Unless we're very much mistaken, and we're not, Murray Walker is the voice that does the impossible:

Inside the commentary box at the San Marino Grand Prix, Murray Walker is getting ready for action. In a space little bigger than the prefab toilet cubicle it resembles, the voice of Formula One is stretching, bending and limbering up. He rocks back and forth like a weightlifter psyching himself up for an extra five kilos. He shakes out the tension from his shoulders and arms like a 100-metre sprinter about to step into the blocks. He hits his legs and punches the air as if he is a boxer on his way to the ring.

A few minutes later, Walker is jabbing and poking at his television monitors. Commentating standing up – he never, ever sits – he launches into the action by rhythmically counting the sequence of start lights with a clenched fist, banging it down on an invisible desk. And then, electric with excitement, wide-eyed and ecstatic, he explodes into the race.

"And it's go, go, go, go! Villeneuve gets a great start! Schumacher pushes ahead of Frentzen – he's up into second place! Frentzen is tucked up behind Schumacher's red Ferrari trying to get past him desperately! It's Villeneuve, Schumacher senior, Frentzen, Schumacher Ralf, Johnny Herbert…"

As Martin Brundle, his co-commentator, picks up the action later in the lap, Walker takes time to check the circuit map he's taped neatly to the bottom of his screen. A few minutes afterwards, as we ride with the on-board camera in Heinz-Harald Frentzen's Williams, Murray guides us round the Imola racetrack. Crouching down to take the Variante Alta chicane in third at 70mph, he leans left, then right, then left again, and accelerates down the long, fast straight to Rivazza, his right foot pressing hard against the concrete floor.

"Fourth gear, fifth, up into sixth; we're doing over 170 miles an hour here. Oh, and he's inching, inching, inching up on Michael Schumacher! And he's going for it! He's really pushing hard!" Murray Walker is attacking his microphone, bellowing at the screen. It is as if he is possessed by a force greater than himself.

