

Moderators Musings

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When is a marque truly a marque?

Bentley finished 1-2 at Le Mans this weekend, which got me thinking. Despite the nationalistic hype that the team tries to surround itself with, is it really a Bentley in the same way that it was when Woolf Barnato, Tim Birkin, Sammy Davis, Bernard Rubin, Glen Kidston and John Benjafield were winning for the team?

Let's consider some facts. Bentley today is owned by the Volkswagen group, after their purchase of the Rolls Royce motorcar company (the rights to the name Rolls Royce are owned by the Rolls Royce aero engine company, which refused VW permission to use them - they gave permission to BMW instead). The VW group was already into sportscar racing through its Audi subsidiary, who were successfully rolling all before them in the ALMS with their R8 sportscar. Note that Audi also had the R8C in its armoury - a closed top version of the R8. It raced once in the Le Mans 24 Hrs, but didn't do terribly well.

Then VW decided to enter Bentley into the Le Mans 24 Hrs. How would they do it? They decided to chose a closed top prototype as the way to go(similar to the R8C, which was built in the UK for Audi), and decided to use the Audi turocharged engine to power the thing. The chassis was to be built by a UK based specialist race car builder.

Not much Bentley so far (apart from the colour scheme and literature). But then you could argue the same for the TWR Jaguar's in the 1980s. But at least in the Jaguar case, the team was funded by Jaguar itself. The companies' own cash flow was spent on the project. I doubt that the Bentley effort has been anywhere near the cash flow of Bentley - do they really produce enough cars to afford a fully funded racing effort? It is all absorbed into the big corporate entity of VAG AG.

So is it really a Bentley? Not really - more like a green VAG-Audi. When they start using a genuine Bentley engine, I might start to reconsider, but whatever the record books may say, it is not the first Bentley win since 1930. Its the fourth consecutive victory for VAG instead.

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Future Champion?

It was the latest round of the British Formula 3 Championship at Castle Combe this weekend, what is supposed to be the pinnacle of British single seater racing before graduating to the International formulae. But is it really?

To put it bluntly, the cars have too little power and too much downforce. As a result the cars go around corners and don't look like they are on edge at all. Until a driver loses it that is. There is no engagement with the crowd, as they look easy to drive, as if you and I could simply step in and drive it. This was reflected in the crowd on Saturday. It was only a qualifying day, but there was plenty of spectator space at Camp Corner and Quarry Corner - this never happens on a club day.

I felt sorry for the F3 drivers, except for one. They are trying to break into F1, and they are barely recognised. Except for one Nelson Angelo Piquet, better known as Nelsinho, son of F1 World Champion Nelson Piquet. Outside of their awning in the paddock were crowds of people

standing watching what was going on. None of the others were given the attention, not even the championship leader.

Piquet Sr though was the model of fatherhood. I was marshalling at the pit exit, and he would come down to stand on the raised bank to get a better view of the track. He would stand there, deep in thought, concern flitting across his face as his son's car wriggled out on the track. His son though is a different kettle of fish.

Getting out of the car, he is immediately fawned over by his girlfriend, the type of girl who's clothes try to be casual and hair tied back, but only succeeds in saying that I have tonnes of cash. Nelsinho stands up, arrogance in the posture already. And why shouldn't he? The commentators and magazine writers fawn all over him, saying that he will for certain be in F1 soon. I will admit that he has talent - you can't simply turn up at Knockhill having never seen it before and win without some. But talent isn't everything - remember Jan Magnussen? What about Marc Hynes and Gary Brabham? British F3 Champions all. You need some humility too.

