

LIFE'S GOOD FOR MR HAPPY

FORMULA ONE SUPREMO BERNIE ECCLESTONE TELLS KEVIN ROBERTS THAT A YEAR OF REAL, TOP LEVEL, HIGH OCTANE COMPETITION HAS BEEN GREAT FOR THE IMAGE OF FORMULA ONE. AND SO TOO, HAS THE INTRIGUE AND CONTROVERSY.

IT IS JUST POSSIBLE that 2009 will go down as the most amazing year in the history of Formula One. On the track we have seen a new team rise from the ashes of Honda and wipe out all opposition in the first third of the season. Off the track we've had... well, where do you want start?

If you'd taken Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grimm, Ian Fleming and a handful of Hollywood's leading script writers, locked them away in a Five Star hotel and fed them Champagne and lobster for a fortnight, they would have struggled to come up with a more dramatic and, frankly, unbelievable narrative for the season.

In what is becoming something of a Groundhog Day occurrence, the pre-season was dominated by discussions of breakaways as the teams rebelled over planned cuts in operating costs.

Then most of the global auto industry was rushed into financial intensive care, raising doubts over which manufacturers could afford to continue in Fi. As market meltdown continued, sponsors across the sporting world began to consider their commitments and many so-called expert observers felt that Fi would be among the hardest hit.

And, as the season progressed, the now familiar pattern of sensation, allegation and recrimination was shattered by the biggest scandal of them all. Renault's axed Brazilian driver Nelson Piquet Jr admitted that he had deliberately crashed into a wall during the 2009 floodlit Grand Prix in Singapore under team orders.

In so doing, he effectively grassed-up his boss, Flavio Briatore and two other senior members of the Renault Fi team, earning Briatore an indefinite ban from the sport.

As ever, the man at the centre of this maelstrom was Bernie Ecclestone, one of the few people on earth whose name rarely appears in print without the prefix Supremo, Svengali or Ring Master. He is the man who created Formula One and has made a lot, an awful lot, of money in the process.

Maybe it is cash envy which divides opinion about Ecclestone. Much of the media appear to dislike or at least distrust him, but those who have worked closely with him talk of his integrity, loyalty and generosity.

Last year his list of achievements was recited one-more time ahead of his receiving the gong for Outstanding Achievement at the SportBusiness Sport Event Management Awards. And it is one hell of a list.

Pre-Bernie, Fi appears to have been the plaything of a bunch of Euro Toffs and Louche Latinos who managed to fit in a spot of driving between lunch and the next Hollywood starlet. While that description clearly does not recognise the tremendous skill and bravery of the pioneering drivers, there was clearly an element of the gentleman's club about the whole enterprise.

Bernie Ecclestone brought discipline and order to Formula One and made it marketable. He nurtured the brand, developed new races in

new markets, experimented with new ideas in broadcast media and created a global force which has, to date, ridden-out each of the many storms it has faced as well as the global economic squall.

