



F1'S INSIDE LINE

**MARK
HUGHES**

"TOMMY WAS RAW IN THE EXTREME, BUT IN A CAR HE WAS FABULOUS"



McLaren is reaping magnificent reward for its long-term investment in Lewis Hamilton. Under the team's tutelage since he was 13, he's been given the perfect grounding to support his talent. Even more importantly, he's also had the total support of his family.

One day over 25 years ago, McLaren's Ron Dennis sat down for a meeting with a guy who possessed a similarly devastating talent, but who had enjoyed no support structures. A poverty stricken upbringing in rural Ireland with little or no guidance had given him a tough front, with none of the social graces expected of someone in Formula 1.

No-one had taken much notice of what he got up to as a kid, he rarely visited school, he got into some trouble with the law. Racing was his escape from that. He knew exactly how good he was and that was his only self-protection against the world. He was raw in the extreme, but in a car he was fabulous.

At the time of his meeting with Ron, Tommy Byrne (right) was dominating the British Formula 3 season. But the guy running him, Murray Taylor, was fast running out of budget. It was Taylor who had arranged the meeting between Ron and Tommy, the hope being that Dennis would underwrite the cost of the remaining F3 season in exchange for first call on the future services of Byrne.

However, the meeting did not go well. Tommy felt he had let himself down, made a bad impression, felt that Ron had

definitely not warmed to him. He's straightforward and very open, but with the rawness of his upbringing he can be taken the wrong way.

He tells it like he sees it - just as he did back then. He came away wishing he had taken someone with him. Not even a sensational McLaren test later in the year could rescue the relationship. There was nothing on offer at McLaren for Tommy Byrne.

F1 missed out on a great talent - save for a few races he did in the uncompetitive Theodore - and Tommy missed out on the life he'd dreamed of. He surrendered himself to fate and his career thereafter lacked direction, some might say imploded. As was evident when two years later he was lined up on the F3 grid of the Monaco support race in an underfinanced, unfancied car.

Lewis is from a family of genuinely nice people, has enjoyed a stable life at home and a solid education. Father Anthony imbued a serious work ethic in him as he guided him through the formative stages of his racing career. Lewis's naturally gracious personality meshed with his great talent to make him an extremely attractive prospect to McLaren.

It's difficult to think of a bigger contrast than that between the 22-year-old McLaren driver leading the world championship and the 24-year-old guy who sat down to talk about a possible McLaren future all those years ago. Yet in the car they could be the same person.

The most impressive thing about Hamilton's Monaco weekend was arguably his recovery from his Thursday Ste Devote shunt. The chassis was damaged beyond immediate repair and the car had to be rebuilt around the spare tub.

He'd done only a limited amount of running in both Thursday practice sessions - and not done a single flying lap on the

supersoft tyres. Team-mate Fernando Alonso meanwhile had an incident-free and well judged build-up to his weekend and had done extensive running on both tyre types.

Lewis's setback was the sort of thing that traditionally leaves a driver playing catch-up for the rest of the weekend. Yet come Saturday, he just continued where he'd left off before the crash - stunningly fast, totally confident, sliding it beautifully everywhere, even Ste Devote, and even faster than Alonso. The normal rules just don't seem to apply to Lewis.

Qualifying for the '84 Monaco F3 event hadn't gone well for Byrne. He was driving Gary Anderson's desperately underfunded Anson. They had no experience of the European-spec tyres and didn't understand the colour coding.

Tommy was only 16th on the grid. Gary did some digging and found that the construction of the front tyres was much stiffer than he realised and made some suspension adjustments to compensate. Off the dummy grid Byrne dropped the clutch and first gear broke. He got away in second but realised he was going to be slow off the line and in the wrong gear every lap for the Loews hairpin.

He adapted his start technique to put least strain on the weak gearbox, chugged away in second and lost some places. "He came by on the first lap in 22nd," recalls Anderson, "and I was going to just bring him in to save mileage on the car for another day. But then he started passing people. Two, three, four cars a lap - despite having no first gear for the hairpin.

"He was going at an incredible rate, doing most of his passing into Mirabeau. He ended up fourth and if the race had gone on a few laps longer I've no doubt in my mind that he would have won it. He was a fantastic little driver, he

could adapt to anything and you knew that if you made the car quicker he would always instantly find that time."

The normal rules just didn't seem to apply to Tommy either, and Monaco had provided a perfect stage on which to demonstrate this - not that many were watching by then.

Some motor racing stories have fairytale endings and Lewis Hamilton's is one. Tommy Byrne's was not. Monaco and its unique challenges provided each of them with the stage to demonstrate their level and even though fourth in an F3 race may not seem to equate with second in the grand prix, that's just a perception.

Their level was very similar and it's a level very few ever reach. But how that translates depends on your circumstances - and the supporting cards that life has dealt you. Lewis and Tommy, from different decades and diametrically opposed upbringings, aren't as different as you'd think.

Lewis Hamilton's straight talking after being denied the chance to go for victory on Sunday probably made Ron Dennis every bit as uncomfortable as Tommy Byrne's had all those years ago.