

2nd February 2004 - British Sidecar Championship - Return to Trouble?

This year sees the reintroduction of the British Sidecar Championship, complete with possible TV coverage and prize money worth winning (and a £5000 entry fee). This championship replaces the existing MRO Championship (and may completely sideline the Superside Championship, by offering the better prize money), and has attracted entries from the World Championship, so much so that it could become the de facto World Championship. But what about the existing club riders?

The existing ladder for sidecar racing works like this: if a club rider in a club championship finishes in the top 50% of a set number of races, that rider can then graduate to the national championship. If that rider then finishes in the top 50% of a set number of national championship or the Euro Championship races, then the rider can then graduate to the Superside championship. However, if the Superside championship now becomes the national championship, and it is attracting World and Euro entries to the extent that they make up over 50% of the field, how is a club rider to move upwards and gain more experience - they face not qualifying at some races. At smaller circuits with limited grid positions, you could face a situation where you have the winner of the Euro Championship (who is not allowed to race in the championship again for two years, so that new talent can be brought on) is not able to qualify for the British Championship, and thus can't gain the experience of racing on the larger circuits with the better outfits. The only place they can race is in the smaller club championships and on the smaller circuits, which is not conducive to improving the standard.

In its aim of creating a world class series, the governing body seems to have lost sight of the need to keep the sidecar ladder in place. Without a regular supply of new and promising talent, how do you keep the championship going? There has to be a championship in which the best of the club championship riders can compete, and the best from that can then go on and compete at international level. At the very least, the governing body could take a leaf out of the Superbike championship rules, and grant wildcard entries to the best of the club racers, and ensure that they get a place on the grid. If something is not done, then the BSC runs the risk of becoming the de facto world series, but without the possibility of entry for anyone else. If it gets all the TV coverage, and the standard there is so much higher, then the bar of entry for those without access to the same level of sponsorship and TV coverage may be too high. Look at F1 - the costs of competing are now so high that a new non-manufacturer team hasn't been able to enter and remain since Jordan in 1991 (we'll forget the abortive Simtek, Pacific, Forti Corse and Lola teams - although they entered, they were effectively bankrupted in the process).

Perhaps what is needed for the British Championship is to run two races, something akin to British F3, which has an International class and Scholarship class, which run as different races on the smaller circuits. Anyone who finishes in the top 50% of the national class would be able to enter the higher class race, thus enabling drivers to progress and enter international races. Otherwise, club drivers will never be able to progress, as you can hardly expect riders at the beginning of their careers to be able to beat World Series riders to get the necessary qualification. Another point to consider is do you even need this 50% rule? After all, you don't need to have even done British

F3 to race European F3. For that matter, you don't even have to have done F3 to reach F1. Look at Kimi Raikkonen - he went straight from Formula Renault.....

29th February 2004 - Xilinx, Williams and Reprogrammable Micro-Chips

I was recently at the Design Automation and Test Europe conference in Paris when I came across a stand which appealed to both the techie and motorsport fanatic in me. It was a stand by Xilinx, and featured the front end of a Williams F1 car which was hooked up to a computer running the game F1GP3. You sat in the car (it is quite an effort getting in and out when you are over 6 foot tall), and had the usual pedals and steering wheel to operate. The best three times of the session won a prize.

Xilinx were demonstrating how their devices, FPGA's (Field Programmable Gate Array's) could be used, and highlighting their collaboration with Williams. But what are they, and why are they so suited to their application? What is their application? Firstly though, we need to take a step back and look at how microchips are usually made.

Whether you build an FPGA or traditional microchip, you start off the same way. You write a model which describes how your chip will work, and you then verify that it does what it is meant to do. You then synthesize your design, turning the model into another model. This model is very different though, and consists of the basic logic blocks (such as AND, NOT – all of those things you have heard of but otherwise never used) all wired together to give the same result as the previous model. These logic blocks are made up of transistors which can be physically made in the fab.

This is where things start to diverge. Traditionally, the design would be shipped off to the factory (or fab, short for fabrication facility), which these days cost \$1 Billion or more, where a set of wafers would be prepared, several thousand devices made, and several weeks would be taken. Making several thousand (or million) devices means that each one can be sold very cheaply. But what does an F1 team want with several thousand (or million) copies of a device? It would be ruinously expensive for them, as simply making a mask set to make the chip in the fab can cost \$500,000 or more.

The alternative is to use an FPGA. Inside the FPGA are several thousand logic components all connected to each other. However, all of the connections can be broken and remade, and the device is programmable. So, once you have synthesized the design, you can physically load it into the FPGA. It is a far quicker process – hours instead of weeks, and if you get something wrong, you simply redo your design, synthesize it again, and reload it onto your FPGA. So what is the downside? Well, an FPGA can't run as quickly as a normal microchip. But it is just so suited to the F1 world – need to fit a new sensor to your car and modify your microchip? Go back to the factory, re-write your code, synthesize, and load it back into the FPGA. By the next race you can have a completely new set of in-car electronics monitoring everything. Your normal road car doesn't use them as car manufacturers aim to sell millions of units, and the normal microchip works out cheaper in volume.

Electronics

Williams use a Xilinx VirtexTM-E XCV600-E FPGA with a Texas Instrument DSP chip to monitor everything to do with the chassis – engine electronics are controlled separately. Everything is included in the black box shown below.



This box of electronics (known as the VCM) acts as data logger and processor, and controls numerous functions on the car.

Gears – as the gearbox is hydraulically controlled, there are numerous actuators to control once the driver has flicked the paddle behind the steering wheel. A gear change takes less than 50 ms, so within this time the processor needs to work out in which order the actuators need to be fired in, as well as controlling the fly-by-wire throttle.

Traction – although traction control is actually performed by the engine, it relies on inputs from the VCM to work out what it does. A model of the tyre is programmed into the device, and from its inputs it predicts the amount of wheel slip required to achieve maximum traction and minimum tyre wear. It also generates control signals for the hydraulic active differential.

Dashboard – all of the screen displays seen by the driver are controlled by the VCM. For 2004, an additional FPGA has been added to the steering wheel to provide additional processing power.

Telemetry – there are some 220 channels of information to be recorded, and 90 of these channels are signals from sensors used to record the car's performance during a race. Other channels monitor the control software, and others monitor driver inputs. All of this can add up to as much as 256 MB of data during a race. This data is stored in a flash ram card mounted inside the VCM. Some of the data is transmitted in real time back to the pit-wall and the garages during a race.

Failure Analysis – for certain critical functions, multiple sensors are used for the same thing in order to build in redundancy. Should one go wrong, the car can still keep

7th March 2004 - Bridgestone wins in the cold

Cold of course is a relative term – I'm writing this on a brisk March day, and an air temperature of 19 C seems pleasantly warm to me. But for a Formula 1 tyre, cold it is, and this moved the game into Bridgestone territory. Only Ferrari and Sauber (alternatively known as Ferrari-B by some) use Bridgestone, so the result for the A-team was a foregone conclusion.

Ferrari

They clearly showed that the fastest time set in testing at Imola was no fluke, which socks it to the cynics such as myself who wondered whether the time had been done with a car which wasn't necessarily in race trim in order to sow the seeds of doubt amongst the others. Both Michael Schumacher and Rubens Barrichello disappeared into the distance at a record pace, until Barrichello's brake pedal started going long, and both cars backed off. The other teams had better hope that the Australian Grand Prix was purely about tyres. If it wasn't, then we are in for a repeat of the 2002 season. Malaysia should make this clear – assuming that it doesn't have unseasonably cold temperatures of course.

McLaren

This team has an awful lot of work to do. Qualifying 10th and 12th simply isn't good enough for a team which should be challenging for wins. In addition, they were the only team which lost an engine amongst the big teams, despite the rules having been changed so that only one engine is allowed to be used by any driver on a weekend (which created some fun before qualifying on Saturday, when Jenson Button damaged his car, and the mechanics had to move his engine into the spare car so that they didn't get penalised for using more than one engine). Although Raikkonen qualified ahead of Coulthard, he didn't look that convincing in the race, with Coulthard beating him off the start.

Williams

It was a strange race by both Williams drivers. Montoya looked the best of the two, and he overtook his own team-mate after a tardy start. He also managed to overtake Button and Trulli on the track, but he suffered on his pit stops with problematic wheel changes. Ralf Schumacher was as enigmatic as ever – he was anonymous for large parts of the race, but once he sniffed the possibility of catching Button, he suddenly puts in a lap time over a second faster than the lap before. This is why Williams don't have the same conception of his financial worth as Ralf and his manager do, and why this might be his final year at the team – rumour has it that he may be Toyota bound.

Renault

Following a change of engine configuration to a much narrower V8, and what was really only a much updated Supertec unit, Renault performed beyond what could have been expected of them, with Alonso finishing 3rd. If they can do this with such an engine, what they could do with an up-to-date unit doesn't bear thinking about for the rest of the field.

Toyota

Second biggest motor manufacturer on the planet, and the worst performance of them all, only managing to beat Minardi, a team with a tenth of the budget. If Toyota want to improve, perhaps they should consider selling up and giving half the budget to the struggling Minardi. They couldn't do much worse.

Sauber

Felipe Massa may have had a year test driving for Ferrari, but you would have to ask if he has really learned anything. He was ragged, and just as often off the track as off it. He may be fast, but only seems to achieve this by being right on the edge, and often just beyond it. If Massa doesn't learn to drive more conservatively, it could prove to be a very expensive year for Sauber in body repairs. Fisichella didn't look up to snuff either, and if he doesn't blow Massa away in the next couple of races, then his Formula 1 goose will well and truly be cooked. After all, we know from his Ferrari testing days that he isn't a Schumacher, nor a Barrichello.

BAR

People had been somewhat sceptical of the BAR testing times over the past couple of weeks, but the team proved that their speed was genuine, with Button qualifying fourth on the grid. Their race pace was slightly off, which is something they will need to work on, but they are there or thereabouts. Sato was fast, but is somewhat in the mould of Massa, with several small offs. Needs to improve.

Jordan

Definitely better than 2003, with Heidfeld proving useful. Pantano was invisible during the race, which is good and bad. He kept it on the road and didn't make a fool of himself, but he didn't make you sit up and notice either. I personally don't rate him that highly. I know that Autosport does, but I never felt him to be that convincing in F3000. He had a poor first year in the category, and the category wasn't that strong last year either – he was also quite convincingly beaten by Bjorn Wirdheim, who is the Jaguar test driver this year. He has a lot to prove beyond his sponsorship cash.