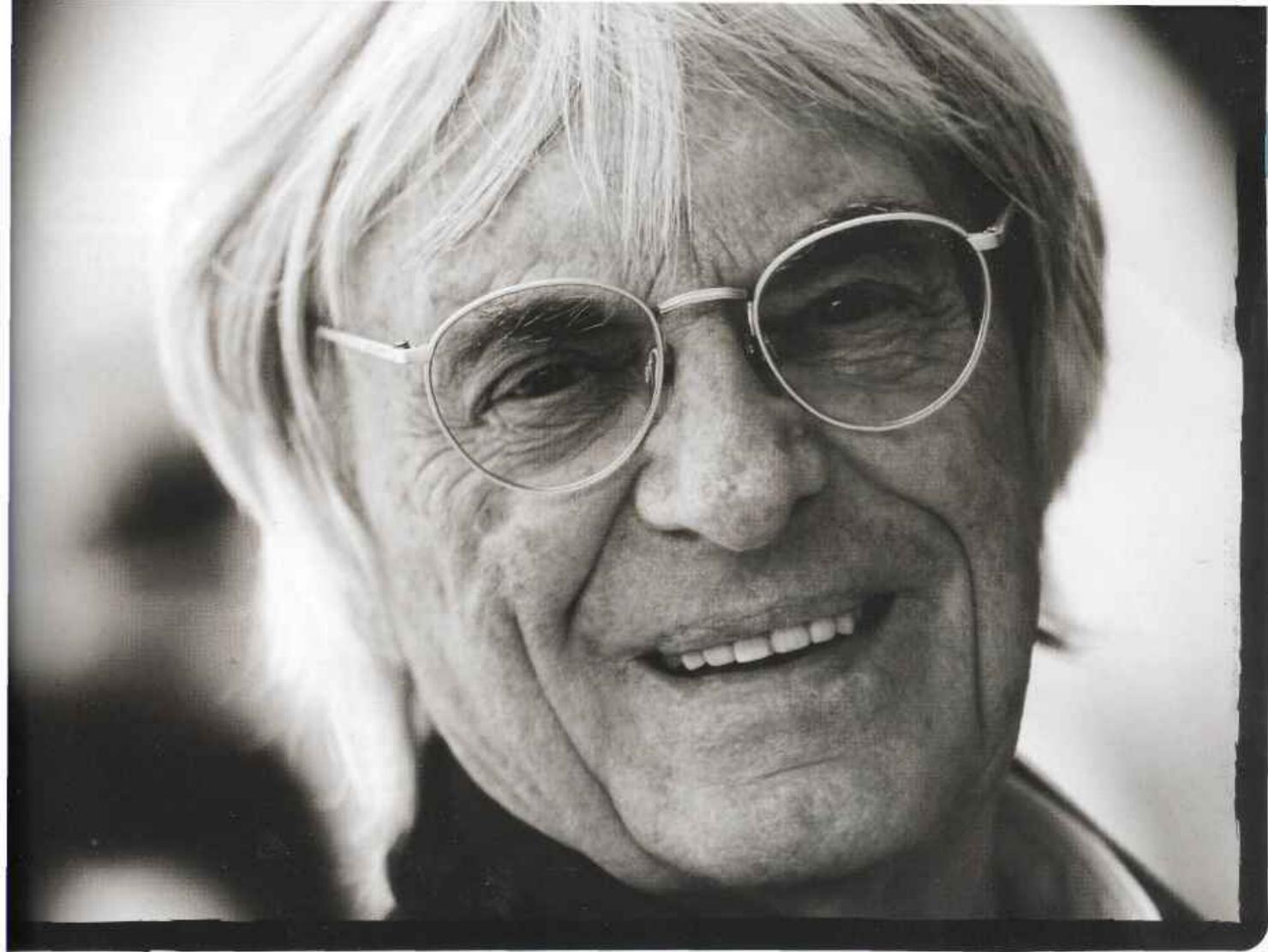
The day after the World Council of the FIA - motor sport's world governing body - ruled on the Renault incident, Ecclestone was at his London headquarters preparing to leave for the Singapore Grand Prix. He reflected on those recent events and the damage which an incident of cheating, which risked the life of not only Piquet but other drivers, might have done to Fi.

"Well we got a lot of press didn't we?" he says, probably tongue in cheek. "I am on the world council so it's difficult for me to talk about the ruling but you have to accept that Flavio was the manager who ran the team. So as far as the teams are concerned, the general opinion is that there were three people involved in the conspiracy. The others in the team and the people at the Renault car company didn't know what was going on.

"What happened to the Renault team was probably quite fair. Perhaps we were a little bit harsh in what we meted out to Flavio. He needed a bit of a slap perhaps because he is the team manager. He could have said - you can't do that.

"The buck stopped with him and in fairness to him he acknowledges that," says Ecclestone.

"There have been many difference incidents over the years which have been portrayed as the beginning of the end for Formula One. But I think



Bernie Ecclestone - Getty Images Sport

the brand of Formula One is so strong that these sorts of things don't hurt it."

The doom-mongers were certainly out in force in late 2008 when, with the world economy in freefall and the motor industry hurting more than most, Honda announced that it was pulling the plug, sparking a furious race for a new owner to keep the UK-based team running. It's a move which Ecclestone paints as being driven by opportunism rather than real financial necessity.

