



Ayrton

An angry Ayrton Senna once challenged a fellow driver to justify his driving tactics following a particularly brutal grand prix. After arguing about the acceptable limits of competitive racing and on-track manoeuvring, it was pointed out to the three-time world champion that he too had been known, on many an occasion, to crudely block an opponent from overtaking. "But I am Senna," was the Brazilian's reply. And almost everything that was brilliant, ruthless, contradictory, compelling and, finally, larger than life about the man and the sportsman can be found in those four simple words.

He may not have been the greatest driver of all time – that hotly debated trophy is awarded more often to Juan Manuel Fangio, Alain Prost and Michael Schumacher – yet he was undoubtedly the most fascinatingly intelligent, emotional and complex of Formula One drivers, and by far the best loved. That he died, aged 34, while racing in the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix at Imola, leaving the track at 191mph and crashing live on television, only added to his heroism, popularity and iconic status. It is a legend that only continues to get stronger and brighter.

Ayrton Senna da Silva, a boy brought up in relatively comfortable surroundings in São Paulo, was a precociously gifted driver from an early age. He came to prominence in karts, then moved to Great Britain and progressed rapidly through the ranks, making his F1 debut at Rio de Janeiro in 1984. His style was marked, even then, by raw aggression, peerless self-belief – and a fearless talent for overtaking. "There is no corner on which it is impossible to pass," he told *Autosport* in 1983. "It's just a case of deciding when to do it."

Yet something more refined was to develop in Senna's flamboyant technique over the following years. Not only did he have an innate understanding of the modern Formula One car and an acute sensitivity to mechanical detail, but he was also consistently willing to push himself and his car right to the edge of their abilities. There was something utterly committed about his race craft, a finesse and virtuosity that seemed to be working on another level to his fellow drivers.

"Senna's car was dancing, like raindrops on a pavement," said eminent Ulster driver John Watson, who competed against him in 1985. "The control... Here was a driver doing things I had never even thought of, never mind attempted."

It was his personality, though, that really sealed his star quality. Perhaps Senna's

looks helped: he was slender and fine-featured, and his brown eyes seemed to have a sensual intensity. He was certainly linked with a number of beautiful women throughout his short life. Yet there was something that separated him further: he had presence and charisma but could appear reserved and aloof; he scrapped with drivers both on and off the track yet there was also a gentleness and grace to his character. He could appear selfish and arrogant, yet made substantial donations to charity and set up the Senna Foundation, which has raised more than £250 million for Brazil's underprivileged children.

■ 18-19

Senna

Driving ambition and a higher purpose propelled Ayrton Senna to pole position on track and off.
Words Philip Watson Photograph Keith Sutton

Most of all, people were drawn to his intelligence, eloquence, and a sense that his chosen path was an almost spiritual quest. Certainly, he was religious. He studied the Bible, said that he was able to experience God's presence on earth and, after winning the 1991 Brazilian Grand Prix, claimed "God gave me this race".

Yet he also spoke of more mystical experiences. He once described a power that "when I am driving actually detaches me completely from anything else... I am no longer driving the car consciously. I am driving it by a kind of instinct, only I am in a different dimension."



He was also unafraid to embrace the metaphysical considerations. "There is no end to the knowledge you can get, or the understanding or peace, by going deeper and deeper," he once commented. "I have an enormous desire to travel beyond my own limits."

Whether it was that unerring reach for the absolute that led to his death at Imola or something more prosaically mechanical, one thing was certain: it had an enormous impact on Formula One, sports fans around the world, and his fellow countrymen. With Austrian rookie Roland Ratzenberger also dying during F1's blackest weekend, technical and procedural changes were soon brought in to make the sport far safer. Since then, no F1 drivers have been killed.

The impact on those with no more than a passing interest in the sport was best expressed when Senna's coffin returned to São Paulo. By 1994, he had become his country's greatest hero – a man idolised in the same way as Bob Marley in Jamaica and Eva Peron in Argentina. The Brazilian president declared three days of national mourning, and Paulistas carried flags and banners around their city for days.

In Richard Williams's fine biography, *The Death of Ayrton Senna*, he describes seeing some banners that bore just a

single word: *saudade*. Its significance was explained to him by a friend. "It's the most beautiful word in the Portuguese language and one for which there's no direct translation. It means the sense of loss and sadness you feel when the person you love isn't there any more."

It sounds fanciful, perhaps, but it is true that Senna was a man who engendered that kind of raw emotional response in people, even those who had never met him. It is characterised by the fact that over ten years on, the sense of sadness and loss, for many of us, endures. He is not forgotten. Ayrton Senna: *saudade*.