Jaguar

Can be summed up as not bad. They were where they expected to be, with Webber not far off the top drivers until his car gave up. Klien gave a decent enough performance as well, managing to make up places off the start. He will need to get closer to Webber though over the rest of the season.

Minardi

Not much I can say really. They made it to the grid again, which is an achievement in itself. Baumgartner doesn't really belong on the grid, and should spend more time learning from other drivers which line to take around the circuit – he could help himself by following his less experienced team-mate, Bruni, who acquitted himself well.

21st March 2004 - Malaysian Conundrums

Another Grand Prix, and another Ferrari win for a certain M.Schumacher. But the race did raise a series of discussion points concerning Ferrari/Bridgestone, Mark Webber, Ralf Schumacher, and Jenson Button.

Ferrari/Bridgestone

Following Melbourne, everyone was left with one question – how good was this years Ferrari? Most people put it down to tyres and the unseasonably cold weather in Australia. It would be different in Malaysia of course.

The Malaysian Grand Prix was either very depressing, or a cause for optimism (or it could be the other way around if you are a Ferrari supporter). It all depends on the Bridgestone tyres. Yes Ferrari won the race, but it was only by a few seconds, rather than the a time best measured in minutes. Which leads to an intriguing question: how good were the Bridgestone tyres in the heat?

It was generally acknowledged in 2003 that the Michelin tyre was far superior to the Bridgestone, so Bridgestone put in a lot of effort to developing new tyres for this season. The problem for working out what happened in this race is that there are so few Bridgestone runners, with only Jordan and Sauber using them alongside Ferrari. Jordan were inconclusive – too many other drama's getting in the way of a decent performance. Sauber managed to get within the top 10, so it looks like the tyres have certainly improved.

But by how much? Given that the Sauber has a Ferrari engine and gearbox, you would expect it to do better, so perhaps not a lot. Which leads perhaps to an uncomfortable conclusion: the 2004 Ferrari could be as good as the 2002 Ferrari in relation to the rest of the field, and that the Australian Grand Prix could be representative of what will be faced for the rest of the year, with the race only being close when the temperatures are hot. After all, even with a harder Bridgestone compound, Barrichello still managed to finish fourth. Which leads me to the following prediction: Ferrari will just win the 1st Bahrein Grand Prix in two weeks, and will probably romp to victory in Imola. Should this come to pass, then Schumacher's seventh world championship is assured. Let's hope that this analysis is completely wrong if we want an interesting season.

Mark Webber

Webber was the revelation of the weekend, sticking his Jaguar 2nd on the grid. You have to feel sorry for Klien – he isn't doing badly, but when your team-mate is performing miracles in an inferior car, it can only reflect in less than desirable terms on yourself.

Unfortunately his car let him down off the start, and he was swamped by the pack, but this set the stage for a demonstration in aggressive but controlled driving. He scythed his way past cars with millimetres to spare, and was uncompromising as he ripped

past the Williams of Ralf Schumacher. Ralf Schumacher appeared to take a dim view of this affront to his dignity (more later), and tagged the right rear wheel, causing a puncture with over three-quarters of the lap still to go. This dropped Webber out of the hunt, and he later parked the car permanently in the gravel trap as he endeavoured to catch up. Still, he made his mark and raised his profile. Expect more of the same.

Ralf Schumacher

Ralf yet again proved that he can't hack it in the mid-field, and he only ever looks a race winner if he is starting from the front row. He is simply over-rated, and over-paid. Which is probably why his negotiations with Williams are floundering at the moment. He claimed in the press that money isn't the sticking point, and that he would happily drive for half the amount. Frank Williams should call his bluff and stick half of Ralf's salary into car development instead – somehow I think that Ralf wouldn't be as happy as he claims he would be.

When racing with Mark Webber, he didn't look convincing at all, with Webber simply driving around the outside of him into the first corner. Ralf seemed to take a dim view of being overtaken by a mere Jaguar, and kept his nose alongside the rear of the Jaguar, puncturing the Jaguar's right rear. After retiring from the race with a blown engine, Ralf claimed that Webber's driving was "too aggressive". Yeah, right. Pull the other one Ralf, it has a Toyota contract on it, or so rumour has it.

Jenson Button

It was Jenson Button's first ever podium position – a third place, and well deserved too, as he achieved it on merit, rather than through the misfortune of others. Those unkindly souls who doubted the testing times achieved by BAR will now have to review their opinions, as it seems that the times were representative. It was also very timely, as Honda have to decide by the end of April whether to continue their contract or not. It didn't hurt that the president of Honda was present at the race either.

What it also shows is how Button has stepped up to the plate, and has successfully taken on the role of team leader. The BAR team of 2004 is different – it gels together, works to one aim, and seems more purposeful. No doubt a lot of this is down to the management of Dave Richards, but Button's contribution shouldn't be underestimated.

4th April 2004 - 1st Bahrain Grand Prix

Let's get one thing straight: it might have been the first Grand Prix in the desert that ITV commentator James Allen had ever attended, but it's not the first Grand Prix to be held in a desert. There was the 1958 Moroccan Grand Prix at Casablanca for a start, won by Stirling Moss in a Vanwall. Oh, and a series of very famous Grands Prix held around Mellaha Lake in Tripoli, Libya, before World War II. And they complain that Michael Schumacher has no concept of the history of the sport – evidently the commentators don't either.

Before the race, "they" were worried about the effects of sand, also intimating that it would be the first time that they would have to deal with it. Not for everyone though. Sand used to be a regular feature of the Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort, as it used to blow out over the track from the sand dunes surrounding the circuit. So, at the very least, Ferrari, Ford, Williams and McLaren should have been used to it.

The circuit itself though has to get the thumbs up. Although off line the circuit was extremely dusty and slippery, it did lend itself to overtaking. The corner on to the 1km long main straight was sufficiently slow that cars could follow each other through closely, and the cars could then outdrag each other down the main straight. There was plenty of overtaking, and the circuit rewarded the aggressive driver.

Race day temperatures were some 20 degrees lower than qualifying, making it more of a Bridgestone day than a Michelin one. As if we needed it, with the Ferrari's already one and two on the grid. For them, it was a mirror of Malaysia, and they disappeared off into the distance to finish 1-2.

Yet again, Ralf Schumacher did little to justify his opinion of himself, or his seat at Williams. Racing with Sato for fourth position, he tripped up big time. Schumacher went down the inside into the first corner, but Sato held on around the outside, and was still alongside him. Schumacher decided though that Sato would give way into the next left, and simply turned in. But there was no reason why Sato should have done, being alongside. Even though he stamped on the brakes, Schumacher's left rear rode up over Sato's right front, and he disappeared into the kitty litter. Schumacher managed to extricate himself, and headed back to the pits for a check over. There was nothing wrong, so the Williams team sent him out and on his way. Note that Sato and Coulthard attempted the same manoeuvre later in the race, and both made it through the two corners, as both drivers gave each other enough room.

Ralf wasn't finished for the day though. He was now back in 16th position or so, and racing Saubers. Again heading down into the first corner, Ralf tried to dive inside Fisichella, but was far too far back to pull it off. Fisichella took his line into the first corner, and Schumacher tagged the right rear of the Sauber, spinning it around. Schumacher sailed through and took the position. This is beginning to become a habit for Ralf, as he pulled the same manoeuvre on Webber. Once is unfortunate, but twice?

He still wasn't finished. At his second pit-stop, Ralf attempted to leave his pits before he was given permission to do so, and knocked over his mechanics in the process, luckily not hurting anyone badly. Rumours have him requesting as much as 14 million for a seat at Toyota next year. I hope that figure is in yen rather than pounds,

given this years performances. Patrick Head simply classed the performance as “very bad”.

Again, there were very few mechanical retirements, which is amazing given that the engines have to last so much longer. Again, McLaren were the weakest in this department. Raikkonen’s engine needed changing after practice, so he had to take a 10 position penalty in qualifying, and thus started from the back. He didn’t last that long in the race, with the left bank of the engine seeming to give way big time, plumes of smoke and fire emanating from the rear of the car on the left-hand side. Norbert Haug’s protestations that none of these failures was actually caused by the engine seemed to ring very hollow indeed.

Another in trouble was Williams, which suffered severe hydraulic problems in Montoya’s car. It was in 3rd position for most of the race, but with less than 10 laps to go, hydraulic malfunction caused the gradual loss of gears and throttle. He was a sitting duck, and was lucky to finish in the points – he was 10 seconds a lap slower at the end of the race than anyone else, and as soon as he passed the finishing line, he came to a complete halt.

The team with most to shout about though was BAR, with Button finishing 3rd, and Sato finishing 5th. Sato actually managed to outqualify Button for the first time, but still has a propensity to make mistakes. It was a mid-race mistake which allowed Button past him, and necessitated a front wing change. It was the front wing change which put him back on the track around Ralf Schumacher. Still, he showed plenty of fighting quality and racecraft. Button was mistake free throughout the race, and deserved his second podium in a row.

Also deserving of mention was Christian Klien in his Jaguar. He might have been well down the order at the start and facing the rear of Raikkonen’s McLaren, but he was still going to make a race of it. The Jaguar seemed to have the legs of the McLaren down the main straight, and time and time again the Jaguar would try to outbrake the McLaren into the first corner, only for it to run out of road due to the dust, and the McLaren was able to nip back past. Until the McLaren’s engine let go that is.

As for the championship, it is looking like being Ferrari’s to lose. The other teams are not so far off, but it is enough, and if the weather is cool, it becomes a lot.

25th April 2004 - Imola – and Warmbold’s Sinking Feeling

Michael Schumacher won, again, and once the first pit-stops were over, that was it as far as racing and overtaking were concerned. The first lap was of interest. Button scorched away from pole into the lead, with Schumacher being hassled by Montoya. Into the first set of corners, Montoya attempted to drive around the outside. Michael decided he was having none of it. “Sticking to the racing line” as Martin Brundle so neatly put it, he simply drove Montoya off the road as he exited the corner, performing a slight right swerve on the kerbing just to make sure. Ross Brawn had the gall to claim last year that Montoya was not “a classy driver”. Perhaps he should review his opinion of his own driver after this performance.

