



# Out of the ashes

## Niki Lauda in his own words

WITH NIKI LAUDA'S RECENT PASSING AT THE AGE OF 70, FORMULA ONE LOST ONE OF ITS MOST STORIED COMPETITORS – A MAN WHO WAS SURE OF A SPOT IN THE PANTHEON OF MOTORING GREATS EVEN BEFORE THE MIRACULOUS COMEBACK THAT TURNED HIM FROM A CHAMPION INTO A LEGEND.

Many able sportsmen and women have written themselves into the history books with feats of unrivalled prowess and the reward of titles, championships, and gold medals. Niki Lauda would certainly have been considered amongst such celebrated company by virtue of his three World Driver's Championship wins alone. It is a unique thing, then, that the Austrian, who passed away in May at the age of 70, would be widely known for something other than his being the only man in F1 to have won titles with both Ferrari and Mercedes.

That singularly incredible aspect of Lauda's career owes more to the seriousness of his infamous crash at the

Nürburgring in 1976 – and his miraculous, expectation-defying recovery – than it does to his undoubted excellence behind the wheel.

The world of motorsport was in deserved mourning following Lauda's death. But the tributes were infused with a sense that the last 43 years were somewhat of a bonus given, as the man himself was often happy to relay, that "a priest had come to give me the last rites" when he had been pulled from the flaming wreckage of his Ferrari 312T2 with severe burns and lung damage from the toxic fumes that had engulfed him.

"Another 10 seconds and I would have died," he would go on to say, and



*Another day at the office.*

yet six weeks later, having missed just two races of the '76 season, Lauda was back on the grid, with his head so heavily bandaged that Ferrari created him a special helmet to do all they could to ease the discomfort.

"They questioned me – did I want to continue?" he recalled of Ferrari's reaction to his return. "But I always thought, yes, I do. I wanted to see if I could make a comeback. I knew about the risks. I was not surprised to have had an accident. All those years I saw people getting killed right in front of me."

It's difficult to consider Lauda – who lost his right ear, part of his scalp, his eyebrows and even his eyelids – "one of the lucky ones". The fact remains, however, that Lauda was racing at a time when the mere act of stepping into the cockpit of an F1 car was a courageous act, with the chances of a fatality during the era soaring at times to affecting one driver in every ten.

"In those days, it was always a fight to stay alive," Lauda later said. "You had to push to the limit without making any mistakes. I've had lots of positive and negative experiences. I don't really have any fear and I've also learnt from my life experience. I think I was much less charismatic before.

"I don't know the reason I don't have fear in me. I'm very secure and always have been. I was brought up in a well-educated family in Austria and I had a very good and stable personality from a very young age. Then I went through a lot of terrible things, like my accident, which again taught me how to be stronger. I've always been able to learn from my experiences and move forward."

But for all the potential problems, Lauda was under no illusions that the buck stopped with him the minute he set out on the track.

"Formula One is simply about controlling these cars and testing your limits," he said. "This is why people race, to feel the speed, the car and the control. If in my time you pushed too far, you would have killed yourself. You had to balance on that thin line to stay alive. It was the precision and not the danger that interested me. I was more



Lauda with rival and friend James Hunt.



Mercedes' tribute at the Monaco GP.

technical than the other guys. I didn't just want to make it go quicker, I wanted to understand the car so I knew exactly how to make it go quicker. I always knew that the car makes me successful and that the faster the car, the better were my chances of winning."

Perhaps this singlemindedness in terms of competing also goes some way to explaining not only the speed of Lauda's return to the sport after his accident, but also the way in which he coped with the life-altering effects of the fire and fumes.

"I accepted the way I looked at the time," he explained. "I never thought about it, I just kept on going, but my wife fainted when she first

saw me, so I knew it could not have looked good!

"I only had to do surgery to improve my eyesight. Cosmetic surgery is boring and expensive and the only thing it could do is give me another face. I had the eye surgery so that my eyes could function and as long as everything functions, I don't care about it. You have to accept it. You cannot think how you would be until it happens to you. When you are in that situation, you think differently, you think, 'what do I do now, how do I find my own way of handling it?' And when you've found it, it doesn't bother you anymore. You have to have enough personality to overcome this beauty bullshit and find the strength



Arriving at Rush premiere with wife Birgit.

to love yourself the way you are.”

Lauda’s distinctive red cap would go on to be a staple of the paddock for the rest of his life. First it was a marketing tool for the Austrian’s closest sponsors, and later a signal that the non-executive chairman of the Mercedes AMG Petronas team – a man who was key to the negotiations to bring current World Champion Lewis Hamilton to the team – had arrived.

Nevertheless, at the time of the accident, Lauda’s physical transformation served an altogether more superficial purpose as yet another division between the scarred and supposedly strait-laced European and his greatest rival, the golden-haired wild child of Formula One, James Hunt.

“We were friends,” Lauda would go on to say of his closest opponent throughout the seventies. “I knew him before we met at Formula One; we always crossed each other’s paths. He was a very competitive guy and he was very quick. In many ways, we were the same. When I looked into his eyes, I knew exactly what was going on. I had a lot of respect for him on the circuit. You could drive two centimetres from his wheels and he never made a stupid move. He was a very solid good driver.

“I liked his way of living. We all had lots of girlfriends. I was not as bad as James, but we were similar, and I engaged in a little bit of what he did. I was not as strict in my personal



In discussions with Renault’s Alain Prost.

manner as I appear in the movie, although I was more disciplined than he was. I would never drink before a race. Certainly, after it, I had to.”

The on-track battles between Lauda and Hunt saw the pair share the Driver’s Championship between 1975 and 1977. Hunt’s sole win in ’76 came after Lauda’s Nürburgring accident and a final race in Japan where torrential rain left many questioning whether the race would go ahead. As it was, Lauda pulled out on Lap 2: “It was too dangerous to drive,” he said. “I was lucky to have survived that far and I had the choice not to risk my life again.” Hunt finished third and snatched the championship by a single point.

Such were the clear differences between the pair in both style and substance, their rivalry would go on to be immortalised by Ron Howard in the film *Rush*, starring Daniel Bruhl and Chris Hemsworth as Lauda and Hunt respectively. Though Lauda praised his on-screen representation – saying he was “very impressed” with Bruhl’s performance – the film’s release was edged with sadness at the untimely end of Lauda and Hunt’s relationship with the latter’s death of a heart-attack aged just 45.

“In many ways he was my opposite,” Lauda noted then. “It’s different today, but then it was a tougher time. Every race we went out and celebrated our survival – so we had a party. It was a different time.

James was just more extreme, and the movie emphasised this. We never had rivalries over girls.

“With other drivers, I would have a beer after the race and then say goodbye. That was not friendship. With James it was different. James was different. He had a rough time. He was sober and clean for four years and then had a heart attack. He died too early, too young. I wish he’d been here to see the movie. It would have been the best time.”

With Lauda’s passing, there’s no escaping the sense that one of Formula One’s most integral characters has gone, and with him, a chapter of racing history has closed. Necessary developments in driver safety have made Lauda’s accident a thing hopefully never to be repeated, but to the man himself it was a cornerstone of his life and personality, and perhaps a trade-off in some respects to having raced in a near mythological era of motorsport.

“I’ve never worked for money, I’ve never raced for money,” he once said. “You cannot do this for the money. You have to first race and if you are successful money comes. I did things I liked, and if I did it well the money followed: this is the way I’ve gone through my life.”

**Editor: This interview was conducted by Peter Wallace exclusively for the National Collision Repairer.**