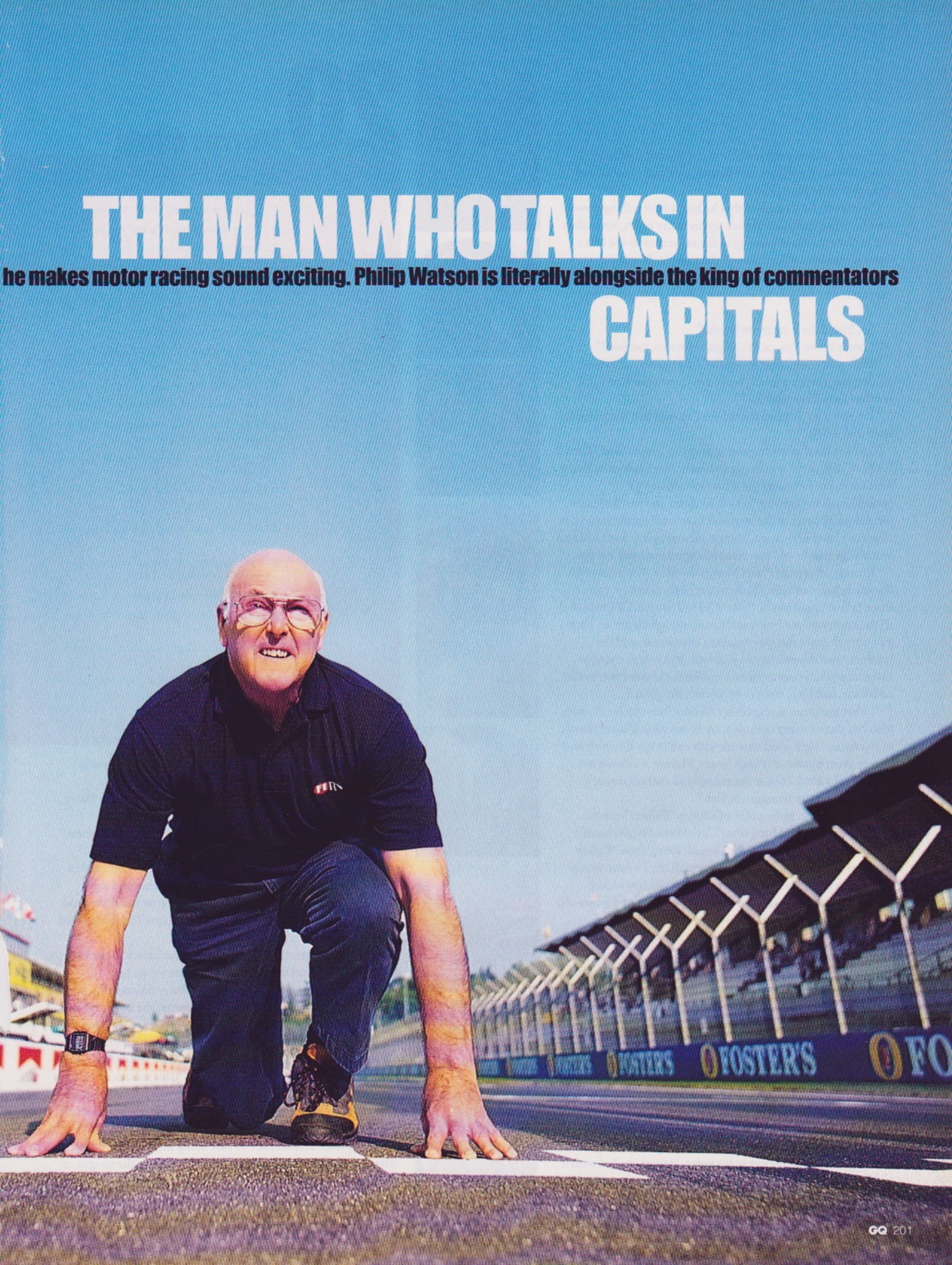
As Schumacher exits the Rivazza corner ahead and gradually pulls away, Walker steps back to allow the cooler, more self-contained Brundle some of the spotlight. But by the time we get to the final lap he is back in full swing. Murray is dancing now, swaying his (replaced) hips from side-to-side. "What! An! Absolutely! Barn! Storming! Finish!" he shouts, the words ejaculating out of his mouth with such force that afterwards he has to wipe his microphone with a handkerchief. "Look how close Schumacher and Frentzen are! Schumacher is eating up the distance between the two cars! But Frentzen is almost home! Frentzen goes left! Frentzen goes right! And Frentzen wins his first grand prix for Williams at Imola!"

Even though it has been raining and is overcast outside, by now the commentary box is hot, fuggy and smells of boys. As well as Murray, Martin Brundle and me, ITV producer Kevin Piper has been in the dark, cramped space. With the door flung open, Brundle heads happily into the afternoon for some serious post-race hospitality, while Piper starts to clear away the

PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM O'SULLIVAN

THE MAN WHO TALKS IN CAPITALS

he makes motor racing sound exciting. Philip Watson is literally alongside the king of commentators



equipment. Murray sits scribbling into his notebook. He is jotting down race figures and statistics furiously before they disappear from his monitors.

Only when he is satisfied that he has got everything down does he begin to relax and pack up his many notes, reminders and fact sheets. He glances up at me as I return to the box a few minutes later with a glass of champagne. It may be exhausting, but Murray Walker has the big, broad smile of someone who has just communed with the thing he loves.

"So, how does it compare to sex?"

"I don't know. You can't compare the two, can you?"

"Well, you could. You're clearly in a heightened state of excitement, there's a lot of thrust and noise and sweat, and you feel incredible passion."

"I suppose so. [Pause] But no sex I've ever had has lasted an hour-and-a-half."

That's as maybe, and no one is about to suggest that Murray Walker OBE, at the tender age of nearly 74, should start living life a little, but he makes the point well. Many TV professionals believe that the job he does, and has done now for almost 50 years, is the toughest in sports commentating. It requires a level of stamina, energy, mental agility and technical knowledge that would put demands upon men half his age.

"It's very, very hard," says Martin Brundle. "Often, as on this track, you can't see anything out of the window, there's three or four monitors in front of you, different TV feeds, and all the computer read-outs and times and information. Then you have the race director speaking in your ear, and the producer and the producer's assistant, and you're trying to listen to your co-commentator and for the countdown to the ad breaks, and I just want to be all over the place."