The only reason this takes place is due to the safety of modern cars, which have moved on immeasurably since the fatal accidents to Roland Ratzenberger and Ayrton Senna at Imola ten years ago. If Schumacher performed that manoeuvre in the 1960s, he risked causing the other drivers death. There is a complete lack of respect for other competitors on the F1 grid, and it wouldn’t hurt to give the other driver a bit of room if you have won the corner, or for conceding the position if the other driver has properly won it. The perfect example of how it can be done is Gilles Villeneuve and Rene Arnoux at Dijon. Both gave each other just enough room, and both stayed on track, and both respected each other. The problem is that what becomes acceptable in F1 becomes acceptable in all other branches of motorsport, and the chance of a fatal injury becomes much higher in something like a Formula Ford, which is nowhere near as strong as an F1 chassis.

Another point of interest was the application of a new penalty on Fisichella this weekend. During practice he set his fastest lap yet while there were waved yellow flags on the circuit. The stewards then gave him a 1 second penalty, to be added to his qualifying time. It is better than the fines they have used before (when a driver is paid millions, is he really going to miss \$10,000?), and doesn’t ruin a race by putting a driver on probation. The FIA is to be applauded here I think – after all, I have thrown enough brickbats at them in the past.

So little happened in the rest of the race, I spent most of it thinking up new puns, which will no doubt appear throughout this weeks tabloids (and Autosport of course – they can never simply use an informative headline). Let’s go through them

- Sato’s car was BAR-be-queued (after his Honda engine waved goodbye to its internals in a big way).
- Sato’s engine BARffed its oil (what happened after the engine broke).
- Jenson Buttoned up second place on the podium.
- Ferrari Button down the hatches.
- Jenson is on the Button.
- Jenson BAR’s Ferrari from pole.
- Montoya is BARred from 2nd place.

- Williams can't pass the Jenson BARrier.

If you can think of anymore, please send them in or post them on the Formula 1 forum, and we can compile the definitive list.

That sinking feeling

You have to feel sorry of Antony Warmbold, a young German rally driver who hired a Ford Focus WRC for the New Zealand Rally. After his engine cut out mid-stage, he phoned up the Ford team to ask for advice, and a little later he got going again.

The problem was that he was just in front of factory Ford driver Francois Duval, who the suffered from the dust thrown up by Warmbold, who was desperate to make up time. Duval was equally desperate, trying to make up time after mechanical dramas of his own. Stephane Prevot got his mobile phone out and rang up Ford HQ, requesting that they get Warmbold get out of the way.

In due turn, Ford rang up the mobile in Warmbold's car. The phone rang.

"Turn that f***ing thing off!" Warmbold shouted to his British co-driver Gemma Price. She obliged, and they ran to the end of the stage. Once parked up with the dust settled, the penny started to drop. "You don't suppose they were calling us for....?" he asked his co-driver. He looked in the rear-view mirror. "Shit, it's Duval!". His team-mate.

9th May 2004 - A Chink in Ferrari's Armour?

If it was a chink at the Spanish Grand Prix, then it was a chink so faint that the light reflected by a butterfly's wings when seen from the end of the channel tunnel would be bright in comparison. But a chink there was, which gives a glimmer of hope to the rest. Mind you, it's a glimmer so faint that a glow-worm on the moon seen from Earth would be brighter.

Despite the result being a Ferrari 1-2, it wasn't quite as easy as it looked. Michael Schumacher's car cracked its exhaust about a third of the way through the race, and it sounded awful, something like a banshee farting. The risk was that the hot exhaust would ignite something inside the car, or at least melt something critical such as the wiring. But this is Ferrari, and Ferrari, being Italian, is apparently blessed by the Almighty. So of course, nothing happened. Schumacher backed off a little, minimised his revs, and disappeared into the wild blue yonder, followed by a slightly downbeat Barrichello whose two stop strategy didn't pay off due to tyre wear, and a botched tyre stop where the mechanics didn't have the tyres ready. It was all reminiscent of the late 1990s and Eddie Irvine, only that was all meant to be impossible these days.

The third chink in the armour was the start. Schumacher, in pole, got a good enough start compared to second placed Montoya, but it was nothing compared to the Renault of Jarno Trulli. Starting from the second row, Trulli rocketed between Montoya and Schumacher, pulling in front of the Williams as the Ferrari moved over. He then had the inside line for the first corner, and he was away. There he stayed until the first pit-stops, at which time it was game over – he finished 3rd, but half a minute behind.

As for the rest of the field, they were in a different race. The McLaren's were nowhere, and struggled to overtake anything. Williams looked at least competitive with Renault, or at least Montoya did. Suffering with a long brake pedal from lap 3, Montoya stayed in touch with the top four cars, using engine braking to help slow the car. It was rumoured that Williams had fitted smaller brake discs, and hence smaller cooling ducts, in order to increase straight line speed. If this was true, it back-fired spectacularly. At the first stop Montoya's rear brakes appeared to be on fire, and when he came in for his second, his brakes failed entirely. He knocked the front jack man over as he attempted to stop, but luckily caused no injury. Ralf Schumacher didn't have the problem, but he wasn't competitive either – he finished 6th behind the two Ferrari's, two Renault's, and the BAR of Takuma Sato, who finished an excellent fifth. Button's sister car was 8th, a victim of the difficulty in overtaking due to his mistake in qualifying.

This lack of overtaking, and the difficulty of doing it, made a mockery of the track changes over the winter. La Caixa corner was reprofiled, with the corner tightened "in order to improve overtaking". There wasn't one overtake done there all day which wasn't due to cars being lapped. The entire design of the circuit mitigates against it, with the long main straight being preceded by a long high-speed corner – the aerodynamics of modern cars mean that they can't follow each other closely through the last corner, so can't slipstream down the straight. Despite Button's BAR being 1 second a lap faster than most of the cars in front of him, he simply couldn't overtake due to this problem. Something radical needs to be done now to solve this. Current plans which would result in changes in two to four years time simply aren't good

enough – we need to get rid of the reliance on aerodynamic grip, and increase mechanical grip. Slick tyres anyone?

Hizzy

Early in 2003, Superbike rider Steve Hislop published his autobiography. However, before the updated softback edition could be published, Hislop perished in a helicopter accident (see previous articles). It made the newly updated book even more poignant.

The softback was published in April this year (published by Collins Willow, retail price £7.99. However, it can be purchased from Asda supermarkets for £3.73, and for the same price from Tesco, or online plus postage and packing), and it is an excellent read. It covers his entire career, and sheds light on his brothers career (which was tragically cut short by an accident at the now disused Silloth circuit), as well as that of his father. It is in turn funny and poignant, and the final chapter drives home the loss. Rather than being written in the first person, it is in the third, with the biographer adding the additional chapter to round out the story. It may be a celebration of his life, but it is also a fitting remembrance for his children. Hislop himself suffered the agony of having his father die in his arms at a young age, and by some freak of coincidence, his children had to suffer the same loss. He never made a fortune from his racing, so I hope that this book helps to provide the security to Steve's family which he couldn't have when he was younger. Go buy it and read it.

23rd May 2004 - Trulli Buttonholes the Keystone Grand Prix

The comedy marshals and the comedy accidents made the event look like a homage to the Keystone Cops films of the 1920s/1930s. There was the marshal who waved a yellow flag and then dropped it. There was the marshal at the startline who, when the safety car was deployed, decided to hang out the red flag – he quickly realised his error and withdrew it. And then there was the marshal with the deathwish. Having seen Klien lose his wing at Mirabeau, and then skate along the wall with it jammed beneath the front wheels only to impact the wall at the Loews Hairpin, the marshal saw fit to stand on the track, centimetres from the racing line, and on the same line that Klien had taken, waving at cars hurtling towards him. You had to laugh at the ineptitude, despite the potential tragic consequences. For next year they really need to get the marshals sorted into shape before the race, so that something fatal doesn't happen. How it was allowed is beyond me – in my many years marshalling at Castle Combe, I've lost count of the number of times chief marshal Niki Fawcington has shouted at me for getting into dangerous situations when I was further away from slower cars than he was. Perhaps she should go there to sort them out. What they do need to remember is that marshals are there to help, and that a dead or injured marshal can't do that.

The comedy accident was while the second safety car was deployed, after Alonso's accident (more on that later). As the cars followed the safety car into the tunnel, Michael Schumacher accelerated hard to get some heat into his tyres, and Montoya followed, desperate not to lose out on any restart. Wanting to get some heat into his brakes, Schumacher then stamped on his brake pedal and locked his left front. Not wanting to hit Schumacher, Montoya dived to the gap to the right. The problem was the Schumacher also went that way, and Schumacher right rear hit Montoya's left front. Schumacher turned sharp right into the Armco, before slewing across the track and hitting the other side, ripping off a wheel. Schumacher of course blamed it on Montoya, but this isn't the first time that this has happened. In the 2000 Italian Grand Prix, Schumacher was leading behind a safety car when he again stamped on his brakes to warm them up. The concertina effect behind him caused absolute chaos, with Jenson Button being spat out of the pack and into the barrier as he tried to avoid everyone. Strange how this only occurs behind one particular driver.

What was more worrying was Alonso's crash when lapping Ralf Schumacher, and if Alonso's allegations are true, then something needs to be done. Alonso was catching Schumacher as they approached the tunnel. In they went one behind the other. Alonso then darted out from behind as Schumacher slowed down, but carried on outwards onto the marbles and into the barrier. Alonso was lived – he gave Schumacher a waved fist, despite scraping backwards along the barrier, and on the following lap pointed accusingly at the Williams as it went past.

At first glance it looked like an error by Alonso – overtaking in a position where it wasn't really safe to do so, although Ralf also had to slow down to let him by. But the post race interview gave an entirely different complexion to the accident. Alonso claimed that Schumacher backed off in the tunnel to let him past (which was an odd place to do this – most other drivers either did it just before they entered the tunnel, or when they exited it, not actually in it), but that when he was alongside, Ralf hit the accelerator again, which meant that Alonso couldn't cut back in on the racing line. He

carried on around the outside, and on into his accident. Despite what I may have said about Ralf in the past, I don't believe that there was any premeditation in this, if this indeed did happen this way. At least, I hope not.

