

KID JENSO



Y The new boy in the BMW-WilliamsF1 team is big on talent but small on experience. In this exclusive, we followed him to the Australian Grand Prix to see if he's got what it takes to go the distance

By Philip Watson

Photographs by Daniel Smith

N You are 20 years old, 12,000 miles away from home, and in 10 minutes' time you will be racing in your first Formula One grand prix. You are sitting in a £2m racing car fitted with a new BMW V10 engine that generates more than 800bhp and 17,000 revs. It can accelerate from 0 to 100mph and back again in less than six seconds. At full stretch and on a light fuel load, you will approach speeds of 190mph.

The track temperature on the starting grid at Melbourne's Albert Park circuit is 40°C and rising.



but it's even hotter inside your racing suit and helmet, despite the black umbrella that shades you from the sharp sunlight. You've been training hard – physically and mentally – for seven weeks for this moment, and feel fitter and more confident than you have ever done in your life. But, inevitably, there are certain bodily impulses it's impossible to control: you feel your pulse quickening, your mouth drying, and the adrenaline kicking in.

In front of you is a mêlée of cars, drivers, mechanics, managers, sponsors, officials, TV crews, grid girls, girlfriends, celebrities and hangers-on. To your left, there are the flags and banners of the F1 fans crowded into grandstands named after the legends of the sport: Juan Manuel Fangio, Alain Prost and, your hero, Michael Schumacher, now a fellow competitor. Before you stepped into the car a few minutes ago, you could feel the exhilaration and expectation of more than 125,000 fans as an almost physical presence.

But you are trying not to feel, or to think. You cannot consider the enormity of the task that faces you. You are trying to concentrate, and to put all doubts behind you.

You know that you are the youngest ever British racing driver, and the fifth youngest in the history of the sport. You've been described as "the next Ayrton Senna" and "the Michael Owen of motorsport", but you know that others have questioned your ability and argued that, because little over two years ago you were driving karts, you're not experienced enough to even be on the grid. Either way, the spotlight has been intense; since you signed to the BMW-WilliamsF1 Team at the end of January, every turn of your wheel and flick of your gelled hair has been pored over by a media and public hungry for a new British sports star.

You're aware, too, that it not only costs your team around £3m to enter you in this one race, and that more than £100 million of sponsorship rides on your debut season, but also that you are driving for one of the most successful teams in motorsport. You know that this is the team with which Damon Hill and Nigel Mansell won their world championships, as did such legendary drivers as Alan Jones and Nelson Piquet.

You know also that WilliamsF1 has a certain bulldog reputation for hiring and firing, and that it is no arena for drivers with fragile egos. While nothing was said, you know that your performance yesterday, when you crashed heavily during only the second lap of your practice session, qualifying 21st out of 22, was not quite what the BMW-WilliamsF1 Team expect. Especially as your gifted, 24-year-old German teammate, Ralf Schumacher, who unavoidably provides a direct comparison, finished 1.6 seconds faster

than you in 11th. And perhaps, finally, somewhere in the back of your mind, you know that when the greatest and most charismatic driver of the modern era, Ayrton Senna, died in a crash at Imola in 1994, he too was driving a Williams car. You could be forgiven for feeling a little nervous.

Perhaps Michael Owen's first England appearance aged 17 comes close, as does Sergio Garcia's place in the Ryder Cup team aged 19 and Jonny Wilkinson's first outings in an England rugby shirt aged 20, but it is hard to recall a sporting debut quite as dramatic as Jenson Button's.

The presentation has certainly helped. With a name that could have been lifted straight out of the pages of *The Beano*, a Hollywood screenplay, or a novel by Martin Amis, Jenson Button was always, after all, going to grab media attention. That he also possesses an accessible, boy-band-type image, a winning sense of humour and a fine line in self-deprecation and a very skilled management and PR team has only added to his fame. You sense Jenson Button had media savvy from an early age.

What seems incontrovertible, however, is that he is a remarkable talent. He is naturally quick. The son of a former rally cross racer, John Button, who finished second in British Championship in 1976, he has extraordinary reflexes and reaction speeds, and an ability to learn a track and its challenges almost on his first outing.

He won his first race in a go-kart aged eight and went on to win all six rounds of the British Cadet Championship at 11. At 15 he was runner-up in the World Karting Championship; and in 1997, aged 17 (the year he failed his driving test), he was the youngest ever winner of the European Super A Championship. "The best two kart racers I have seen," says one of his team owners, Paul Lemmens, "are Ayrton Senna and Jenson Button."