"I have the greatest respect for Murray," says Jackie Stewart, who has shared many commentary boxes with Walker, mostly in Australia. "He's good to work with and keeps the spirit and energy at extraordinarily high levels. Murray is a character; he's one of a kind. He has the energy and enthusiasm of a teenager – of a pre-teenager, in fact."

This, of course, is the point of Murray Walker: he is the ultimate enthusiast. Using what Clive James once famously described as a "trousers-on-fire" broadcasting style, Walker manages to capture and communicate all the fervour, frenzy and drama of motorsport. He is a 15-year-old boy locked inside a 73-year-old man's body (sometimes with a 15-year-old boy's sense of humour as well – at one point during the weekend, off-mike, he refers to Olivier Panis as "Olivier Penis"). He makes the viewer feel as if he might almost be there. He is the living embodiment of the first fire that turned us on to motor racing or football or music or sex, but that often, over the years, quite naturally wanes just a little.

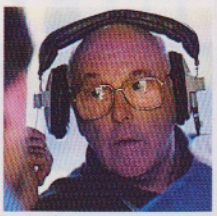
Life, for Murray Walker, has fed and nurtured his enthusiasm. Switched on to motorsport at an early age by his father, his fanaticism has remained at a fever pitch ever since. Murray's love of motorsport is unbridled, unsullied, uncynical and unadulterated. He can respond rationally to the sport, but more importantly he reacts emotionally, too. No one who watched Damon Hill come home first in the last race of the 1996 season to win the world championship could forget the intense pride and emotion in his voice. He was choked with it.

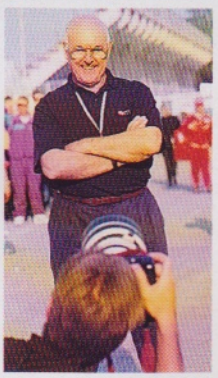
"Part of his skill as a commentator is that he *creates* emotion," says team boss Eddie Jordan. "He makes watching Formula One very human and touching and patriotic. He brings great feeling to a set of pictures he has no control over – bit of an art, I think."

"I get very fired up during a race. It's an all-action situation," says Walker. "I think motorsport is enormously exciting, colourful, spectacular, noisy, dangerous and dramatic, and in my opinion you don't deal with it in monotones and dull phrases – you try and make it live. And because I don't try and work out things to say in advance, and because I'm so involved with it, I sometimes make mistakes."

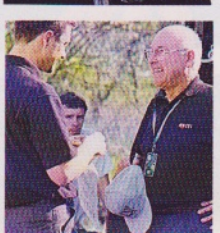
Ah yes, the legendary mistakes. The solecisms, the blunders, even the occasional indiscretions. Because for all his undoubted talents, Muddly Talker (or Flurry Squawker), as he is sometimes called, has been known to utter the odd goof and gaffe. As much as he uses well-worn techniques to slow his delivery down and allow himself thinking time (experienced Walker Watchers recognise his hallmark "And. And. And. And" and "Wait a minute. What's happened?"), his mouth often runs away with him. Perhaps it's the speed and volume of his output that works against him, but only David Coleman can claim a higher position in *Private Eye*'s all-time Colemanballs Top Ten.

"In my own defence, as I've said many times [and he has], if what people call mistakes and what I call slips of the tongue or malapropisms were genuine mistakes caused by a lack of





20 Murray mints

- You can cut the tension with a cricket stump
- Nigel Mansell – the man of the race, the man of the day, the man from the Isle of Man
- Brundle is driving an absolutely pluperfect race
- There's only one second between them. One. That's how long a second is
- And now the boot is on the other Schumacher
- The beak of the Ayrton Senna chicken is pushing its way through the shell
- And now, excuse me while I interrupt myself
- Thackwell really can metaphorically coast home now
- ...into lap 53, the penultimate last lap but one...
- Once again Damon Hill is modest in defeat
- This would have been Senna's third win in a row had he won the two before
- Anything happens in grand prix racing, and it usually does
- This is lap 54 – after that it's lap 55, 56, 57, 58...
- I've just stopped my start watch
- With half the race gone, there is half the race still to go
- Tombay's hopes, which were nil before, are absolutely zero now
- Alain Prost is in a commanding second position
- And now Jacques Laffitte is as close to Surer as Surer is to Laffitte
- You can't see a digital clock because there isn't one
- [During the 1994 German Grand Prix, as Martin Brundle climbs out of his broken McLaren and removes his helmet]... Oh, Brundle's got a bald patch – and he won't be happy about that!

