

AS A GRAND PRIX DRIVER,
MARTIN BRUNDLE WAS A RUNNER-UP.
AS ITV'S FEARLESS LIVE-FROM-THE-GRID INTERVIEWER,
HE'S IN A CLASS OF HIS OWN
INTERVIEW BY PHILIP WATSON
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MOTOR MOUTH



Martin Brundle is striding along a packed grid at the San Marino Grand Prix looking for the most elusive man in Formula One. Wearing headphones and carrying a red-topped microphone, he urges his cameraman Keith to quicken his pace and watch out for their prey. "We call him 'The Bolt' when he's not around - 'Bernie The Bolt'," says Brundle of his target, filling in time while he keenly surveys the track. "But we call him 'Sir' to his face."

Seconds later he has a firm hand on the shoulder of his reluctant interviewee, and he's not letting go. "So what do you think of today's Formula One drivers – no, really," he asks a nervous-looking Bernie Ecclestone, president of the FIA (the sport's governing body) and the man who exerts an almost autocratic influence over the sport. Ecclestone is a rich and powerful presence in F1, but rarely grants interviews. Brundle is forcing him to address a live audience approaching six million.

"Conservative," says a staccato Ecclestone. Brundle presses him. "Out of the car, I mean. We're lacking characters like you. You were a bit wild and mad and outspoken, and drivers are not like that any more." Brundle is unmoved by the false flattery. He is on to his next question. "You're a very rich man, give or take a million. What are you saving for?"

As Ecclestone shuffles his feet and tries to deflect the question, Brundle hits him with his final one-liner. "So it's not reincarnation then, Bernie – or something like that."

BACK-SEAT DRIVER In 1983, below, Brundle was overshadowed in F3 by Ayrton Senna. The same happened nine years later as Schumacher's F1 team-mate, below right

'SENNA AND I HAD INCREDIBLE RACING FIGHTS, HALF ON THE GRASS, HALF ON THE TRACK'



It is a good-natured exchange, and there's obvious mutual respect. But from the expressions flashing across Ecclestone's face, he's clearly not used to such interrogation, especially from a commentator working for a company to which Ecclestone grants the broadcast licence. These are things you do not say to your ultimate boss. It's like a junior cabinet minister taking the rise out of Tony Blair.

Brundle goes on to charm Ecclestone's daughter (in view of a very protective father) and his beautiful Croatian ex-model wife, before handing back to Jim Rosenthal in the ITV studio. "Brave fellow, Martin," says Rosenthal, in almost hushed and reverential tones. "You're a brave fellow down there."

Candid camera

Whether he was in fact mad or bad as a driver is a matter of conjecture, but one thing is for certain: the live pre-race grid walk has put Martin Brundle on the TV sports personality map. First broadcast during the 1997 British Grand Prix, his unscripted stroll along the track has seen Brundle negotiate challenges that would have floored many more experienced broadcasters.

During an interview with Gerhard Berger at last year's Argentinian Grand Prix, Brundle was interrupted by a playful Michael Schumacher, who promptly had his cap swiped off for his troubles. Approaching Eddie Irvine a few minutes later, he was greeted, characteristically, with a dismissive: "What do you want, then?" "I want to ask you some questions on behalf of the British public,"



came Brundle's reflex retort. And while everyone was trying to get a word with Mika Hakkinen before the start of 1998's decisive Grand Prix at Suzuka, it was Brundle who bagged the last-minute interview with the driver who went on to be World Champion.

Throughout these broadcasts – be they with recalcitrant drivers, tight-lipped team bosses, glamorous grid girls, and even with

such celebrities as Liz Hurley and Sylvester Stallone – Brundle has shown admirable composure. He is articulate and authoritative. He is camera-confident and looks like he is enjoying himself. He is candid and talks sense. Part of the fascination may be waiting to see if he dries up, messes up or falls flat on his face, but most viewers seem to find him amiable and engaging. Brundle has shown a sangfroid way beyond his broadcast years.

"I'm comfortable with the camera and microphone because I stared at them long enough when I was a driver," says Brundle, who raced in sports cars and F1 for almost 18 years. "And now I don't owe anybody anything, so I can say what I think when I think it. I don't depend on the TV work to eat and put my kids in clothes, and that gives me an advantage. I can wing it and push my luck."

