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AUSSIE Grit

Aussie racing legend

Mark Webber has swapped the glitz and glamour of Formula 1 for the earthy GT racing of the World Endurance Championships – and is loving every minute. He talks to National Collision Repairer about chapter two of his career and his life in F1.



Mark Webber is loving life outside the goldfish bowl of Formula 1. After 11 years of thrilling wins, devastating near misses, life-threatening crashes and off-track soap opera in the glitziest racing industry of all, the track star is enjoying the relative tranquillity of what he calls 'chapter two' of his racing career as the prize attraction at the World Endurance Championships.

Webber has been stationed there since he called time on his F1 adventure in 2013 with a record of nine wins and 42 podiums from his 215 races for Minardi, Jaguar, Williams and Red Bull. On three separate occasions he finished third in the driver's championship – agonisingly losing out on the title in 2010 to arch rival and Red Bull team mate Sebastian Vettel, having lead going into the last race of the year at Abu Dhabi.

But the longer distance GT events are giving the man from Queanbeyan, New South Wales a new lease of life at 39-years-old. Driving for Porsche, Webber says, with his usual enthusiasm, that "the racing is great", but what he is enjoying even more than life on the track is the community spirit of the car enthusiasts who both participate and spectate.

"I'm over here in Virginia right now," he tells National Collision Repairer down the line from the USA, "and it's such a global brand that even here I am meeting some really special collectors, people with a real passion for cars and racing. There's no dark horses, no smoke and mirrors; it's just special people with a genuine passion for this beautiful hobby that they have."

This feeling is a marked difference from the things Webber experienced in the past. "You don't come across that in F1.



But you know, in F1 I wanted that, I wanted that thrill, I wanted that window; that was absolutely what I wanted. But now, I am on chapter two of my racing/professional life. And to be working with Porsche on a global brand has been the perfect tonic for me. I've had a bit more time to get to know people who are so passionate about this, more than you do in

F1. In that world, you just drive around on your own planet. Now, I do more listening and hearing about why it is they do what they do, and they love the sport."

If that makes it sound like Webber is thankful to be out of the highly politicised, at times Machiavellian world of F1 and into the less stressful, homely World Endurance, then that's precisely because he is. Not that he is knocking F1, as such – he says that when you're in the environment of F1, you have to accept that the sense of heightened theatre is the reality.

"That's Formula One. That's all part of the drama. It's always been like that and it always will be like that when you have so much money involved. Drivers are part of that, it's marketed like that, the driver market is like that, with drivers and engines moving around and so on. It's always been like that, for decades and decades, and it always will be."

Webber knows just what it's like to be in the eye of the F1 storm. His battles with Vettel weren't confined to the track – they got personal, with things reaching a nadir when the German defied team orders to win the 2013 Malaysian grand prix ahead of Webber. He dismisses their feud, saying: "Me and Seb get on fine now, everyone is bored about that," and is more interested in looking back at his own success.

"There were loads of milestones along the way," is how Webber himself puts it, though the two he picks out as his favourite relate somehow to his own country. As a proud, straight talking, nice guy Aussie, that won't surprise anyone – after all, Webber gave his recent, excellent and revealing autobiography the title "Aussie Grit" (do you see what he did there?)

His first F1 drive with Minardi, where he came an incredible fifth at the Australian Grand Prix, comes a close second to his first race victory, 132 drives into his F1 career, in Germany in 2009. Not only did it get a personal monkey off his back – "the frustration was building and it was such a relief" – but also a national one.

"It was 28 years since an Australian had won a race. That was also on my shoulders and it was reminding me of what it meant to win at that level." How much did he feel the pressure of the long wait for an Oz F1 victory? "Well, there wasn't a lot I could do about it in terms of how long that was, but the expectation was just you have to do it. It'd been so long, people were like 'why can't he do it, what's so hard about it?' But you know what – there were only two winners before me with Jack (Brabham) and AJ (Alan Jones), so we'd gone 60 years with just two winners. It's friggin' hard!"

Part of the joy of watching Webber race was that he actually made it look so easy. Even when he was in the twilight of his career, he was still competitive – he came second in his last race in Brazil. "I was lucky that I was getting results at the end of my career rather than the start". But he knew his time was up. "Eventually, you slowly just run out of fire. That's inevitable." He signed a deal with Porsche to compete in the World Endurance and bid farewell to the sport with no regrets. "Definitely not. There were a few creeping frustrations and I went out on a good race. If I was on the stock market, which I'm not, I more or less did it perfectly, didn't I?" he laughs.

As alluded to in his book, the main thing Webber questions now, with the benefit of hindsight, is whether or not his



"Aussie battler mentality", as he calls it, was the right fit for the world of F1.

"Having that approach of saying 'I am the best, I am going to win everything, I am the man, every time I get on the track there is no-one else like me': that is one attitude and you can have that, or you might get more out of yourself with

another mentality. Some people arrive thinking that they are absolutely the best; others have doubts. I heard an interview with Roger Federer the other day when he said that he has doubts, which was interesting to hear. Every sportsman and woman at the elite level finds a different way to keep themselves fired up. My way

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was more backs against the wall, come out fighting against the odds, type thing. That's just how I always was. Whether it was right or wrong – well, it probably was the right way because it generally worked for me. I don't know how I would have done things differently."

As one door closes, another opens. While Webber was planning for his debut in the World Endurance, fellow Aussie Daniel Ricciardo took his place at Red Bull. Despite becoming just the fourth Australian to win a grand prix after victory in the 2014 Canadian Grand Prix, the first of three race wins during the season, and a fine third place finish in last year's driver's championship, Ricciardo has endured a difficult 2015. With just one podium to his name, constant car troubles in the Red Bull camp and speculation about a move to Ferrari dogging every race weekend, it has been a year to forget for the 26-year-old from Perth.

But Webber is not concerned about Ricciardo's plight. He says that, with regards to his future, Ricciardo might "have some thinking to do next summer," but is confident he can succeed where Webber himself failed and claim the top prize. "This year has been tough going for him, with the car not performing, but he can get over this and come back even stronger. He's got what it takes to win, there's



no doubt about it. He can do it, with Red Bull or whoever. There's no better man to bring Red Bull back. He's quick and hungry and he's got a big future."

Webber's own future is the World Endurance, where he wants "to continue to raise the profile", another go at the legendary French endurance race 24 Hours of Le Mans – "it's a sight to behold and it was a sight to be involved in" – but not Australia's Bathurst 1000. "I've got no plans to do that," he confirms.

But does he have plans to return to Australia to live, nearly a decade and a half after leaving?

"Not at the moment, mate," he says reluctantly. "Eventually, then yes maybe, but not at the moment. I'm a busy boy!"

"Aussie Grit" by Mark Webber is published by Macmillan Australia and is out now. **NCR**

Editor: This article written by Shaun Curran and commissioned by The National Collision Repairer magazine