TIM O'SULLIVAN

understanding or knowledge of the sport, I would be very worried. In fact, I wouldn't do it any more. But when things are moving so quickly, there are bound to be times, in the heat of the moment, when I say the wrong thing."

In fact, his attention to detail and his unending thirst for knowledge of the sport is clearly obsessional in its dimensions. He has a very Motson-like tendency towards statistical trainspotting. His commentary box position is plastered with diagrams, charts and mnemonics. He has crib sheets, rule books and notebooks full of grid positions, lap times, points tables, track histories and driver resumés, dating all the way back to 1986. In his kit bag he carries at all times the *Marlboro Grand Prix Guide* (F1's *Wisden*), assorted race reports and press releases, a rain jacket and poncho, white sticking tape, Kleenex, two pairs of glasses, a pencil case, ruler and a Swiss Army knife.

He is an omnipresent force at any race meeting. He scours the paddock, pits and pressrooms for stories, rumours and inside information. He talks to mechanics, engineers, technicians, drivers, team leaders and sponsors. He often walks the track. And because of his very gentlemanly and avuncular demeanour, and his uncritical respect for the sport and its players (he would not, over the years, even be drawn on Nigel Mansell, who apparently calls him "Dad"), everyone likes him and everyone talks to him.

"What's great for me is that I know Murray is never short of words and if I start to dry up he will pick it up," says Brundle.

Pits and pieces: above, despite help from Damon Hill's Arrows team, Murray breaks the golden rule of Formula One racing – don't forget the car. Top, in action sharing the mic with Martin Brundle

Opposite left, the hardest working man in motor racing with, among others, Eddie Shah (top), Damon Hill (third from top), Jackie Stewart (fourth from bottom) and Williams technical director Patrick Head (second from bottom)

"He'd prefer to commentate on motor racing, of course, but there's no doubt he could actually do an exciting 20-minute commentary on a wall of fresh paint drying. He'd compare how the paint dried before, what the paint might do later on, and how the paint had been performing generally up to this point."

This raw enthusiasm for commentating can even spill over into ordinary life. James Allen, ITV's pits reporter, tells a nice story about a breakfast he shared with Walker before this year's Brazilian Grand Prix. "At the end of it, just for a laugh and perhaps to get himself into the mood for the day, he began to commentate on his own meal. 'Does Murray want another slice of toast?' he asked himself in his best grand prix voice. 'Yes, Murray does want another slice of toast' was his heated reply. It was brilliant, brilliant."

If commentating is genetic then Murray Walker had a better start than most. His father, Graham Walker, was a prewar motorcycle champion who later became a renowned BBC commentator. Encouraged to develop an interest in motorcycle racing – a passion that even today he says is greater than that for cars ("Bikes make this lot look like a load of geriatrics," he tells me, during a loose moment at Imola) – he made his commentating debut covering the 1949 British Grand Prix at Silverstone for BBC radio.

He would have followed in the footsteps of his father earlier, but the war intervened. Born in Birmingham, but brought up as

War war not jaw jaw: right, Lieutenant Walker in 1946. Above, with his father (left) at the Rhine in 1945

an only child in a middle-class home in Enfield, Middlesex, he had attended Highgate public school before volunteering for the tank corps. His father, who he openly hero-worships, had been a pupil at the same school and also served in the army. "I wanted to be in tanks or submarines," he says. "I might have wanted to be a fighter pilot if I hadn't worn glasses."

He trained at Sandhurst, before joining the Royal Scots Greys in 1942, a regiment he was with for four-and-a-half years. He saw action in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany before linking up with the Russians at Wismar on the Baltic coast. He was a technical adjutant and then commander of a tank division stationed at the recently liberated Belsen concentration camp. "Murray's years in tanks make us drivers look like a load of wimps," says Damon Hill.