Brundle is being disingenuous, because many sportsmen over the years have failed, often lamentably, to make the transition from player to pundit. Yet the former F1 driver, and the man who won the 1988 World Sports Car Championship, must now be added to the select group of athletes who are as commanding reporting on their sport as they were playing it.

"Perhaps his greatest quality as a broadcaster is his use of idiomatic English," says James Allen, ITV's pit reporter. He has an ability to put technical issues into the language you hear down the pub, language that everyone can understand," says James Allen, ITV's pit-lane reporter. "He once explained G-force [the extreme gravitational pull exerted on a driver cornering at speed] as 'the force that makes your granny swap seats in the back of a car'. It was absolutely perfect."

Also crucial to Brundle's success has been the unexpected chemistry between him and the grand master of Grand Prix commentary, Murray Walker. Walker has had many co-commentators over the years – most famously, James Hunt – but not all have had the skill or humility to work with, rather than against, his very idiosyncratic talents.

Battle with him for microphone space and a pundit will lose out – the sheer volume (in all senses) of Walker's output is compelling – and he, after all, is the lead commentator. Disrespect or talk over him, as you often felt Hunt was tempted to do, and the viewer will be entertained but confused – the commentary pulls two ways at once. Come on like a clever dick or a petrolhead and the tone will be all wrong – and anyway, Walker has enough Grand Prix trivia up his sleeve to fill out the most delayed of restarts or predictable of races.

"Martin is the best partner I've ever had,"

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF MARTIN BRUNDLE

"He laid two big darkies on that corner" (after Johnny Herbert locked his brakes during the 1997 Spanish GP).

"In the blue corner you've got Goldilocks and in the red corner you've got golden gonads himself" (referring to a

bleach-haired Jacques Villeneuve and a determined Michael Schumacher at the 1997 European GP).

"Ricardo Rosset couldn't drive a nail into a piece of wood" (on the Tyrrell driver's performance at the 1998 Brazilian Grand Prix).

"Obviously if your name's Schumacher, you can talk cobblers" (after Ralf absolved himself from blame following a shunt with Johnny Herbert at the 1997 Italian GP).

"The Germans have got their towels on the front row" (after Michael Schumacher

and Heinz-Harald Frentzen headed the grid at the 1997 San Marino GP).

"A pathetic lap! All over the place – locking wheels left, locking wheels right. Pathetic!" (on Frentzen's efforts in qualifying for the same race).

BRUNDLE FLY

The 180mph crash at the 1996 Australian Grand Prix that Brundle somehow survived unscathed

says Walker. "James Hunt was an outstanding personality, but Martin is a better commentator – a bloke with the driver's point of view at his fingertips, and who can explain it authoritatively and entertainingly. I have something with Martin that I've never had: eye contact. We talk to each other instead of talking to the public through each other, and that communicates a kind of togetherness."

Walker's views are indicative of the way Martin Brundle has made his presence felt in TV commentary. He has gone from being the man who many confused with fellow British driver Mark Blundell, to being the new voice of F1, and now the prime-time presenter of such ITV shows as *Great Escapes* and *Quest for Speed*. Ironically, it has also made him better known than he ever was as a driver.

"I seem to be more highly regarded after two years in TV than I was during 12 years in a Grand Prix car – which makes me very lucky, but in a way doesn't really please me," says Brundle. "It's as if my racing career was an apprenticeship for my TV commentating."

Close, but no cigar

Brundle's motor-racing career is a classic case of unrealised potential. Born into a motoring family – his father was a rally driver, his mother competed in autocross, and the couple ran a used-car business in Norfolk – he sold his first car at the age of eight, built his first racer at 12, and started competing in it soon after. Finding school "very easy" (he went on to get a dozen O-levels and a distinction in business studies), he spent most of his teenage years either in the garage or on the race track.