In his first year of car racing, he triumphed in the British Formula Ford title and the prestigious Formula Ford Festival, being named *Autosport's* Young Driver of the Year. And in Formula 3 last year, although he finished only third in the championship, he continued to make a mark.

"I watched Jenson in 1999's big, blue-ribbon Formula 3 Grand Prix in Macau, and I was very, very impressed," says ITV's pits reporter James Allen. "It was the biggest race of his career, his first time at the circuit, and he didn't have a good engine in his car, but he built up his performance in practice, and three or four minutes before the end of qualifying he stuck it on the front row. The special guys in motor racing always do that: when the big question is asked, they always come through with the right answer."

The *Autosport* award led to an F1 try-out with Prost, and further tests with McLaren and Stewart-Ford (now Jaguar). All made him offers. But it was Frank Williams, calling first on Jenson's mobile while he sat in a pub with his mates, who eventually signed him on a "multi-year contract", after a head-to-head shoot-out at the Barcelona circuit with young Brazilian Bruno Junquiera.

While there are precedents, most notably Piquet, Prost and Senna, for drivers making the transition from Formula 3 to Formula One without spending a season in Formula 3000, or as an F1 test driver, and while Button has explained memorably, "If I'm good enough, I'm old enough", in some quarters the WilliamsF1 decision has been greeted with scepticism and scorn.

Some argue there is no substitute for experience and race craft: "I hope Button can handle it," says Mika Salo. "If not, it will be a big mess. He could hurt himself, or someone else." It is an expedient move, borne out of panic and the influence of PR, others suggest: "I don't believe you can go straight from kindergarten to university," argues Jackie Stewart. It is far too early, others say: "I do not believe that young Button should be on the grid for the Australian Grand Prix," writes Martin Brundle in the *Sunday Express*. "It is too early for him, not just by a season but by two or three years."

Even Frank Williams admits to me in Melbourne that the decision was carried by the narrowest of margins, and that he was "badgered into it by lots of well-meaning people, mainly journalists". Did the PR value of signing him count for anything? "No. It did not. We made the decision purely on technical and driver merit. I don't know enough yet – no one does – but Jenson's progress to date has been remarkable. He is exceptionally young, but we think he's exceptionally gifted, and our thinking was that if he was that good at 19 or 20, then he can only get better."

Franz Tost, who is Ralf Schumacher's manager and who has watched Jenson in several tests, agrees. "I would honestly say that, right now, Button is one of the top five drivers in the world. He is a phenomenon."

The week before the Australian Grand Prix, I join Button at Silverstone for his final two days of pre-season testing. The contrast couldn't be more extreme. On the first day, the test is blighted by torrential rain; on the second the northerly wind is so biting that it brings hail and sleet.

The WilliamsF1 garage is also far removed from the sunny atmosphere in Melbourne. At Silverstone it's about the serious business of engineering technology, and about preparing the team's new FW22 car for its

I listen to Britney. No one else really compares

ultimate test: a full-length, competitive grand prix.

Surrounded by metal roll-bar doors, gas canisters, stacks of tyres, a works canteen, and the noxious smells and deafening sounds of a Formula One car being adjusted and refined, the Silverstone garage more resembles what it actually is: a cheap and nasty industrial unit in Northamptonshire. This is Formula One racing at its most unglamorous.

Because of the weather, there is much waiting around, and some frustration. Button missed the previous week's test in Jerez through a back injury sustained in the gym, and had much of his practice time at the Kyalami circuit in South Africa adversely affected by freak storms. Track time is vital not just for him, so he can begin to appreciate the knife-edge skills and fine judgements needed to race a Formula One car at its limit, but also for the BMW-WilliamsF1 Team, so it can make the car reliable and efficient.

Still, when the rain briefly abates and the track begins to dry, Jenson heads out for his first Formula One laps at the home of British motor racing. As he passes the pit wall, however, it is difficult to see him or the car – clouds of thick spray billow out behind him.

What was it like? I ask him, afterwards. "Wet. Very wet," he deadpans. "There are rivers running across the track, which makes it interesting. But I love Silverstone. This is

probably the only circuit I've driven both in a Formula 3 and Formula One car, and I can really tell the difference. It's *so* much faster; the speed is quite staggering."