"In reality the reason Honda stopped was nothing to do with the money because by then everyone had agreed they were all spending too much and that it was possible to spend a bit less and get the same (results/performance)," he says.

"They left because they were gth in the Constructors Championship again and because they had heard stories every year that they were going to do better. They were looking for an excuse to go but the excuse they brought up wasn't really valid."

His words are given some weight by the spectacular season enjoyed by Ross Brawn's Brawn GP team which picked up where Honda left off. And some, winning both the Constructor's and Drivers Championships for 2009.

"At the beginning of the season it was the Honda car which won the races - they would have got the points that Ross got," Ecclestone says.

And while Honda has departed, new teams are set to join the series and Fi is looking buoyant once more. In fact, the black clouds of recession



Bernie Ecclestone, Chief Executive Officer, Formula One Group

Bernie Ecclestone is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Formula One Group. He first went into business selling motorcycles, diversified into property and then began his involvement in motor-racing. He raced motorcycles from the age of 16, moved onto car racing and competed in the first ever round of the Formula One World Championship, the 1950 British Grand Prix.

His entrepreneurial character took him into the business of motor sport, managing Stuart Lewis- Evans, buying the Connaught F1 Team and later managing Jochen Rindt. He then bought Brabham which enjoyed Grand Prix success, winning three World Championships.

Since 1972, Ecclestone has transformed F1 from an expensive hobby for wealthy gentleman racers into the global, multi-billion dollar industry it is today.

Taking place in 19 countries on five continents in front of millions of spectators and watched on TV by hundreds of millions of fans, F1 is now in the most popular annual sports series in the world.

may well have played into Ecclestone's hands, helping corale militant teams by forcing them to reduce costs and re-consider any future they might have outside the Formula One ring.

"I think we have adjusted (to difficult economic times) in the right way," Ecclestone says. "We have conquered the necessity to spend a lot of money to be competitive. The best thing to come out of the recession for us was that it was a wake-up call for the teams. We didn't need to make an agreement to say you couldn't spend... it has happened on its own, which is what I predicted."

But money, he says, is not the only driving force behind the last round of threats by FOTA, the Formula One Teams Association, to pull out of the series and go-it-alone. He believes the last skirmish was a move to show that the FIA under Max Moseley, the outgoing president had lost Formula One. It's a point on which Ecclestone appears somewhat exasperated.

"Dealing with the teams can be like dealing with Trades Unions, he says. "I suppose you can't blame the people for using whatever leverage they can to get more of something they don't need. Because the more money they get the more they waste.

"But in this case it wasn't to do with money. They wanted to see Max changed. That's why they wanted to get together and start their own series."

And that, says Ecclestone is something which would "never, ever, ever, have worked. The Formula One brand is just so strong world-wide. You can't

Unless you have a lot of points being scored and breaks all the way through Americans can't watch. Their kids have been educated not to watch something for that long.

just start-up something with a new name. It would never have happened."

This season's Fi series finished in Abu Dhabi, the carbon dollar powered Emirate which built a brand new circuit, complete with air conditioned grandstand seating for 55,000 spectators, especially for the privilege.

Next year the newcomers will be South Korea, continuing the pattern of innovative geographical development which has become Ecclestone's hallmark. Over the years Formula One has tilted closer towards the emerging epicentre of the new commercial world but not every new venture has been a success.

One case in point is Turkey where the government funded a state-of-the-art track and facilities. Yet the stands have been disappointingly empty at the Turkish Grand Prix.

"I am the one to blame because I am the one who says where we are going to go," says Ecclestone who remains committed to the event.

"I thought about the huge size of the population in the Istanbul area but I suppose the bottom line is that race has never been well publicised locally. On top of that you have to ask whether our friends in Turkey are enthusiastic about mechanical sport... they like football. You can't change these things overnight. To get the culture going takes a bit of time.

"I am terribly disappointed for the people in Turkey who have supported this from the beginning. Turkey is a fantastic facility, probably the best we've got. The track is like Spa and sorts the men from the boys and the rest of the facilities are great. We will make it work."