Forgetting all of the above, it was a good race. Jarno Trulli drove the race of his life, for once belying his tag that he qualifies well but is poor at racing. He was flat out for the entire race, and when put under pressure at the end of the race by Button closing him down, he admitted to even backing off a little in order to ensure his car finished. It was coolness in the extreme, and the win will do his confidence no end of good. Gone will be the self doubt, and I expect to see a new and improved Trulli from here on in. Alonso will have a harder run for his money from now on.

Jenson Button also ran a good race, finishing a close second to Trulli. He had the speed throughout the race, but got caught behind a Toyota after his first pit-stop. Would this have really had made a difference given the second safety car period? I somehow doubt this, but what was impressive was Button's never give up attitude. He will go far.

30th May 2004 - Service Resumed – So we'll have some anecdotes as well

After the chaos of Monaco, normal service was resumed with a Ferrari 1-2 at the Nürburgring in the European Grand Prix. The conditions made it a Bridgestone day, but even so, no-one else except the BAR drivers was even close.

BAR have been making some progress this year, and this was reflected in Sato being 2nd on the grid. It was the best ever showing by a Japanese driver in the race, and he kept up the showing during the race, remaining in 2nd for much of it. However, when trying to overtake the two stopping Rubens Barrichello he made an optimistic dive up the inside, and removed his front wing. Two laps later, his engine went bang. It does make you wonder how this always happens to the same driver, as this was the second race in the row that this happened to Sato. Perhaps he needs to look at his driving style? However, Sato's loss was Button's gain, and he was yet again on the grid in 3rd, after a slightly quieter afternoon.

Ralf Schumacher again didn't finish, but this time he can get some sympathy, as he was the innocent party. He was heading into the first corner on the first lap on the outside line into the first hairpin bend, with Montoya alongside. Montoya locked up his front wheels when turning in, and nerfed Ralf, who then span. Montoya removed the rest of the front wing, and as he disappeared off the circuit, he took da Matta with him. End of game yet again.

Given the strong showing in the last race, Renault were extremely disappointing. Yes, they both finished in the top 6, but they were largely anonymous during the race, and were some 12 kph slower than the Ferrari's and the BAR's on the main straight. Alonso compounded his problems by spinning, gifting Trulli an easy pass, after having beaten him away on the grid. Alonso got all of the plaudits last year for his performances, but he isn't living up to them this year. Therefore it beats me why Alonso has a definite contract with Renault for next year, and Trulli does not. I also don't understand why Alonso isn't being criticised for his mistakes, but if Trulli makes one, he is more likely to be lambasted. It strikes me that the Formula 1 fraternity is being blinded by youth, and making too many allowances for a driver who is, it should be remembered, in his third racing season in F1, and has had a full season testing for Renault. If he really is as good as Schumacher, these mistakes have to be eliminated.

McLaren had a marginally better race than usual, with Räikkönen qualifying 4th, and racing with the lead cars until his engine went bang yet again. Coulthard started from the back of the grid due to an engine change, but was up to 10th by the end of the first lap. He was looking good for a points finish until his engine also went bang. On a circuit sponsored by Mercedes and located in Germany, this was extremely embarrassing. You can't criticise McLaren for a bad chassis if they don't have an engine which gets them to the end of the race. It's a team sport after all.

Anecdotes

There's no overall theme to the rest of this article – it is just a collection of anecdotes from those who have been involved in motor-racing in some capacity or another. What they do is flesh out the bare statistics, and tell the stories which can otherwise be missed from the record. The words are not mine, and belong to those who are telling them.

Raul Boesel

By Barry Lake, Australian journalist.

I was at the British GP at Brands Hatch, in the pit/paddock area. A couple of hours before the start I was asking for advice as to where I should stand to watch the race. A Brazilian lady, who had told me she had worked for Bernie Ecclestone at some stage, but was no longer in that capacity, said that the inside of Paddock Bend was the best. She said, "If you meet me here at X minutes before the start, you can walk up there with me and I will show you."

When I met her at the appointed time, one Brazilian lady became three Brazilian ladies. The first introduced me to the other two by their first names and we walked together to the corner.

When we planted ourselves at the fence on the inside of the entry to Paddock Bend, I had the Brazilian ladies on one side of me and a young Australian couple, who told me they were on their honeymoon, on the other.

We were accustomed to hearing Murray Walker's TV commentary and he used to call Raul Boesel something like, "Rowl Boysell". The course commentator was running through the cars and drivers in grid order and got to, "... and on the Xth row, Rowl Bo-ezzel..."

The young Aussie newly-wed laughed and said something like, "Ha! He got that one wrong!" At which point one of the Brazilian ladies leaned around me to say to him, "No; that is the correct pronunciation."

The young Aussie looked at her with a doubting grin, "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because I'm his wife."

The young Aussie gave the only reply possible. "Oh," he said, sheepishly.

Sherm Decker

By Dave Nicholas, some time IMSA sportscar driver.

Sherm was a fast, brutal driver. As he aged he got smoother, but even early on his car control was second to none. Remember that "brutal" must be taken in context that he

is driving MGA's back when you were boss if you could get Michelin X radials... His battles in 1956 - 1958 with Bob Bucher in MG's was legendary. Bucher was a WWII bomber pilot who was as cool as the other side of the pillow. Never flustered, smooth as Stirling Moss. Decker was bouncing off the dirt, sliding to the edge. Still talked about (their finish will be reprised this year at the MG car club meet at Watkins Glen in September) is how they were at a complete dead heat coming into the last turn at Watkins Glen Collier Cup in 1958. They touched slightly and Bucher beat Sherm to the line by inches. When asked why he didn't bump Bucher off the road (Decker had come up the inside into what was then a hairpin turn) he replied simply "you don't do that to a driver like Jake". The two had tremendous respect for each other and co-drove an Aston-Martin at Sebring in 1961 being far faster than the name drivers in the other factory Aston.

Decker was a class act who drove the wheels off an old Cooper-Ford in the mid-60's and scared the pants off Pedro Rodriguez & Ludovico Scarfiotti (Ferraris) and Walt Hansgen (Scarab) and the other big guns at Bridgehampton in 1964 (it was a World Champ race in those days).

Sherm's nickname to us was "arms" because he built like a modern linebacker... and he was quite a football player in school. Back in those days there were no gyms or machines or swanky fitness clubs, yet Decker was buff and sculpted - all by nature and hard work.

Imagine if you can somebody who was so good he could take a 100 hp MGA and beat a full overhead cam Porsche Carrera roadster with 150hp. I saw him do it many times.

6th June 2004 - Charlie Cox and Steve Parrish - An Appreciation

Since Murray Walker stopped commentating in 2002, the motorsport world has been lacking a commentator who can really grab the viewers attention. James Allen simply doesn't hack it for me. Perhaps the four-wheeled world should take a look at someone who they seem to have dropped - Charlie Cox.

Charlie Cox, born in Sydney on the 10th October 1960, was a competitor on four wheels before hitting the commentators trail. He moved to the UK in 1990, and in 1993 was competing in the National Saloon Car Cup, winning five races in a Ford Escort RS Cosworth, as well as the Willhire 24 Hours. He stayed in the series for 1994, before moving to the British Touring Car Championship Independents Championship in 1995, in a Ford Mondeo. His season was curtailed at Thruxton, when he barrel rolled out of the race in a rather major way.



After the accident he raced occasionally in the British GT Championship, sometimes in a Porsche 911, sometimes in a Ford Saleen Mustang. However, he started commentating for the BBC in 1996 alongside John Watson on the BTCC, before moving on to the BBC's coverage of the Le Mans 24 Hrs. When the coverage of the BTCC moved to ITV, Charlie started commentating on World Superbikes, followed by Moto GP for 2003.

Cox's sidekick on the Moto GP coverage is Steve Parrish. Born on the 24th February 1954. By the age of 14 he was competing on motorbikes, and in 1977 he came 5th in the 500cc World motorbike championship for Suzuki. He won the British GP Championship in 1978, and the British Superbike Championship in 1981. He retired from riding in 1986, and managed the UK Yamaha Superbike team, winning three titles.



In 1984, Steve started truck racing for Mercedes, and won the European Championship in 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1996, as well as occasionally racing a Caterham. He first commentated for the BBC in 1985, commentating on motorbikes for radio, before moving to TV in 1990. He moved to commentating on World Superbikes in 2000, and later joined the Moto GP team.

Cox and Parrish together are reminiscent of Walker and Hunt in Formula 1. One is the ex-competitor expert, while the other is an enthusiast. What really kicks it off is the dry humour of Cox, especially his use of strange similes and metaphors. They are amusing when edited, but to hear him at his best, you have to watch a live transmission, as some of his metaphors stretch what is allowable on afternoon television.

Murray Walker had web-sites devoted to him by the dozen, but Cox and Parrish have yet to have this honour. I think they should, so lets get started. This is an appreciation of their commentary, and what follows is a list of memorable quotations. If there are any that you think should be added, please either mail me at

Darren.Galpin@virgin.net, or log on to www.thegaffer.com, go to the Motorsport Forum, and post your quote there.

"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 Charlie Cox about Superbike racer James Toseland at the Assen GP. 3rd September 2003.

Cox commenting on a picture of Ruben Xaus talking to a mechanic: *"Please can you give me a new motorbike as I did this to the last one and I broke it."* 6th June 2004, Gran Premio d'Italia Moto GP round.

"It's like a Darwinian theory..... Natural selection is coming into play" - Cox commenting on Rossi, Gibernau and Biagi being 1st, 2nd and 3rd at the end of the 6 lap restarted race 1, as they were when the race was stopped. 6th June 2004, Gran Premio d'Italia Moto GP round.

"It's like dropping a Porsche engine into a Reliant Robin, comparing how much power you have to the tyres" - Charlie Cox trying to describe what 240 bhp through one back wheel is like, Catalunya GP, 13th June 2004.

"Can you imagine what he [Mick Doohan] will have to say to Mr Honda tonight? Well, it was like this...." commenting on factory riders Nicky Hayden and Alex Barros both crashing out of the Czech Grand Prix at Brno, 22nd August 2004.

"This circuit is like snakes and ladders - you climb all the way up, and then slither all the way down again for 3 kilometres," commenting on the Brno circuit, 22nd August 2004.

