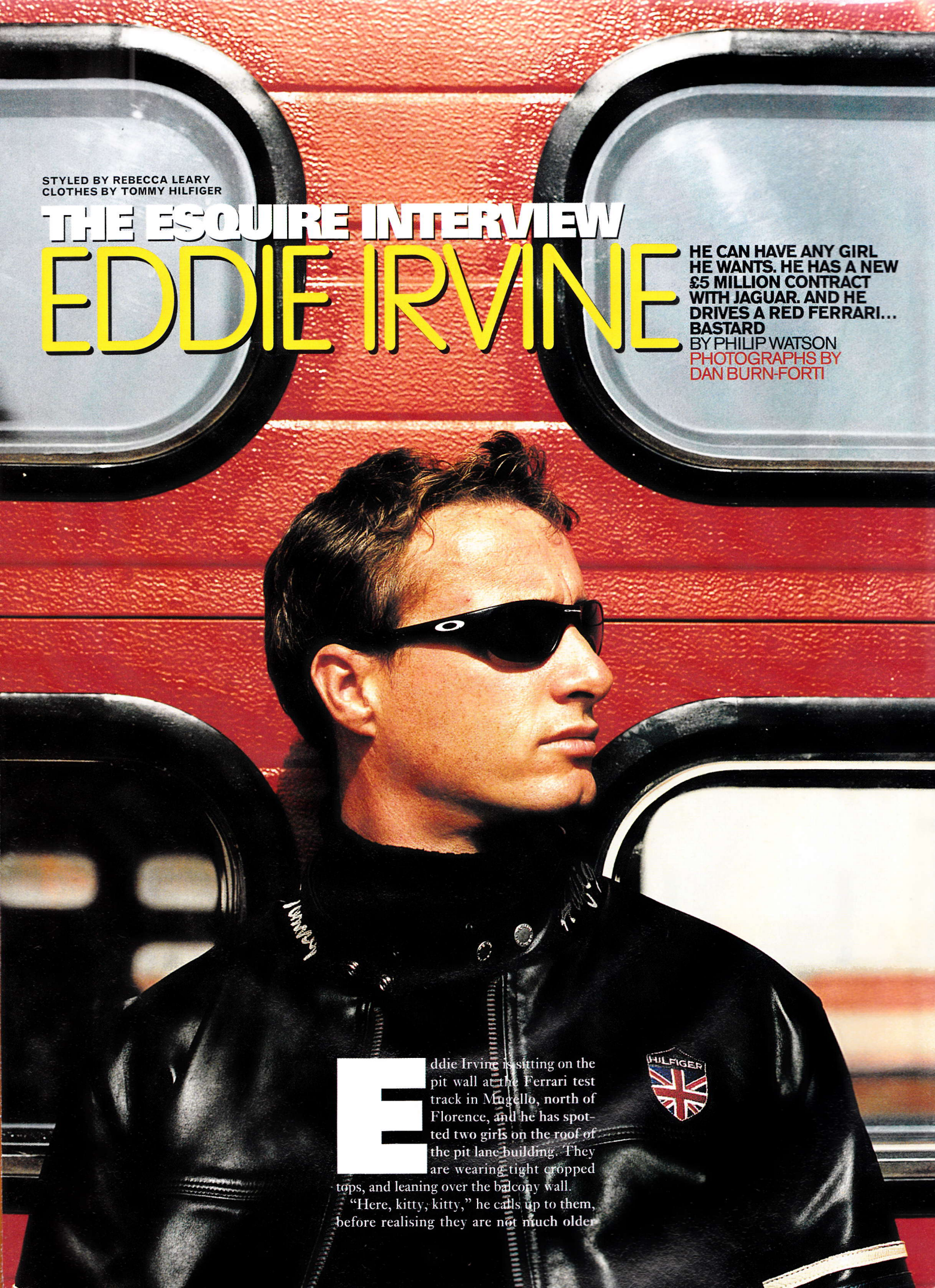


STYLED BY REBECCA LEARY  
CLOTHES BY TOMMY HILFIGER

# THE ESQUIRE INTERVIEW

# EDDIE IRVINE

HE CAN HAVE ANY GIRL HE WANTS. HE HAS A NEW £5 MILLION CONTRACT WITH JAGUAR. AND HE DRIVES A RED FERRARI...  
**BASTARD**  
BY PHILIP WATSON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN BURN-FORTI



**E**ddie Irvine is sitting on the pit wall at the Ferrari test track in Mugello, north of Florence, and he has spotted two girls on the roof of the pit lane building. They are wearing tight cropped tops, and leaning over the balcony wall. "Here, kitty, kitty," he calls up to them, before realising they are not much older





than 15. They giggle and smooth down their hair in girlish embarrassment, pretending not to notice that Irvine is addressing them.