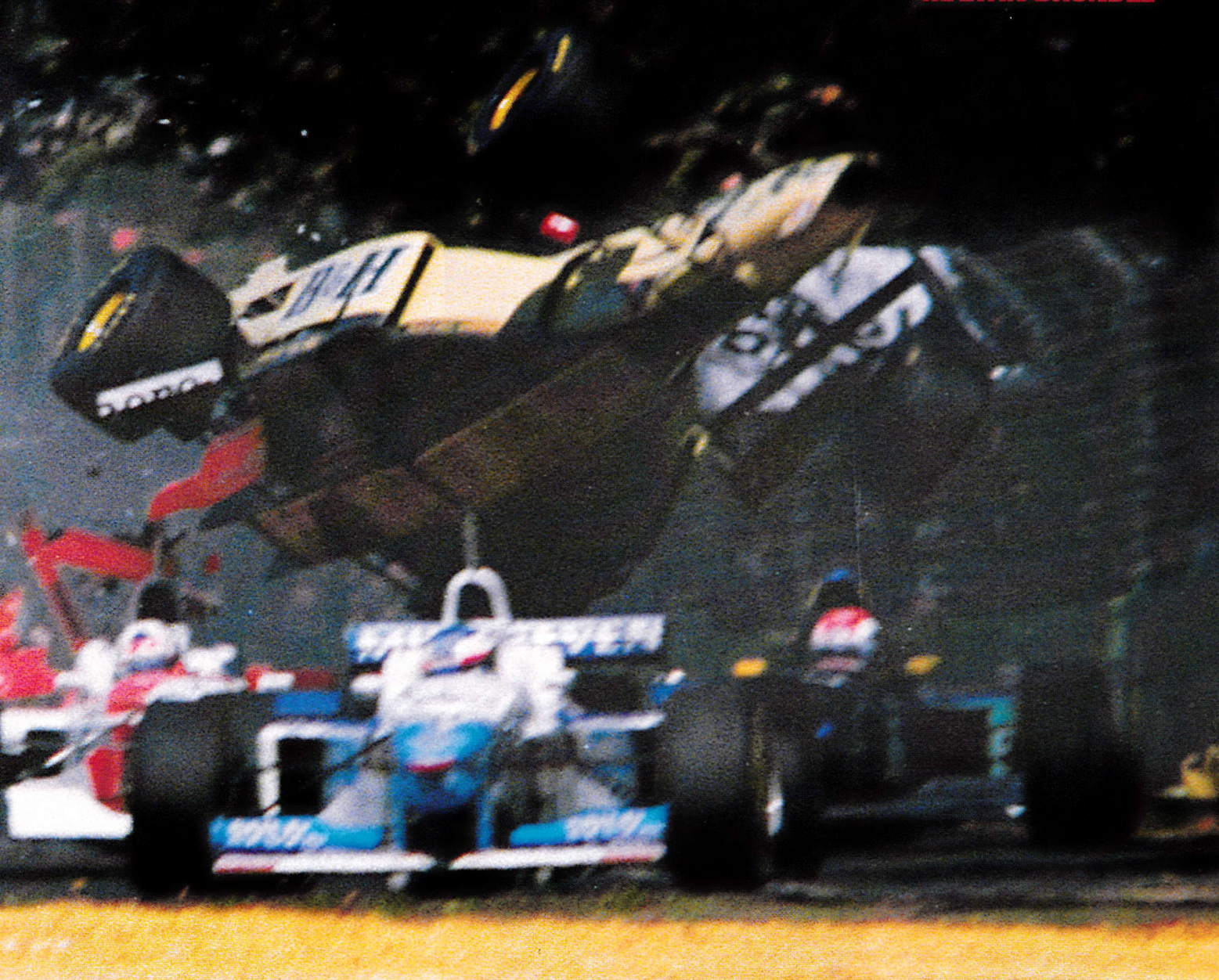
His break came in 1979 when he fired off a letter to Tom Walkinshaw, then running a BMW sports car championship featuring high-fliers such as future F1 champion Alan Jones. "I wrote something like, 'Dear Mr Walkinshaw, I'm going to be a top racing driver. Can I drive one of your BMWs in the Norfolk round of the championship?'" says Brundle. "He must have liked it because he gave me a test, I got the drive and had a barnstorming race, finishing second by a nano."

Brundle was catapulted overnight on to

the international racing circuit, got a full drive with Walkinshaw the next year, and worked his way quickly through the Grand Prix ranks. Aficionados still talk with awe of Brundle's breakthrough 1983 season in Formula Three, in which he duelled with fire, ferocity and much success against a brilliant young gun from Brazil named Ayrton Senna.

"We had the most incredible racing fights and accidents," says Brundle. "We both just went for it, trying impossible passing moves, half on the track and half on the grass, and we were often called to the steward's office for dangerous driving. It's amazing we both came out of that season unscathed."