"... he is a hard charger, but he does hop off a lot before the race finishes," commenting on Ruben Xaus' propensity to crash, 22nd August 2004.

"It can be calm one minute, and blowing your dog off the chain the next," commenting on the weather conditions at Estoril, 5th September 2004.

"He's got the absolute ducks' guts of motorbikes," talking about the latest factory Yamaha at Estoril, 5th September 2004. A novel twist on the phrase "the dogs' bollocks"!

"He needs that like a third armpit," on Capirossi overtaking Bayliss for the second time, Estoril, 5th September 2004.

"Tamada is starting to turn the wick up on the bunsen burner," on Tamada catching Rossi, Estoril, 5th September 2004. Cox, seconds later, requested that people didn't write in, as he remembered Bunsen Burners from school times.

Steve Parrish is also known for his practical jokes.....

From "Hizzy", the autobiography of Steve Hislop.

"Macau...Steve blew up a brothel with a huge bomb made out of fireworks. Steve knew some of the riders were inside the brothel being 'treated' so he thought he'd

surprise them. The bomb was far more powerful than he'd imagined and the whole joint was practically wrecked in the explosion. Steve was chased out of the country by the police and just avoided being captured as he fled to Hong Kong. The authorities impounded his hire car and charged him for it and he's still banned from the country to this day."

13th June 2004 - Thar She Blows – Another Honda Bites the Dust

The latest F1 motor-race was at the Canadian Grand Prix in Montreal. I say race, but what I meant to say was there was a high speed procession punctuated with some pit-stops in which no-one actually managed to overtake anyone else. There was the odd lapping incident, but that was it as far as cars going past each other was concerned. It all came down to fuel strategy and passing in the pits. How boring – Y A W N !!!!!

Also quite boring was the live coverage of the Le Mans 24 Hour race on ITV. It's not that the race wasn't interesting – it was – but the nature of a race over 24 hours with cars laps apart means that there isn't much racing to show. What it really needed was a highlights program which showed you the bits you missed, such as McNish's accident which took him out of the race, which you only heard about in passing from the commentators. Good effort ITV, but you must try harder if you want to keep people watching this event. They also made a complete dogs dinner of the post race coverage, when the commentators were talking over driver interviews, making it difficult to hear either

However, there was lots of motorsport to watch, what with the Moto GP race from Catalunya, and the World Superbikes in Silverstone also on the BBC. Having watched the motorbike racing, the Formula 1 race was always going to be on to a loser unless it could throw up a race as interesting as Monaco, and that was always unlikely to happen. It also suffered by being on before the England-France football match, which was guaranteed to be more exciting. Formula 1 has to be able to compete against these other sports for viewers, and at the moment it simply isn't delivering the interest or the excitement. Viewers will vote with their feet, and then sponsors with their cash. They have been warned.

Ralf Schumacher managed to get pole position, and as is his wont, he had a good race and finished second to his brother. He always manages to have a good race from pole when he does not actually have to race anyone, and despite previous denials that this is the case, he did nothing to disprove this assertion. He pulled out a gap from Button at the start, and from there on he was always driving on his own, with his brother Michael taking advantage of a two-stop strategy and pit-stops to do his dirty work.

We also had what is almost becoming the customary sight of Sato's engine letting go big time. Again, it was only his BAR which suffered the problem, and not Button's. There must be something in Sato's car setup which predisposes his engine to suffer more stress. Perhaps it is in how he sets up the traction control to come in, or the throttle mapping he uses. Whatever it is, it pushes his Honda engine over what must be a very close edge. Four blow-ups is going beyond coincidence.

What else happened in the race? Oh, Klien hit Coulthard and then Webber in the first corner of the first lap, causing his later retirement with dodgy suspension. Massa had a suspension failure late on in the race and disappeared at high speed into a tyre barrier, emerging OK. And Pantano couldn't agree commercial terms with Jordan and was replaced by Timo Glock for the race. Nothing else really happened, or at least nothing memorable. Sad, but true.

20th June 2004 - Show first, safety last

Yet another 1-2 for Ferrari, with Michael Schumacher leading Rubens Barrichello, and Sato with his first podium position. But this was incidental to the entire race. What was the major factor was Ralf Schumacher's huge accident, and the complete farce that were the safety procedures used during the race.

The first safety car appeared after an accident involving three cars in the first corner. There was carbon fibre across the track, but the race continued. This probably led to the next scare. Fernando Alonso was approaching the braking zone at some 200 mph down the main straight when his right-rear tyre let go. His car speared left into the concrete wall, and his car slid along it, shedding bits as it went.

This left debris in the braking zone, but this time the race continued. However, several laps later, the safety car was needed again.

Coming into Turn 13, the 9 degree banked corner which leads onto the main straight, Ralf Schumacher somehow lost it. The car spun around, and at the best part of 150 mph hit the concrete wall going backwards. There was an explosion of debris, and Schumacher's car spun into the middle of the track, shedding more bodywork as it went. Cars speared in all directions in avoidance.

Ralf didn't move, and the safety car was scrambled. But where were the marshals or the medical staff? The complete lack of attendance to Ralf Schumacher's accident was reprehensible. He was left for ages with no-one attending him when quite clearly he wasn't moving. It took almost half a minute before the medical teams arrived and tried to extract him from the car (he was suffering from concussion). The safety car meanwhile had picked up the leaders, and was leading the cars back around. Given the amount of debris, which was almost carpeting the track, what was it going to do? Leading the cars through the pit-lane looked like being the safe option if they wouldn't use the red flag.

Instead, the safety car led the whole field through the debris on the track. What on earth were they thinking of? There had already been one tyre failure during the race so far, possibly caused by carbon fibre debris puncturing a tyre, so how they expected nothing to possibly happen this time is beyond me. If they had to keep going around the track, then they had to red flag the race, as it was simply too unsafe, and they were risking a repeat accident once the field was let go. However, these days the television rules all, and the need to keep to schedules is king. It seems that the need to keep the show on the road over-rides safety concerns in this most television dependent of sports. Perhaps it will take a driver being maimed or killed before they change their attitude. They need to, because their current utterings of wanting to be safe at all times simply smack of hypocrisy and make me laugh.

Once Ralf had been extracted from his wreck of a car and placed into the ambulance, the farce continued. They needed to get him to the medical centre, and as the accident had occurred past the pit-exit, they proceeded to drive around the entire circuit to get back to the pit-exit and in to the infield. Why? Given the potential urgency of the situation, surely it wouldn't have hurt for the ambulance to drive down the main straight, turn into the pit exit, and get back to the infield that way? It isn't as though

they would have been putting the rest of the field in danger, given that it was following the safety car, and the pit exit and pit-lane was extremely wide.

The other element of farce was the treatment of Juan Pablo Montoya. As they were getting ready to move away on the green flag lap, Montoya's car broke down. He jumped out of the car, jumped the pit-wall, and then ran over to his garage, getting into the spare car. He had to start from the pit-lane, but he was ready before the race was started properly.

However, with 15 laps to go (remember, this was a 73 lap race), Montoya was given a black flag and disqualified from the race. The car hadn't been properly nominated and scrutineered, and didn't have the proper sticker on it. This was an acceptable reason to disqualify him from the race, but why do it so late into the race, especially when he had already completed almost 80% of it? There is always the risk of collision and accident during the race, and what if Montoya had taken someone out from the race when he shouldn't have been there? There would be an absolute uproar. If the FIA are going to penalise a driver, they should do it quickly, not that late in the race. There is also usually a rule in place which says that once an investigation has been notified, then the penalty has to be issued within 20 minutes. The FIA were pushing it, to say the least.

4th July 2004 - Sack the TV director

With the F1 circus revisiting Magny-Bores, we were looking forward to an hour and a half of tedium, and the likelihood of having to borrow some matchsticks to prop open your eyelids. And thanks to the French TV director, that is what was needed. Fernando Alonso and Michael Schumacher started to move clear of the field, and the TV director stayed with them. They never looked like overtaking on the track, and they never did - it all took place in the pit-lane. There was a great fight for the lower points positions, but we couldn't get to see it. And then, when there were 10 laps to go and we finally cut to this fight, ITV go to adverts. I ask you! Is it any wonder that people label F1 boring? The TV output seems to do its best to make it so.

The only thing of note in the entire race was Michael Schumacher's mid-race switch of strategy. Realising that they were unlikely to beat Alonso on the same three-stop strategy, Ferrari instead switched to a *four(!)* stop strategy, short-fuelling Michael in his first stop. It could only work at Magny-Cours with its incredibly short pit entrance road, and with Michael Schumacher, who can lap consistently at a high pace - he came out in first position. Oh, and Barrichello overtook Trulli with two corners to go for third.

I'm struggling to find something interesting to say about F1, so instead, let's look at the following entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of British Place Names* by A.D.Mills, which I bought this weekend and gives the origin of British place names. The entry for Silverstone says "Suleston 942, Silvestone 1086 (Doomsday Book). Probably 'farmstead of a man called Saewulf or Sigewulf'. Old English person name + tūn." So now you know.

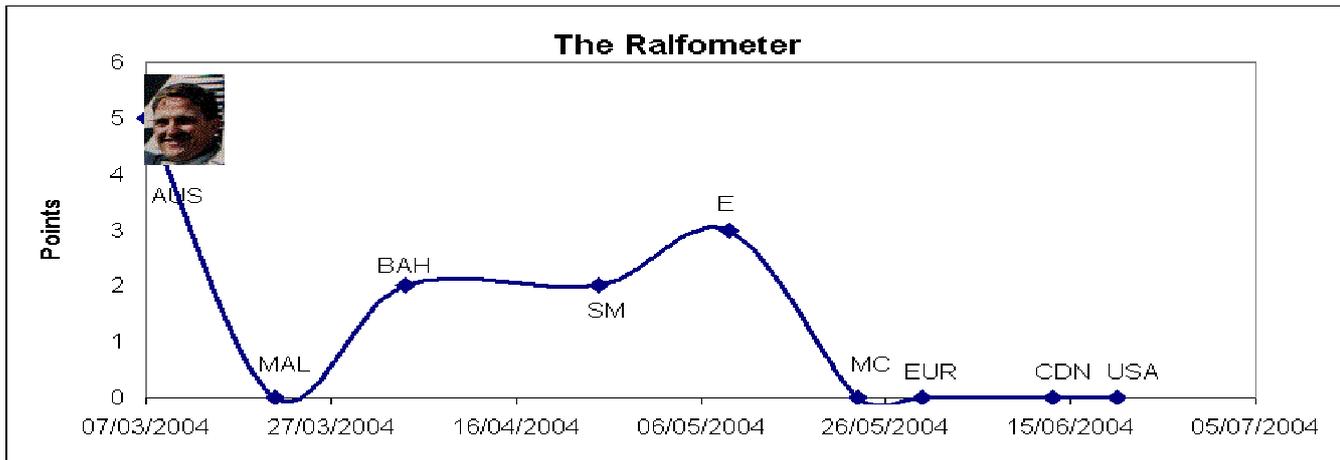
Cycling – Tour de France and Drugs

This weekend sees the start of the Tour de France cycle race, with American rider Lance Armstrong seeking to win a historic sixth straight race, thus cementing his place in cycling history. However, all of this has been overshadowed by yet another drugs scandal, this time involving British rider David Millar.

