing the USSR, Czechoslovakia etc were entered.

The championship initially ran to Formula Junior regulations, being replaced by 1000cc Formula 3 in 1965, after which Lotus and De Sanctis chassis were imported. In 1972, Formula 3 was replaced by Formula Vostok, which ran 1300cc stock block engines. This continued through until the 1980s, when everyone was running modified VAZ 21011 engines, which delivered around 90 hp, and allowed a top speed of around 220 kph. In 1989, Formula Vostok was replaced with Formula Mondial, which ran 1600cc engines. But it didn't last for long – the championship was renamed the Peace and Friendship Cup for 1990, and soon petered out.

The decline of Communism interrupted the Soviet world of motorsport, but it didn't kill it completely. By the late 1990s, a Russian Formula 3 Championship was inaugurated, as well as a Russian Touring Car Championship which ran similar rules to the British Saloon Car Championship. Unlike previous years, the championship featured drivers from outside of the former Warsaw Pact, and was won more than once by James Kaye, an ex-British Touring Car Driver. Most of the circuits were contrived road circuits, but it has paved the way for more ambitious programs, such as the aborted F1 circuit on Nagatino Island in Moscow.

7th September 2003 - The Legalities of those four black round things

The F1 issue of the moment is tyres, not the fact that the top three drivers in the championship are all within two points of each other. Thus the best fact of the entire season is being missed, and at the centre of this mess is the team which has all too frequently been the instigator of recent F1 furore – Ferrari.

The problem is that of the tread width of the Michelin tyre, which Michelin claims they have used since 2001. The rules up to and including this year's Hungarian Grand Prix state that the tread width of a tyre must be no more than 270 mm, and this was measured when the tyre was new. Rumour had it some days after the race that the tyres were in some way illegal, and that they had been protested, but no-one knew by whom – but they had their suspicions.

FIA President Max Mosley and FIA Technical Delegate Charlie Whiting went to Maranello on the Tuesday after the race, but Ferrari denied that they were protesting at all. And this is where I start to get very annoyed with the whole process. If rules are really being broken, then it is correct that the offenders are named and shamed, and it should be demonstrated what they were doing wrong. But why did Ferrari have to approach this in such an underhand manner? If they thought that the rules were being broken, why not be open and say “yes, we really do believe that this is incorrect, and this is why”? In protesting, yet denying that they were, Ferrari have sullied the entire process. It is though they hoped the matter could be resolved in secret, and if they were proven incorrect, then the matter could be swept under the carpet and forgotten about. That's a great way to run a championship, and to foster a spirit of cooperation. In fact, it shows a complete lack of respect for the opposition, and only encourages the suspicions that the FIA favours Ferrari.

Ferrari claim that they have photographic evidence that the Michelin tyres are being used illegally during the race, and that at the end of the race they have illegal wear on them showing that the effective tread width was larger than the allowed 270 mm. The problem seems to stem from the fact that the tyres curve at the edge. Thus when in cornering, and the tyre deforms, the edge of the tyre is used more, and if a kerb is hit or a bump is encountered, the extra deformation can cause an area beyond the normal tread to be in contact with the ground. Ferrari said that they had photographs which backed up their claims.

The FIA then suddenly announced that the tyre measurement rules would be changed – the tyres would now have to be measured before and after the race, which the Michelin teams were understandably unhappy about, as from their point of view this constituted a mid-season rule change. Pierre Dupasquier was understandably also upset. A source inside Williams also said that they were upset and worried about what would happen in Monza, as they would have to use new tyres and remodel the suspension. And most of the public wondered what the hell the problem was when the championship was boiling up nicely.

The entire episode makes Ferrari look like bad losers, especially after suffering the indignity of being lapped in the previous Grand Prix. Not only are they trying to force Michelin to change their tyres, they are also suggesting that the results from all of this year's Grands Prix could be annulled with all of the Michelin runners being disqualified. That's a fine way to win a championship, and would completely devalue

the resulting constructors' and drivers' championships. Could Michael Schumacher really call it a 6th World Championship when his main championship rivals have all been removed from the championship? Given that he is quite happy to win championships by running his rivals off the road, perhaps he would.

The confusion in the first place arises because of the ambiguity in the FIA technical regulations which govern the sport. All too often they are worded in ways which leave loopholes and many a grey area, and it has ever been thus. Who can forget the Brabham Fan-car exploiting cooling fans to get around the non-movable aerodynamic device rule, or the Lotus twin-chassis car? The men of Michelin obviously read the rule-book very carefully, and built a tyre to the letter of the law. If the laws are so poorly worded that any decent lawyer can drive a coach and horses through them, then that is the fault of the governing body, which is somewhat ironic given that it itself is led by a renowned lawyer (one Max Mosley, Esq). In recent years, several items which were developed by teams other than Ferrari, which were initially declared legal, have been subsequently ruled against, such as brake-steer by McLaren. This can't be allowed to go on. The rules should be rewritten, and rewritten in such a way that what is meant is crystal clear, with no arguments on what is legal and what is not. Until this happens we will continually face crises such as these. It's also such a pity that it is Ferrari which always seems to throw its toys from its pram every time it loses more than two races in a row. If Old Man Enzo was around today, he would have gone back to Maranello and told them to build a better engine. Old Pretender Todt instead goes and gets a better lawyer.

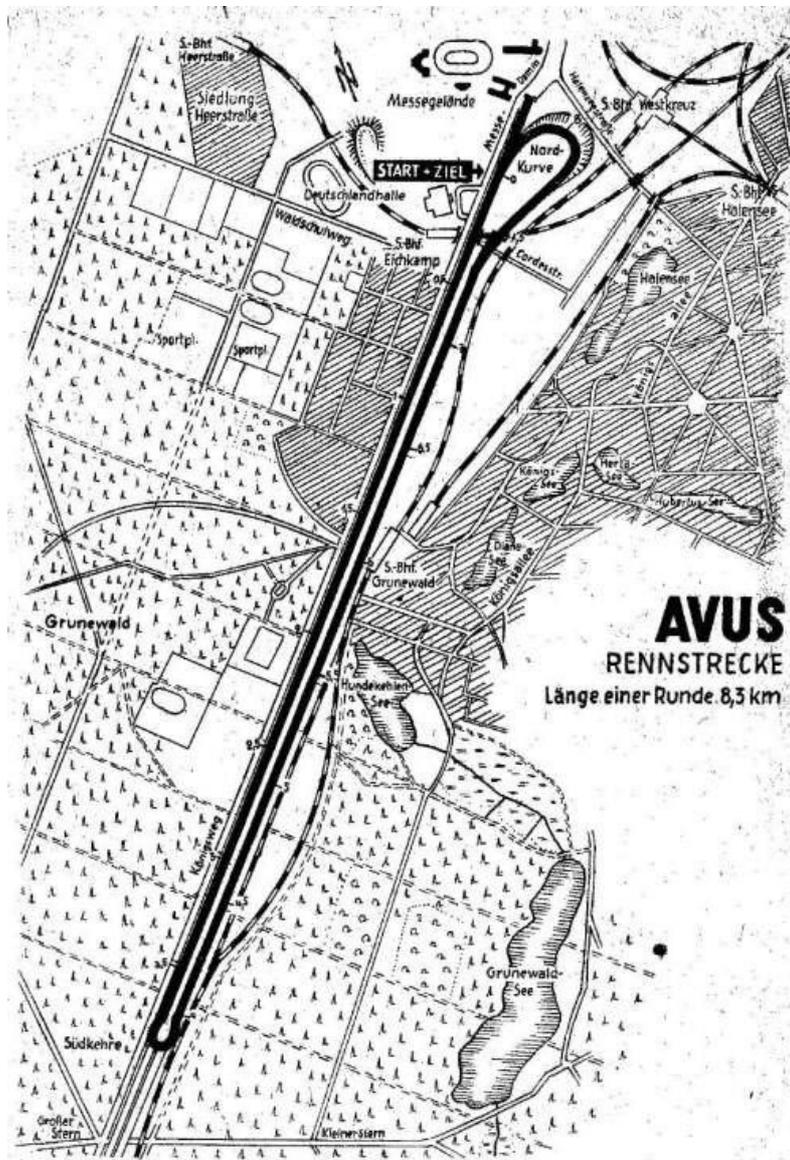
Comment of the week

"He's got such bad luck that if he fell in a bucket of boob's, he'd still come up sucking his thumb." Said by BBC Commentator Charlie Cox about Superbike racer James Toseland at the Assen GP.

