



Button up

➔ **Britain's top F1 driver and premier playboy is now ready to challenge for the championship**

Photographs by Lee Powers
Fashion by Tony Lewis
Words by Philip Watson

Jenson Button walks out of the dressing room of a photographic studio in South London looking every inch the Seventies playboy.

He's wearing patent-leather slip-ons and a wide-lapelled Gucci suit that glitters under the bright studio lights, fitted and tightly cut so that it trims and bulges in all the right places. It takes a lean young man to carry off clothes such as these, a man with self-confidence and a relaxed approach to life. This is a suit that works best when worn by somebody who can effortlessly project "star quality" in front of the camera. In all these regards, Jenson Button more than fits the bill.

It's just that on this particular afternoon, Britain's leading Formula One driver more closely resembles a cross between a young Tom Jones and Dirk Diggler, Mark Wahlberg's character in *Boogie Nights*. "It's an awesome suit," he says, using one of his favourite words as he steps into the bright white glare of the studio set. As he sits himself nonchalantly on the edge of a high stool, you almost expect him to grab a microphone and break into song, maybe something by Burt Bacharach – "The Look of Love", perhaps.

There may be something of a retro feel in the studio, but Jenson Button is very much the man of the moment. Although he had a very poor 2006 season up to last July, Button was the highest points-scorer in the last six races. He took 35 points, including a maximum 10 for his first-ever victory, at the Hungarian Grand Prix in Budapest; it was more than both the retiring *Übermensch* of Formula One, Michael Schumacher, and the eventual champion, Fernando Alonso, could clock up during the latter stages.



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Button says it was the win at Hungary, in his 113th Grand Prix and seventh season in F1, that changed everything. "I always knew I had it in me. Some of the guys at the team had worked seven or eight years for that win. I've never seen so many grown men cry. It also gave us a taste of what we could achieve. It all looks very strong for 2007."

Certainly this year's championship gives Button his best chance of success since 2004, when he finished an impressive third behind Schumacher and Rubens Barrichello, who is now his team-mate at Honda. With the seven-time German world champion now out of the picture, several top drivers moving to new teams – Alonso to McLaren, Kimi Raikkonen to Ferrari – and new stars such as Heikki Kovalainen and young British prodigy Lewis Hamilton making their Formula One debuts in top teams, the championship is more open than it has been for many years. "At the moment there is no driver in Formula One who is better than me," says Button. It sounds arrogant and, some would argue, highly debatable, but somehow Button makes it seem like a statement of fact.

He also appears to be looking forward to having some of the British media spotlight and public expectation shifted to 22-year-old, Hertfordshire-born hotshot Lewis Hamilton, who will be spending his first season in Formula One as current world champion Fernando Alonso's team-mate at McLaren. "I wish him all the luck in the world, but it's going to be a tough season for him. Personally, I think it would have been better if he'd had a year's testing and then came into Formula One in 2008. He would have been very, very strong then."

This mixture of high hopes and controversial prodigiousness accurately echoes the furor surrounding Button when I previously spent time with the driver. I profiled Jenson for *Esquire* shortly after the Williams team dramatically signed him at the start of 2000. At that time, Button, aged just 20, was the youngest British racing driver and the fifth youngest in the history of the sport. He was described as "the next Ayrton Senna" and "the Michael Owen of motorsport" and seemed destined to grab a good amount of media attention.

Although Button, who is from Frome in Somerset, had enjoyed a remarkable career in karting as a youngster, had shown great skill and promise in Formula Ford and Formula Three, and had won *Autosport* magazine's prestigious Young Driver of the Year award, there were many who greeted his rapid promotion to Formula One with scepticism and scorn. "I don't believe you can go straight from kindergarten to university," argued Jackie Stewart. "I do not believe that young Button should be on the grid," wrote Martin Brundle. "It is two or three years too early for him."

I remind Jenson of the comments, and that his assessment of Hamilton could have been equally applied to him seven years ago. "Yeah, you're right, and they were 100 per cent right, too," he says. "I came into Formula One maybe two years too soon. I didn't have the experience I needed and I didn't know what to do when things got difficult."

Button is referring to his disastrous 2001 season with Benetton, when – after a creditable rookie year with Williams, who kept him under contract >

Cotton suit jacket, £400; matching trousers, £170, both by **Diesel**. Linen shirt, £209; knitted tie, from a selection, both by **Dolce & Gabbana**. Crocodile shoes, £135, by **Russell & Bromley**

Linen suit, from £595,
by **Gieves**. Cotton shirt,
£150, by **Pringle of Scotland**
Collection. Silk tie, £65,
by **Richard James**

– he was shifted to make way for Juan Pablo Montoya. Clashing with Benetton's playboy boss, Flavio Briatore, who accused him of being too distracted by his new-found wealth and celebrity lifestyle, Button had a dismal season wrestling with a car that was in development and never fast.

