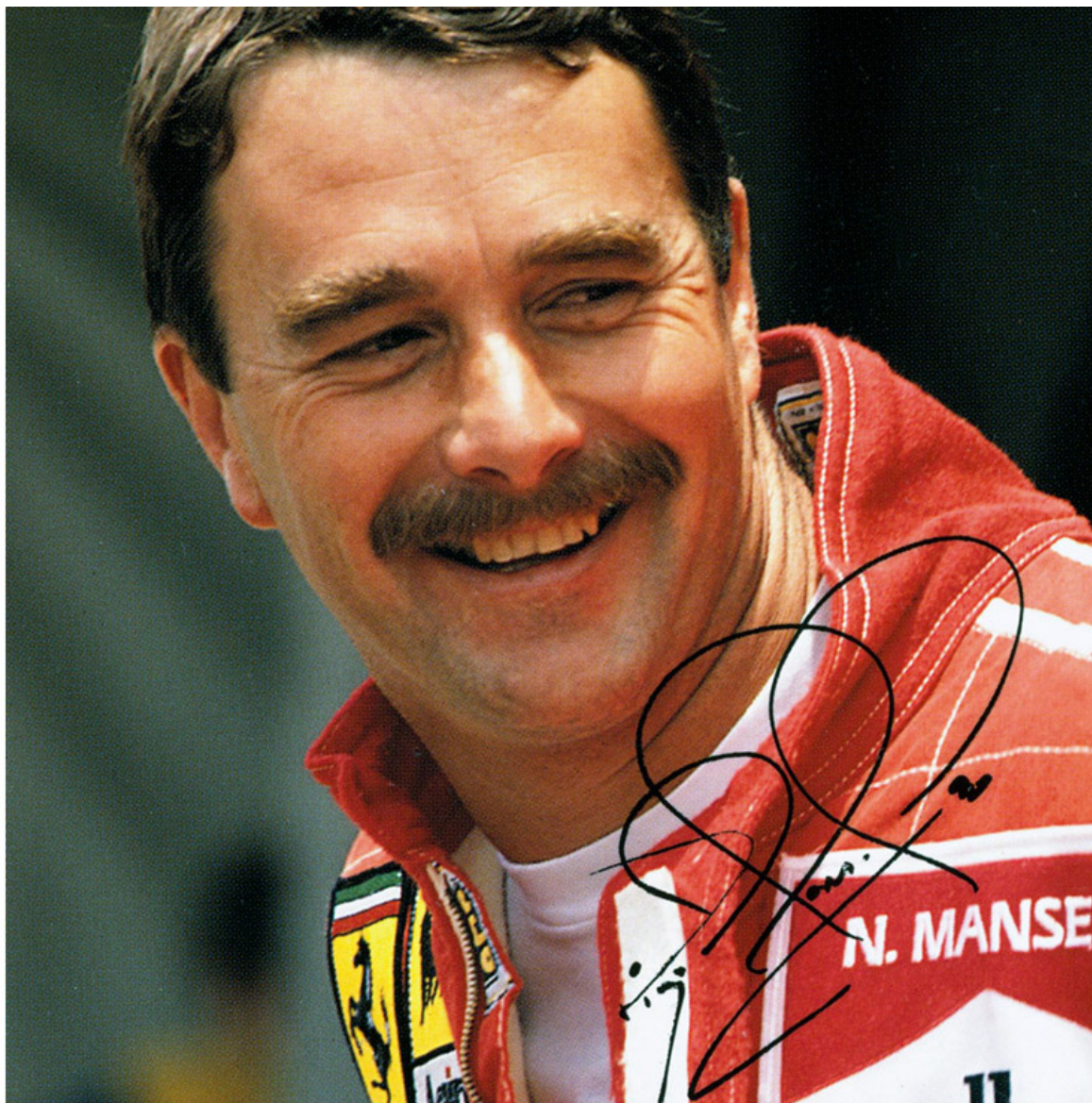


THE LION KING

N I G E L
M A N S E L L



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In the history of motor sport there have always been drivers who managed to lie at the fans' hearts and stay there forever, even many years after they have ended their active careers in competitive racing. Nigel Mansell, to all even better known as "The Lion", falls without any doubt in the exclusive and limited category of "immortals". A rare driver - all heart and courage. There is no doubt that Nigel took a very particular road in the world of motor sports. As a child of a family where money was not available in abundance, Nigel started his career as a racing driver with enormous sacrifices by his parents, who definitely wanted to help him in realizing his passion; this youngster who looked so typically British and who had such a "heavy foot".