14th September 2003 - The Fastest Grand Prix? Not Likely!

Every year when the Formula 1 circus visits Monza, the same question is always raised – will we see the fastest ever Grand Prix? This in reference to the famous slipstreaming Grands Prix of yesteryear, before Monza suffered from chicane blight. In those days, the Monza race was famous for its close finishes, and in particular for the 1971 race won by Peter Gethin in a BRM P160. For lap after lap the top 6 cars followed each other around until the final lap, when Gethin won by 0.01 seconds from Ronnie Petersen, and the top 5 were covered by 0.61 seconds. The race's average speed was 150.759 mph, with a fastest lap of 153.493 mph.

Sunday's race was fast, and that is beyond doubt. Schumacher won it at an average speed of 247.585 kph, or 153.846 mph, as there was no safety car interruption as there was in 2002. But the fastest Grand Prix? No. That honour is claimed by the 1937



Avusrennen race, held 66 years ago on the Avus track, shown left.

The Avus track was based on an autobahn running through Berlin. It was built for speed, with the 8.3 km track having a specially constructed bank bend at the north end of the circuit, known as the Nord-Kurve. The rest of the track consisted of the two carriageways of the autobahn linked by a hairpin at the end. The layout ensured that the races were high speed.

The rules for 1937 had been changed in order to reduce speeds (something which never changes, does it?), with a maximum weight limit of 750 kg being imposed.

However, this was the

Nazi era, and Hitler's Germany wanted to demonstrate its technical superiority, and funded directly the Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz race teams. This enabled them to

put in a lot of research into metallurgy, and they built extremely powerful aluminium based cars. Auto Union were using their C model, a rear-engined, 600 bhp car, and Mercedes-Benz their W125, also in excess of 600 bhp. The demands of the Avus track demanded excellent aerodynamics, so for this race Mercedes entered a “streamliner”, the W25K, with enclosed wheels and aerodynamically shaped body. The Avusrennen was run with two qualifying heats, and a final. The final was won by Hermann Lang at an average speed of 261.67 kph, or 162.60 kph (by 2 seconds from Ernst von Delius in an Auto Union), with a fastest lap speed of 269.73 kph, or 167.70 kph. Bear in mind that these cars had narrow, treaded tyres, no traction control, and no seat belts either. And they were still averaging ten miles an hour faster than today. It certainly puts the superlatives of today’s commentators into perspective.

The Italian Grand Prix itself was sorted out at the second corner of the race, and thereafter didn’t really live up to expectations. Montoya and Schumacher Sr (Ralf was sitting out the race after complaining of a head-ache from first qualifying, a legacy of a high-speed testing accident in Monza the week before) toughed it out into the chicane, with Montoya trying to drive around the outside. It was a gutsy move, but failed to come off. The good thing about it was that they left each other room, and both came out of the corner on the track, to the credit of both drivers. However, it was the move that sealed the race, and Montoya never got as close again. He briefly threatened to after his second pitstop, but traffic in the form of Heinz-Harald Frentzen helped to break up the fight, and Montoya settled for second place. Frentzen drives for Sauber, who have a Ferrari engine, a Ferrari drive-train, and who will likely be employing a Ferrari test-driver in the form of Felipe Massa next year. And they were racing in Italy. The more Machiavellian amongst you might be putting two and two together at this point, but of course, it was entirely coincidental.

From being the hero of the race meeting at the Hungaroring, Fernando Alonso was made to look like a novice driver this race meeting, rather than the potential world champion that is often stated. He spun during qualifying, a legacy of a malfunctioning traction control system according to the team (although as far as I am aware they didn’t specify whether the particular system in question was the right foot or electronic). This meant that he started from the back of the grid, and on the start he forgot where he was. The Renault launch control system is spectacular at the best of times, but against the likes of Jaguar, Jordan and Minardi, it was just too good. As Alonso rocketed away from the startline, Justin Wilson was suffering from a dodgy gearbox, and contact inevitably ensued, with Alonso being launched skywards. Amazingly, the car came down on its wheels, and he was able to continue after a change of front wing. Not content with this, Alonso really gave his mechanics a job to do by missing a chicane and crunching over some rumble strips, ripping out the bottom of the car and leaving it scattered across the circuit. With carbon fibre flapping off the bottom of the car, he still continued, and finished eighth. Lapped. I bet Mr Schumacher enjoyed that.

A performance of note was that of Marc Gene, who was deputising for the absent Ralf Schumacher. He had taken part in the pre-race testing at Monza, so wasn’t completely cold, but he didn’t get to drive the car until after first qualifying. His fifth place on the grid was a good effort, and his fifth in the race, only 27.8 seconds behind the race winner was even better – at one point he was the fastest person on the grid. He hasn’t raced in F1 for two years, and on this performance he deserves another chance. It’s

just a pity that he doesn't give the same performances when racing in the Dallara Nissan World Series.

21st September 2003 - World Rally Championship – Why Change?

The FIA World Rally Championship this year is brewing up nicely. Peugeot driver Richard Burns is leading the championship despite not winning a rally due to consistent finishing and the revised points scoring system. Coming to the fore are the next generation of drivers, with Ford's Markko Märtin, Subaru's Petter Solberg and Citroën's Sebastien Loeb all winning a rally this year. Everyone agrees that this is one of the best years rallying for a long time. So why does the FIA want to ruin it so comprehensively?

For most of the year, the FIA and the teams have been negotiating and trying to come up with ideas on how to save money. So I am at a complete loss to understand why the FIA decided for next year to expand the number of rounds from 14 to 16. This would only increase costs, but the FIA decided that it hadn't finished yet. The new rounds would be in Mexico and Japan. So not only do you have the costs of hotels for team personnel as well as car preparation for two more rallies, you also have to pay to fly them half way around the world twice. And they would have to be flown in order to get the cars there and back in time, unless you can afford to have two sets of cars built up and prepared. I might be missing something here, but all of these things only increase costs, so it seems as though they have really done their cost cutting job well.

But it gets better. In the middle of this year, the FIA announced that if a team wished to run more than two cars, then the third driver must not have finished on the podium in a WRC before. This was a seismic announcement, and threw the drivers market into confusion.

The biggest shake-up would occur at Citroën, as they have three rally winners on their driving strength – Sebastien Loeb, Carlos Sainz, and Colin McRae. One of them would have to go, and as Sebastien Loeb was on a multi-year contract, it would have to be either Sainz or McRae, two of the biggest names in the sport. Peugeot faced a similar problem, but this was solved by Richard Burns leaving and going to Subaru, who now had Burns and Solberg on their books, Tommi Mäkinen retiring at the end of 2003.

We were then faced with the ridiculous situation of Hyundai driver Freddy Loix being the most important driver on the market, as he is by far the most experienced driver never to have stepped on the WRC podium. I don't mean any disrespect to Loix, as he is a reasonable driver, but he isn't in the top league. When he signed for Peugeot, things began to fall out. Citroën signed Martinique driver Simon Jean-Joseph as their third driver, which meant that there was a vacancy at Hyundai. Skoda didn't announce anything with regards to their driving line-up, so options were running out for McRae. After the announcement of the increase of rounds to 16, Hyundai dropped a bombshell – they wouldn't be competing in 2004.