Millar, who rides for the Cofidis team, was one of Britain's brightest prospects for a gold medal at the Athens Olympics, but that is all out of the window now. The Cofidis team had had all sorts of drugs problems over the past year, but Millar had always insisted that he was clean. However, in a search of his house in France, the drug EPO was found, and he admitted using it. It's a crying shame – Millar was good enough to win a gold medal, and has won sprint stages on the Tour de France before without using drugs. It has sullied his name, and possibly shot his chances of Olympic success forever.

The Ralfometer

This was starting out as a look at Ralf's slightly ridiculous comments at the beginning of the year, and his inflated sense of his own worth. However, given his US GP accident, he looks likely to be out for the rest of the year. Hence I'll publish this now instead.



After colliding with Alonso, Ralf said "I took the time to analyse thoroughly the scene on the video. You can see I am ahead of Alonso at all stages of the manoeuvre, and never less than half a car length. But in my view, it cannot be the meaning of overtaking to suddenly pull in on the inside and hope and pray that the car on the outside, taking the ideal line, will leave enough room." Sato and Coulthard managed it OK though.

San Marino Grand Prix:

Managed to nurse his brakes better than Montoya, finishing 7th. Said "I'm annoyed this season, with my own performance and with that of the car after expecting a lot more."

Spanish Grand Prix

Had an ill-performing car which gradually lost its gears, but still managed a contretemps with Alonso in the tunnel. Alonso said that Ralf backed off, and when he got alongside, Ralf hit the accelerator, causing him to hit the marbles and then the barrier. Williams said that it was his gearbox causing the problem. Ralf said "It wasn't my fucking fault!" and in comments to the BBC Sport website that "he [Alonso] is inexperienced".

Monaco Grand Prix



Figure 1 - Alonso hand signalling to Ralf what he thought of the accident.

Hit by Montoya at the first corner, and took with him da Matta as he went off. This accident was not his fault, although his nickname in the paddock is now Ralf Shuntmaker.

European Grand Prix

Canadian Grand Prix

Started from pole, which means he has a good race as he doesn't have to overtake anyone. Finishes 2nd, but is disqualified post race for a brake duct infringement. Crashed in the final turn after suffering a puncture, probably due to picking up carbon fibre shards from Alonso's accident. Ralf was knocked unconscious, and it took the medical team an unconscionable 3 minutes before they attended the accident. Ralf was lucky to suffer only minor concussion and major bruising, especially given the way the aftermath of the accident was handled. Was released from hospital the next day, but later in the week a check up at home revealed two fractures to the spine.

United States Grand Prix

11th July 2004 - McLaren flattered by a safety car

There was hype, claim and counter-claim, but through it all came the Ferrari of Michael Schumacher as normal. But boy oh boy did he spout some BS over the weekend.

Saturday preliminary qualifying took place amongst rain showers, so a game of cat and mouse was played amongst the teams, with people vying for certain places in order to guarantee where they would start in final qualifying. During Michael's run, a slight error sent him flying backwards across a gravel trap. Interviewed on ITV after his run, Michael hinted that he had done this deliberately. Pull the other one! I could just about go along with a deliberate spin theory if he had spun at one of the points where there was concrete run-off. In this situation, no damage could be done to the car, and he would have what he wanted. But across a gravel trap? Gravel would have shot into the engine bay, risking damage to the car, and the undertray would have taken a pounding. Plus there is always the risk that the car could have dug in to the gravel and flipped. Given the proximity of final qualifying, Michael couldn't possibly take this risk, as if he needed to use the reserve car, they would have had to put his race engine in it or face a 10 place penalty on the grid. Face it Michael, you made a mistake. Why not own up to it?

The story of the weekend though was the performance of McLaren, and specifically the car of Kimi Raikkonen. He put his car onto pole position, but there was always a question at the back of the mind – just how much fuel was he carrying? This was answered when 2nd placed driver Rubens Barrichello pitted before he did – there was genuine pace in the McLaren. However, when Raikkonen pitted, Michael Schumacher had clear air and lapped over a second a lap faster than he had done previously. This was enough for him to come back out in first place after his pit-stop, and then he was away.

That was almost race over, even though Kimi managed to keep him within sight for a few laps. Michael was gently motoring away when Trulli's suspension appeared to give way coming out of Bridge corner, slamming him into the wall and scattering debris across the track. Cue the safety car, and a free pitstop for the rest of the field. This closed all of the field up for the final run to the flag, and led to some pressure being applied by Kimi to Michael, but to no avail – Michael still won, albeit by a far smaller gap than would have been possible. The final gap was only a couple of seconds, but the true gap was nearer half a minute. McLaren have made a good step forward with their new B spec car, but they are not quite there yet.

What was novel in this race was we had overtaking. Not just one or two changes of position, but more than 20. There are long straights, fast corners, and the possibility of taking more than one line. It puts the inadequacies of tracks such as Magny-Cours or the Hungaroring into perspective. It also makes you wonder why the powers that be are always so critical of the track – it is one of the few where you nearly always get a good race, and Formula 1 needs to be doing all it can to keep the interest in the sport.

In the end, what was shown was the superiority of Ferrari, and also of Bridgestone, with the Bridgestone shod Sauber of Fisichella finishing in the points despite starting from the back of the grid. The Ferrari is clearly superior in the faster corners, as evidenced by its faster 1st sector times around Silverstone, and it isn't really any

slower than the others in the slower corners. This points to the car being more aerodynamically efficient than the others. Its that a-word again – the root of all problems in F1 today. Let's give them barn doors for rear wings, and ban refuelling. We might then even get a Silverstone style race at Magny-Cours. Mind you, I'm sure that I have just caught site of a porcine style object flying over my house as I was typing that.

Quote of the week

“The grid is full of politicians pretending that they are marginally interested in Formula 1.” By Martin Brundle during his grid walk, as he tried to get to Jenson Button for an interview.

25th July 2004 - Deutschland not quite so über alles

As the usual set of national anthems rang out at the end of the race, one could be forgiven for thinking that things were as usual in the F1 world. Yet, despite all this, there are grounds for optimism for the rest of the season, because we almost had a race for the lead. And we certainly had a race for the rest of the positions.

The first challenger was Kimi Räikkönen, who clearly likes the latest incarnation of the McLaren. He started from second on the grid, and despite Schumacher's best efforts, he wasn't dropped away by much, and surprisingly had enough fuel to run a couple of extra laps to the first set of fuel stops, setting the fastest lap of the race along the way. Coming out of the pit lane, he was right behind the German, and we were looking forward to the continuing battle.

However, coming past the start/finish line, Räikkönen's rear wing catastrophically failed, the bonded-carbon main element departing company from the wing endplates and flying upwards. Shorn of its downforce, the car pirouetted off at the first available opportunity, landing heavily in the tyre wall. The reaction of the crowd was unnecessary – the red-clad German “fans” threw up their arms in joy that the main challenge to Michael Schumacher had gone even before Räikkönen was out of the car and was seen to be uninjured. It was nationalism at its ugliest, and perhaps a sad commentary of the state of modern Germany.

Elsewhere in the race, Jenson Button was on the move. He started 13th on the grid due to a 10 place penalty for an engine change on Friday, having set a time only a third of a second slower than Schumacher. However, Geoff Willis of BAR later disclosed that Button had five laps worth of extra fuel on board, which was worth around half a second, so the pace which Button had set was even more impressive. He demonstrated this pace quite clearly, moving through the pack, and leading the race for a short while as the leaders pitted. He used the second pit-stop to leapfrog David Coulthard, and set-off after Fernando Alonso.

He feinted this way and that, and had several attempts at the new hairpin, but the Renault had far better traction out of the corner, so despite getting alongside on the exit more than once, he was always outragged to the next corner. However, he bided his time, dropped back a little, and launched a new attack. His hairpin attempt failed, but he had enough momentum to drive up the inside two corners later. Once past, he went away, and started to catch the Ferrari, although never fast enough to seriously worry the German. You couldn't help but wonder what might have been – what might have happened if the BAR's engine hadn't let go on the Friday? Button said in the post race interview that it had been the race of the life, and you couldn't disagree, especially if you consider what had happened to his helmet mid-race. The chin-strap had started to work loose for some reason, and the air running over the car sucked it upwards, starting to choke Button. This meant that when he was driving down the straights (or long curves), Button had to use his left hand to help keep his helmet on his head, using his right hand to steer and change up. He would place his left hand on the steering wheel when he came into the braking areas, as he needed it to change down. It made his drive even more remarkable.

I wouldn't be surprised to see Button winning his first race this year, but it won't be at the next GP in three weeks time at the Hungaroring – the number of corners will favour the Renaults and their traction. But the Belgian and Italian GP's are a possibility, and it will be well deserved progress for the rejuvenated BAR team.

Congratulations must go the German GP director for concentrating on battles within the field rather than just on the leader Michael Schumacher. It made the race interesting to watch, rather than a turgid fight against sleep and the onset of narcolepsy.

Drivel

On UK Channel 5 last week, the terrestrial premiere of the film "Driven" occurred, sometimes better known as Drivel. You can see why - screen play better suited to a TV show, and ludicrous computerised special effects (I've seen better on a Playstation - the rain effects were certainly no better), overlaid with excessive amounts of rap music. In racing films, you don't need music to build up a sense of atmosphere. Take a look at Roman Polanski's film about a weekend in Monaco - the atmosphere is created purely by recording the sound that is there - the crowd, the engines, and it works wonderfully, building the sense of occasion.

