

THIERRY BOUTSEN

FROM F1 TO THE BOARD ROOM

By Thibaut Parat

In the lobby of Boutsen Aviation, the monoplace stands out proudly on the wall; the Williams-Renault that led Thierry Boutsen to his first victory in Formula 1. It was on the wet asphalt of the Canadian Grand Prix in June 1989. Nostalgia? Not an ounce; “just a wink,” he says. Since many years, the 57-year old Belgian has swapped his jumpsuit for the business suit and a tie, preferring now by far the sky to the burning asphalt. Behind his desk, he weighs every word. Humble and calmly, he traces his second “career”: selling business aircraft .

F.1.M. : *Transition to the sale of aircraft began during your driving career. Could you explain?*

T.B. : My passion has always been automobiles and aviation. When I was in Formula 1, I made a few aircraft transactions. Then, at the end of my career, I advised Heinz-Harald Frentzen, Michael Schumacher, and Keke Rosberg. Thus, a second passion was born. I founded Boutsen Aviation in 1997 when I was riding Endurance races. The company grew and we have sold to date, 298 units in 50 countries: the business planes and helicopters (10%).

F.1.M. : *Getting behind the wheel and managing a company: is it so different in the end?*

T.B. : I had no experience in company management. I am purely self-taught. I embraced my team in a policy similar to that in motor racing: do it right or not at all. It is very complex in aircraft sales because one handles the entire transaction from A to Z: commercial, legal, technical, ... There is no room for error. We are dealing with prestigious aircraft carrying people to the highest standard.

F.1.M. : *Exactly who are your customers?*

T.B. : The greats of this world ... Prince Albert II of Monaco is one of our most loyal customers. There are also multinational companies (Daimler, Coca-Cola ...), private companies and individual customers for their families. Most of the time, the aircraft is closely related to professional use. It makes traveling confidential and is so well equipped with communication tools, that you can work there as well as in your office. A company manager in a plane: time is ever wasted. Another interesting selling point is that transacting a

plane for an Israeli, a Chinese or an Eskimo requires a relatively different approach. One must listen to them, understand their way of working. We have to be on the same wave length.

F.1.M. : *Boutsen Design is an annex of Boutsen Aviation company involved in the interior design and refurbishing. Who handles this sector?*

T.B. : Since 2011, my wife, Daniela, is responsible for the interior design of our aircraft. At the sale of two Airbus Corporate Jet, we realized that no one in the aviation industry could provide all these elements. So we launched it because there was a real demand. When the manufacturer supplies the empty plane, we work with interior designers involved in building the VVIP cabin to the owner's criteria: living room, bedroom, bathroom, shower ... Then we take hold of outfitting the interior: plates, cutlery, glasses, cushions, table and bed linen, soaps. We create five-star spaces, just what the customer demands. We can even take care of staff uniforms, meals...

F.1.M. : *Do you work with craftsmen and brands?*

T.B. : Yes, we are working with 140 suppliers and brands to provide accessories. Baccarat for crystal, Christofle for cutlery, Bernardaud for porcelain, Bulgari, Loro Piana Interiors and Ralph Lauren... to name a few. By soliciting these companies, we ensure our customers of the top players in the mastery of these products. Everything is designed for customer comfort. This is what provides a warm atmosphere. The client's need to feel better than at home is extremely important to us. And, it is often the case.



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F.1.M. : *Over the years, have you witnessed a change in the business tourism market? More demands from clients, perhaps?*

T.B. : Yes. In the early 2000s, there has been some movement toward the high end market. The rich of this world (heads of states, corporations, oligarchs) saw a need to travel in more impressive, powerful and comfortable airplanes. The demand was heard. Manufacturers began to build aircraft capable of crossing the globe nonstop. Then there was the race for equipment ... Today, some planes can carry up to 30 people in a luxury we not even imagined. Some companies do a lot of charters and just want a means of durable transport. But there is also the customer who wants gold everywhere. Just for the decoration on a Airbus type plane, for example, the price could be around 300,000 euros. If they want Swarovski stones, we provide them. The customer is king.

F.1.M. : *You seem truly passionate by this second “life.”*

T.B. : Work for me is something that doesn't exist. I go to the office to live my passion. My team has the same spirit as that of a racing stable. Each aircraft sold is a victory.