"*Avete niente da fare?*" he shouts, after getting no response. Having lived in Italy for most of the past four years, Irvine speaks passable Italian and conducts interviews with the Italian media in their native language. He gets little reaction from asking "Nothing else to do?" other than blushes and hip-swivelling glances away.

Later, however, the girls loiter outside his Ferrari motorhome, and are introduced to Irvine by their uncle, the vice-director of track security. He informs Irvine that they are here for him, that they adore him, and think he is very good-looking.

The girls don't know what to do with themselves. I suggest a photo with Eddie and he obliges. They stand bolt upright with a look of shock on their faces. Dan, the *Esquire* photographer, encourages Irvine to put his arms around the girls and he cuddles them close. "OK, that's enough," he calls out. "You'll get me arrested."

### **Eddie Irvine behaves how we**

expect our racing drivers to behave: like racing devils, not automaton angels. He has flair and front, and a certain rock-star swagger. He is, perhaps, the George Best of Formula One, both hero and villain – but without his fellow Ulsterman's fatal need to self-destruct. In an era dominated by dry perfectionists and drivers with families to support, Irvine has perfected the art of living fast on and off the track.

"Fast Eddie" has a Jack-the-lad reputation as a womaniser and a player of the grand prix female field. With his model-like good looks, piercing blue eyes and Irish charm, he seems to send women the world over into supplicant adoration.

"Some girls are very obvious, but they don't have to try hard to meet me – if they're nice-looking," he told me, chuckling, at last year's Italian Grand Prix. "I get sent photographs, given phone numbers, and girls ring me in hotels. But it's the quality you have to go after because the things that come easy are not worth having. It's easy to get a Ford Fiesta, if you know what I'm saying."

What filter system do you use?

"My eyes. I'm that shallow."

### **Irvine has a large house near**

Dublin, a flat in Milan, an 80ft yacht that he sails from Portofino on the Italian coast, along the French Riviera, stopping at various tried-and-tested hot spots along the



**HARD AND FAST** Above, Irvine and crew at the Ferrari racetrack in Mugello, Italy. Left, 'they adore Eddie and think he is very good-looking'

**I GET SENT PHOTOS, GIVEN NUMBERS FROM GIRLS ALL OVER THE WORLD. IT'S THE QUALITY YOU HAVE TO GO AFTER. IT'S EASY TO GET A FORD FIESTA!**

way (his nickname for the vessel is *Babe Magnet*). He has a selection of cars (including a Ferrari 550 Maranello and 280 GTO), a nine-seater Falcon jet (he got rid of the helicopter), and currently a grand prix contract worth around £2.5 million a year. Sponsorship deals and stock market investments must push his annual income to nearer £4 million. Oh, and he drives a red Ferrari Formula One car.

**"Do you ever stop and think...?"**

"No. I don't know what you were going to ask, but the answer's 'no'."

I am interviewing Eddie Irvine during a lunch break at Mugello. "Well, I was going to ask if you ever think that you've got every man and boy's dream – the money, the girls, the toys, the fame, and [this is mid-August] the lead in the Formula One World Championships in a Ferrari?"

"No."

"...That you're living our fantasy."

"I think he's going to give me a wank in a second." Irvine laughs out loud.

**In the increasingly corporate and political world of Formula One, Eddie Irvine is a throwback to the sex-driven playboy drivers of yesteryear. He embodies the spirit of roguish characters such as Gerhard Berger, Graham Hill, and especially legendary *bon vivant* James Hunt, the man, lest we forget, who used to wear a badge on his jump suit that read: "Happiness is a tight pussy."**

While it's true that he may have calmed down somewhat over recent months – according to one of his closest motor racing friends, Ian Phillips, commercial director

of the Jordan team, he is currently "seriously loved-up" by 20-year-old Dutch model Anouk Voorveld (information correct at time of going to press) – his prowess with women remains legendary on the Formula One circuit.

Almost everyone connected with the sport seems to have a story about an Irvine sexual conquest, not all of them believable or printable. Phillips, who worked and played closely with Irvine during his two-year tenure at Jordan from 1993-95, tells one story of Irvine spying a pretty grid girl at the German Grand Prix in 1994. "He had pulled her even before he got in the car," says Phillips. "Half an hour after the end of the race, he'd locked himself in our motorhome and was shagging her stupid."