The family moved from race to race, from track to track, with its improvised motorhome, which was in effect just a modified caravan; and so Nigel started to move his way up the ranks through the minor Formulas, also thanks to his then girlfriend Rosanne, who was always by his side. Rosanne, who later would become his wife, even mortgaged her family's house, just to enable young Mansell to get closer and closer to the racing series, which every driver in the world considers Mount Olymp of motor sport: the Formula One.

Nigel managed to launch himself into Formula One in a way that today we might not call typically "traditional". The first person who had an eye on Nigel was a certain Peter Collins, who by then was sporting director of Lotus, who told Colin Chapman, founder and animator of the team, to have a closer look at this young Brit.



Mansell reflecting during one of the first tests at Fiorano.

The brilliant British planner, who knew not only about cars but also about racing drivers, decided after a couple of intensive tests with Nigel on the race track of Paul Ricard, to give him the possibility to work as a test driver for the team in the upcoming season of 1980. The fact that Mansell had already been part of the Lotus team since the beginning of the year 1979, when he decided to accept Collin's offer to work as a "travelling inspector", coordinating the different offices of the company was a minor detail. Just to give you an idea what that meant: it was as if today Hamilton had been hired by McLaren to become an ambassador for their clothing line and not a driver.....

After a couple of convincing tests Mansell managed to be consistently as quick or even quicker than the two official drivers Mario Andretti and Elio De Angelis. Chapman was impressed enough to let Mansell debut in one of the racing cars before the end of the season, while in the following season Nigel was already one of the official drivers of the team, next to his teammate De Angelis. Impressive results aside, Nigel was not very fortunate in the upcoming races, mainly due to the fact that Chapman had passed away in the year 1982, which was followed by a degrade and the eventual the disappearance of one of the most successful teams in the history of Formula One.

In the year 1985, after his adventure with Lotus, Mansell started to drive for Williams, although still without the first real success in his career. But it seemed that now he had the chance of a lifetime, as Frank Williams' team had the official support of Honda, and the Japanese's intention was to show their technological supremacy also on four wheels.