As he heads off to chat to a couple of mates, his youth instantly strikes me. It is not that he is callow. In fact, he seems remarkably level-headed and self-possessed for his age. But as yet, he doesn't quite look the part. He does not carry himself like an F1 driver; there is no Right Stuff, nor grand prix swagger. He is tall at 1.8m, and has a very slim build, but he doesn't fill out his race suit with any conviction. Perhaps he is yet to develop the muscles he will need to cope with 90 minutes or more of physical Formula One racing. There is a certain lumbering gawkiness to him, and a boyish energy that sees him rarely physically at ease. His dad's nickname for him is "Whirlwind".

Yet, as Jenson is called away to go out again in the new car, his demeanour suddenly changes. Around his crew of mechanics and managers he is understandably respectful and co-operative. But there is something more. It's as if he puts on a carapace of confidence the moment he steps into the car. As if he is *projecting* his talent.

"Yeah, he's lucky," says his father John, who has been his constant companion during these past few months. "Jense can be talking and joking before going out and even when he's just got into the car, but as soon as he leaves the garage, that's it – he's focused and calm and he has total, total belief."

WilliamsF1's experienced race team manager, Dickie Stanford, has also noticed the metamorphosis: "He's very young, but he's equipped himself well in the tests that he's had, getting on the pace straight away and proving that he can handle the equipment and the technical side of the car." However, he adds, "There's an old saying in Formula One: when the flag drops, the bullshit stops."

Almost 40 minutes of the hour-long qualifying session for the Australian Grand Prix have passed and you still haven't put in a lap that will get you a start in the biggest race of your life. You are lying 22nd out of 22 drivers, and in danger of not qualifying.

Going out early in the session, your team quickly discovers that your car has a fuel pressure problem, and you limp back to the pits after just one lap. Perhaps your engine hasn't been helped by your heavy crash in the first practice session of the morning. On only your second lap of the day, you take a corner too tightly, lose traction as you move speedily from kerb to grass, and lose control at almost 160mph. You smash hard into the tyre barrier. "Well, that's the first of many," you say, ruefully, to a race marshal shortly afterwards.

The damage to the car is extensive: it destroys the front and rear suspension on the left hand side, and affects the steering, floor and the front and rear wings. You sustain a blow to the knee that isn't serious, but for a couple of hours you need to apply ice packs to reduce the swelling.

The practice session is red-flagged and stopped for 10 minutes and, by the time your car is returned to the garage, there is no time to repair it for the rest of the practice sessions. You have lost the best part of 90 minutes' invaluable experience on a circuit on which you have never before raced.

While you try to reassure yourself that you are in good company – yesterday Michael Schumacher span off and damaged his Ferrari, and today Rubens Barrichello, Heinz-Harald Frentzen and Giancarlo Fisichella have all left the track – you're reminded that, if you fail this season, Colombian racer Juan Pablo Montoya has already been optioned for the WilliamsF1 team for next year.

And now, a few hours later, with the minutes ticking by, you are sitting in your team's spare car desperately waiting to return to the track. At least you go on to record a time that qualifies you for the race. It is, however, the second slowest of the session.

Spins on the circuit by other drivers cause yellow warning flags to slow you down, so you are called back into the pits for some final modifications. With less than four minutes of qualifying remaining, you go out for your final run. The pressure of the last-minute dash is something you thrive on. Then you see red flags. Up ahead, David Coulthard has spun his McLaren through 180° and slammed backwards into the tyre barriers. The session is over. You will start the race on the back row of the grid.

Back in the team garage you lift yourself out of the car and head straight for the race engineers' office without even removing your helmet. You'll admit later that it is the worst day of your motor racing career. But, for now, you feel numb. This is a new experience; you have never known failure, and never known such disappointment.

The WilliamsF1 team is one of the toughest environments for any Formula One driver, let alone a rookie. With a track record of nine constructors' championships (only Ferrari has as many), seven drivers' titles and over 100 grand prix victories, it is a team that carries high expectations. It is only in the past two seasons, during which it has suffered from uncompetitive engines and the loss of key personnel, that it has fallen back and felt more like a team of the past than the future. But still, Frank Williams has employed some of F1's greatest drivers,




The winning formula Clockwise from left, Jenson Button; this year's Formula One drivers at Melbourne (Button is on the top row, third from left, with Ralph Schumacher); press attention after the Melbourne grand prix; Button takes five in the Silverstone canteen; celebrating at Melbourne; man and machine; Button with his dad, John Button