Although Senna, perhaps the most gifted and ruthless driver of the modern era, went on to clinch the F3 championship from Brundle in the last race of the season, Brundle had made his mark. He was signed by Tyrrell for his debut F1 season. Scoring two points in his first race and getting on the podium in his seventh, finishing inches behind reigning World Champion Nelson Piquet, Brundle



was heralded as one of the most promising F1 talents in years. At the eighth race of the 1984 season in Dallas, however, he had the first of his many Grand Prix misfortunes.

"I went off the track, hit the wall three times and smashed up my feet," explains Brundle. "The hospital wanted to chop off my left foot, but [F1 doctor] Professor Sid Watkins stopped them and got me back to England. It took about a month but they found enough bits and pieces to screw my foot back together."

Out for the season, and further set back by Tyrrell being banned for alleged fuel irregularities, Brundle never seemed to fully recover his form. In the late Eighties he switched teams every season. He stopped being a winner. The likely lad had become the driver least likely to score points. And in 1990 he stepped out of F1 altogether.

Winning Le Mans that year set his career back on the front of the grid. In 1992 he returned to F1 with Benetton, one of that season's top teams, where Tom Walkinshaw was engineering director. The only catch

was that he was again up against a prodigious driving talent: that of his team-mate, 23-year-old Michael Schumacher. He fared badly at first, but improved throughout the season, occasionally beating Schumacher and coming sixth in the championship.

Before the season ended he had two further setbacks. First Benetton dropped Brundle in favour of Riccardo Patrese, then he lost a promised drive with Williams, the team which had won the 1992 championship with Nigel Mansell. At 33, he was at the peak of his powers. He had shown bravery and determination. He was admired by the mechanics for his disciplined approach to driving. He was a great tactician, maybe even a driver's driver. But he failed to get the big break, to be in the right place at the right time.

"I was a rock-solid driver, the sort who scored points, who was good technically, and could get involved at a management level and help run a team," says Brundle now. "But I guess I was never a must-have driver."

He drove out the last four years of his

career with Ligier, McLaren and Jordan, and in 1996 survived an horrific 180mph crash at Melbourne: Brundle's car somersaulted into the air before disintegrating on impact. But his moment had passed; he had become the Nearly Man of Formula One.

"Martin never had a golden-boy image, or some mystique or razzmatazz," says Damon Hill, a close friend. "He was perhaps too close to home – he never moved to Monte Carlo." It is true that Brundle never had any sense of renegade glamour or danger about him. He preferred to stay at home near King's Lynn with his wife Liz, a local girl he met in his teens, and their two children, rather than move to the tax-free playboy world of Monaco. And he never seemed, as Senna and Schumacher repeatedly did, to quite take a Formula One car to the ragged edge, to produce that single extra-fast lap or inspired passing manoeuvre that elevates a driver into the super-league.

"I have always felt invincible in sports cars," says Brundle. "But I failed to deliver what I was capable of behind the wheel of a Formula



PUNDITS: THE MAVERICK TENDENCY

JIMMY HILL

Forget Sky's Andy Gray, Five Live's Alan Green and Capital's Jonathan Pearce: the real rebel in the football commentary studio has always been Jimmy Hill. Often dismissed as a windbag, this is the man who, through his long career as a player, coach, manager, chairman and broadcaster, helped bring in such radical advancements as breaking the

maximum wage, three points for a win and all-seater stadia.

GEOFF BOYCOTT

Ian Botham and Ray Illingworth come close, but for real firebrand punditry few match Bruiser Boycott. Selfish and maligned as a player, and a man never afraid to say what's on his mind, the Yorkshire hitter went on to star as a one-man crusader against

every England side of the past 10 years (particularly under Mike Atherton's captaincy) and to face certain convictions in a French court.

JOHN McENROE

As outspoken off the tennis court as he was during his many successful years on it, the ESPN commentator memorably dismissed Tim Henman, live and while Henman was in John

Inverdale's *On Side* studio, by implying he was too nice, English and middle class to ever be a true winner.

JOHN MCCRIRICK

The maverick's maverick in every sense – sartorial, tonsorial and televisual – Channel 4's racing insider has always been as loud and unorthodox in his views (introducing a tax on bookies, for example) as his multi-coloured suits.

'MY IDEA OF FEAR USED TO BE DRIVING AT 210MPH IN THE POURING RAIN AT HOCKENHEIM'

One car because I used to let the pressure get to me a little bit. Confidence is an intangible thing and I never got on the crest of a wave."