Although the camp had been cleared by the time Walker arrived, it is his experience at Belsen in particular, and the war in general, that some believe fuels his fierce conservatism and patriotism. "The war taught me discipline and I got to meet all kinds of people, but it also gave me a sense of identity in terms of being British and proud of it – very proud of it," he says.

"The memories of the war have stayed with Murray, and I think he has nursed a grievance against Germans ever since," says Mike Doodson, who has shared a commentary box with him since 1978 as stats man and lap counter. "It would never manifest itself in his commentary, but you get the feeling he is less comfortable with Germans than he is with other people."

He had won a business scholarship with Dunlop before volunteering for the tanks and, after demob, rejoined the company to work in its advertising department. He also attempted, unsuccessfully, to make it as a motorcycle racer. He was hired by headache pill makers Aspro eight years later, and in 1959 joined the ad agency that is now known as D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles. It has often been stated that during his time there he wrote the slogans "A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play" and "Trill makes budgies bounce with health" – the truth is that he was an account director not a copywriter.

What is true is that he made a considerable amount of money. An astute businessman and rigorous negotiator to this day, he was offered a 5 per cent share in the agency shortly after he joined, borrowed £30,000 (an equivalent today of almost £400,000), and remained a director for 23 years. When he joined the agency, it had just a single office in London and client billings of £6 million a year. On retiring in 1982 at the age of 59, the company boasted 54 offices in 28 countries and annual billings of £1.5 billion.

Throughout all this time – incredibly – he also maintained his broadcasting career. From 1949 to 1962 he commentated on motorsport, often with his father, inheriting the BBC's chief motorcycling commentary spot after Graham Walker's death in 1962. After that he "picked up [commentating] crumbs from the rich man's table" – that man being Raymond Baxter. When the BBC committed itself, in 1978, to providing live broadcasts of all grands prix, he became a roving Formula One commentator – except, that is, when the budget would not stretch to it. As has been recently revealed, until 1993 he commentated on many grands prix from a small room in BBC Television Centre.

It is this latter period – a time that most famously includes his knockabout commentary box duals with James Hunt – that established Walker undeniably as the 'Voice' of British motorsport. His commentating is now instantly recognisable and is as synonymous with his sport as Peter O'Sullevan is with horse racing, Dan Maskell was with tennis and John Arlott was with cricket.

"Watching Formula One without listening to Murray is like watching a horror movie or a love film without the soundtrack," says David Coulthard. "You need him to set the scene and build the tension. Murray's the music to Formula One."

"He is ingrained on our consciousness," says Damon Hill. "If you look back on the great moments from the past 20 years, it's his words that you remember – they are part of the experience."

Because of this, he is actually very well-known (often better than the drivers themselves) and is very much in demand. In Australia there is an unoffical Murray Walker fan club, which produces T-shirts with "Unless I'm very much mistaken" on the front, and "I am very much mistaken" on the back. He was the instant choice for the voice-over commentary on the best-selling Sony PlayStation *Formula 1* game, a compulsive and sophisticated set-up that includes such Murray classics as "He must be shedding buckets of adrenalin in that car" (all recorded at four levels of intensity) and a wonderful "Gibberish" mode on which he gets it all wrong. He records advertising voice-overs, and stars in that Pizza Hut commercial. And he is booked-up months ahead as an after-dinner speaker (something his father also did), his self-deprecating style and very knowing ability to send himself up proving as infectious as the sport he has undoubtedly helped popularise.