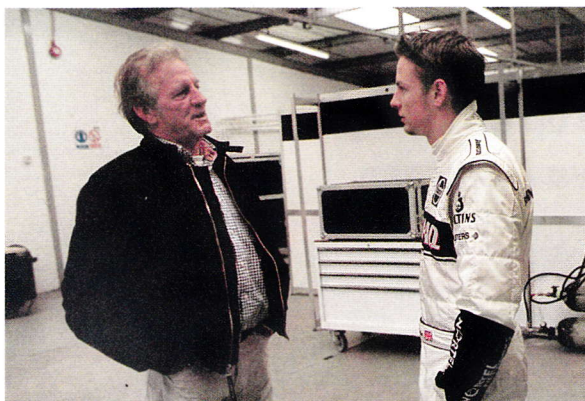


and his team is much respected for its strong work ethic, obsessive determination, and its love of good, honest, head-down racers.

Yet his unsentimental and straightforward approach has also made him a controversial figure and one not always popular with the British public. What largely separates Williams from other team bosses is that he has had no qualms about jetisoning four of his most successful drivers – Piquet, Prost, Mansell and, in 1996, after he had handed him the world championship crown, Damon Hill. It has given Williams a reputation for ruthless and impassive pragmatism.

As an old-fashioned, unostentatious, red-blooded racing team, Williams stands in stark contrast to the rock'n'roll razzmatazz of a team like Jordan, or indeed, to the increasingly marketing-led and digital-television aware arena of modern Formula One. Frank Williams and technical director Patrick Head are primarily motivated by engineering and the cutting-edge design and technology that can make a car go just that little bit quicker.

You detect that the team's new five-year partnership with BMW, which this year returns to Formula One after a break of 13 years, is hugely important, as are their sponsors, which now eschew tobacco manufacturers in favour of such leading hi-tech companies as Compaq, Intel and Nortel Networks. But you also suspect the 



drivers are a rather more dispensable priority, and that part of the philosophy of the team is to challenge the cult of the driver superstar. "For the most part, they're bastards," Frank Williams once said. Certainly, Alex Zanardi, who joined the team last year having twice won the American CART series, parted company with Williams very quickly after he failed to make any mark on Formula One.

"The team does take a fairly tough approach to drivers; I think Frank and Patrick's policy is to keep them realistic," says Jenson's race engineer, Tim Preston. "At WilliamsF1, drivers are regarded more as employees than heroes."

Jenson Button was born in Frome in Somerset and named not after a Seventies' sportscar, as has been widely reported, but after a racing friend of his father's.

"I know my wife has said that we walked out of hospital to the car park with Jense, she saw a car there and asked, 'What's that?', and I replied, 'My favourite sportscar, a Jenson', and she said, 'Well, that's what we'll call him' – but that is a load of bollocks. She named our three girls, who came before Jenson, and so I said I would name the boy. I used to race against a guy in European rally cross named Erling Jensen, and I liked his surname, so I changed the 'e' to an 'o' because I didn't want people to think I had named him after a bloody car."

Jenson was a good-natured if hyperactive child and, after his parents divorced when he was seven and he began to spend weekends with his father, his dad bought him a motorised kart for Christmas. "At first it was a way of keeping him occupied; I had no intention for him to go into motor racing," says Button Sr, who was running the kart-tuning business he still owns today. "Then a couple of members of our local club said that he was quick, so we gave him a try and he won his first race."

John Button cuts an interesting figure when I first spot him at Silverstone. With his slicked back hair, goatee beard (copied, I learn later, from his son), black puffa jacket and black jeans, he looks like a cross between an aging teddy boy and a faded rock star. He's the type of dad you expect to be wearing cowboy boots.

Yet he has a certain charm; he is very close to his son and very supportive. "I've never been over-ambitious on Jenson's behalf, or pushed him too hard to succeed – that would be failing the child," he says. "After he had decided that he wanted to make a career in motor sport, we looked at all of the reasons why drivers don't make it, and a lot of it comes from a father who thinks his child's much better than he really is and sets unrealistic goals. So, after a while, I brought someone else in to manage him, and I was happy to be there in the background."

"Yeah, we are very close," says Jenson,

when I ask him about the relationship. "We share a lot of time together. And we're the same sort of person, so we argue a bit, too. Mostly I think of him not just as the Old Man but as a friend." They share a house in Bicester in Oxfordshire, near to Silverstone and WilliamsF1 HQ, which John describes as very "Men Behaving Badly".