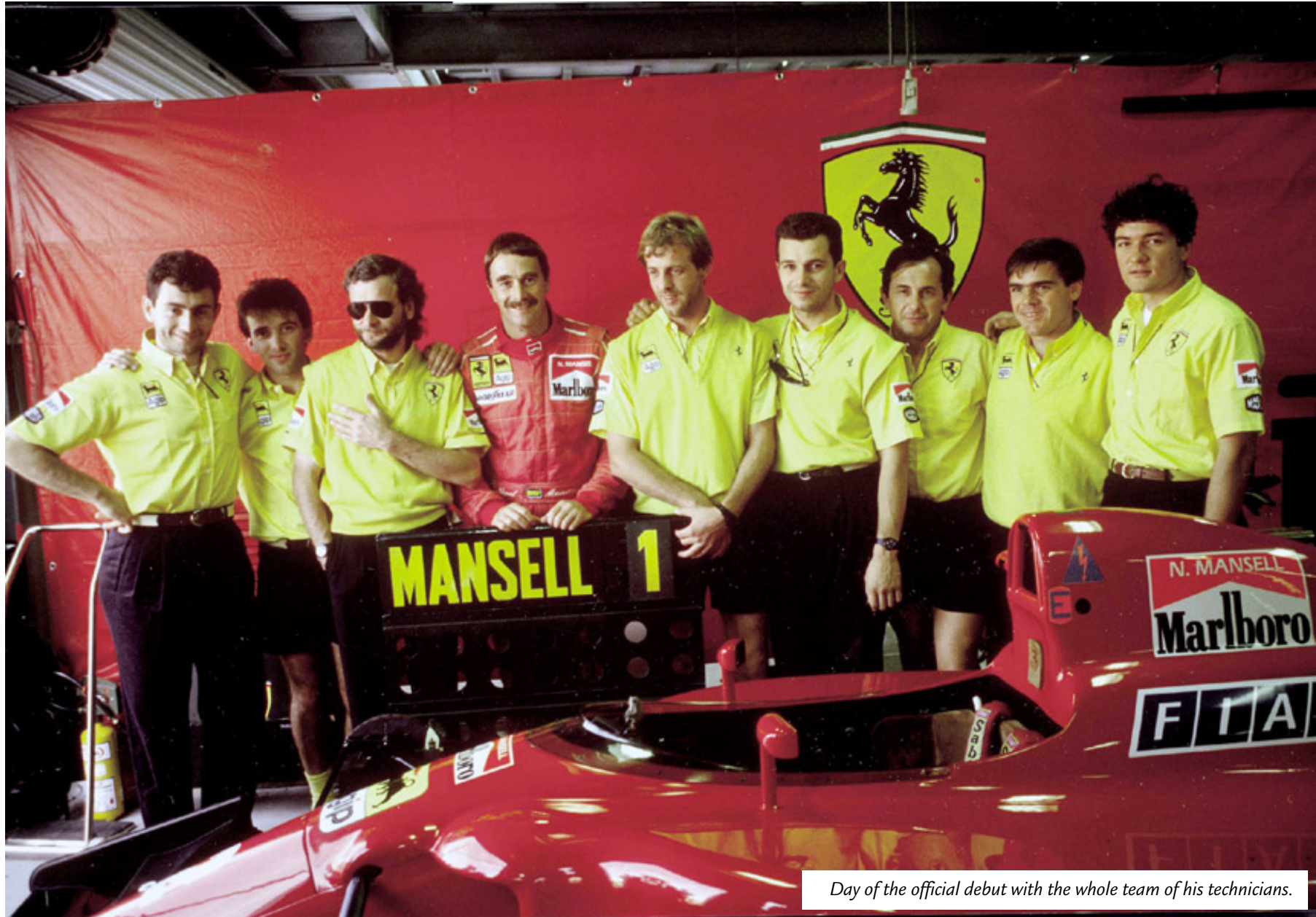
Frank Williams decided to put Nelson Piquet next to the British driver. Piquet, combative and always in a joking mood, had already twice been World Champion behind the wheel of a Brabham. Almost intimidated by the more famous and shrewd teammate, Mansell started his season on the wrong foot. Although after a couple of races eventually the first, hugely anticipated success arrived at the European GP in Brands Hatch, in front of an enthusiastic crowd who had already chosen him as their favourite.

Over the next few years, thanks to the numerous duels with Piquet, the repeated victories and a series of manoeuvres at the edge of the impossible, helped him to gain his nickname "The Lion"; just like the famous overtaking manoeuvre on the outside of the terrible Stowe corner – the right turn, which was driven with an open throttle with a speed of over 250 km/h - in which he harmed his very own teammate, making him to one of the most important, but also to one of the most loved drivers in the Formula One circus of those years.