His manager, Enrico Zanarini, a super-smooth, raven-haired 48-year-old Italian who looks 10 years younger, also waxes lyrical about his client's powers of attraction. "Wherever we go, he knows he can pull," he told me at this year's Hungarian Grand Prix. "He can do in one day what a normal guy would do in two months. He can go out in the morning with a French girl, and pull. Then he'll take lunch with a Belgian girl, and pull. In the afternoon he can go out with an American girl for tea, and pull. Then, he'll go for dinner with, I don't know, a South American belly dancer, and pull. And that's not to mention the night."

**Underneath Irvine's braggadocio, of course, lies a racing driver of serious intent and determination. While he may have an image of playing the fool and larking around (he has been known to break off a TV inter-**

view mid-sentence to walk over and introduce himself to a couple of pit girls), and he is prone to chaotic personal disorganisation, bad timekeeping, and losing things (his helicopter, for example), when it comes to money matters and his grand prix career he seems to have everything very much under control.

"He's pretty serious underneath that playboy exterior," says Jackie Stewart, whose Stewart Grand Prix team was bought by Ford for £55 million in June. Irvine has signed to the team in its rebranded racing green Jaguar form for next season, in a three-year deal reported to be worth at least £5.5 million a year. "His main strength as a driver is that he's very ambitious, and hungry to win. You don't get to win three grands prix [as Irvine has this season] unless you're extremely committed physically and mentally."

While he may not be the ideal build for a grand prix driver – he has short legs and has suffered from recurring back problems – one of his greatest qualities is consistency. As I write, so far this season, as well as winning his first grand prix at 1999's debut in Melbourne, he has scored points in every race except San Marino, during which he retired

**MY DAD GOT ME INTO RACING. WE WENT FOR A BIT OF A GIGGLE. I DON'T THINK I EVER THOUGHT IT WOULD LEAD ANYWHERE.**

while in third place because of, according to a Ferrari press release, "a broken engine".

It is a factor that many overlook when they suggest Irvine owes much of his good fortune this year (at one point, in a career high, he led the championship by eight points) to the bad luck of his team mate Michael Schumacher, who broke his right leg in a 100mph crash into a tyre wall at Silverstone, and to the occasional unreliability of the McLaren team and engines.

The fact remains, however, that before Schumacher's accident, Irvine was only six points adrift from the Ferrari number one; he could challenge for the world championship because he was in a position to. In comparison to Irvine's tally after seven races of 26 points, McLaren's David Coulthard had just 12.

"If you actually look at the results over the years, I'm the most consistent driver in the championships," says Irvine, not unsurprisingly, during our chat at Mugello. "In the year before I joined Ferrari I was the only driver who hadn't crashed out of a race. Even last weekend at Hungary wasn't my fault [Irvine appeared to spin off following incessant pressure from Coulthard]. Everyone's jumped on me saying it was driver error, but we've since looked at it and there were problems with the car."

He is also very composed and self-possessed in and out of the car. At Hungary, even though he has spent a few days off in St Tropez (after which he is reported to have complained: "It's hard to relax there, believe me. I was in bed all day and all night"), the pressure is on for him to perform on a circuit he has never liked and in a race he has never completed. There is also a chance, albeit a slim one, that Irvine could deliver Ferrari's first Formula One world championship victory since Jody Scheckter in 1979.

Yet he appears as cool as the red leather designer chairs and Carpigiani ice-cream machine in the motorhome. During the Saturday afternoon after qualifying, he hangs around the Ferrari motorhome chatting with team members and hangers-on, signing autographs, and doing quick interviews with TV



WHAT'S THE FUCKING POINT OF HAVING £50 MILLION IN THE BANK IF YOU LIVE LIKE A PIG AND JUST SIT IN FRONT OF THE TV ALL DAY?

**SORTED FOR SPEED**

Top right, Irvine sets the pace at Mugello.  
Right, a rare moment of inactivity



crews. He is putting on the charm and acting the pro.

“He is very relaxed and it isn’t an act,” says Carlo Tazzioli, Ferrari’s sponsorship director. “He believes in living for the moment. He told me that he’ll start thinking about being World Champion the day after he has secured the title.”