Eddie Irvine believes Brundle was a lot better driver than he ever got credit for. "He was at least as good as [Gerhard] Berger, but Berger earned \$100 million and Brundle did not," says Irvine. "Brundle was never fashionable, and F1 is about fashion. Coming from Norfolk can't help. Whenever you mention Norfolk, turkeys springs to mind."

Wheeler dealing

As with the boy from Romford, Johnny Herbert, there is a very ordinary Englishness about Martin Brundle. He is the kind of man who wears reflective sunglasses (even during our interview), the collar up on his ITV polo shirt, and his Versace jeans with the leather label showing prominently over his belt.

You sense that he still likes to live, albeit vicariously these days, the driver's life. At Grands Prix he is a more likely to be found in the McLaren motor home largeing it in his role as David Coulthard's business manager than hanging around the more down-at-heel TV compound. I asked to see him

during last year's Italian Grand Prix only to be told he was in a meeting with Mick Jagger. And, unlike Murray Walker, who is in the commentary box an hour early to prepare himself, Brundle often turns up (as James Hunt did) just minutes before transmission.

He has the demeanour of a driver because he still races. He likes his speedy boy's toys: he has a helicopter; six cars, including a Ferrari 550 Maranello and a Jaguar XK8 convertible; and Ducati and BMW motorbikes. He has competed in the past two Le Mans races, and has a clause in his ITV contract that allows him to sit out an F1 commentary if it clashes with the 24-hour race in June. If commitments allow, he also races in the Network Q RAC Rally. "I'm doing Le Mans because I need to drive," he said before the 1997 race. "I've been a racing driver for 25 years and I just can't give that up. Fun races wouldn't satisfy me; I am a competitive person."

That competitive spirit has fuelled his work as a commentator. During his first season in 1997, it made him a little resentful; his commentary lacked warmth and nuance. Spurned by Jordan, he was often heard criticising that team's inexperienced youngsters, Ralf Schumacher and Giancarlo Fisichella. He has admitted that he felt railroaded into the ITV job: "I felt they had eased me out of F1 a year or two early."

Since then, however, he has seemed more at ease with himself and has begun to exploit his natural talents. His inside knowledge has often resulted in him predicting mechanical and tactical developments way before they happen. He has built up a gentle way of correcting Walker's occasional inaccuracies ("I think you'll find, Murray..."). And he has learnt to emote, to communicate all the energy,

electricity and emotion of F1. Finally, after selling cars, his driving ability and his benefit to any team, he has begun to sell himself.

"The grid walk is the one thing I've found since I stopped driving that gives me an adrenaline rush," says Brundle. "Like all sports people, I'm hooked on adrenaline. My idea of fear used to be driving at 210mph in the pouring rain at Hockenheim. Now it's when I hear them say, 'Cue Martin on the grid...'"


He's found success by allowing his personality to emerge. Not only has he gone on to front two prime-time TV series, but he is now involved in a dizzying array of business interests. He runs, with his brother, five car dealerships in Norfolk; he is a director of the British Racing Drivers' Club, which owns and controls Silverstone; he writes a column (admittedly ghosted) for the *Express* and *Autosport*; and he does voice-overs for PlayStation F1 games. In 1997 he was a director and occasional test driver for Arrows; this year, in addition to managing Coulthard's affairs, he has done promotional work for McLaren, driving their two-seater F1 car around Silverstone. He is now the natural successor to Murray Walker, ready for the day the 74-year-old finally retires.

"When my dad died a couple of years ago, it set me on a different course," says Brundle. "He was 59, 20 years older than I am, and I think, 'Live for today, boy.' I have a great life, I set my own agenda, and I've never been so successful – I turn down jobs every week, and I hope I don't say that with arrogance. And I get a buzz out of everything I do."

And finally...

And that would be it: Martin Brundle, ex-racing driver made good. Yet there is one last episode. The day after I interview Brundle at Monza, I bump into him by the ITV studio.

"It didn't come across as all negative, did it?" he asks, referring to our chat. "It was moody, but there were some good things too, weren't there?" I reassure him. Brundle is not a man naturally given to self-reflection – he is a doer not a thinker, and bright rather than intelligent – but he was honest and thoughtful about his career and motivations.

It is a revealing exchange nonetheless. Because for all Martin Brundle's front and unflappability, there remain cracks in his seemingly unerring self-confidence. What he doesn't realise is this: those doubts may have hindered him as a driver, but as a broadcaster they may just make him. 

ITV's F1 coverage continues with the Brazilian Grand Prix on 10/11 April