



THE FORMULA 1 that today draws continent-sized audiences is a far cry from the spectacle of the 'Eighties. In this current era of highly professional and corporate-driven celebrities backed by multi-million-dollar budgets and the highest levels of safety, the names Hamilton, Vettel and Rosberg are among the biggest in sport.

The years of the gentleman racer scraping together sponsorship pledges in the hope of securing a race seat are long gone; likewise the sense that anything could happen on track, by drama or catastrophe, has been replaced by whole-race leaders and pit crew technology to measure telemetrics and milliseconds.

Thierry Boutsen, a young racing enthusiast who gathered \$500,000 in tobacco sponsorship to buy a seat in the Arrows team in 1983, would balk at this current bland era of champions "weighing the percentages" and "taking the positives" from a race. During his decade-long career that saw him race for motorsport's biggest teams, he would race by the seat of his pants for glory while stuffing away the constant threat of calamity to the back of his mind.

Born in Belgium in 1957, Boutsen quickly ascended the racing ladder via the feeder formulas of the late 'Seventies and early 'Eighties.

By 1987, having finished his three-year F1 apprenticeship at Arrows with a reputation ▶

[CAPTION]

top: Thierry Boutsen on the victory podium in Budapest, 1990. opposite: in the offices of his jet brokerage business that is anchored in Monaco.



FROM PIT LANES TO PITCH CONTROLS

Thierry Boutsen's grand prix career might have been hampered by bad luck and uncharacteristically bad cars, but he has found success in his next venture thanks to some of his old track friends

By Richard Whitehead



[CAPTION]

► for being fast and unflappable, he was picked up by the Ford works team, Benetton, one of the big names of the sport. While he knew his car wouldn't break many records, it would still provide an opportunity to challenge for podiums.

However, Boutsen found his new car was simply not competitive—a trend that would continue with a subsequent move to Williams in 1989, just two years after Nelson Piquet had won the drivers' title for the constructor. By now, Williams was using a new Renault engine in a car that did not perform well. Boutsen was fired in 1991, two years after he arrived, even though he outperformed his teammate, Riccardo Patrese, by winning three races.

Twenty-one years after retiring after later stints at Ligier and Jordan, his love of speed and the jet-set lifestyle continues. Living in Monaco, motorsport's favourite constituency, where he owns a private jet charter business, he is sanguine about his legacy as one of the best drivers of his era never to have won a world championship.

He dismisses suggestions that, as a specialist in grinding down rivals, he lacked the ruthless streak that might have brought him more F1 wins.

"It may have looked like that because I never had the most competitive car," he says, "but if you look closely at my results, most of the times I would beat my teammates, whoever they were. I just had no opportunity."

This misplaced suggestion may also have come from his introverted personality amid an industry of gregarious types, though he maintains his character would transform whenever he got behind the wheel.

In the Eighties, a racer had to show an alpha personality on track, much as today, but back then drivers would take even greater risks with little protection to keep them safe, making motorsport the domain only of those with enough sheer nerve to shatter any fears.

Boutsen might not have won all the races he had in him, but he managed to continue working a hobby as a profession when he launched a jet brokerage business in 1997, with past F1 stars Keke Rosberg, Mika Häkkinen and Michael Schumacher among his first clients. A keen aviator, he felt he needed a change of scenery after leaving motorsport. Since it opened, his brokerage has sold 288 aircraft in 50 countries.

"I wanted to change my horizon. In motorsport you are in a very small microcosm; you meet the same people the whole time, talk about the same subject, answer continuously the same

questions from journalists and sponsors, and as long as you enjoy driving and accept the physical risk of getting hurt or worse, it is okay.

"But once I reached a certain point I decided to develop my other passion, which was aviation. The transition was easy and I enjoy what I am doing as much as I enjoyed motorsport."

He says that driving and flying have similarities, not least the speed, noise and sometimes danger. But at the same time, there are differences, like situation awareness and anticipation.

"In a plane you have time to react if anything goes wrong; in an F1 car, you have milliseconds to take decisions that could be life-threatening," he says, adding that selling a big aircraft like the Airbus ACJ can be as thrilling winning the most difficult race.

Now he has swapped pit lanes at Spa for pitch controls in a Cessna, Boutsen does not envy those who are on the grid in this latest generation of F1. Whereas he and his peers were free to live and socialise outside the glare of the media, today's drivers are "in golden jails, where every word they say is controlled, and their private life is somewhat limited by contract".

However, he does maintain a close interest in the sport, not least because many of his clients and neighbours are still involved in it, and he remains a big fan of Williams even if their car he drove was not a winner. He is also positive about his career and refuses to dwell on what could have been. "Like in all businesses, and mainly in Motorsport, you have cycles. Teams may have three, four or five very good years, then another comes along to take their place."

The nearly man who was never given the car he deserved, Boutsen might have raced during such lull times, but he doesn't even think anymore about what could have been.

"I'm extremely lucky to have done well in Formula 1. Of course you can always do better when you think back, but when you do it you are limited by certain factors and you should not cry too much." ■

opposite top: Boutsen's jet business was supported heavily by his F1 peers, with stars such as Keke Rosberg, Mika Häkkinen and Michael Schumacher among his first clients.
opposite bottom: The victory lap in 1990, Hungary.