Irvine is also shrewd and streetwise, and a pragmatic player in one of the toughest and most political arenas in modern sport. While many within Formula One questioned his move in 1996 to Ferrari as Schumacher’s number two, pointing to the long legacy of drivers – from Johnny Herbert to Riccardo Patrese, Martin Brundle and Nelson Piquet – who have failed to survive the rigours, pressures and expectations of being the German’s team-mate, Irv the Swerve bided his time, looked and learnt, and cashed the lira.

While, to sporting outsiders, it must appear contrary to all sporting instincts to join a team knowing you’ll be in the inferior position, Irvine knew he was in the best place to improve. Certainly he complained early on that he wasn’t getting enough testing or the best set-ups in the cars. Yet, by successfully pitting himself against the modern era’s most talented driver, he realised he could only progress.

He used his steely resilience (“he’s an Irish fighter,” says Enrico Zanarini) and his intelligence to steer a path, despite occasional fall-outs with the team and offers from elsewhere, that has led him to this summer’s career peak. He could have gone, for example, to Frank Williams’s team at the end of last season for more money, but decided to stay at Ferrari and await his opportunity.

“What most people think about him is that he’s a gobby Irishman, but that’s part of the act,” says Ian Phillips. “Deep down he’s actually the most intelligent of the modern grand prix drivers. He’s not a natural athlete and he’s not the sort of driver, like Michael [Schumacher], with instinctive flair. Eddie is the textbook technical driver. He’s basically planned what he wanted and made it happen.”

**“You have a reputation for speaking your mind, and there are times when your tongue has got you in trouble.”** Irvine and I are continuing our chat at the Autodromo Internazionale Mugello, but this time he is not biting at my bait. “Where does that come from? From your dad, or your family?”

“I don’t know. [Pause.] I don’t go in for all this psychology shit. I just get on and do it. My memory’s not that great and to be a good liar you need to have a hell of a good memory. Being honest makes life easier than trying to manipulate. I do tend to tell the truth, which doesn’t go down well in Formula One.”

“That’s quite admirable though, isn’t it?”

“I think we should get this over and done with.” He stands up and starts to loosen the belt on his jeans.

**Eddie Irvine was born Edmund Irvine in Newtownards,** near Belfast on 10 November 1965. “Eddie” is actually a racing name; Sonia, his elder sister, who is his physiotherapist and personal business manager, calls him “Edmun” or “Ed”, as do his parents. As for the debate surrounding the pronunciation of his surname (“Ir-vine” or Irvin’?), there’s no definitive judgement. He told *Esquire* back in 1996 that “my dad says ‘Irvin’ and my mum says ‘Ir-vine’.” Forever laid-back, he says he doesn’t mind either way.

His father, Edmund senior (or “Big Ed”), ran a scrapyard in the nearby village of Conlig (where his parents still live), repairing and selling cars, and occasionally racing for fun at the local Kirkistown circuit. He was such a motor racing fanatic that he had to be dissuaded from christening his son “Stirling Moss Irvine” – and insisted on taking the family’s annual holiday at the British Grand Prix. “My dad’s brother got him into motor racing, and my dad did the same to me,” says Eddie. “We just went racing for a bit of a giggle and I don’t think I ever thought it would lead anywhere.”

He describes his childhood (other than “still being in the middle of it”) as happy “and working-class with a great will to get out of the working class”. Certainly there seems a restless desire to get on and get out. Dropping out of a business studies course at Bangor Technical College, he decided instead to concentrate on making money from cars and racing. Irvine now profits from the ownership of two taxi firms in Bangor, with a fleet of 60 cabs.

When Eddie was 17, his father bought a Formula Ford 1600, and the course was set. “Once he got in the car that was it,” Edmund senior told *Hello!* in July. “I’ve never seen him so excited about anything. After that he raced, and worked seven days a week in the garage to help pay the expenses of racing.”

In his early twenties, Eddie went to race in England and won the Formula Ford Festival at Brands Hatch in 1987. He worked his way up the ranks of Formula Three and F3000, funding himself by selling cars which his father shipped from Ireland. In 1991, he went to Japan to complete in the highly paid if relatively obscure world of the Japanese F3000 series. Many expressed surprise, but Irvine knew what he was doing: he returned home to a place in the Jordan Formula One team having already made his first million investing in property and the Tokyo stock exchange.

“The first time I took a flight with him, he took out *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *Autosport* – and he read them in that order,” says ITV Formula One reporter Louise Goodman, who had the challenge of being Irvine’s press officer at Jordan. “I thought this is not your usual Formula One driver.”