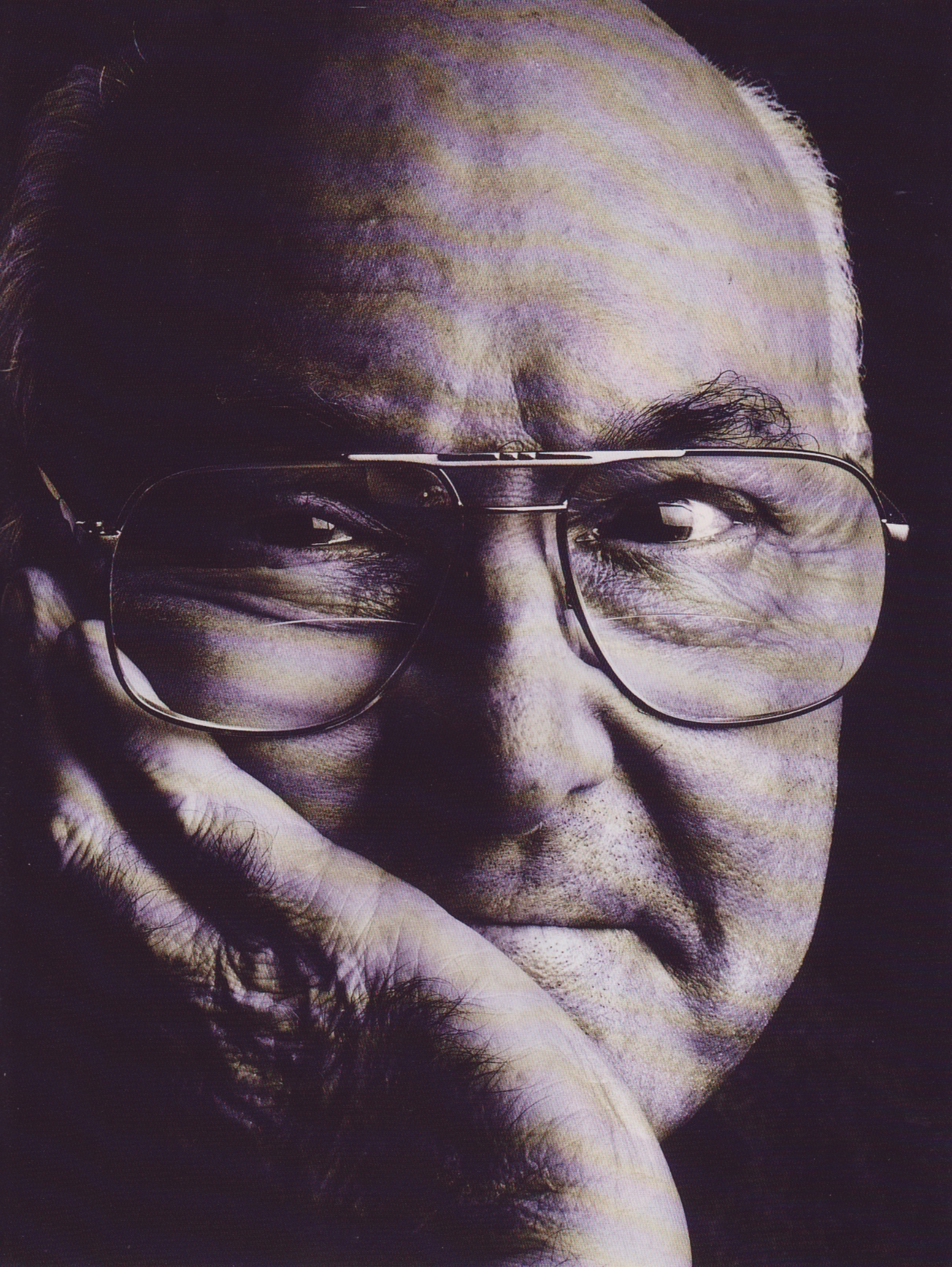
He is, by now, a very unlikely cult figure, a national institution, perhaps even a folk hero. "The interview I did with Murray in Barcelona in '94, my very first as a Formula One driver, had a much greater impact on me than when Frank Williams offered me the drive," says David Coulthard. "I'm being serious. Murray's been my link with Formula One since I was a young boy, and it suddenly struck me halfway through that now he was interviewing me. That was the realisation that finally I was a grand prix driver."