So the World Rally Championship is now faced with running the 2004 championship without its biggest named driver in the championship, unless McRae is willing to pay up to £3 million to fund his own car. He brings massive name recognition to the championship, and is known well outside of the normal rallying fraternity – we are on the fourth version of "Colin McRae's World Rally Championship" computer game, one of the best selling Playstation titles. At a time of increasing popularity, the FIA has managed to force out one of the people who has made it so, a completely bizarre

situation. David Richards, who owns the media rights for the World Championship, knows this only too well, and is actively involved in trying to get McRae a ride. After all, if McRae doesn't take part next year, the value of his investment goes down.

Then the FIA managed to dig itself in a hole yet still deeper. On Monday 8th September, the FIA World Council ratified a change to the proposals – in 2004, only two drivers could score championship points for their teams. Peugeot and Citroën were now left looking very stupid. In order to maximise their chances of points scoring in 2004, they had gone out and hired new drivers (Loix and Jean-Joseph) to drive for them, and now they were redundant – why would you want two drivers who hadn't had WRC success driving for you when you already had drivers who did? It looked like a wasted investment, although both Peugeot and Citroën announced that their drivers would drive next year, just not on all of the rallies.

I am at a complete loss to understand what on earth the FIA is playing at, and if someone can explain it in simple sentences, please drop me an e-mail or post an explanation in the F1/Rallying forum. Not only have the FIA increased costs with two fly-away events, they have caused two manufacturers to waste money employing drivers that they no longer have a use for. The increased costs of the fly-away races have cost us one manufacturer (Hyundai), and we could potentially lose more. The FIA might sanction the series and provide the regulation, but they need to be kept well away from actually making up the rules, as they only seem to make things worse. The manufacturers should be sat down together in a sealed room, and not allowed to emerge until they have an agreed set of rules, and a size of championship with which they agree. After all, they are the people who actually fund the series, and they can always walk away from it – Toyota did so when it started its Formula 1 team. Only one manufacturer was happy with the change to 16 rounds – Citroën – yet still the FIA made the changes. The FIA is behaving in a dictatorial manner with no regard to its subjects, and it would do well to take a peek at recent 20th century history. Remember what happened to the USSR or the rest of the Eastern Bloc?

28th September 2003 - It rained on Williams' Parade

As so often this year, the race was decided by tyres and divine inspiration. And God would seem to be a Ferrari supporter.

The race was partly decided at the start, when Montoya bogged down and Michael Schumacher shot into fourth place. This meant that Montoya needed to do some overtaking, and he needed to do it fast so that he did not fall too far behind Raikkonen and Schumacher. Staring at the rear wing of the Ferrari of Barrichello, he decided he would have a go at the first corner of the second lap. Using his superior straight line speed, Montoya tried to go around the outside. At the second left-hand corner, Barrichello was still marginally ahead, so he came across to take the racing line. Montoya was having none of it, and kept his car on Barrichello's inside, riding up onto the grass. You were just awaiting the inevitable contact, and along it came – Barrichello went skating off into a gravel trap, and Montoya was overtaken by the two Renaults. Montoya was later given a drive-through penalty for avoidable contact.

The more Machiavellian amongst you may have thought “Team Orders” at this point. Mad Max Mosley had declared before the race that if there had been any hint of team orders, then teams would be punished. Barrichello had qualified in 2nd, so what was he doing so far back so soon in the race? It was all the better for holding Montoya up. Montoya was desperate to be after Schumacher, and he had to go for it. Was it just a racing incident? Barrichello didn't suggest it was anything else. Perhaps the contact was slightly dumb, but the decision to penalise Montoya ruined his championship chances.

What also ruined his chances was something we've seen all too often – fuel rigs. When Montoya came in for his first stop, his rig failed, and his crew had to get the back-up system ready, costing him several seconds. He wasn't the only driver to suffer, with Fisichella also experiencing rig failure. Something has to be done about this, as the lottery of fuel rigs shouldn't be deciding race outcomes. The FIA should just ban refuelling altogether, and go back to completing races on one tank of fuel. This forces the driver to finesse his car – he has to compromise between full and empty tanks. Races can evolve over time, with cars coming back into and out of a race as their set-ups suit the fuel loads they are carrying. It also gives the FIA a very easy way to regulate engine power – they can simply reduce the fuel tank capacity. They did it very successfully in the turbo era.

The race was decided by the weather. When it started to rain, the track suited the Michelin runners, as they operate within a wider range than the dry Bridgestones. However, when it rained harder, the Bridgestone runners switched to intermediate tyres, and these are far better than the equivalent Michelin tyres. They also can run in quite dry conditions, as well as wet ones. The Bridgestone runners could then run faster in the wet, and stay on wets for longer, whereas the Michelin runners would have to change to “slick” tyres, and risk trying to stay on a slippery circuit with less than ideal tyres. It was tailor made for Michael Schumacher, and he made the most of it.

Kimi Raikkonen drove a superb race, finishing second, and keeping his slim championship hopes alive (providing he wins in Japan and Mr S doesn't score, he wins.....). He kept his car on the track through the entire race, and pushed throughout

to keep the pressure on Michael. His feelings on his championship chances were clear to see on the podium – rarely will you see anyone looking so unhappy at finishing second during a race.

Also unlucky was Jenson Button, who seems destined to never finish on the podium of a Grand Prix. He was in a comfortable second place, when his engine appeared to let go, and he pulled up at the end of the pit straight. What does he have to do to finish on the podium? He was in a comfortable 3rd in Malaysia last year when his suspension broke. He gets himself into decent positions only for his car to let him down. The problem is that this is always reflected on to him by the press, who denounce him for never getting to the podium. Let's hope that BAR get him a decent car for next year so that he can exorcise this particular ghost once and for all.

The upshot of this is that barring a miracle, Michael Schumacher will win his 6th World Championship this year, and will take the record for the most World Championships which he currently jointly holds with Juan Manuel Fangio. They are two drivers from two completely different eras, and it is very difficult (next to impossible) to compare them. However, it is my personal view that whatever statistics Michael Schumacher manages to achieve, he will never compare to Fangio. He didn't make the mistakes that Schumacher does, and didn't need to run his rivals off the road either.

The IRL

Sam Hornish won the IRL race at Fontana on the 21st September in his "Chevworth" at the record speed of 207.151 mph, the fastest open wheel ever, by 0.3562 seconds from Scott Dixon. The fastest lap of the race was 224.154 mph, by Dixon. Fontana is a 2.029 mile oval, and the record speed was achieved due to there only being a single caution period in the entire race. Formula One has some way to go before it achieves an average speed similar to that.

5th October 2003 - 12 Years of Marshalling at Castle Combe

This weekend was the final race meeting of the year at Castle Combe, and it featured the Formula Ford 1600 Festival. A good meeting it was too, with plenty of racing, and controversy too, including a near contretemps in the pit-lane after two drivers came together on the track, and Eugene O'Brian (ex-touring car driver) decided to have a go at Kevin Mills, the respective team owners. Blows were not exchanged, but on being handed the driveshaft from his crashed car at the end of the race, Mills was threatening to embed it in O'Brian's head. It didn't come to pass, and it was just one more event which has enlivened the past 12 years I have spent marshalling at the track, all of it on the startline and pit-lane.

A particular favourite of mine is the Special GT Championship, a race for which there seem to be few rules beyond the car having to be technically a two seater. This has allowed a plethora of spectacular cars to be entered over the years. Top of the list have to be two Jaguars which raced there in the early 1990s. The first of them was the Jaguar XJR14 of Brian Chatfield. It was an ex-Le Mans car, and still had the same gearing, although the paintwork had been redone, and it was now totally white. However, Chatfield had a real problem with noise. As the circuit is near several villages (which contain many jobs-worths who love to complain. Most of them moved there knowing that there was a race circuit nearby, so I have little sympathy. If you don't like the sound of racing engines, why move there?), they are very strict on noise, so to solve the problem, Chatfield would stuff his exhaust pipes full of metal wool to deaden the sound, and then drive very gently around the circuit in practice. This would normally net him a place on the fourth row of the grid.

