



The thrill of the Hunt

THE WILDEST MAN IN THE HISTORY OF FORMULA ONE RACING, JAMES HUNT'S MATINEE IDOL LOOKS AND DEVILISH SWAGGER TURNED HIM INTO ONE OF THE GREATEST SYMBOLS OF MOTORING MACHISMO IN HIS TIME, AND HE DID EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO LIVE UP TO THAT REPUTATION.



James Hunt's roguish, flamboyant ways would be inconceivable in today's era, as drivers stick to pre-programmed platitudes when describing their performances in post-race interviews and are often forced to submit formal apologies after daring to criticise dangerous driving by fellow racers or incomprehensible strategic errors by their teams.

Apart from his Bacchanalian aura, Hunt was also one of the most fearless racers in Formula One. He willed himself to the world title in 1976 by racing all-out in the final race of the season in Tokyo under the worst conditions imaginable. The potential loss of millions in TV revenues from an expected record live audience of 30 million spectators obliged race organisers to go ahead with the event during a massive downpour that should have led to the race being postponed.

The risks were so great that Ferrari pilot Niki Lauda, who suffered severe burns and nearly died in a fiery crash earlier that season at Nürburgring, decided to pull out of the race and return to the pits after

only two laps. To his credit, Lauda refused to allow his team to offer an excuse on his behalf that he had dropped out due to mechanical reasons. "I quit the race because ... my life is worth more than a Formula One title ... I don't mind admitting that."

As it turned out, Hunt, who had started second from the grid, aggressively passed polesitter Mario Andretti to move into first place on lap 1 and remained in the lead for most of the race. Pushing his McLaren M26 to the limit on the rain-soaked track, Hunt managed to survive severe tyre wear and a puncture to finish third and thereby claim the world title from defending champion Lauda by a single point.

It was one of the most exciting closes to any Formula One season and served to crown James Hunt as one of the most charismatic champions and sportsmen in history.

Hunt's life and his epic 1976 battle with Niki Lauda is best known to the casual fan from "Rush", the 2012 film directed by Ron Howard. It was the first feature film about Formula One racing since John Frankenheimer's epic

1965 movie, "Grand Prix". Starring Chris Hemsworth (The Avengers' Thor) as Hunt and Daniel Bruhl (The Fifth Estate, Inglorious Basterds) as Lauda, "Rush" did a reasonable job of adding to the legend of the wild Englishman.

After completing the movie, Howard, who had been accused of sanitising Hunt's life, explained that he had to tone down his treatment of the libidinous Englishman's sexual exploits "because no one would ever believe it!"

Lauda, who died last year, enjoyed a more convivial relationship with Hunt despite the fierce rivalry depicted in the film. Three years before Hunt's death, Lauda met him in London and, to his horror, discovered that his friend looked more like a hobo than a glamorous playboy.

"He was dishevelled, his clothes were dirty, and he met me at this cheap restaurant in London on a bicycle that had no air in its tyres," recalled Lauda.

"James explained that he had no money. He asked me for 300 pounds, and I gave it to him but told him to stop drinking. I looked at him and said, 'James, you're going to kill yourself.' I had to do this a second time and then he got clean."

Lauda would see Hunt shortly before he died and was delighted to see that his friend had turned his life around. Still under contract as BBC co-commentator for Formula One alongside Murray Walker, Hunt "had stopped smoking and drinking, and he was happy".

Sadly, a few days later Hunt was dead. "It's too bad that he didn't go get medical help that night he wasn't feeling well," recalled Lauda. Hunt had called a doctor late one night from his house in Wimbledon but was told to go to sleep and not to worry. "He shouldn't have died."

Lauda later added: "James was a man you never forgot once you knew him. He is one of the very few people who are still alive [in my mind] even though they've been dead for many years. Hunt was a big part of my life - he's still alive for me."

Today's F1 pilots certainly have nothing in common with Hunt and the generation of drivers from the 60s and

70s. They were true gladiators whose chariots were akin to lightly armoured, high velocity, jet-fuelled torpedoes that offered little protection in the event of a crash.

Hunt himself had to drag fellow race car driver Ronnie Peterson out of his burning car when track marshals were too afraid to do so. (Peterson later died in hospital as a result of faulty medical treatment.) Jochen Rindt even won the 1970 F1 championship posthumously after being killed prior to the end of that season.

Whereas Hunt and the F1 drivers of his era entered each race with a 20 percent statistical risk of dying, today's cars offer near-absolute protection against paying the ultimate price. Prior to Frenchman Jules Bianchi's death from a brain injury suffered at the 2014 Japanese Grand Prix, Brazil's Ayrton Senna - generally acknowledged as the greatest F1 driver of all time, and who won the Monaco Grand Prix an astonishing five times in a row, six times overall - was the last man to die in a race.