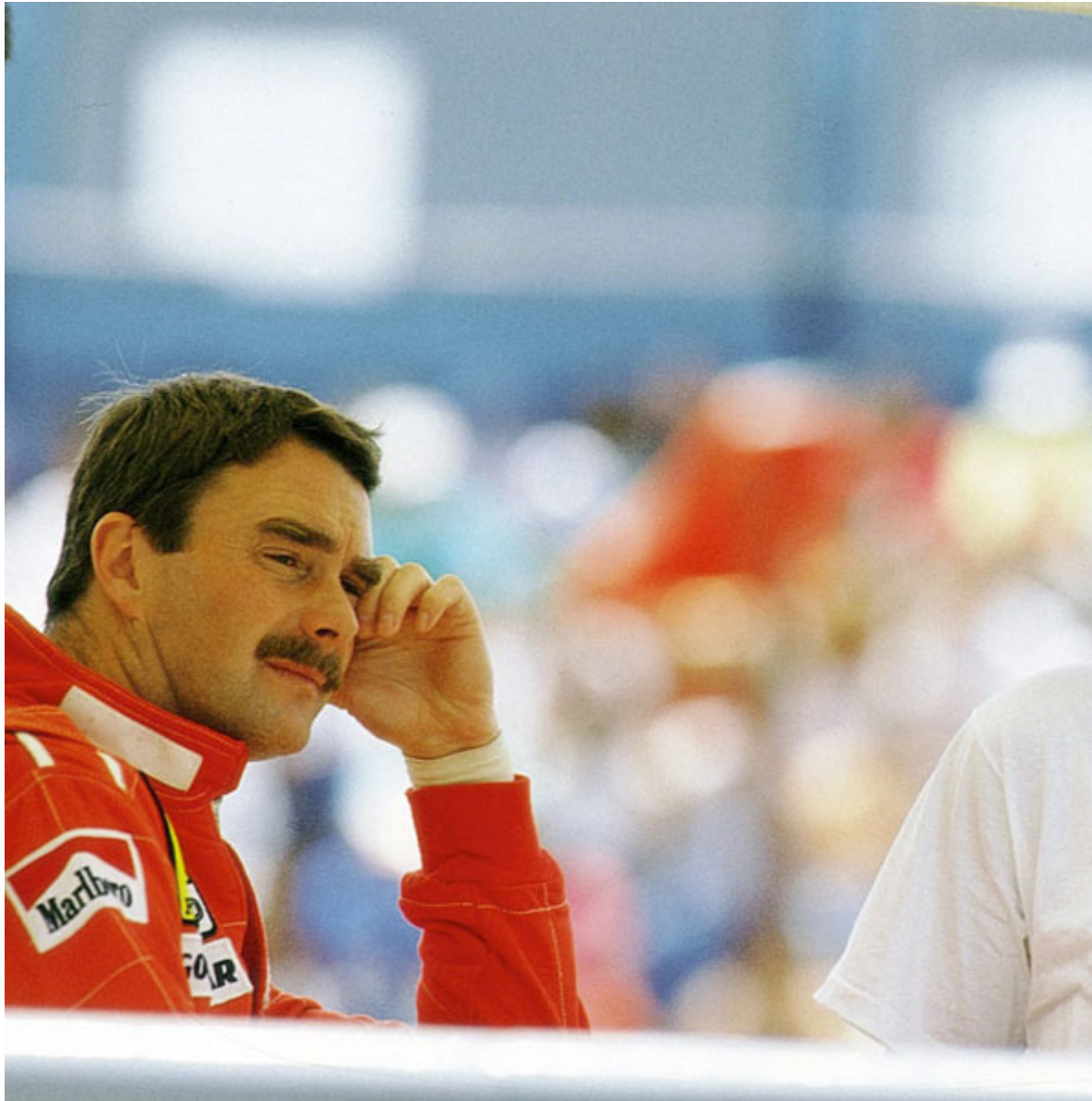
On the other hand the British driver was unfortunately also one of those who were not lucky at the right moment. More than once, and even when the World Title he had waited for, for so long, and he had really deserved and was so close, his luck had abandoned him. Memorable in the same way are the episodes during the year 1986, where an unforeseen puncture during the last race of the season put a spoke in his wheel whilst he was on his way to an almost certain victory; or the following year, when a terrible accident in the race on the track of Suzuka abruptly stopped his run on the road to the top.



Nigel shows up like this at Fiorano for the presentation of the "639".



Day of the official debut with the whole team of his technicians.



Mansell having a break before the qualifying session for the Italian GP.

After the year 1988 - with technical and financial troubles in the Williams Team, which also lost Honda as contractor for the cars' engines and was now dealing with a much more modest John Judd - the performance of the team and also of Mansell himself suffered immensely. Although for Nigel the contract with Maranello was already home and dry. It was a contract Enzo Ferrari himself had strongly requested already some year before - in 1986 to be precise - when the British driver decided to stay with Williams and the Commendatore, who was not used to a "no" from anyone, was infuriated. But Ferrari's judgment concerning the Brit was not flattering at all: "He's got a lot of courage and every time he tries to be reasonable he does harm to his very own instinct;" those were the words of Enzo Ferrari in his book "Piloti che gente".