His Formula One debut in Japan in the final race of the 1993 season was also far from ordinary. Lapped by race leader ➤ 256

Ayrton Senna, Irvine proceeded somewhat cheekily to “unlap” himself by repassing the

three-time world champion. Senna was incensed; after the race he confronted Irvine and landed a left hook. In the first race of the 1994 season, Irvine was held responsible for a four-car pile-up, subsequently being banned for three races. It was an explosive start to a Formula One career.

### “Do you think you’re egotistical?”

“I don’t know that I am.” He turns to the PR woman from Tommy Hilfiger (his clothing sponsors), who is sitting in, along with assorted others, on our interview. “Do you think I am?” She demurs.

“Yeah, I think you are,” I interject.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, he doesn’t want to wank me off any more.”

### It’s sometimes hard to like Eddie

Irvine. Perhaps no journalist is ever going to warm to him; not only has he often repeated that he thinks motor racing correspondents know nothing about his sport, but he has referred to reporters as “low-life”. Interviewing him is a little like boxing a few rounds; he is continually trying to undermine you and catch you off-guard.

He is certainly plain-speaking and opinionated; you suspect that he never thinks he is wrong. Ferrari press director Claudio Berro tells me that while he has taught Irvine to be a little more diplomatic with the media, he still considers his job one of the most difficult in Formula One. Without much encouragement you can get Irvine to stray into diatribes on all manner of subjects – from the benevolent rule of Formula One boss Bernie

Ecclestone (“Bernie is proof that dictatorships can work, to a certain point”), to Ireland (rather confusingly he is a Protestant Ulsterman who believes in a United Ireland, and wears a shamrock on his helmet), to Maggie Thatcher (“I am a fan because she broke the unions, which needed to happen”). Even his walk is determined and dogmatic.

Irvine is in many ways a classic working-class Tory-made-good. Although Ian Phillips says he has changed and is now more co-operative and consultative, he looks after number one and trusts no one. In a sport like Formula One this is no doubt wise. But by not suffering fools gladly and occasionally being sharp-tongued, he can seem stubborn and selfish – or, as one grand prix commentator put it, “a bit of a cock”. He laughs a lot (mostly at his own jokes – “Role models? No,” he tells me. “But models, oh, I’ve had fucking loads of them”), and although I’m reliably informed that he has a more sensitive side, he can appear abrasive, crude, even cruel.

He certainly seems to hold some questionable views of women. At Monza he told me, straight-faced, “women love being treated like pieces of shit – to a certain extent, as long as you’re funny with it.” Repeated in the national papers, it landed him in a certain amount of hot water – a temperature, you suspect, to which he is accustomed.

At Mugello, again, with little prompting (well, “Do you think you treat women badly?”), he explains: “No, I just don’t spoil them – if they don’t value you, you can be walked on. You’ve got to knock them back a few times. And if a woman lets you just walk on her, you’ll walk on her – then walk away.” It is a brutal view of women and the world.

### “My whole life is organised around

having fun,” Irvine says. “I get in the

morning, dive in the sea, go swimming and jet-skiing all day, then I take my mates out and we go to a club and, you know, we have fun. I live life to the full because you’re a long time dead. What’s the fucking point of having \$50 million in the bank if you live like a pig and just sit in front of the TV all day?”

You get the impression that he likes the lifestyle more than he does the driving, and that the racing gives him a healthy structure and regime that he would not otherwise possess. When I ask Eddie Jordan why the fun-loving Jordan team hasn’t been able to re-sign Irvine, Jordan replies: “Is that not the problem – we’d have *too much* fun.”

Irvine has talked of retiring and taking two years off “to sail around the world for 10 years with two girls, who I would swop for two new ones in every port”. And he sees his pleasure as only increasingly exponentially: “I thought I had a lot of fun at 26, but I had a lot more fun at 30, and I’m having at lot more fun at 33.”

But when, I ask, will it start to become just a little bit sad. Does he fear that he might become the Peter Stringfellow of Formula One? He blanches (at last, a glancing blow), but quickly regains his composure. “Oh, no, no, no,” he says. “Anyway, Peter Stringfellow isn’t sad; he’s having a blast. He’s living his life the way he wants to, and having a ball. I think live and let live.

“But everything’s relative,” he continues, picking up steam. “I’m probably not having any more fun than you – it’s just that you’re low-life [I’m prepared for this, obviously] and your fun is on a lower level. You can have 99 per cent of fun on very little money. But to get to 100 you need to go the whole hog.”

“So you’re saying you operate at 100 per cent, most of the time?”

“I’m probably 98.8,” he says, and laughs. ☺