

# THE CHAMPION AND A CAUSE

*He is already regarded as one of the greatest racing drivers of all time. But Lewis Hamilton covets a more profound legacy: to leave behind a sport whose culture is fundamentally different to the one he first encountered in 2007. Interview by NICK SCOTT.*

Lewis Hamilton's fix-it list, on the evening *The Rake* catches up with him at the Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 team headquarters in Austria, is longer than usual. A few days before our conversation, a rare off day saw the six-time Formula One world champion, competing in the Austrian Grand Prix in Spielberg, Styria, penalised five seconds for a collision with Red Bull's Alex Albon before finishing in fourth place.

"I just can't wait to get back into a car tomorrow — I just want to get going," he says, frustration seeping through the thousand-megawatt smile Hamilton wears even when expressing exasperation to people he's only just met. "Last weekend wasn't good, in terms of the result. Luckily, usually the time between races can be this long period of that uncomfortable feeling about your performance, and you just want to correct things, but the great thing is these races are back-to-back, so... [When you under-perform] you're keen to rectify things because everything just happens so fast, and you can't go back and change anything — all you can do is make sure you're better prepared for what's coming up ahead."

On this occasion, the post-race autopsy — the customary exchanges between drivers and engineers — would have been a protracted affair, characterised by borderline-obsessive scrutiny of the data given off by the cars' 300 sensors. Did things pan out according to pre-race simulations back at Team H.Q. in Brackley, Northamptonshire? Did the new vehicle parts perform as expected? How well was the race strategy implemented, and what can be learned from specific incidents that occurred during the race?

After the Austrian GP, data indicated that both Mercedes cars (Hamilton's and that of Valtteri Bottas, who won the race despite the technical hitches) were suffering from high suspension loads, meaning that they had to stay off the kerbs or





Lewis Hamilton and his Big Pilot's Watch Perpetual Calendar Edition, a 46.5mm limited edition (100 pieces available).

risk a non-finish. In addition, from about half-race distance, the drivers started experiencing gearbox issues, which meant they needed to shift gears at lower revs.

While these compromises would have left him feeling stymied, Hamilton probably enjoyed the remedial exchanges — his insatiable hunger for the gargantuan amount of insightful data F1 generates is well documented, and just one of the factors that make him the most successful British driver in F1 history. Another is his psychological mettle: the karting legend Martin Hines noticed in Hamilton “a fierce will to be first, combined with great feel and an ice-cool brain” when he was just eight years old, and these words, relayed to Hamilton today, prompt a beaming smile and a vigorous nod. “I would definitely say that a lot of the character I have, and the fire I drive with, and a deep will to succeed, was something I had back then,” he says. “Hopefully when you watch my next race you’ll see that I still have that core in me. I think that’s what helped me sustain the performance and have the success I’ve had — that’s never tailed off.”

These mental attributes were galvanised, Hamilton says, by wading through so much adversity to get to the rarefied position in which he now finds himself. “Some of that [mental steel] comes through the struggle, through the adversity you face, and the wish to prove people wrong,” he says. “All these different things that you build up over time. My dad had four jobs, and that makes me realise I can’t squander the opportunity I have — I have to grab it with both hands. Also, I always remain conscious that it’s never a given that I can keep this job — it’s a real privilege to be here and be one of the 20 [F1 drivers]. All of that stuff combined is what often gets me across the line to where I want to be.”

Another key strength, according to many who are closest to him, is his consistency. “He’s got no real weaknesses on any of the tracks,” Bottas has pointed out. “He’s always able to find the performance in whatever the conditions and circumstances.” The British driver Anthony Davidson, meanwhile, points to Hamilton’s swashbuckling race craft. “The thing that impresses me again and again with him is his ability to get very close in combat with other cars and rarely touch them,” he says. “If he does ever get into a position where the two cars touch, nine times out of 10 he’ll be the one who comes out of it best. That’s a key attribute to building championships and winning them.”

Then there’s Hamilton’s almost pathological fearlessness. “I’d definitely say, as well as in the racing space, that’s generally been my character my whole life,” he tells *The Rake*. “I skydive, I’m super-adventurous, and of course my whole life has been taking risks. When it comes to being in the car, fear has never

been an issue for me. I’d like to think that’s a good trait in me, but obviously you have to keep a balance, too, and not get too crazy.”