'Watching Formula One without listening to Murray is like watching a movie without the soundtrack'

For all this, there is a controversial theory (yet one gaining currency) that Murray Walker might be starting to lose it. Talk to some people around the paddock, to the sponsors and the money men in particular, and the feeling is that this year Murray has made one mistake too many. For all the fulsome respect and admiration he engenders, there are those who will suggest that too often he has got cars and drivers wrong, too often he has missed important developments, too often has Martin ▶ 278

TIM O'SULLIVAN

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF MURRAY WALKER



 ◀ Brundle had to diplomatically bail him out. In the qualifying session at Imola, for example, he described Ralf Schumacher as "Michael's son".

All recognise that he was essential to the transition of F1 coverage from BBC to ITV (there was even a "Save Our Murray" campaign in the *Daily Mirror*), but once ITV has settled into a broadcasting system and audiences have adapted to the commercial breaks, Walker dissenters think he will be dumped in favour of a younger, sharper, more presentable commentator. ITV strongly deny this, of course, but the rumours persist.

"The two-minute ad breaks would be less of a problem if the commentator were anyone other than Murray Walker," wrote the *Guardian*'s Richard Williams, one of the few observers prepared to go on the record. "...but now we really need a reliable commentator, and Murray's erratic credibility is suddenly a problem once more."

"People ask, 'When are you going to stop?' And I say, 'I don't want to stop because I like doing it'," Walker says, in his own defence, when I put these criticisms to him in a quiet corner of a café at the Imola circuit, early on Sunday race day. "I know it's my imminent problem, because it can't be all that far off now in view of my age, but I will know when to stop before anyone else does... hopefully. And I don't think I'm anywhere near that now. I feel I'm still on top of it.

"But it's a 50-year relationship, isn't it, and if I had to go I wouldn't be upset – I'd be bloody distraught. I suppose I can't actually envisage a life without it because I can't remember a time when my life wasn't bound up in some way with motorsport. It's an appalling admission to make, but I haven't got any outside interests. This is my hobby. This is my passion."

It's true that Murray Walker keeps himself in great shape physically – he goes to a health club near his home in the New Forest twice a week and trains for an hour and a half – and his short, compact, muscly frame looks sturdy enough to survive the sometimes punishing travel and commentating schedule he puts himself through. On the two days prior to this race, for example, rather than resting, he spent a total of 14 hours commentating on Touring Cars for the BBC. Yet, just occasionally – and you see it in the eyes – he looks strained, as if the effort, the required levels of energy and concentration, are getting to him. Then again, it is possible that he is suffering from no more than the effects of the hay fever that so often afflicts people at Imola.

"What keeps him going, what keeps him young, is coming to the races and commentating," says Eddie Jordan. "His hobby is his business – he wants to go to work, he *needs* to go to work. It's harder to stay away."

It could be the realisation of this professional catch-22, of the fact that for the first time in his life his passion could act as a trap and that the end of his long commentating career could be closer than he might think, that makes him a little more reflective towards the end of our chat. I ask him what he feels he has left to do.

"Make sure I go before my wife does..." he replies instantly, before the emotion catches up with him and brings him up short. He pauses, head down, for what seems an eternity. "Sorry. I'm getting emotional now," he says. And perhaps it is because of all this talk of the twilight of his career, of his father's death and his mother's imminent 100th birthday, of the prospect of a life, and with it his 37-year marriage, coming to an end – or simply because he is a warm-hearted, honest, decent sort of bloke – but Murray Walker's eyes are full of tears.

Four hours later, on lap 11 of the San Marino Grand Prix, though, they are full of rapture and amazement. "Oh, and there's been a coming together between Damon Hill and Shinji Nakano, the Japanese driver in the Prost," he says, his voice rising to a familar crescendo. "Hill ploughs through the gravel trap and yes, he's lost his right front wheel! He's out of the race!"

As the ITV director cuts a few minutes later to an interview with a highly agitated Damon in the pits, and Murray takes a quick breather, suddenly there is action on the track. A struggling, sixth-placed Olivier Panis is about to be passed by both Eddie Irvine and Giancarlo Fisichella! He's definitely in trouble! Oh, oh, oh, oh... "Come on, come on, come on," Murray blusters under his breath, his impatience to rejoin the action excruciating to watch. Murray Walker is so beside himself, so hysterical with frustration, that he looks ready to jump up and down on his headphones ■