As if Mansell wanted to show the "Drake" that two years earlier he had taken the wrong decision, he announced his contract with the Scuderia from Maranello just before the home race, right in the middle of the season 1988. Nigel's arrival in Maranello happened at the same moment another huge talent of Formula One, a certain John Barnard, came to work for the Prancing Horse: Barnard, a brilliant planner of the invincible McLarens, who had absolutely dominated the last two seasons. With his arrival in Maranello and the controversy concerning the creating of the so called "technological antenna" at the British offices in Guilford, Barnard, as it was his very own style, brought with him a series of radical innovations and was able not only to condition the technological course of Ferrari but of the whole of Formula One. Amongst the numerous innovations the most important one was without doubt the revolutionary electronically controlled transmission with shift paddles behind the wheel.

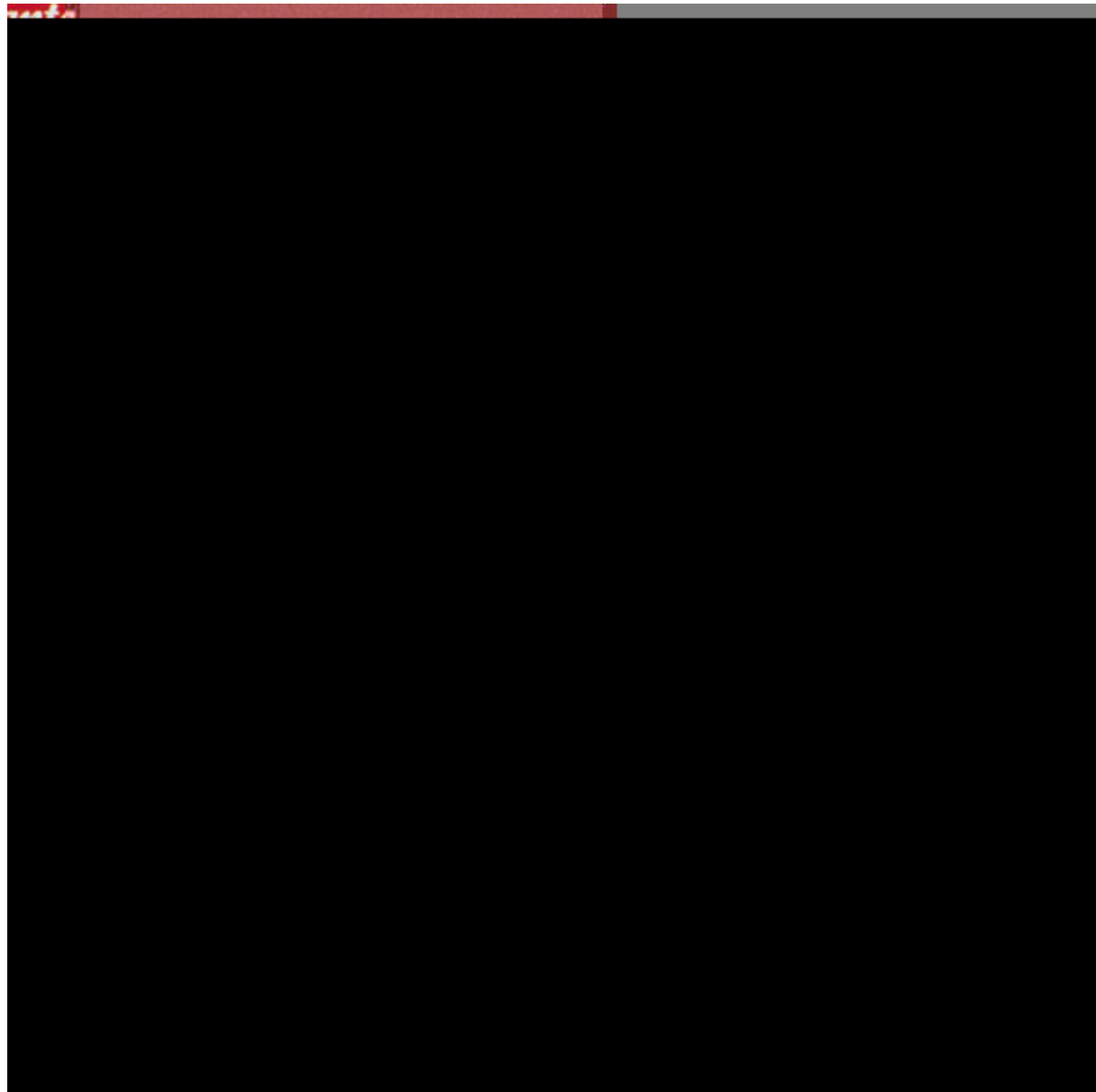


The first unforgettable victory at the car's debut at the Brazilian GP.