While he fared better in 2002, finishing seventh in the championship, he was replaced by Fernando Alonso in 2003 and moved to BAR-Honda. Despite heated public disagreements with teammate and former world champion Jacques Villeneuve, Button consistently outperformed the veteran Canadian driver and finished the season with 17 points to Villeneuve's dismal six.

Many F1 commentators point to this cast-iron gauge – that a racing driver's first duty is to beat his team-mate, a feat Button has achieved for the last five seasons running – as evidence of his extraordinary natural ability. The son of a former rallycross racer, John Button, who finished second in the British Championship in 1976, Jenson has a remarkable ability to master a track and its challenges almost on his first outing.

As a driver Jenson is something of a classical stylist – smooth, consistent, sensitive, technical and precise. “He almost never make mistakes, has magnificent car control, and is almost in Michael Schumacher's class when it comes to sheer all-round talent,” says Frank Williams, a team boss who does not give praise lightly. Honda's sporting

director Gil de Ferran, a Brazilian, goes a few degrees further: “He's a driver like few I've seen before. Jenson is a man touched by God.”

Superhuman or not, it is instructive to examine how he has changed in the seven years between our interviews. Physically, he has grown into himself and seems at ease with his slim, 6ft frame. At 20, there was a certain lumbering gawkiness to Jenson Button. Even his facial hair looks more convincing these days; before, his sideburns were more fuzz than firm statement.

It is a physical confidence, allied to his good looks (and bank balance), that has charmed a number of highly attractive women. Shortly after I spoke to him last time, he started seeing former *Fame Academy* contestant Louise Griffiths. The couple got engaged in 2003, but Jenson broke up the relationship three months before they were due to marry in 2005. “I just wasn't ready to settle down,” he said.

Since then he has developed a reputation, in the tabloids at least, of being a “serial shagger”. “I'm a young guy,” he has said. “What am I supposed to do – go home and read Shakespeare?”

Shakespeare aside, he is bright and articulate. It's simply that, like many racing drivers, his intelligence is vertical. He lives for motor racing and little else. However, he has rounded somewhat since 2000. Back then, he was asked by a journalist >



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Canvas coat, £1,250, by **Burberry Prorsum**. Wool suit, from £495, by **Gieves & Hawkes**. Cotton shirt, £195, by **Paul Smith**. Silk tie, £49, by **Thomas Pink**. Leather belt, £195, by **Pringle of Scotland Collection**



from *The Daily Telegraph* to name the capital of Australia, the Home Secretary, and three of the Beatles, and he replied that he didn't have a clue. I decide to ask him the same questions to see if he has learned anything in the intervening years.

Australia? "Oh, it's erm, it's that funny little place – what's it called, Jules?" His personal assistant has entered the room and Jenson is phoning a friend. "Yes, Canberra, that's the one."

Home Secretary? "Erm, Brown, is it?" I tell Jenson that Gordon Brown is Chancellor of the Exchequer. "Why should I know? I don't live in the country," he protests (he lives in Monaco). I tell him it's John Reid. "Who? I've never heard of him."

Beatles? "Erm, yeah, all of them. George, whatsisface, Ringo bloke... McCartney..."

"That's three," interjects a guy from his PR company, who has also mysteriously joined us.

He has grown financially, too. In 2000, his contract with Williams was £350,000 a year. Now his package with Honda is thought to be worth £25m over four years. It makes him one of the highest paid drivers in Formula One. He'd be a lot richer if, in 2005, he hadn't bought himself out of his long-standing contractual dispute with Williams. Although he had signed to race for Williams in 2006, he judged his best chances of success would be with Honda. Breaking the contract cost him dearly; up to \$50m, according to recently released Williams accounts.

I put that sum to him. "If you took all the money I've earned it wouldn't add up to that, so paying that amount would be difficult." I press him, but he insists he is bound by confidentiality agreements.

Jenson Button often seems so media-savvy that, as one frustrated journalist wrote in 2005, "He is about as likely to say something controversial as he is to beat Michael Schumacher to the championship." Button doesn't do opinion, attitude, emotion or anecdote – not in front of the media, at least. So, in a final attempt to get a reaction, I put to him some of the criticisms that have been made of his abilities. I tell him that the suspicion is that he is not quite good enough, that he's not assertive or ruthless enough, that he lacks real emotion and the killer instinct. I tell him he's a victim of the Nice-But-Tim Henman syndrome.

He is impressively unconcerned. "Those people really don't know me," he says, "It's no use even answering them. I'm giving everything I can, and nobody could have done better in 2006 in the same car – no other driver would have come close."

He is back on track now and racing down the home straight. "I want to be up there winning races and challenging for the championship... *that is my aim*." The last four words are said slowly, assuredly. He looks me straight in the eye. "For me, there's no other reason to be in Formula One." 🏎️

The 2007 Formula One season begins in Australia on 18 March. Enquiries: www.formula1.com

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