A sometimes overlooked aspect of Hamilton’s effectiveness behind the wheel is via his ravenous consumption of the data (2,000 statistics are generated each lap, on average) and the resulting intimacy of his relationship with the machines in which he races. He says: “When I was a kid I was always into building things, always taking things apart. My dad was a mechanic, and I wanted to do what he did. I was always taking my bike apart and rebuilding it. As I got older I was a mechanic to my own road car, and when I was karting I’d act as a mechanic when my dad was out marshalling.

“I was always keen, always hands on, and when I got into Formula One it was a much, much higher level, and communicating with these incredibly intelligent engineers

**“What us drivers have in common is pure grit and the feel and connection you have with these machines.”**

— geniuses — learning how to communicate with them, understanding how to create a dialogue where you’re explaining how the car feels, and putting all these different concepts into numbers: that’s

always been a fascination for me, particularly when you’ve been in the background and have seen everything designed and built from scratch at the factory, right from the first moulding.”

It was this adoration for technology and engineering that made Hamilton, when he visited the IWC Schaffhausen headquarters in 2013, aware that one day he’d like to collaborate with the Swiss giants on a timepiece. “They showed me some of the works in the background,” he says. “I’d always been a watch fan, but, as with many things, I didn’t know how they were made, or how much work and R&D had gone into it, so when I saw there were 500 tiny pieces in the back of this watch, all assembled by hand, I was blown away. It wasn’t long before I told them I wanted to design my own watch.”

The result of their collaborative efforts, released late last year, was the Lewis Hamilton Big Pilot’s Watch Perpetual Calendar Edition, a 46.5mm limited edition (100 pieces available) gem that combines a black ceramic case and a Bordeaux-red dial and textile strap with a crown and caseback ring made of 18-carat 5N gold. It’s a piece that “radiates understated luxury,” according to IWC Schaffhausen’s Creative Director, Christian Knoop, and we couldn’t agree more.

Unlike watchmaking, motorsport becomes more complex, technologically, with each passing decade (to give just one example, algorithm-based modelling now assesses variables such as race conditions, tyre wear, track condition, fuel, and how previous races at the venue unfolded in order to advise drivers on an overtaking manoeuvre in real time). Which begs the question, how might Hamilton fare taking on Juan Manuel Fangio at the Nürburgring in



Lewis Hamilton and his Mercedes F1 car dressed in the new black livery.

the late fifties? “What us drivers have in common is pure grit and the feel and connection you have with these machines — something you need to take them beyond the limits of the mind and body,” he says.

“Fangio was incredible with what he achieved, and I’ve naturally tried to imagine how it would be [racing against him], because it was such a different time. I did get the opportunity to drive with Sir Stirling Moss in Monza in one of the old Silver Arrows. We were on the bank, and I didn’t wear a helmet — I just wore a cap because I wanted to feel what it was like [to race then] — and I remember riding alongside Sir Stirling and thinking, Wow, this must have been the view that Fangio and so on would have seen, and that for me felt like a time-travel moment. But I don’t know if I’d want to race in that era. Sir Stirling was saying, ‘If you crash in one of these, you want the car to throw you out onto the track!’ And I was like, ‘What?’ ‘Well, otherwise you’ll burn to death!’ ‘Wow’. The mentality was so different back then. Just crazy.”

Again Hamilton’s luminous smile emerges: “That said, we have to acknowledge the fact that if I went back in time to Fangio’s era, I would not be allowed to race ...”

**‘Free to be myself’**

In June, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the subsequent protests around the world, Hamilton spoke to the press of the “sense of deep pain, anguish and frustration”

experienced in response to the incident, and elaborated on the racial abuse he has received since the age of eight. He talked of other children throwing objects at him during his karting days, and of being taunted by fans wearing blackface at pre-season testing in 2008. “It was only when wearing my helmet that I felt free to be myself,” went one particularly poignant remark.