Inevitably, with Jenson competing as far abroad as Japan and America, and spending up to three weeks away, his schooling suffered, and he left after his GCSEs at 16 to concentrate on racing. He is bright, though, articulate and capable. It's simply that, like many racing drivers, his intelligence is vertical and uncomplicated. But when you're risking your life and earning £350,000 a year plus sponsorship deals at the age of 20, of course, it probably doesn't matter.

If there is one thing that Jenson Button does seem to know about it's Britney Spears. She crops up again and again in the cuttings. When I ask what music he listens to, as quick as a flash he replies: "Britney. No one else really compares."

Jenson has a girlfriend, Kimberley Keay, who he's been seeing for the past three years. He is loyal to her, and mentions her quite often, but it's hard not to conclude that the relationship will founder. She visits Jenson on his second day at Silverstone, but they seem uncomfortable with each other, as if neither wants the other to really be there. "I'm bored," she mouths to him, when she fails to get enough attention during a busy day of testing. This is a grand prix girl's most fundamental mistake.

Certainly, as a healthy and relatively normal 20-year-old, he shows an interest in life away from the circuit. As he confessed recently: "The public has this image of clean-living plastic androids in racing suits, but it's just not like that. I go out and get pissed up with my mates like anyone else." When I ask him if he is in motor racing to have a good time, his reply is instant.

"Oh, definitely. Definitely. When I'm away from the circuit I've got my life to lead and I go clubbing and to the cinema and nice restaurants. The female attention is also a bonus, and hopefully more of it will come in the future. We're all human," Jenson says, laughing.

In the meantime, however, you have more immediate concerns. You are so far back on the grid at Melbourne that you almost can't see the lights that indicate the start of the race. You have to rely on the other cars, and hope that none of them hits the throttle too soon.

Yet, despite the pressure, you actually feel calm. Then you think of the start itself, and your greatest fear, you realise, especially after yesterday's mishaps and misdemeanours, is to stall on the grid. So, as the lights go out and the race gets under way, you give the car extra revs, the wheels spin and burn, but you make it away cleanly. You know you must pick off places during this first lap because,

once the race has settled down, overtaking will be difficult.

By the end of the first lap, you are 15th. You need now to keep the car balanced, to settle into the race, smooth out the corners, and keep your lap times consistent.

As cars drop out through spins and engine problems, you move up the field. Half-way, you are 11th and cars are beginning to exit into the pits. On lap 34, Rubens Barrichello re-enters the race behind you, and for three laps you have the fiery red of a Ferrari Formula One car flashing in your wing mirrors.

At one point, with most of the frontrunners having pit-stopped, you are pretty sure that you're up to fourth. You come in and rejoin in seventh. Two laps later, you pass the pit wall and the board reads "P6; YOU ARE IN THE POINTS". You are ecstatic, and feel so positive that you start to believe you can close on Fisichella and Villeneuve ahead of you, that you can catch a world champion – and at one point you are only 0.4 seconds adrift. It's odd: you are beginning to feel more at home in a Formula One car than any other car you have raced in. You are beginning to feel that elevation, that peaceful place, where your body seems to work independently and in tune with the car.

Then, on lap 46, your engine blows. It happens suddenly, and there is nothing for you to do but roll off the circuit and wait to be taken back to the garage, but mostly you don't feel disappointment, you feel elation. Sure, it would have been special to have scored a point in your first grand prix. But you know that you progressed from 21st to sixth, that you could have easily lasted until the end, and that you were lapping at times comparable with your teammate, who goes on to finish the race in third. You know also that, in just over 24 hours, you have gone from the worst day of your motor racing career to the very best.

After the race, you talk with the crowds of reporters and television crews gathered at the back of the team garage. Your hands rest firmly on your hips, and you're aware that the glint of self-assurance is back in your eyes. As your trainer puts a towel around your neck you try to revel in the moment. "I've proved to myself today that I can do the job," you say, firmly. "And I think I've proved a lot of people wrong."

As you and your dad are ushered through to the front of the garage to do a live TV link to the UK, members of your team are slapping each other on the back and giving high fives. The atmosphere is charged with passion and the triumph of a podium position. You're told it's the first time in 30 years that a debut engine has delivered such a result.

After the interview, and away from the celebrations, your father steals a quiet word. "You did it, and I'm amazed, really amazed," he says. "And I didn't think you could surprise me any more." As you hug each other tightly, tears well up in your eyes, and you realise for the first time that you really feel like a Formula One driver. **3**