This was a real and proper innovation, which over the following years almost all the other constructors in the Formula One adopted for their own cars.

Obviously this kind of solution was not without contraindications, especially as far as reliability was concerned, which was put to an acid test especially by the complexity of the system itself, which beyond that was coupled with another equally revolutionary project: the 639.

In Rio de Janeiro, on the Jacarepaguà race track, where the inaugural GP of the season was started, the two cars with Mansell and Berger behind the wheel had several technical problems both during the qualifying and the warm up. Because of these problems the British driver even booked his return flight, which was outbound earlier than the natural end of the race; this showed how little trust he had in a possible outcome of the race, not even in the possibility to cross the line at the end. Nigel managed to have a fantastic start from position six, while in the front rows the cars were touching each other in a jam; allowing Nigel to be already driving in position number two by the end of the first lap and he managed to take lead of the field after another fifteen laps. With incredulity Nigel later declared: "I was repeatedly saying to myself during the race that I won't make it at this first round with Ferrari, I thought I was asking too much, but I was wrong."



The disputed success at the Portuguese GP in the year 1990.



Mansell and Prost talking before the GP in Imola 1989.



The victory at the Hungaroring will probably stay the most memorable.

In fact the "Lion" was wrong; because although Prost's McLaren was momentarily leading the race, while the Ferrari with the number 27 – it was almost a sign of the destiny, that the "legendary" red 27 was given to the British driver for the Prancing Horse at the start of the season - was in the pits, the car from Maranello was inexorably shooting past Prost on the main straight and catapulted Mansell to his first and unexpected victory behind the wheel of a car from Maranello. A victory Mansell himself dedicated to Enzo Ferrari, who had passed away the year before, in August 1988.

After a whole five retirements and three places on the podium it was obvious that this car was incredibly competitive whenever it had the possibility to cross the line. So eventually the Formula One stopped in Hungary for the ninth race of the season. At the Hungaroring things went not exactly smoothly for the red team from Maranello, as Berger managed to qualify for the sixth and Mansell for the twelfth spot. This didn't mean anything good for the race. In the end, this run was a real masterpiece of Mansell, who managed to have one of the races that might even be the most memorable of all the races during his long career, culminating in an extraordinary success ahead of Ayrton Senna's McLaren, after Nigel had managed a whole eleven overtaking manoeuvres on a track, which was usually considered as one where overtaking was almost impossible. The rest of the season was extremely bitter for Nigel, as he managed just one other place on the podium, at the Belgian GP. Although all of this will never deprive the "Lion" of the incredible work he has done, while driving the newly born 639 immediately after his debut to victory.

In the year 1990 Mansell's new teammate was the multiple world champion Alain Prost. After several disputes with his huge adversary Ayrton Senna the Frenchman had decided to migrate from McLaren to Maranello; but conflicts would happen also during the new season, although the Frenchman brought the number one with him for the cars with the Prancing Horse; a fact that helped the Frenchman during his races, of which he won five and picked up numerous excellent positions over the season. Thus he enabled Ferrari to be part of the game for the Drivers' Championship until the last race, which ended with the well know epilogue in Suzuka. During this season Mansell suffered for the first time in his career under the personality of his teammate, although he had always been a real master in managing the relationships inside the team. During this season the "Lion" won only one race, the fiercely battled Portuguese GP, in which the cars of the two drivers of the Scuderia touched each other right after the start.

After his adventurous years with the Prancing Horse Mansell returned to Williams, where, in the year 1992, he won the much deserved and anticipated Drivers' Championship with a personal record of victories in one season, which were overcome only ten years later by Schumacher. The Formula One title was followed by another two extraordinary achievements in the Indy Car Championship - where Mansell migrated to after his numerous successes in Formula One, the highest expression of motor sport - where he became one of the most loved and most popular drivers by the fans in stars and stripes.



Mansell in Monte Carlo before the race in company of Gianni Agnelli..

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