The race start though was spectacular – when the lights went out, Chatfield would floor the accelerator. A huge plume of metal wool would shoot out of the exhaust, and the car would rocket past the next two rows before anyone else had even moved – damn the noise at this point. It would also give Chatfield a challenge, as there was only really one car which compete with it – a Skoda! Mind you, this Skoda did have a tubular chassis, and a Rover V8 engine. The Jaguar would usually win, although its job was made easier when drive Phil Lomas sold the car to Erling Jensen, who then wrapped it around a marshal's post at 160 mph, doing himself and the car a lot of damage in the process. He also managed to move the marshals post backwards by a foot as well.

The second Jaguar was entered by Dave Appleby, but this one was turbo-charged, and he entered several races in competition with Chatfield, until he decided to concentrate on rallying his Metro 6R4 instead. The car was spectacular, and had a special button on the steering wheel which would for a short period of time raise the turbo pressure and increase the engine power. Appleby had never used this button, until one race in particular. This race was wet, and Appleby was fed up with following the lead car around. Going around Quarry Corner, Appleby got fed up, and pulling onto the straight, he pulled out from behind the car and the resultant spray, and pressed the button. Appleby shot past the car, and with a clear track in front of him, shot off to the race win. Mind you, when he finally got out of his car to be interviewed, he was white and shaking with the fright he had given himself.

Although the Special GT championship can be highly spectacular, it has also seen its fair share of farce. One time that springs to mind is when the black and yellow

quartered flag was shown. This flag is only used in British Club racing, and is used when there has been an accident which needs clearing up, but when a red flag isn't really necessary. The flag is shown to the lead car, which is then meant to slow down to 50 mph, and act as the pace car until the green flag is waved again. However, in this particular case the lead cars decided to slow down only a little bit, but this new speed was still faster than the tail-enders could manage. Coming onto the start finish straight off Camp Corner, the green flag was waved for a one lap dash to the flag. However, there were cars everywhere. The tail-enders had slowed down to 50 mph as per the instructions, but were being overtaken at the same time by the leaders, despite the black and quartered flags meaning no overtaking as well. Cars were boxed in, and spread all over the track. Various pit-crew were claiming illegal overtaking manoeuvres, and it could only be sorted out by resorting to the computerised timing system.

The worst day of all that I marshalled was Monday 2nd May 1994. On the Saturday, the world of Motor Racing had lost Austrian F1 driver Roland Ratzenberger at Imola, the first fatality in F1 since Elio de Angelis lost his life at Paul Ricard in 1986. Then on the Sunday we lost Ayrton Senna. Talk at the circuit on Monday was of nothing else, with people pouring over the morning newspapers. We hoped that nothing like that would happen again, but sadly, it did.

The start of the Formula Ford 1600 race looked OK, until they reached the end of the pit-exit and the start of Folly corner. Cars were moving around, and somehow in the middle of the pack, two cars touched, setting off a chain-reaction. One car was spat out of the pack on the left-hand side, and it speared into the barriers head-on with a sickening thud. The race was quickly red-flagged, but what was more worrying was that the driver wasn't getting out of his car, a result of his car bending under impact around the driver and breaking his pelvis. He had to be cut out of his car, and while they were doing it, marshals held up blankets around the car to stop the public looking at what was happening. But what was worse was that the poor driver's parents were in the pit-lane, and I was at the pit-exit. The mother was close to tears, and both of them obviously very concerned. Luckily for me, the parents were not hysterical (I have seen it happen over far smaller accidents), and listened as I tried to prevent them running down the track. I managed to get them to go to the medical centre to wait for their son to be brought in – he was later airlifted to Frenchay Hospital in Bristol. It sounds easy now when writing this, but at the time it was quite harrowing – how was I meant to calm and help these two people, when their son was lying there injured on the race track? Hell, their son was older than I was! Somehow you do it – you have to, you are the official representative and interface with the people. Still, it hits you hard, and makes you realise that when they say Motorsport is dangerous, they really mean it.

Luckily, in all the time that I have been marshalling at Castle Combe, I have only seen one fatality, the deceased being one poor unfortunate mouse. The first I knew of the mouse was when the Chief Startline marshal, Nicki Fawdington, let forth a squeal and started jumping around as a grid of classic Porsche's sat awaiting the start procedure. The mouse made a break for it up the grid, hiding behind cars as it went. Proving that the English are a nation of animal lovers, a group of us followed the mouse as it went, trying to encourage it to head towards the infield. It didn't want to know. We tried leaning beneath cars to flush it out, but it would just make another run and hide underneath another car. Paul Lawrence, journalist for the Motoring News, thought it

was hilarious, and mentioned it in his article the following week. The three minute board was held up, signifying that the race would soon be underway, but the mouse had now taken refuge in front of a tyre. It sat there quivering, and I desperately tried to frighten it out of there, but I was now being shouted at to get off the grid so the cars could be waved off. The mouse wasn't moving.

I stood at the side of the circuit, but dared not look. The cars went off, and left behind was a sad messy flat piece of what had been the mouse. One or two of the female marshals looked at me, asking how I could have left the mouse where it was, but the race was being waved off, and I didn't want to end up like the mouse. But it had the last laugh – the car which ended the mouse's life span off into the infield within 100 metres of the start, and was out of the race.

T-Cars also spring to mind. This series was brought in by the BRSCC so that young teenagers could get an experience of circuit racing before their 17th birthday. However, this also brings fathers into the pit-lane, and they can be more competitive than their offspring. After one race, three drivers managed to come together as they crossed the finishing line (I'll call them drivers – one poor girl who was at the back of the grid look absolutely petrified, and only seemed to be there because of her fathers' cash and wish to get his child to do what he could not), with one of them disappearing into the crash barrier. The irate father tried to rush out onto the track, and I had to try and stop him. I suggested that it was dangerous as there were still cars out there on the circuit, to which he replied that the race was already over. Yes, but that hadn't stopped his son from crashing, had it?

Other things that come to mind are Dale Coyne and his Lancia Stratos silhouette racing car, powered by a turbocharged Cosworth engine. His exhaust system and engine caught fire as he crossed the start line to start his final lap, but he was so far ahead that he managed to limp across the finish line in first, before rapidly coming to a halt. There were still cars crossing the finishing line at racing speed – and these were fast cars – but the pit-crew decided that the fire marshals weren't attending the car quickly enough. Picking up a dry-powder fire extinguisher which was lying on the ground (and was thus half empty – it had been used earlier in the day), the mechanic ran across the track to the stricken car, being missed only by inches by cars doing over 100 mph. The circuit was very lucky that day.

What is also surprising when marshalling is how few drivers actually know the regulations. It is quite common to have to show a black and white flag (the flag being in both colours, with the flag being divided diagonally between the two) to a driver, showing that his driving was being observed due to either bad driving, unacceptable contact, or taking out corner markers at a chicane. It is not unusual for a driver to arrive in the pits to ask why he was being called in – the flag means nothing of the sort, and only a black flag can summon a driver in (except for a black and orange flag, which means that you have a mechanical defect and must come in and have it fixed).

Marshalling, though, has enabled me to speak with many of the people most involved in the sport, and a special note of thanks has to go to Ian Ashley (see www.silhouet.com/motorsport/drivers/ashley.html), who gave me a half hour of his time and discussed his career up to Formula 1 and beyond. Most of the drivers who compete really appreciate marshals, and the efforts they put in, and many a driver has donated a prize to the marshals' raffle as thanks for helping them in their hour of

need. However, one or two do need to remember that the marshals volunteer for what they do, and are not paid. I have also had to remind myself of that fact several times. Particularly when it is hosing it down with rain, windy, cold, and beginning to snow.....