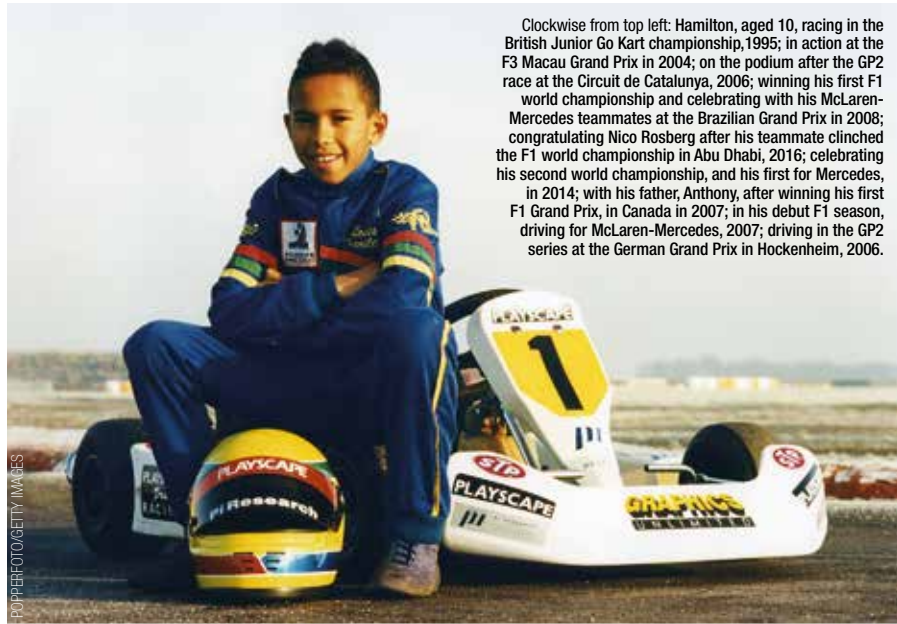
Of this and other statements — such as his referring to Bernie Ecclestone as “ignorant and uneducated” after the former F1 boss stated, inexplicably, that “in lots of cases, black people are more racist than what white people are” — Hamilton says: “That really is who I am: you’ve seen how outspoken I am about things. I don’t really have a filter, and don’t fear the backlash — this is just who I am. Take it or leave it. Some love me and some hate me, but that’s O.K.”

Hence Hamilton is now applying that aforementioned grit, tenacity, fearlessness and combative zeal to making F1 more inclusive. “Since I’ve been in motorsport, there’s been little to no diversity,” he says. “At the end of last year, after the last race in December, I was looking at the photos of all the teams, and I’m like, ‘I can’t believe I’ve been in this sport for 14 years and there has been little to no shift within the sport’. It really boils under my skin.

“Being the first and only black driver [in Formula One], I thought, would help shift things, but unfortunately that hasn’t been the case. It’s something I’ve constantly talked to my team about, to Toto [Wolff, Team Principal and C.E.O. of the

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Clockwise from top left: Hamilton, aged 10, racing in the British Junior Go Kart championship, 1995; in action at the F3 Macau Grand Prix in 2004; on the podium after the GP2 race at the Circuit de Catalunya, 2006; winning his first F1 world championship and celebrating with his McLaren-Mercedes teammates at the Brazilian Grand Prix in 2008; congratulating Nico Rosberg after his teammate clinched the F1 world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016; celebrating his second world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016; celebrating the F1 world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016; celebrating his second world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016; celebrating the F1 world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016; celebrating his second world championship in Abu Dhabi, 2016.



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LAT IMAGES FOR MERCEDES-BENZ/GRAND PRIX

Top to bottom: Hamilton leads Alexander Albon at the Austrian Grand Prix in July this year; and Hamilton passes his team celebrating on the pitwall as he wins the Hungarian GP at the Hungaroring in July.



BRYN LEON/GETTY IMAGES



Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 team] about, and the team has started to try and improve diversity within the organisation, but it always gets to the point where there just aren't enough people from minority groups applying for the jobs."

There is more to Hamilton's efforts for the cause than statements to the press and pre- and post-race gestures. He says: "I recently thought, You can't fix what you don't know, so we decided to create and launch the Hamilton Commission, a research partnership with the Royal Academy of Engineering that will aim to address the under-representation of young black people in U.K. motorsport. Alongside the research, we're assembling a group of highly experienced individuals to collate as much information as we can. Some will be from engineering, education, schools, colleges, universities, as well as BAME community and youth organisations. It's about asking the right questions, getting to the root causes. There are black students in universities, but many don't finish — why is that? That is the sort of question we want to address.

