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MASTERS *DEGREE*

In a special series of features, leading up to the Grand Prix Masters of Great Britain at Silverstone on August 13th, autosport.com talks to the driving masters themselves - about the old days, the new series and their love of motor racing. This week: Stefan Johansson on driving for Ferrari and McLaren

By Tim Redmayne
autosport.com's international news editor

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"I honestly don't think there has been one day since I stopped Formula One when I don't think about not winning a Grand Prix. Seriously. Drivers are all proud people. We don't get to that level without having some form of ego and not winning a race bothers me a great deal, it really does."

These days, anybody who had two seasons with Ferrari and a year with McLaren would expect to come out with at least a victory or two.

Sadly, that didn't happen for the likeable Swede, Stefan Johansson.

McLaren were a multi-title winning force in the mid-eighties and despite their barren run championship-wise, Ferrari weren't exactly shabby either.

"It is the perfect example of bad timing, because both teams had a major dip when I joined," Johansson recalls of his seasons in what should have been top machinery.

"I did have the talent to win a race. A lot of guys probably do, you know. But I recognise

my faults and my weakness and my weaknesses were that I wasn't pushing or fending enough for my territory in those teams.

"I was too grateful for the opportunities at the time and I didn't have enough experience in maybe a lower lever team. In a way maybe it was too much too soon. The biggest problem was that I wasn't forceful enough within the teams to push to get what I wanted - I was too nice, I think."

Johansson was on the podium a solid 12 times from his 79 starts but, to him, that doesn't make up for the fact that an outright victory eluded him.

He was a leading Formula Two driver in the early eighties and made his debut with his F2 team, Spirit Honda, at the 1983 British Grand Prix (ignoring his failure to qualify for two races in 1980 with Arrows).

Johansson then had occasional drives with Tyrrell and Toleman the following season as a super sub, and was signed for the latter for the full season in '85 until their dispute over tyres left him without a drive.



Stefan Johansson (McLaren MP4/3 TAG Porsche) finishing in 2nd position with only three wheels left on the car, after a puncture in the 1987 German GP at Hockenheim © LAT

But this left the Swede being in the prime position to join Ferrari in 1985, when the Scuderia fired Rene Arnoux, and accelerate Johansson into the big time.

Yet despite the brace of second places he scored that year, with hindsight, he believes he wasn't ready for that chance so soon.

"I would have signed with them at the time anyway, because I don't think any driver would turn down Ferrari, but at the time I didn't even have a full season of Grand Prix racing under my belt. I was way too wet behind the ears to deal with the politics there.

"In Grand Prix racing you have to deal with lots of stuff, and you have to fend for your territory all the time. I know I lost out in many areas.

"It was a difficult political environment to be in."

His closest opportunity for that elusive win came early in his tenure with Ferrari - only his second race in fact, the 1985 San Marino Grand Prix. Several cars had fuel mileage problems, and Johansson believes that if he too hadn't run out of fuel, he would have taken the chequered flag first.

"I should have won," he insists. "But I ran out of fuel a lap before the end. It was no fault of mine and I actually drove a perfect race.

"I was quickest in the practice session before qualifying and then the floor came lose. We only discovered it after the session and I only qualified in 15th but I knew the car was really quick. I knew I was the quickest car there really.

"In the race I could just peel them off one after the other and work my way out to the front. I was told to keep turning the boost up and go faster because I was well within the margin on the fuel. I should have just cruised it from then, but with one lap to go the

stupid thing runs out.

"There was a crack in the air manifold which was pushing and sucking air in, and the engine was trying to compensate for this and it kept just pouring fuel in into the engine. I used 30 to 40 per cent more fuel than I should have done.

"There are races that were good, of course, and you remember the win or how close you came. But often there were times when the car was perfect and you had a complete technical advantage over everyone else and you are just cruising along and you are not pushing yourself to the limit.

"Then there are other races where you may finish tenth but you know at the end of the day you have done everything you can with the material at the time. You have to savour the moment."

Having been re-signed by Ferrari to support Michele Alboreto's championship push in 1986, he ultimately outperformed him. In fact, he trounced the Italian, often outqualifying him and scoring four podiums to Alboreto's one. It was that year that Johansson scored his a career best of fifth place in the championship.



Stefan Johansson (Ferrari 156/85) in the 1986 Grand Prix of Brazil in Rio © LAT

"It was my best year when I beat Michele. I did what I could," he continues. "I wasn't out-maneuvred, I wasn't an Italian and I didn't really speak much Italian.

"The car wasn't quick - it was just a plain fact - it was not a very quick car and I managed to beat my teammate."

Yet he was replaced by Gerhard Berger the following year and was after another drive. He was offered one at reigning champions McLaren, when Ron Dennis couldn't secure Ayrton Senna's services soon enough. But Johansson knew was always going to be a stop-gap until Senna did come along.

"I drove for Ron in Formula Three before so obviously we knew each other very well. There was a strong possibility of Senna coming on board a year later and the team was right at the top so I knew it would only be for one year. He was trying very hard to get Senna. But I knew there was no better choice out there anyway.

"I ended up 15 points behind Prost in the championship, which was closer than Senna was the following year - from that point of view I did a good job in the circumstances."

But Johansson also looks back at McLaren as a missed opportunity, citing a lack of testing as the reason why he didn't get a fair chance to beat the Frenchman.

"Prost was definitely the team leader. I did a total of 39 laps in testing all year. For whatever reason they normally only brought one car to most of the tests and Prost did most of the testing, to be honest. I don't really want to say much more than that really."

Even now, nearly 20 years on, Johansson is careful about upsetting the Grand Prix fraternity and would rather leave such problems, and any bitterness and blame, in the past.

"I showed up at every Grand Prix and the car was super difficult to drive and it was a very nervous and very twitchy car, so you either step over the mark or you are a little bit behind it.

"Mostly the car was just very snappy. And that didn't really suit Prost's driving style and that was the characteristic of that particular car. My speciality was always the high-speed stuff.

"And of course we had a massive amount of engine problems that year and it was quite a difficult year. But considering all that in the circumstances people tend to forget that we had a second place and quite a few podiums. We consistently finished strong in the points."

After those three seasons at the top, Johansson was never in with a shot at serious glory again. A podium with Onyx in 1989 provided a quick Indian summer before he switched to America, as a driver and then team owner, in Champ Cars and the American Le Mans Series.

"I loved racing," he concludes. "But at that level it was not enough and you have to be equally ruthless and strong willed and not nice. If I had the opportunity it would be a different story all together. Had I known then what I know now it would have been a lot different, you know."