12th October 2003 - Yet another won

Michael Schumacher won his sixth World Championship, but it was one of his most unconvincing displays of driving this year. As seems to be usual (see races passim, such as the Japanese GP where he stalled on Pole, his coming together with Villeneuve, his coming together with Hill.....), he wobbled, and was lucky to still be in the race come the end.

The single lap qualifying joker was played out on Saturday, with rain starting to fall in the second half of qualifying, and it showed the difference between the Michelin and Bridgestone tyres. It wasn't wet enough for intermediates, but it was wet enough to make it slippery, and in these conditions the Michelin is far superior. Raikkonen and Coulthard ended up 7th and 8th, with Michael Schumacher back in 14th. He had his work cut out for him, but he only needed one point to win the championship no-matter what Raikkonen did. And Barrichello was on pole.

Montoya was determined to show that Indianapolis had been an aberration, and was on a mission off the start. Barrichello may have been away in the lead, but Montoya was soon past and pushing on. It was to be in vain, a hydraulic leak shutting down everything, leaving Montoya with only enough power to get him back to the garage. The upside was that he didn't have to walk back.

Michael Schumacher was picking off the back markers, but was over eager. Coming into the Casio Triangle behind Sato, he decided that he would overtake, but was far too far back to make it realistically stick. Perhaps Schumacher is too used to lapping traffic rather than fighting for position, and expected Sato to jump out of the way. Sato stuck to the racing line, as he was correctly entitled to do, and Schumacher had to back out, catching his front wing on Sato's tyre. If you are going to damage your wing, you couldn't do it in a better place – he drove out of the chicane and straight into the pits, rejoining in last.

Barrichello was now in a seemingly untroubled lead (especially when Alonso's Renault died a smoky death), with the McLaren's in a 1-2, but all eyes were on Michael Schumacher, and whether he would make it into 8th place and so win the championship on his own, or whether he would have to rely on Barrichello denying Raikkonen. Schumacher was picking drivers off one by one, until he came up upon da Matta and his brother Ralf. It was cat and mouse for a while, with pit-stops interrupting, but it was again da Matta, Michael and Ralf. Michael was desperate to get past the Toyota (who fuelled themselves light for qualifying, so flattered to deceive with 3rd and 4th on the grid, a triumph of marketing over reality by the parent company), and coming around 130R, he was right up the rear of da Matta. Da Matta braked for the corner, covering his line, forcing Michael to jink left very rapidly to avoid contact. However, this was directly into the path of Ralf, who was on the normal line. Ralf locked up and part spun in avoidance, knocking off his front wing in the process. Michael ran wide and cut the chicane, but was able to rejoin without losing anything.

You did have to ask yourself what Michael was up to at this point. He was quite capable of putting in laps some two seconds a lap faster than the Toyota, so why did he put himself at the mercy of da Matta in 130R? If anything befell da Matta, he would have been caught up in it. With such car superiority, he should have got past

without such difficulty, so it can only have been the pressure of the situation getting to him again.

Thereafter it was business as usual. Schumacher finished in 8th place, and got his point. Barrichello won, with Raikkonen in 2nd and Coulthard 3rd (now there was a case of implicit team orders. Coulthard was obviously the faster car, but he didn't overtake. Given the noise that Max Mosley made about team orders before Indianapolis, he should perhaps take some action on this? He won't though – it would go to court if he did, and I'd like to see him try and win that one). We then had the slightly strange sight of the podium without the World Champion on it. Martin Brundle suggested that Schumacher should really have been up there too for the sake of Formula 1. Tough – Schumacher should simply drive better.

So Michael now holds the record outright for winning the most World Championships, eclipsing Juan Manuel Fangio, who achieved his five in the 1950s. Some will claim that this makes him the greatest driver ever, but I can't help but doubt this. He undoubtedly has the touch of genius, but he also has too many flaws. He looked distinctly average mid-season, with Barrichello getting the better of him. It has been suggested that the newest Bridgestone tyres were inducing understeer in the car, and that Barrichello copes better with this than Schumacher. But surely a driver of the supposed standard of Schumacher should be able to cope with this? Schumacher was lucky that his title rivals were taking points from each other, and couldn't always finish, either due to errors or mechanic reliability. Given the standard of the car, Michael didn't always make the best of it. There is also his past history, alluded to above. The numbers may say one thing, but I will always believe something else.

Quote of the week

“Heidfeld should have put an arrow out [for Michael Schumacher] and said you go that side.” Martin Brundle commenting on Michael Schumacher overtaking the Ferrari engined Sauber for position during the Japanese GP.

19th October 2003 - The Safety of Rallying

If there is a fatal accident in Formula 1, there is a major outcry, and a revision of the technical guidelines. Yet if a similar thing happens in rallying, life goes on as normal with little done – it is passed off as one of those things. Yes, the pursuit of safety may go to extremes in F1 (who can forget that temporary chicane made up of bound-up tyres at the Circuit de Catalunya for the Spanish Grand Prix, or the sudden appearance of chicane blight on circuits?), but it does have a point. Why should rallying have to put up with a more negligent attitude?

Consider two rallies which have occurred in the past couple of months. First, the Tour of Mull, a tarmac based rally on the Isle of Mull off the coast of Scotland. On the 11th of October, driver Duncan Hamilton left the road just after the start of stage 3, hitting a tree. The contact killed his co-driver instantly, his co-driver being his wife Susan. With Duncan's approval, the rally continued. Contrast that with F1. Then there was the ELPA Rally in Greece, a round of the European Rally Championship. Greek driver Dimitris Kolopianos in a Toyota Yaris came off the road and hit a telegraph pole. He survived the accident – but not the impact from the 2 ton electrical transformer which sat atop the pole and which then fell on the car.

Then there is the places they rally as well. Consider last weekends Tour de Corse, part of the World Rally Championship. The drivers are regularly racing down single track roads at speeds of over 100 mph, with 200 metre drops at the road-side. And they do come off from time to time, as Louise Aitken-Walker found in Portugal when she plunged off the side of the road and down a large cliff and into a lake – into which her car then sank. Without the drops, the rally can be dangerous enough, as Henri Toivonen found in 1986, when he crashed his group B Lancia Delta – it caught fire, and killed himself and his co-driver Sergio Cresto. Group B rally cars were immediately banned from the World Rally Championship, but they still compete in national rallies, with the sight of Metro 6R4's being very common on British national rallies.

The FIA puts a lot of money into safety research for Formula 1, but it also ought to be doing the same for rally cars. It is obvious from the litany of accidents mentioned earlier that rally cars are highly susceptible to side impacts, so the FIA should be looking at making the cars safer in these areas, perhaps mandating certain crumple zones or crash resistant structures. Perhaps they should be even more radical and insist that the co-driver is sited behind the driver, although a little offset, so that both the driver and co-driver can be kept further away from the sides of the car. This was tried with some success in Touring Cars, particularly following the death of Keith Odor from a side impact during a German Super Touring race at Avus.

First and foremost though, much more care and attention should be applied to the street furniture which litters the course during a rally. This is not to say that Armco should be placed along the entire route, as this would be prohibitively expensive, and would kill off national level rallying altogether. Simple things such as the use of hay bales could be increased. During the Goodwood Festival of Speed, huge hay bales are used to line the course and to protect the spectators from errant vehicles. They work, and no spectator has been injured at the event. Such hay bales could be placed around prominent poles or walls on rally routes. This, perhaps, wouldn't have stopped the tragedy in Greece, but would help in many other cases. In the case of Greece, you

would have to ask why such an obstacle was alongside the route of a rally – it was close to the start, and the start could have been moved so that it was past such an obstacle. The people who plan such rallies need to take into account that a car can come off on any corner, and given a puncture, even on a straight. They should analyse where cars can go in the event of an accident, and what can be done to minimise the problem. If it is too dangerous, take another route, or split the stage into two and use the dangerous bit as a control section.

