



THE SKY'S *The Limit*

Words: Richard Whitehead
Pictures: Boutsen Aviation / Getty

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HE IS OFT-REMEMBERED FOR HIS ADRENALINE-INDUCING DUEL WITH AYRTON SENNA FROM BEHIND THE WHEEL OF A WILLIAMS-RENAULT AT THE 1990 HUNGARIAN GRAND PRIX, BUT THESE DAYS, FORMER F1 DRIVER, *THIERRY BOUTSEN*, GETS HIS KICKS CLOSING MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR DEALS. WITH THE REGIONAL MARKET FOR PRIVATE JETS HITTING TRIPLE FIGURES IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, HIS LATEST VENTURE, MONACO-BASED BOUTSEN AVIATION, IS LOOKING TO CATCH THE UPDRAFT OF A LUCRATIVE MARKET TREND HERE IN THE GCC. HE CHATS TO *SLT* ABOUT HIS DAYS BEHIND THE WHEEL, MODERN F1 AND HOW HIS EPONYMOUS BUSINESS IS TAKING FLIGHT.

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There were suggestions that, as a driver, you lacked the ruthless streak that might have taken you to more F1 wins. Now you are in high-level business, have you discovered that hardness that might have been lacking in the past?

It may have looked so because I never had the most competitive car. But if you look closely at my results, most of the time I have beaten my teammates, whoever they were. So, I don't think that I lacked a ruthless streak, I just had no opportunity. This suggestion may also have come from the fact that I have a quiet character, outside the car, but in the car it was not the same!



Thierry Boutsen fends off the attentions of Ayrton Senna to claim a famous victory for Williams-Renault at the Hungarian Grand Prix in 1990.

"IN MY EARLY DAYS IN F1, WE DID NOT HAVE COMPUTERS. THE CAR WAS HAND-DESIGNED BY THE ENGINEER AND THE DRIVER WAS A KEY ELEMENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CAR."

What has your experience of driving for top teams when they were running underperforming cars taught you about acquiring complex machines, like private aircraft?

Driving and flying have some similarities: speed, noise, danger... but also some big divergences, like flight preparation, situation awareness and anticipation. In a plane you have time to react if anything goes wrong, in an F1 car you have milliseconds to make decisions that could be life-threatening.

You drove at a time when the safety levels in cars and around tracks is terrifying to think about. At the same time, the sophistication of technology used nowadays is quite breathtaking and allows incredible performance and handling. What do drivers of a different era think about modern F1? How would today's cars and competitors suit your style of driving?

Like everything in our modern life, technology has taken over human capacities. In my early days in F1, we did not have computers. The car was hand-designed by the engineer and the driver was a key element for the development of the car. I studied mechanical engineering, and I think that the capabilities I had as a result allowed me to have a better dialogue with the engineers. More than once, I progressed an almost un-drivable car to a potential "rostrum-car." Arrows in 1985, Benetton in 1987, Williams FW13 (I hardly qualified in Jerez, then won in Australia 4 races later).

You were known as a keen pilot, and now you own an aviation brokerage. In light of this, and the fact you drove in F1 for a living, could you imagine what it would be like to work a job that is not also your hobby? And why did you not stick to roles in motorsport, as so many others have done?

I must say that I really wanted to change horizons. In motorsport, you are in a very small microcosm, you meet the same people all the time, talk about the same subject, continuously answer the same questions from journalists and sponsors, but as long as you enjoy driving and accept the physical risk of getting hurt - or worse - it is ok. However, once I reached a certain point, I decided to develop my other passion, which is aviation.

The transition was easy and I enjoy what I am doing now as much as I enjoyed motorsport before.

Which career is the more thrilling, and how do they make you feel: sending off Ayrton Senna at Budapest in 1990 or sealing a big aviation deal?

Selling a big aircraft like an Airbus ACJ, for example, is as thrilling as winning the most difficult race!

Do you still sell planes to F1 racers?

I started my aircraft brokerage business in 1997 and my first clients were F1 people: HH Frenzen, Keke Rosberg, Mika Hakkinen, Michael Schumacher, Guy Ligier, etc. Once I reached 10 sales, I decided to expand and started to explore the rest of the world. To date we have sold 288 aircraft ranging from Cessna Citation to Airbus, in 50 different countries.

Critics compare the "technocratic" drivers of today with the swagger and strong personalities of your Eighties and early Nineties? Do you feel the drivers before you would look down on your generation the way the current generation admires your era?

We were free to live and socialise, today's drivers are "in golden jails," every word they say is controlled, their private life is somewhat limited by contract. It is sad...

Which constructor do you support now? Four years after you retired, Williams went on the wane after being one of the most successful constructors for many years. Do you see Williams ever returning to its former glory after so many years without challenging?

Like in all businesses, and mainly in Motorsport, you have cycles. Take Williams, McLaren, Ferrari, even Red Bull; they may have three, maybe four or five, very good years, then another team takes their place. It is just a matter of time before they come back and win again. Of course, I am a big fan of Williams and I hope they will win a few races this year!

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