It was also noteworthy for the complete disregard for physics and fact. Take the crashes - there were at least three cars which ended up in rivers, and several over barriers (this was one season's racing remember). When was the last time a car cleared a barrier in Indycar racing? Not for a very long time. And cars in water? Well, during the entire 80 year history of the Monaco GP, only two cars have ever ended up in the harbour, and only a handful of cars have ever ended up in the lake at Mallory Park despite all of the club racing there.

And the worst was the fireball caused by the crashed car in the lake being set on fire. The scene was set - car upside down in the river (looked more like a lake to me - no movement of water could be seen), with a split fuel tank spilling out fluid at a high rate. If this was an F1 car, then there would have been no problem, but Indycars run on methanol, and methanol dissolves in water, which is why during an Indycar pit they keep buckets of water around, and after finishing fuelling, often through some water at the fuel intake to dissolve any spillage left behind (this was shown happening in the film). So, the methanol may have been dumped at a high rate into the water, but it would have rapidly dissolved too, so couldn't have caught fire. Besides, if it had been a river, it would have been swept away down stream fast enough to not have caused a problem.

Still, at least I could continue working on my webpage on my laptop while the film was on, so it wasn't a complete waste of two hours.

8th August 2004 - Not FIRST among equals

The FIRST Formula 1 Effort

The FIRST-Judd 189. What is that I hear you ask? Well, it never took part in a Grand Prix (except in its second incarnation as the Life), and only saw track time during the Bologna Autosprint, after which it disappeared.

This story starts with Gordon Coppuck and Adrian Newey, who were designing the March 881 for Leyton House, with Ricardo Divila working on the geometry on a Hewlett-Packard 9825. At the same time, Divila was working for Lamberto Leoni and his FIRST F3000 team, working as the technical director. Leyton House proposed to Leoni that they borrow Divila for their F1 project, and supply a works engineer to run FIRST, thus making FIRST a semi-works team. Leoni didn't accept, as he had plans for his own team.

FIRST took delivery of their F3000 March 88B on the 24th December, and were running it at Misano on the 26th. Two months of testing followed at the very smooth circuit, and the times were impressive, being fast enough to beat the Minardo, Osella and Zakspeed F1 teams who were testing at the same time. However, when they turned up at Jerez for the first race, the car was completely undrivable over the bumps, the car switching from massive turn-in oversteer to arms-crossed understeer on the way out. The Reynard on pole was some two seconds faster than the FIRST, although it was the fastest of the Marches.

Divila attempted to solve the problem by changing the diffuser, modifying it with a hacksaw at the track. Post-race, they took a model to Southampton university and put it in the wind tunnel, and discovered that the model's 18swg aluminium floor was bowing with the aero suction and was not keeping its shape. This meant that when the model was pitched, it had a very stable center of pressure. When the floor was replaced by a thicker gauged version, they found that the center of pressure changed was nearly 10%, and caused massive instability. As a result, they changed the aerodynamics and geometry of the car, and reinforced the chassis (including changing the bottom engine mounts and reinforcing the tub). This increased the competitiveness, and driver Pier Luigi Martini was in contention for the championship until he went to replace Adrian Campos at Minardi.

As the championship challenge was now over, Leoni preferred to invest in his ongoing F1 project, which had been running in parallel to the F3000 team. Divila had laid out the basic design of the car, and it was assumed that Pier Luigi Martini and Marco Apicella would be driving. However, as the F3000 project was taking most of Divila's time, the F1 project was passed on to the design studio of Giovanni Marelli, who had previously done design work for Zakspeed, and he was contracted to build the car and components for a very "competitive" price. Marelli fiddled with the design - the gearbox casing was from an ex-Alfa Romeo design, but was badly designed and had suspension mounts which suffered from "casting pull-back" (when the material in the bosses shrinks when the magnesium contracts under cooling), leaving a 1/4 inch wall of metal where the rear lower pickups were. In addition, the subcontractor who built the monocoque set the autoclave wrong and overcooked the tub, burning the resin, which resulted in a tub constructed from loose sheets of carbon fibre only vaguely linked together. The steering column was built from 3/8 inch solid titanium,

but it was possible after applying full steering lock to turn the steering wheel nearly a full extra turn as the metal wound up.

Divila realised that the car was fundamentally unsafe, and as he had not been involved in the detail design, stated that he did not want to be associated with the car in any form. As the finance for the project was not forthcoming, Divila followed up an offer to go to Ligier. However, he was horrified to see the car turn up at Bologna, with Tarquini scheduled to drive (he had to go on a crash diet to fit in the car, as he was considerably taller and burlier than Martini). Divila's name was quoted frequently as the designer of the car, with a picture being published in the Italian Autosprint magazine of Divila next to the car, the picture being from when FIRST took delivery of the car from Marelli. So Divila flew into Milan with Guy Ligier's own Italian lawyer, and had Leoni sign an affidavit pledging not to mention Divila's name in any shape or form, and to issue press retractions clearly dissociating Divila from the project. The Milan court also issued an injunction, threatening to take Leoni to court for misrepresentation, libel and mendacity should his name be used, and this injunction is still in force to this day.

15th August 2004 - Hungaroboring

The Hungaroboring is a dry and dusty bowl of a track outside of Budapest. It doesn't lend itself much to overtaking, and so it proved on the weekend. Once the drivers had sorted themselves out at the start, the two Ferrari's pootled off into the distance and won as they pleased, and in their natural order. The lack of undue excitement meant that the race provided a decent amount of time to help gently digest the Sunday lunch.

The excitement was all off track, with the story of Buttongate filling the headlines. It would seem as though Button's management were on the legal ball, whereas BAR's were slightly remiss in how they handled things. Button's contract with BAR expired this year, but there was an option which BAR could take up to secure his services for the following year, and it had to be exercised by a certain time. It would seem as though BAR missed this by a couple of days, and anticipating this, Button's management contacted Williams, and a contract was sorted out. Somehow word of this was leaked to the media, specifically the newspapers, so to pre-empt the breaking news, Sir Frank Williams announced the news live on BBC Radio 5 Live.

Given that Dave Richards and BAR had shown some faith in Button after what could be considered his wilderness years at Renault, many people consider that Button's activities lack integrity, and don't reward the loyalty shown by Richards. This may be true, but consider the reverse situation - would BAR show the same degree of loyalty and integrity to Button if Michael Schumacher suddenly became available to them? Of course not - it's a dog eat dog world, and not for nothing is the Formula 1 paddock known as the Piranha Club.

The interesting question is whether Williams will be a better package next year than BAR. Given this years performances, you would suggest that this is questionable, but Williams have been there and done it several times, whereas BAR never has. And what about the commitment of Honda? It has taken them a long time to build a half decent engine, and with proposed rule changes afoot which could affect engine capacity, how long will it take them to get around the new ideas and come up with a competitive unit? Plus Williams is the team which gave Button his F1 break, so he knows that he will feel at home there. Button summed up his move by saying that he thought that Williams would give him the better chance at winning the world championship - you can't really disagree with that.

29th August 2004 - Can you emasculate the emasculated?

Can you emasculate the emasculated? I couldn't help but ponder this question after seeing the latest addition to the Spa-Francorchamps race circuit, the re-profiled bus-stop chicane. The circuit is back on the calendar after a years hiatus, during which the Belgian government decided that the income from the race and the prestige outweighed the benefit of the anti-tobacco legislation in place.

Emasculating isn't new to Spa. In its original form, the circuit was a 9.236 mile blast through the Ardennes countryside, and in 1921, when the first race was held, it was a fearsome place. There were no crash barriers or any safety features, and it was treacherous in the wet, with the trees trapping the spray. The circuit went from the La Source hairpin, and where the famous Eau Rouge now is, turned left into Virage de l'Ancienne Douanne. In later years, when the Eau Rouge stretch of tarmac was built, the Virage de l'Ancienne Douanne wasn't used for racing, but it remained in place as part of the main road which every day traffic used. Although it isn't obvious on TV, Eau Rouge is exceedingly steep, and would be difficult for heavy traffic to get up, so they need to use the old track and its hairpin. Even so, the run up Les Combes is still steep enough. It creates an awful lot of fun and games when the track is open and used as a public road – the trucks and coaches crawl up the right hand side, cars come down the left hand side, and you have cars overtaking the coaches and trucks in the middle at the same time. Queue lots of near-misses.

Where the modern circuit turns right, the old circuit plunges onwards all the way to the town of Stavelot. The circuit was by no means straight, with a series of gentle turns. You barely notice these at road speeds, but at race speeds these became fearsome, the Masta Kink becoming a test of nerve – do you lift or not? Depends on your confidence and whether you can risk plunging off at 160 mph or more. At Stavelot, the track turns back on itself, and heads back to La Source.

The first change to the circuit occurred as early as 1930, with a further change in 1934, when the Malmedy corner was tightened. La Virage de l'Ancienne Douanne was bypassed in 1934. The circuit then became the venue for the pre-war gladiatorial contests between Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz, but retained a fearsome edge, with Dick Seaman losing his life in 1939 while driving for Mercedes.

The circuit remained unchanged through to 1956, and from this point onwards there was incremental change as corners were gradually eased, and a chicane was installed before Malmedy. Speeds became ever higher, with a sportscar race running at an average of 151.885 mph in 1973. F1 had moved to Nivelles and Zolder by this point, the danger being too much, especially after Jackie Stewart crashed and disappeared off the circuit in a car leaking fuel. This accident became the catalyst for Stewart's drive in improving safety.

To improve safety and re-open the track, a new purpose-built bit of circuit was added, running from Les Combes down to Blanchimont. Unusually for circuit changes, the change met with approval, as it retained the character of the circuit, but it shortened the length to 4.317 miles. However, the run into La Source was still considered to fast, so the Bus-Stop chicane was built for 1980, to slow the cars down further. This was the first mickey-mouse corner ever on the circuit, but it was still distinctive compared to others elsewhere. The track then remained unchanged in layout until this

year, except for 1994 when a temporary chicane was installed in Eau Rouge following Alex Zanardi's huge accident in 1993.