Rallying is inherently dangerous, and that is part of its appeal – who can but marvel at the sight of cars rushing past trees at over 100 mph with only a metre or two to spare? But the life of a rally driver shouldn't be considered as being worth less than that of a Formula 1 driver. They are all people after all, and they all have families who will grieve after them – death is the biggest equalizer of all, and it is no less final whether you are being paid \$15 million a year to drive a Ferrari, or paying for your own car out of your hard earned cash. But a little extra thought and research could make their lives a lot safer without destroying the sport. How spectacular an accident will it require before the powers that be take note and do something about it?

26th October 2003 - Remember Tony Renna

Scott Dixon became this years Indy Racing League champion at the final race of the series at Texas Motor Speedway, but the race itself was marred by a huge accident involving Kenny Brack and Tomas Scheckter with five laps to go. Brack appeared to move down on Scheckter, and caught his rear wheel. This flung Brack into the air, the car disintegrating around him. He punched a hole in the catch fencing, but came to rest on the circuit itself, only the survival cell intact. The race was immediately stopped, and wasn't restarted due to the hole in the fencing.

Brack was extremely lucky, only suffering a few broken bones. The fact that the car broke up around him saved his life, as it dissipated the energy of the accident. Not so lucky was Tony Renna on the 22nd October, tyre testing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Renna was testing for the first time for the team he had signed for the 2004 race season – Ganassi Racing. On his fourth flying lap, something broke, and the car became airborne as it approached turn 3. It hit the catch fencing, and the car disintegrated, bits flying everywhere. It has been said by some that the gearbox itself was found in the grandstand, the catch fencing being destroyed. Thank goodness that this wasn't on a race weekend, as the consequences for the crowd don't bear thinking about – it would have been all too reminiscent of Le Mans 1955.

The accident occurred at 9:20 am, and Renna was immediately taken by ambulance to the Indianapolis Methodist Hospital. He was pronounced dead on arrival. It was the 67th fatality at the track.

Renna started racing at the age of 6 in karts and quarter-midgets (similar to stock cars in the UK. They run on small oval tracks), and moved into the Skip Barber series in 1993, moving into the Pro Series in 1994 for three races. He entered the championship properly in 1996, and won the Rookie of the Year championship. That year he represented the USA in the Formula Opel Nations Cup at Donington Park, the team finishing second (this now defunct championship was for any car entered in various national Formula Opel/Formula Vauxhall championships. Each national Motor Racing body chose four drivers to represent it, and they all raced together). He also competed in British Formula 3 Class B, winning his class at one race.

He competed again in the Barber Dodge Pro Series for 1997, before moving up to the Indy Lights series in 1998, driving for the Mattco Raceworks team, and recording one win at Michigan. He moved to PacWest for 1999, but only drove in five races. For 2000 he was entered for all of the races, as team-mate to Scott Dixon, and he finished 5th overall. But he struggled to find a full-time ride for the following year, only racing twice – for TC Kline Racing in the Speedvision Challenge GT Championship.

Things looked up in 2002, and he was signed by the Kelley Racing Indy Racing League team as a test driver. He substituted for lead driver Al Unser Jr for two races in July, finishing 4th at Michigan, and impressed enough to get a full time ride for the rest of the season. For 2003 he was announced as test-driver again for Kelly Racing, but did get a full ride at the Indianapolis 500, finishing 7th. Looking for a full-time ride in 2004, he signed for Ganassi Racing on the 1st October. Sadly, he never got to experience what he had been always working for.

Quote of the week

“There’s literally zero traction on these roads.” Robby Head talking about Colin McRae on the Rally Catalunya. Tell me Robby – how was it that McRae managed to accelerate and didn’t go straight on at the next corner? A lesson in physics is in order I think. Newton’s first law of motion – each action has an equal and opposite reaction.....

2nd November 2003 - Early Racing in the UK

Today we are used to seeing motor racing on closed circuits, whether they are purpose built facilities such as Rockingham or Silverstone, or street circuits such as Monaco which are constructed with full safety facilities and accompanying Armco. This is a far cry from the rather more basic races (and circuits) originally used in the UK. Indeed, circuits such as Silverstone might never have been built in this country if World War II hadn't happened.

At the beginning of the 1900s, races were usually point to point affairs, with public roads between towns being used for racing. In fact, they were more like modern day rallies. However, racing on public roads was banned on mainland Britain, so when Britain won the Gordon Bennett Trophy in 1902, and thus had to host the 1903 event, Athy in Ireland was used, the circuit being shown below.

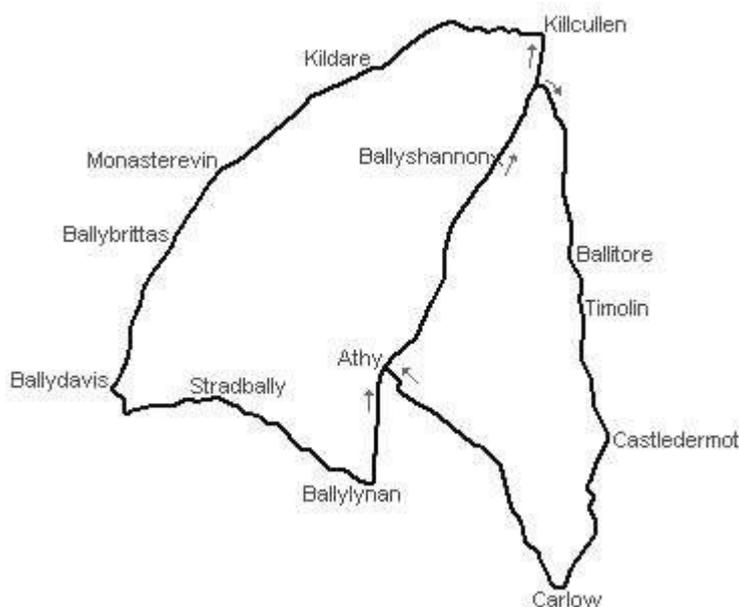


Figure 1 - Athy Circuit, made up of two separate circuits, the Carlow circuit (clockwise) and Kildare circuit (anticlockwise)

Further racing venues were sought after, and the Isle of Man was used from 1905. Sited between mainland Britain and Ireland and ruled by its own government, it made the ideal location. The original circuit was some 52 miles long, and went around nearly all the island. It was shortened to 40 miles for 1906, and was shortened again in 1908 to become 37.5 miles. This circuit, known as the mountain circuit, is still in use today, hosting the annual TT motorbike races. The various circuit variants are shown on the map below.