As an aside, here is an incident which occurred around the Piquet team last year in the South American F3 Championship at Fortaleza, Brazil:

As the field lined up on the grid for the second race, 13 drivers got out of their car and presented a letter to race officials protesting the conduct of the Piquet Sport team. Testing at circuits is banned until they have staged a race, but Piquet Sports modified their Dallara by placing mudguards over the wheels, making it a "sports prototype", so eligible to test. Piquet Sports argued that the testing rule was targeted purely at Piquet Jr anyway, as he had only half a seasons race experience. Members of the Piquet team, and the event sponsor, Arialdo Pinho, allegedly hurled verbal abuse at the drivers as this presentation occurred. On leaving the circuit, Thiago Medeiros, who lead the drivers protest, saw Pinho, and allegedly gave him some verbal abuse back. Pinho then grabbed a gun from a security guard, and pointed it at Medeiros' head. Both men were separated, and the incident was reported to the police. Both men were also suspended from Brazilian tracks for six months, Medeiros for calling the local motorsport federation president "Piquet's ass kisser". The following round of the championship was instead rescheduled to take place at Obera, in Argentina.

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NASCAR to F1

Following last week's Trading Paint event at Indianapolis, where Juan Pablo Montoya and Jeff Gordon swapped cars and drove around the GP circuit, both getting within a second of the benchmark times set in the NASCAR and F1 car in each others cars, wild rumours have been emerging.

The wildest has to surround Ferrari. Following the cessation of tobacco sponsorship, rumour has it that the sponsor lined up to follow Marlboro at Ferrari is Budweiser. Budweiser sponsor Dale Earnhardt Jr in NASCAR, and it is rumoured that they would pay for him to come to F1.

Come on! Earnhardt Jr, son of legendary seven times Winston Cup champion Dale Earnhardt, simply wouldn't cut it. He has only ever raced stock-cars, and has been lucky with his name. He may win restrictor-plate races (these occur on the 2.5 mile superspeedways such as Talladega and Daytona, where a restrictor plate is placed over the carburettor to reduce airflow and thus engine power), but little else. He simply isn't the type of driver who would grab the car and disappear off. He is a percentage guy - hence his second in the championship this year, higher than he normally is.

Jeff Gordon, on the other hand, would really be a proposition. He started off in single seaters before converting to stocks, and has to be one of the most gifted drivers of his generation. He is also open to motorsport outside of the US, taking an interest in F1, and having taken part in the Race of Champions event in the Canary Islands last year. He is also a racer, being the first

driver to win in NASCAR by aiming to take the point for fastest lap, leading most laps, taking pole and finishing 1st in all races, rather than taking percentages. Will it ever happen? Unlikely. As Patrick Head said in Nigel Roebuck's *Fifth Column* article this week in Autosport, they couldn't afford him in F1. He's paid even more than Michael Schumacher.

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2003 European Grand Prix

So what did people think? Here's my take.....

1) What an overtaking manoeuvre by Montoya on Michael Schumacher. He left enough room for both to get past, but Michael's car washed out a little, slid slightly, hit Montoya's car and caused him to spin. Michael admitted afterwards that he would have done the same, and that it was a racing incident. More overtaking like this please - audacious, brave, and willing to try something different to the norm.

2) Should Michael have been restarted? What about all of the other cars in the past which have beached themselves, still had the engine running, but were out of the race? Now the precedent has been set, I expect to see all cars which are stuck in gravel traps but are otherwise OK to be pushed out and allowed to continue. If not, then we have one rule for the plebs and one for the F1 Royalty.

3) Ralf Schumacher. Despite the race commentary, only a partial answer to his previous race. He has shown on many occasions that if he is out in front, he can win a race no problem. He has still to demonstrate that he can win a race by actually overtaking someone.

4) Coulthard - elementary driving error? If you know that the car in front has braking problems, be prepared for him to brake in odd places. You could argue that Alonso had a slightly liberal view on the one move rule, but Coulthard had a far superior car, and it shouldn't have been as difficult as he was making it.

5) Raikkonen. I think that he laid down a marker in that race that he has now arrived fully as a Grand Prix driver, and as a potential world champion. His initial speed, and the way he was dominating the race, was in the manner of Prost, Senna and Schumacher. His qualifying lap was special too. If he can make sure that his previous qualifying mishaps are behind him now, and Mercedes build reliable engines, then this may well be his year.