For 2004, the bus-stop chicane was completely re-profiled, to and avoid the cars clattering over the first corner and taking out bollards, tyres, or whatever they cared to put there to try and stop short-cutting of the corner. However, what they have done is cut down on an overtaking opportunity. No-longer can you tow down the straight and out-brake into the first corner so easily, as the straight now turns right before getting to the sharp-left. As mentioned in the first sentence, it's an emasculation. But the bus-stop was an emasculation of the circuit in the first place..... (however, just to demonstrate that whatever you say will be proven incorrect, Montoya drove around the outside of Schumacher in the new corner. So, perhaps you can't overtake into the corner, but you can overtake in the middle of it. Or, at least, Montoya can).

What is also a disappointment is the run-off at Eau Rouge. The run-off areas used to be gravel, which meant that you had to thread your car through and keep it on track. Now, who cares whether you get it right? If you get it wrong, you simply run wide, go onto the run-off tarmac, and continue. It means that even the worst driver now goes through the corner flat out, as you don't have to worry about getting slightly out of line. It no longer rewards the best drivers, as even the worst can go through there flat. In some ways, it has reduced the challenge of the circuit – there has to be some penalty for getting things wrong. This was demonstrated by Juan Pablo Montoya on lap one of the Belgian Grand Prix – Sato was in the way, so he went right onto the run-off area to overtake him. It can't be right that you can get an advantage for going off circuit.

Ah, the race itself. It really suffered from a case of Autosecuritis, that is there was an out-break of safety cars, caused by that weapon of mass destruction known as the shard of carbon fibre. Following the first lap pile-up at Radillon, there was a steady stream of punctures throughout the race, some more serious than others. Following the criticism at Indianapolis of the FIA and for running the cars through the field of debris, each time there was a major accident the safety car was sent out so that the track could be swept. Perhaps, though, this is a case of treating the symptoms rather than treating the cause – what causes the shards in the first place? To this end, the FIA is proposing that all pieces of carbon fibre should be encased in a Kevlar jacket to prevent the shattering in the case of an accident, and this has to be applauded.

In some ways though, the safety car made the race, as it allowed drivers who were otherwise out of the race to get back in. Barrichello had his rear wing removed at the first corner, but he managed to get back to the pits and have it replaced. The safety car periods allowed him to catch back up and eventually finish 3rd. Another beneficiary was David Coulthard, who had a puncture and dropped to the back of the pack. He was working his way through when he came up behind Klien in Radillon. Coulthard tried to overtake on the left, but Klien moved over to cover, and they touched. Coulthard's front wing was ripped off, and as it went over the top of the car, it decapitated the on-board camera from its mounting – the possibilities of what could have happened should the trajectory of the front wing been lower are horrendous. Despite hitting the barrier, Coulthard was able to make it back to the pits and get a new front wing. The safety car had been deployed, so Coulthard was able to rejoin the fight. How he had the confidence to fight so much given the battering his car had received, I don't know.

The good news was that we had a new race winner in Kimi Raikkonen. However, Michael Schumacher finished 2nd, which means that he has won his seventh Drivers World Championship. McLaren have got it together too late in the season to make any difference, so lets hope that this provides some kind of pointer to next year, as everyone will be looking to it now that the championship is over.

26th September 2004 - Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude – a malicious pleasure in the misfortune of others. Not a pretty emotion perhaps, but you couldn't help but get a small amount of it after qualifying on Saturday. Seven time world drivers champion Michael Schumacher thinks that he can do no wrong, and on his qualifying lap he barrelled into the first corner far faster than anyone else. Even a Ferrari has its limit, and this was too far over it – the car's back end snapped out, and Schumacher disappeared backwards into the gravel and into last place on the back of the grid. On his return to the pit, Schumacher got out of his car, and facing the camera's he stuck out his chin and announced to the world that he didn't think that it was a mistake of his which caused the spin. Yeah, right, hence the pleasure in his downfall.

The ridiculousness of the statement was only heightened today when the Ferrari stated that they had changed the engine, stripped the car down and checked the electrics out fully, and yet found nothing. Whatever Schumacher thought, he was starting from the back, and chose indeed to start from the pits full to the gills with fuel. Thus an afternoon was set up where that schadenfreude feeling just grew and grew.

For someone who is meant to be at the height of their powers, Schumacher made an awful lot of rookie mistakes, with only occasional flashes of brilliance as he tried to fight back from his clumsiness. The first mistake was on lap 13, when trying to overtake the Jaguar of Christian Klien. Going into the hairpin bend at the end of the main straight, Klien was on his normal line while Schumacher was catching due to his superior engine power. Schumacher is seemingly so used to traffic getting out of his way while he is lapping them that he has forgotten how to overtake properly. He dived up the inside from a large distance back, and as Klien drove around the corner, he slid into the Jaguar, banging both of his wheels. The Jaguar's suspension broke on impact, but the Ferrari is seemingly indestructible, and Schumacher drove off into the distance.

The interesting thing with this is to see whether there will be any post race censure of Schumacher or not, as this incident definitely comes under the definition of "an avoidable accident". Montoya at Indianapolis in 2003 had to take a drive through penalty for knocking into Barrichello when the championship was at stake, and Barrichello was able to continue. Schumacher took someone out permanently. If some kind of penalty isn't issued, it will only fuel the complaints that there is one rule for Ferrari, and one rule for everyone else.

Schumacher wasn't finished yet though, and a couple of laps later he managed to spin off in a corner in what looked like a carbon copy of his qualifying accident. He got going again, and during the pitstop confusion he overtook his brother Ralf on the track, and had the cheek to wave to him as he did it. It was to no avail, as on lap 35 he suffered a left rear puncture and had to pit to have it replaced. He eventually finished 12th. Not one of his better days at the office, and the third race in a row that he hasn't won. However, it was the second race in a row that Barrichello has won, and it looked throughout the race as though he had everything in hand, bar a little graining of his front tyres.

Second was Jenson Button, who unlike most of the other drivers had a two stop race rather than a three. This helped him leapfrog third placed Kimi Raikkonen, but wasn't enough to deal with the Ferrari – they still have plenty in hand compared to the rest of the field. However, the 1st Chinese Grand Prix held plenty of interest, although there are perhaps one or two reservations about the track itself. A long straight leading into a hairpin bend at least creates an overtaking spot, but there are too many left-right sequences of bends which hinder overtaking, as they create a single line race circuit. You cannot drive around the outside of anyone. It was also a little worrying to see washboard type bumps forming in some of the braking areas. These cause the cars to buck around as they try and slow down, and they are only likely to get worse over time. The circuit itself is built on a swamp, and this could promote subsidence and an acceleration of the bump formation a la Interlagos, plus the quality of Chinese engineering in recent times has sometimes left something to be desired. There are at least nine more F1 races to be held at the circuit, so lets hope that these fears are unfounded.



31st October 2004 - Rally Le Touquet Paris-Plage Historique

There I was driving down a French country lane in September when I rounded a corner and found myself in the middle of a time control point of an unknown rally. There had been no warning, and no closed roads, and I was slightly worried as to what I would meet coming towards me. Then I heard an engine - definitely not modern, as there wasn't enough rasp to it. The roar deepened, and an Austin Healey emerged.

It was the 3rd Rally Le Touquet Paris-Plage Historique, a navigation rally for cars which are supposedly historic, although it seemed as though anything went as long as it was either old or sporty. There was a great variety of cars, some of which are shown below.

Bugatti T57



The Bugatti T57 was first introduced in 1934, and was largely designed by Jean Bugatti, Ettore's son. It featured a 3257cc engine, with twin overhead cams. Although the bodies were styled by Jean, some chassis were available for custom coachbuilders, such as Graber, Letourneur et Marchand, Saoutchik and James Young. Although intended as a GT, competition models were built which won at Le Mans in 1937 and 1939. New versions were built in 1936 and 1937 - the 57S and 57SC - which had lowered chassis, and had shortened wheelbases by 320mm. A total of 684 Type 57's were built.

Alpine A110



First built in 1963 with a 1108cc, 87 bhp Renault R8 engine, the A110 was produced through to 1977, when it featured an engine capable of producing 180 bhp. The car was frequently used with success in rallying.

Jensen-Healey



The Jensen brothers, Alan and Richard, were building cars as early as the late 1920s, although Jensen Motors Ltd wasn't set up until 1936. It built a variety of cars over the years, with a variety of engines, usually accompanied with weak finances.

In 1972, British Leyland declined to renew Donald Healey's contract, and removed the Healey name from the remaining Austin Healey Sprites, a car that Richard Jensen had been involved with. The American distributor of British sports cars, Kjell Qvale of San Francisco, decided that something needed to be done, and this neatly coincided with the needs of Jensen, whose bankers were searching for additional capital. A deal was arranged for Qvale to become the majority shareholder in the firm, with Donald Healey as the new chairman. A new car, called the Jensen-Healey and targeted at the USA, was to be built, featuring a 1973cc DOHC Lotus engine, and the suspension from a Vauxhall Firenza. After trouble with the cars, a Mk II was introduced in August 1973, and in 1975 new Federal impact rules meant that the rear bumper was changed. A GT coupe-estate was also introduced that year, but by May 1976 the company had closed, with the company in receivership. Around 10,000 Jensen-Healey's were produced in total.

Jaguar XK



MG TD Midget



The MG TD Midget was produced in December 1949, and shared the engine from the earlier TC. 29,664 were made through to the production end in 1953. In 1952, for every car sold in Britain, 42 were sold abroad.

MG A



The MG A was produced in 1955, powered by a 1489cc, 72 bhp, twin carburettor based engine. It was an instant success, and sold 13,000 in the first year of production, and 101,081 by mid-1962. A twin-cam 1588cc, 108 bhp engine option was introduced, giving a top speed of 113 mph. Disc brakes were available on all wheels.

Porsche 356



When Professor Ferdinand Porsche was imprisoned by the French after World War II, his son, Dr Ferdinand "Ferry" Porsche, built a VW special which was sold to a Swiss who arranged for a magazine to test it. The resulting review was very positive, and a further batch were made - it became the 356, so-called because it was job 356 in the design studio's portfolio. Early cars had the VW Beetle air-cooled 1131cc flat-four engine, and featured cable operated brakes. In 1950 the engine was reduced to 1086cc so that it could qualify for the 1100cc class at Le Mans, which it won first time out in 1951. The cabriolet version, shown above, was first produced in 1951.