"I don't do anything half-arsed. Fortunately I very rarely fail at anything. And my real goal — and it's not about me — is about this sport looking completely different, being open to a wider and more diverse audience. There are people of colour working on my team and they get calls and social media messages saying, 'You did it — that means I can do it!' Having role models is very important, and I think it starts at the grassroots level. It's about education and parents' understanding as well. We won't know until we get this commission together and the research is finished what the answers are going to be, but what I can tell you at this stage is, I won't stop until things are done right and [inclusiveness] is really implemented into every area of the sport. There's so much to improve."

Hamilton, who grew up with his mother on a housing estate in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, before moving in with his father aged 12, is confident the commission will uncover a correlation between the lack of young black people in U.K. motorsport, the persistent economic inequalities faced by black and minority ethnic people in Britain and elsewhere, and the gargantuan expense of embarking on a motorsport career. "This commission is not about finding the next me," he says, "but hopefully we'll have a little bit more information about what the barriers are, because there are teams that have the driving academies, but ultimately it's so expensive — it's easily twice as expensive as when I was racing in the lower categories. And it's not only a problem for those families in black communities who don't have the funds to support their kids in extracurricular activities. That was something I was able to do — when I finished school I was out karting in the carpark down the road or at the track, just getting a few runs in. So that's

at the core of the problem — people's circumstances. When I was at school I don't remember a single kid saying, 'I want to be an F1 engineer or mechanic'. How can we improve that?"

There are plenty of reasons, Hamilton says, for optimism: he seems focused more on the fact that 14 out of 20 drivers took a knee before that first race in Spielberg than the fact that six didn't; for this season, Mercedes ditched its traditional silver colours for all-black regalia, which Hamilton helped design and that he and Bottas will wear as a statement of support in the fight against racism and discrimination in all forms. "The great thing is, people in Formula One are waking up," he says. "It's important that people hold themselves accountable and say, 'You know what, damn, we've tried but not done enough, and we have to do more'. Hopefully this commission will enable us to say, 'Hey, these are the problems and this is where you can put your funding and help shift the whole business'.

"This problem has been around a long, long time and is still going to be around at the end of our time. I really, really

love kids and think they're the future, and I'm thinking, if we can help start the wheel of change spinning for our kids and for our kids' kids, I want to be a part of that. This sport has given me so much but I'm the only one here in terms of [black] drivers, so how do we make that more open, more accessible for all types of people and more inclusive? That would make me super-proud. Yes, winning championships is a good thing — but changing people's lives and opening people's minds up to wanting to get into this sport..."

#### 'He's got such fire'

Being a serial winner and tackling racism are not the only matters occupying Lewis Hamilton's considerable bandwidth. In response to his half-brother Nicolas's sterling efforts in the British Touring Car championship, in which he races with a specially modified car due to his cerebral palsy, Hamilton is also a champion of inclusiveness in motorsport when it comes to people with disabilities. "Nicolas is a super-inspiration to me," he says. "Going from being told he'd never be able to walk to being able to walk; going from being told that 'racing's not for you' and now he's a racing driver; being told that he'd never play the drums — he now plays the drums... He's got such fire, such willpower, and he goes around the country doing talks for kids, inspiring kids in schools. Obviously he's got such a massive handicap compared to us drivers with able bodies, and he just won't let it stand in his way.

"I love giving him a call and saying, 'How's practice going?' I'm his older brother but he was there, growing up, for all my kart races, for the Formula Four, Three and Two races as well as Formula One, and I love to try and give him the support that I had

***"If we can help start the wheel of change spinning for our kids and our kids' kids, I want to be a part of that."***





from him. I don't know any other disabled drivers in motorsport, and I think the sport needs to do more to be more accessible to people with disabilities, too. It's a massive challenge for him — they have to do so much work on his car. He always tells me he's my biggest fan, and I always tell him the same thing back and that I'm right behind him. So many of us don't know what we're capable of, and when you have people, peers, people you can look up to as role models, that's a really important thing. There will be many disabled individuals now thinking, Jeez, if he can do it then I can do it! And we need more people like that."