Elsewhere the picture is brighter. There will be an Indian Grand Prix in 2011 and Ecclestone declares himself "happier than they are" at the emergence of the Force India team.

"We also keep knocking on the door in Russia," says Ecclestone who has no worries over the success of the inaugural race in Korea.

In many respects Korea is a smart move from a commercial perspective. Many Korean companies are active in global in sport but Fi seems somewhat under-represented to date. "I expect Korean corporations to wake up and realise what they can get out of Fi," Ecclestone says.

While the move east appears logical, there remains what appears to be a gaping hole in the Fis programme. When told that one team boss had

- in an earlier interview - said that they desperately wanted at least one and perhaps two US/North American races Ecclestone's response is swift and somewhat devastating.

"He has not been in the business long enough to know. We've never had anything out of America. No sponsorship as such comes out of America and America has got its own way of presenting almost everything including sport.

"Unless you have a lot of points being scored and breaks all the way through they can't watch. That why it is difficult for football. They don't want to sit for 45 minutes and see nothing happen.

"Americans are walking around (at sports events) all the time. Their children have been educated not to watch something for that long."

Having somewhat trashed American sports viewing habits and the attention span of next-generation Americans, Ecclestone does admit that there's one location which would attract him.

"We want to be in Manhattan. It could be a street race or they can build a circuit if they want," he says. The issue, it appears is one of timing, although Fi has raced in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, the 8 hour negative difference makes it difficult for broadcasters both in Europe and Asia where time issues were solved in Singapore by the first Fi use of floodlights.

"Singapore last year was great for the people who were there and came over very well on TV," Ecclestone reflects. "It was a bit of a ballsy thing to do to, ask them to light up their bloody streets. Everyone said the same thing...that I was mad, the drivers wouldn't be able to see and that it would be a disaster. It wasn't."

All in all, what could have turned out to be an annus horribilis for Ecclestone has worked out quite well. If nothing else, Fi is back on the pub/water cooler conversational agenda among those who are not die-hard petrol heads.

And Ecclestone agrees that it's far more interesting to watch right now. "The good thing about it is that when you go to a race now and somebody asks who is going to win I'd have to say I haven't a clue. I just don't know," he says. "Before, when Michael (Schumacher) was around we knew that if he was on pole he was probably going to win... Now we don't know and that's good, it's what people want."

Ecclestone has been in the game a long time now but says he's as excited by every race as

he ever was. And he's also convinced that the new generation of drivers will produce a new generation of real superstars.

"Once they get a few wins under their belts they acquire the confidence to make them real characters," he says. "And I love seeing the new venues and how they improve the old ones," he says. "You know, apart from Monza and Monaco I have started the race everywhere."

If that sounds like the musings of a man focused on the past, forget it. Ecclestone has always been an innovator. He has embraced the potential of every media development as it has arrived, only to find that sometimes he was ahead of the demand curve.

"We try to produce what people want. I asked whether they would broadcast in HD if we produced and it was surprising that we didn't get a big uptake.

"We like to produce product for our customers, the broadcasters. We can speculate but they know better than us what they want."

Yet right now, it appears that Fi's stars are, at least temporarily in alignment and in that event, even a restless soul like Ecclestone is content with his lot.

"I am happy, happy, happy that a lot of new teams are coming in. And they are coming in because they realise they can be competitive with a lot less money than before. It was really a bit of a closed shop by virtue of the cost. We are now getting new and interesting teams.

"Changing the rules for the sake of changing is crazy. Qualifying today is as good as it has ever been. They will be no refuelling (next year) we will have to wait and see whether that is good or bad. We have to make sure we don't keep changing our regulations because that is what costs a fortune. As soon as you change something, what you've built is scrap and you start again."

So there you have it. Bernie Ecclestone as Mr Happy, Happy Happy. TV audiences are good, costs are down, sponsorship is more or less holding up. New tracks are looking promising and there are new stars in the making.

So cut to the most unexpected of interview moments from the man who worries his staff sometimes by straying off message from time to time...

Asked to sum up the state of play he answers simply: "Life's Good... as our sponsors LG say."