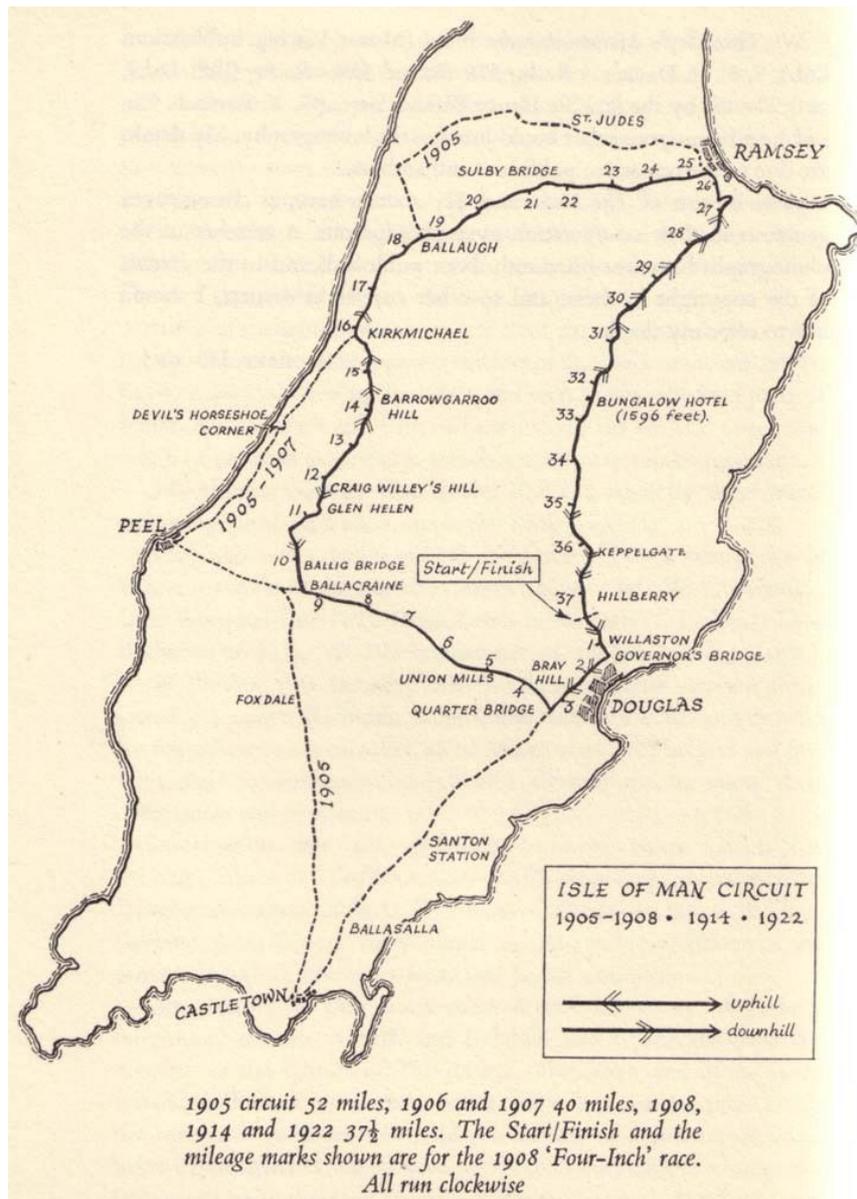


Figure 2 - The Isle of Man

In 1907, the first purpose built circuit in the UK was built – Brooklands – and uniquely it was oval, pre-dating Indianapolis by two years. It caused great excitement, but had what could be considered to be a detrimental effect on British motor-sport. While road racing continued in continental Europe, with permanent road based circuits being created (Monza was built in 1922), racing was largely concentrated at Brooklands in the UK with its unique demands of high speed and bumpy banking.

Brooklands also caused a class divide. Road racing, especially in mainland Europe, was open to anyone, whereas racing at Brooklands was open to “the right crowd”. This meant that racing and spectating at Brooklands was typically the preserve of the upper classes, as it was somewhere to “be seen”. As the cars became more and more specialised, competitors from Europe became fewer and fewer. Typical of the cars which raced at Brooklands were the aero-engined monsters. These cars were huge, with aircraft engines of 16 and 18 litre capacities being used (and with names such as Mephistopheles), and with lap times to match. They stuck to the outer banking, the

lap record of the 2.767 mile circuit being held by John Cobb in a Napier Railton at 1m09.44, 143.451 mph.

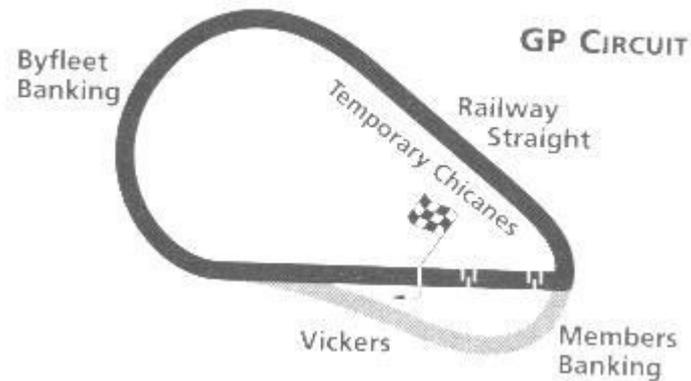


Figure 3 - Brooklands

However, during World War II, Brooklands was used for military purposes, with aircraft being manufactured on site. With the concrete surface breaking up, and with the military still in place after the war, budding racers had to look elsewhere for their circuits. It just so happened that there were plenty of disused airfields now dotted around the countryside, with names such as Castle Combe and Silverstone, and they had some very interesting perimeter roads. A new era of British motorsport was about to begin.

9th November 2003 - Corporate Pride MARRS WRC Finale

It promised to be a spectacular finale, with four drivers all in contention for the World Rally Championship. There were the two newcomers: Sebastien Loeb for Citroën, and Petter Solberg for Subaru. Then there were the two “old stagers” – Carlos Sainz for Citroën, and Richard Burns for Peugeot. And it was the two old stagers who blew it.

Burns was the most unfortunate, and the manner of his departure may put a question mark over the rest of his career. Going down the M4 motorway towards Cardiff in his Porsche 911 during the previous week, with Markko Märtin as passenger, Burns fainted. Märtin managed to bring the car to a safe stop, and Burns was rushed to Newport Hospital, where he recovered with seemingly no ill effects. But with no-one knowing what had caused the problem, Burns was refused permission to compete, and will have to undergo further medical tests. Should it be something serious, it could be the end for Burns – what if he blacked out along the narrow roads of the Tour de Corse with their sheer drops? His place in the Peugeot team was taken by ex-Hyundai driver Freddy Loix.

Sainz’s problems occurred as he sat awaiting the start of the very first stage. With seconds to go, he had to abort his start as smoke was issuing from the rear of the car due to an electrical fault. There then followed a circus act, as Sainz had to move his car out of the start area, and then proceeded to run around with his co-driver trying to find the fault. Once fixed, they took the start proper, but Sainz’s cool was so upset that on the second stage he misheard a pacenote and stuffed it permanently into the trees.

Grönholm was only a little better. Sliding wide, he clouted a pile of cut logs, and partially ripped off a wheel. As he couldn’t fix it, Grönholm tried to drive back to service, but ran into the long arm of the law, who gently pointed out that a car has to be roadworthy to go on the highway, and that his car wasn’t exactly ready for an MOT. There is precedence for this – Tommi Mäkinen was stopped a couple of years ago after knocking a rear wheel off against a concrete block on the MIRA proving grounds. The cars have to drive amongst the public, so it is only right that they don’t pose anyone a danger. After all, there would be hell to pay if something else broke and the car caused an accident.

Märtin lasted a couple of stages more, but was losing water from his engine. His engine temperature soared, but he made it back to service. He also made it back out, but only for a short while. Although the engine had been refilled with water, it had taken enough abuse for the day, and he parked up a few miles down the road.

Solberg was in the lead at this point, with Loeb in second place, and it was cooking up nicely for the rest of the rally. Only Citroën didn’t want to play. Deciding that the manufacturers championship was the most important thing, they instructed Loeb and Colin McRae to back off to ensure that they finished, leaving the road open for Solberg. Your heart went out to Loeb, because he was in such an invidious position. There he was, at the cusp of his first championship, and he was being told not to. Did he ignore his employers wishes and risk his contract for the following year should he stuff it into the scenery, or did he back off? After all, who knows, it might be his only ever chance – stranger things have happened in motorsport. Loeb backed off, and

Citroën were castigated in the French press, as La France was being denied her first world champion in over a decade. For Citroën, it was a Public Relations nightmare.

Solberg insisted that Loeb wouldn't back off, but he was steadily disappearing into the distance. Loeb was steady in second, so the focus was now on two departing stars, Tommi Mäkinen and Colin McRae. Mäkinen was retiring after the event, and had been given a pair of golden driving boots to celebrate. The only thing more golden was his smile – he was enjoying himself more than he had in years, and it showed in his driving. He traded tenths of seconds with McRae throughout the rally until the final stage, when McRae suffered a puncture. Although he parked up and changed it in record time, he still lost two minutes. Mäkinen was safe in third, and McRae finished fourth – he was that far ahead of Ford's François Duval.