Hamilton follows a plant-based diet, and is, in part, an advocate of plant-based diets for their effect on health and wellbeing. "As I've started getting older, every year I think, O.K., how can I better myself, how can I be fitter when doing the same thing each year?" he says. "You have a limit. And once I went plant-based I really started seeing drastic changes in my physicality. I was recovering faster, sleeping better, my gut felt completely different, I felt fresher and didn't feel groggy in the mornings, my skin cleared up. That, with understanding training better and not over-training, means I'm definitely a different machine to what I was 10 years ago. Back then it was all raw ability and no direction or understanding. My understanding of my body now and what I need to do to be the best hugely surpasses what it was in the past. The [difference in] feeling is with my wellbeing, my understanding of when I can push further and when I can't, my understanding of whether I'm exhausted or not."

But Hamilton has also said in the past, in relation to his plant-based diet, "For me, it's also about the environmental impact as well as in many cases the inhumane treatment of animals. The cruelty is horrible and I don't necessarily want to support that." Today he laments the environmental impact of Formula One with similar passion. "We can all talk, but action needs to be taken and you don't need to be perfect to do your part," he says. "Without a doubt it'll never be enough — we need to do more as an industry. What I do feel proud to have been part of is having gone from using V10 engines to using a third of the fuel over time and into the turbo era. We've really been at the forefront of battery technology and hybrid cars. But, yes, we absolutely need to do more. And it's something I spend a lot of time talking to Formula One about. When we have these races with all these fans, the amount of waste that's left behind, no one thinks about [it], and it's mind-blowing. How can we go to these countries and cities and leave a legacy behind, have a positive impact on that city, and not just for a few days but socially — how can we improve a place, rather than leave behind all the waste that we do? With my team the plan is to be carbon neutral

***“With my team the plan is to be carbon neutral by the end of this year. All we can do is hold ourselves accountable.”***

by the end of this year. All we can do is hold ourselves accountable and do more. Hopefully we can encourage other teams to do more."

So is it fair to say that playing a role in reinventing the sport is even more important than his growing list of victories and accolades? "Definitely, definitely," he says. "Winning and competing has been my life, but as I get older I start thinking, While it's an incredible honour and a privilege to be winning championships and competing in such a great team in such a great sport, I don't want to look back on it all one day and think that's all I was. I want to look back and know I was part of a shift. I really want to be proud that I was a part of shifting the perceptions that people have and the thought processes that this industry has had for so long. I don't know if I can achieve that, but that's what I'm trying to do — and that's what I'd be far more proud of, for sure." Right now, he adds — with the world in a kind of existential pit-stop due to the coronavirus pandemic — the iron is hot, and begging to be struck. "Right now we've got the mic," as he puts it.

For Hamilton — who has talked of the "implicit bias" that occurs when people stay silent — inaction on the issues he engages with equates to negative action. And it's not just silence he's up against: the army of disaffected fans and pundits reacting with scorn to his actions — those who insist politics, not racism, be excluded from sport, seemingly unaware of how obviously that stance constitutes cowardly denial — is a large and vocal one. In relation to his words and actions against racism, inevitably the word 'bandwagon' has been used, when in fact it's surely only fair to say that Hamilton has picked a ripe time to use his platform to support a cause about which he has felt strongly, quietly, for most of his life.

Having taken a knee before that (by his standards) poor performance in Austria a few days before our conversation, he followed it a week later with an imperious victory in the Styrian GP, where, on the podium, he performed an even more potent gesture: a raised-fist Black Power salute. His move upset reactionary swathes of the global community who stubbornly interpret the phrase "black lives matter" as being prefixed with the word 'only', when in fact its purport is best served with the suffix 'too'.

It won't have concerned him one iota. He'd made short work, in his preparation and on the track, of fixing the technical issues that had dogged him one week previously, though a far more weightier cause, and a much steeper incline, awaits Hamilton if he is to achieve his ultimate career goal: the eradication of subtle but insidious discrimination within the sport that made him famous. We can be sure he'll invest in the endeavour the same zest, the same winning mentality, that has led him to 153 podium finishes long after he's stopped taking to the track. ■