Said Hunt of driving at the tail end

of an era where an average of four drivers died every F1 season: "There's a lie that all drivers tell themselves: death is something that happens to other people. That's how you find the courage to get in the car in the first place. The closer you are to death, the more alive you feel. But more powerful than fear itself, is the will to win."

In Hunt's day, the individual driver still mattered. Not so much in terms of determining the outcome of the race - usually the best car would win, something which is much truer today - but with respect to defining a sense of the man behind the wheel.

It was only fitting that Hunt made his debut in F1 racing for a team personally financed by Lord Thomas Alexander Fermor-Hesketh, the flashy British aristocrat who identified with Hunt's dashing looks, aggressive driving style and equally decadent lifestyle. And even though Hunt wrecked more than his fair share of cars while driving for Hesketh - so much so that he was given the nickname "Hunt the Shunt" - fellow drivers, including Niki Lauda who had



James Hunt with Niki Lauda - note the body language.



competed against Hunt in the lower Formula series, knew that he was not only “quick” but an intense competitor.

After Hesketh Racing ran out of money after three seasons in F1, Hunt was fortunate to land a ride with the Marlboro McLaren team just prior to the 1975 season when Brazilian driver Emerson Fittipaldi left to start his own Copersucar race team. It was the decisive moment in Hunt’s career. He finally had a competitive car that would enable him to challenge his arch-rival Lauda and the dominance of Ferrari.

Interestingly, Hunt had turned down an offer to race for Lotus, believing that team owner Colin Chapman’s cars were essentially “flying gas bombs” and even too risky for his liking. Indeed, many people in F1 held Chapman liable for World Champion driver Jochen Rindt’s death several years earlier.

Gerald Donaldson, the legendary Canadian motorsport writer who wrote arguably the definitive book on Hunt (*James Hunt: The Biography*), stated that Hunt had a “rage to compete” and was willing to “race more on the limit, and for longer” than almost any other driver of his era.

The 1976 F1 season was essentially a mano-a-mano duel pitting Hunt, piloting a McLaren M23, and Lauda, driving a Ferrari that he had forced notoriously arrogant owner Enzo Ferrari to re-design to his own exacting specifications. In the opening race, the Brazilian Grand Prix, Hunt

won the pole position and looked very fast throughout qualifying. Even though he ultimately crashed out on lap 32 due to a stuck throttle, he had served notice that he would be a serious contender for the title. He and Lauda would trade victories over the course of the season until the latter’s near-fatal crash at Nürburgring that burned the flesh off his forehead, erased his eyebrows, melted most of his right ear, and seared his lungs.

Lauda would spend anxious days in a coma and at one point a priest delivered the last rites to him – but he miraculously survived and returned to race again six weeks later while Hunt scored several victories in his absence. By the final race in Japan, Hunt had reduced Lauda’s lead to a mere three points and the title was there for the taking. However, although some people claim that Lauda’s accident had effectively given the 1976 championship to Hunt by default, it is worth noting that both men, either by injury or mechanical failure, failed to finish five races apiece.

On race day in Tokyo, the rain was so heavy that visibility was less than 100 metres and during the warm-up lap most drivers complained that they could hardly see anything due to the heavy spray that the cars in front of them were channelling into their visors.

Hunt himself would comment after the race was over: “I thought it was pathetic that they made us drive.

Having said that, if there had been two cars out there, the second would have been mine.”

But Hunt and 20 other drivers stayed out on the wet track to race despite the danger. Hunt led for most of the race but on lap 62, while running comfortably in second – he only needed to finish third to win the championship – the rain had stopped and, as a result, the dry track peeled the tread off Hunt’s soft-compound rain tyres. With eight laps remaining, his left front tyre blew, and he had to pit, causing him to sink to sixth.

Furious and desperate, Hunt rejoined the race and drove like a madman, passing the fourth and fifth place cars on a single corner on his way to the third-place finish that would make him world champion. But there was considerable confusion amongst race officials about whether Hunt had possibly finished fourth, which would have made Lauda champion. Finally, the stewards checked their chronometers and it was determined that Hunt had indeed finished third.

It was the most thrilling climax in the history of Formula One racing and earned Hunt his place in the pantheon of world champions. To this day, few individuals personify the risks and rewards of a life lived on those early, lethal days on the track.

This article was written by Jan Janssen exclusively for the National Collision Repairer in Australia.



Hunt in his Marlboro McLaren.