In the end, Citroën's decision looked even more daft than it did at the beginning of the rally, as McRae's fourth place was enough to seal the title. The difference in body language at the finish in Margam Park told you all you needed to know. Rally and Championship winner Petter Solberg was bouncing around and off everyone, while Loeb was trying to be polite enough to everyone. Subaru couldn't be more happy, but Citroën's chief Guy Frequelin was left to consider what might have been. Yes, Citroën were the manufacturer's champions, but if they hadn't held back their drivers, then they might have had two titles to shout about. However, I have a sneaky suspicion that however hard Loeb would have tried, Solberg would have had him covered, as he was driving that well. But with the extra pressure of being chased? We'll never know. I just hope that Loeb's contract ensures that he is really adequately compensated, although there is nothing monetary which can make up for what he was made to suffer through this weekend.

Grand-Am

It was the final round of the Grand-Am championship at Daytona last weekend. In the pre-race testing, Lyndon Amick managed to crash his Chevrolet Corvette into an anthill. It took his pit-crew two days to get all of the ants out of the car, but at the cost of many bites.....

The Brazilian GP – will it disappear?

On the 24th October, a State Judge from São Paulo decided that the Brazilian Grand Prix breached the state financial rules of São Paulo, as it generates a financial loss each year and does not justify the state investment. The problem is that the Grand Prix can't be moved to the other traditional Grand Prix track of Jacarepagua, as the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Cesar Maia, has decided to build an Olympic Village on the track so that they can host the 2007 Pan-American Games (this is the same mayor who refused to invest any money to host the annual Indycar race there). The race may be lost forever, unless a new court appeal succeeds, or someone can up-rate another track quickly – perhaps the track in the federal capital of Brasilia?

16th November 2003 - Even aircraft don't stop the racing



You're club racing in Canada, on the 23rd July 1983, and an aeroplane crash lands on your circuit. What do you do? You continue racing.....

The incident happened at the Gimli circuit, a race track based around a World War II airfield in Canada. Flight 143, an Air Canada Boeing 767, was in Montreal, and the fuel monitoring system had broken, so the amount of fuel to be loaded had to be calculated by hand. Using the specific gravity factor of 1.77 pounds/litre, they worked out what fuel they needed, and re-ran the calculations three times to ensure they got the figure right. This was the crucial mistake – the 767 used the metric system throughout, and they should have used 0.8 kg/litre. They loaded on less than half the fuel they needed.

Somewhere over Red Lake Ontario, problems started to become apparent, with the fuel pressure dropping. The crew switched off the left fuel pump, but then the second pump started showing problems. Fearing a problem, the crew decided to divert to Winnipeg, and requested emergency clearance. They started a gradual descent – and the left engine flamed out. Two minutes later, the onboard warning system issued a bong – the second engine flamed out. The pilots hadn't heard the warning sound before, as it wasn't in the training simulator.

Having lost both engine, the Ram Air Turbine dropped out of the bottom of the plane. This is a propeller driven hydraulic pump to supply power to all of the control surfaces. However, Winnipeg was now out of the question, so where would they land now?

The problem was that the manual didn't say what the sink rate of the aircraft was – Boeing never expected anyone to glide their aircraft. The RAT fan was creating enormous drag, so the sink rate was quite high. One of the crew remembered Gimli, an abandoned Royal Canadian Air Force Base where he had been stationed during the war. Only since then, one of the runways was used for motorsport, with guard rails down the middle of it to make a drag strip. And on the 23rd July, the Winnipeg Sports Car Club was running its Family Day. There were kart races on part of the runway,

road races on the road course, and off the main straight there were kids, campers and barbecues. The plane was heading this way.

The crew tried to lower the landing gear, but the RAT system wouldn't supply enough hydraulic pressure. The force of the air locked the rear wheels into position, but the front wheel fell against the air, and wouldn't lock in – they would be landing with no nose wheel. They were approaching the airfield, and lined up with the left hand runway – the one in use. It was the wider runway, and the painted "X" on the runway indicating the inactive status was faded to non-existent. Once the decision had been made on which one to go for, there was no going back – you can't pull out and go again in a 132 ton glider.

As the plane levelled off and touched down, spectators and racers fled in all directions. There was allegedly one person walking down the dragstrip with a five gallon can full of racing fuel, who looked up and saw an aeroplane surging towards him. The pilot applied the brakes – two tyres blew out, and the nose gear, which wasn't locked in place, collapsed. Showers of sparks flew off the bottom of the plane as it scraped across the tarmac. The pilot applied extra right braking so that the main gear straddled the guard rail in the middle of the runway, and it ploughed along until it came to a stop less than a hundred feet from the spectators and camper vans. On stopping, a small fire broke out in the nose of the aircraft, so an emergency evacuation was ordered. The emergency slides at the rear of the aircraft proved problematic, as the nose-down nature of the body meant that the slides were almost vertical. Astonishingly, the only injuries in the entire incident occurred as passengers hit the tarmac exiting the rear.

The fire in the aircraft was put out by the track marshals with hand held fire extinguishers, and the plane was amazingly undamaged – indeed, it was flown out of the airfield two days later. And racing continued, hence the photo above. An amazingly nonchalant attitude given the enormity of the accident which had just been avoided.

23rd November 2003 - Richard Burns

It was announced last weekend the medical reasons behind why Richard Burns blacked out on the way to the Rally Great Britain, and it was worse than we imagined. He was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

It was a shock to the rallying world, and his current team Peugeot, and future team Subaru all pledged to do what they could to help Burns back into his rallying seat. It has also been announced that Burns will have to undergo radio-therapy to treat the tumour, but that it should be possible to treat it successfully. It will be a worrying time for him and his family, and we wish him well. Burns has already been ruled out for the 2004 season, which leaves a seat available at Subaru. Already the speculation has started.

The main rumour concerns Colin McRae, who was formally announced this week as a member of the Nissan team for the Paris-Dakar Rally. This would make it difficult for him to compete on the Monte Carlo Rally, but he would be available for the rest of the season. Out of respect for Richard Burns, Colin wouldn't say whether he would be going for the seat or not yet, but it makes sense. Subaru get another well-known driver who can help develop the car, and he is a known quantity to them from years past. Don't rule it out!

F1 Rumour Mill – Correct Again

The F1 Rumour Mill has been proved correct yet again. Despite denials from all sides, it was announced this week that Juan Pablo Montoya will be driving for McLaren in 2005. McLaren don't have another driver signed for 2005 yet, but it is a pretty safe bet that they will keep hold of Kimi Räikkönen, with David Coulthard being out of a job. Ralf Schumacher's manager Willi Weber is seeing this as an opportunity to ratchet up Ralf's wages from an already excessive £7 million to an exorbitant £10 million a year. Knowing how Frank and Patrick have viewed their drivers in the past (think Nigel Mansell in 1992, for instance), I think that Weber will be told to stick it where the sun don't shine. They already have a decent test driver with F1 experience in Marc Gené who more than adequately replaced Schumacher at Monza, and also have Antonio Pizzonia, who has tested successfully for them in the past (although he raced without success at Jaguar). If Ralf isn't careful, he will price himself out of his seat – Frank and Patrick are renowned for preferring to spend their money on their cars rather than on their drivers.

Early UK Racing – over the banking

John Duff, driving a 22.5 litre chain-drive Mercedes-Benz, went over the top of the Members' banking in the 100 mph Short Handicap at the 1922 Autumn meeting at Brooklands. He took a friend as a passenger, and failed to slow sufficiently at the end of the Finishing Straight. He slid up the banking, hit a telegraph pole, and went over the top, sliding down the steep slope the other side and coming to rest. Duff and his passenger were lying beside the car, with the passenger vociferously complaining about Duff's driving, when the petrol tank which had lodged in a tree fell out and hit the passenger's head. "There, now you will have something to complain about!" Duff is alleged to have said.

See Motorsport, December 2003, pg 97 for further details

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