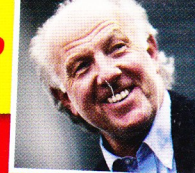


PRODRIVE CALLS TIME ON F1 "IT'S NO LONGER ON THE AGENDA"



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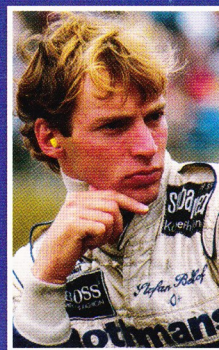
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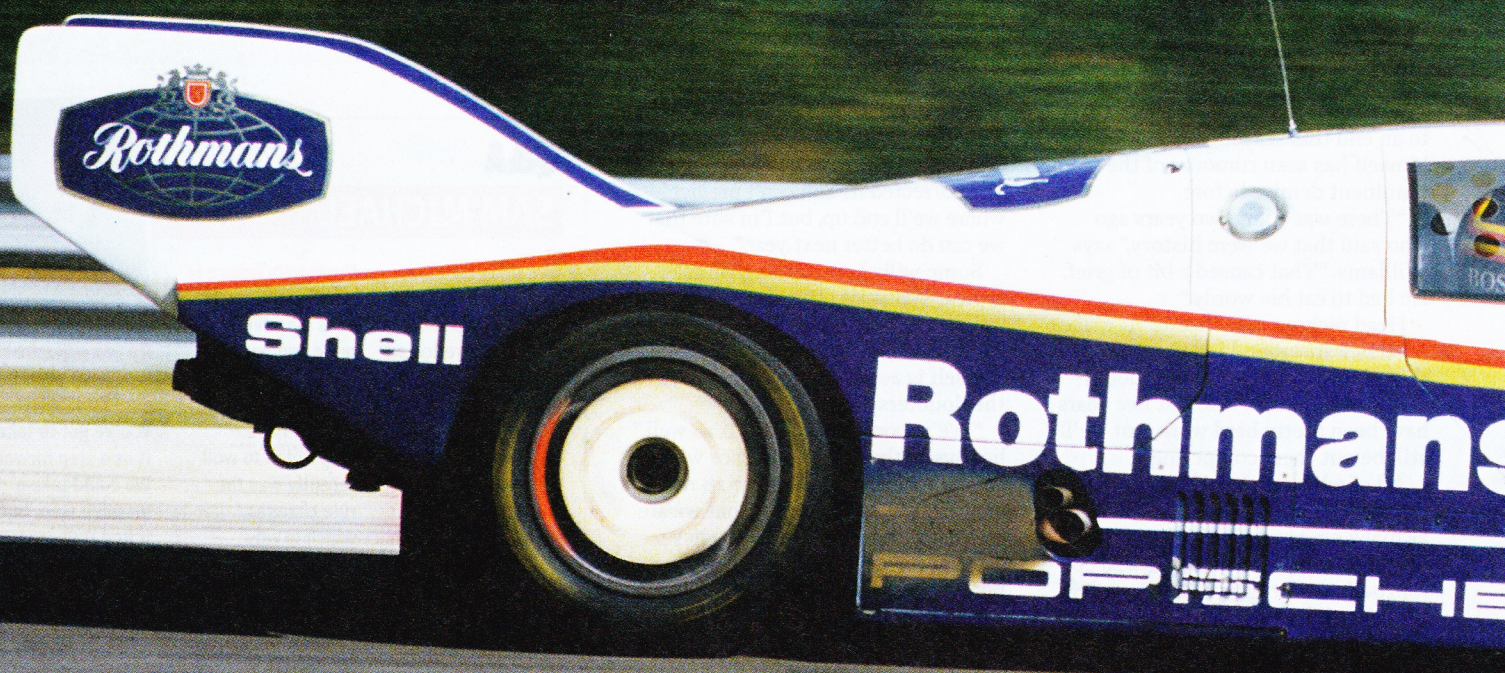


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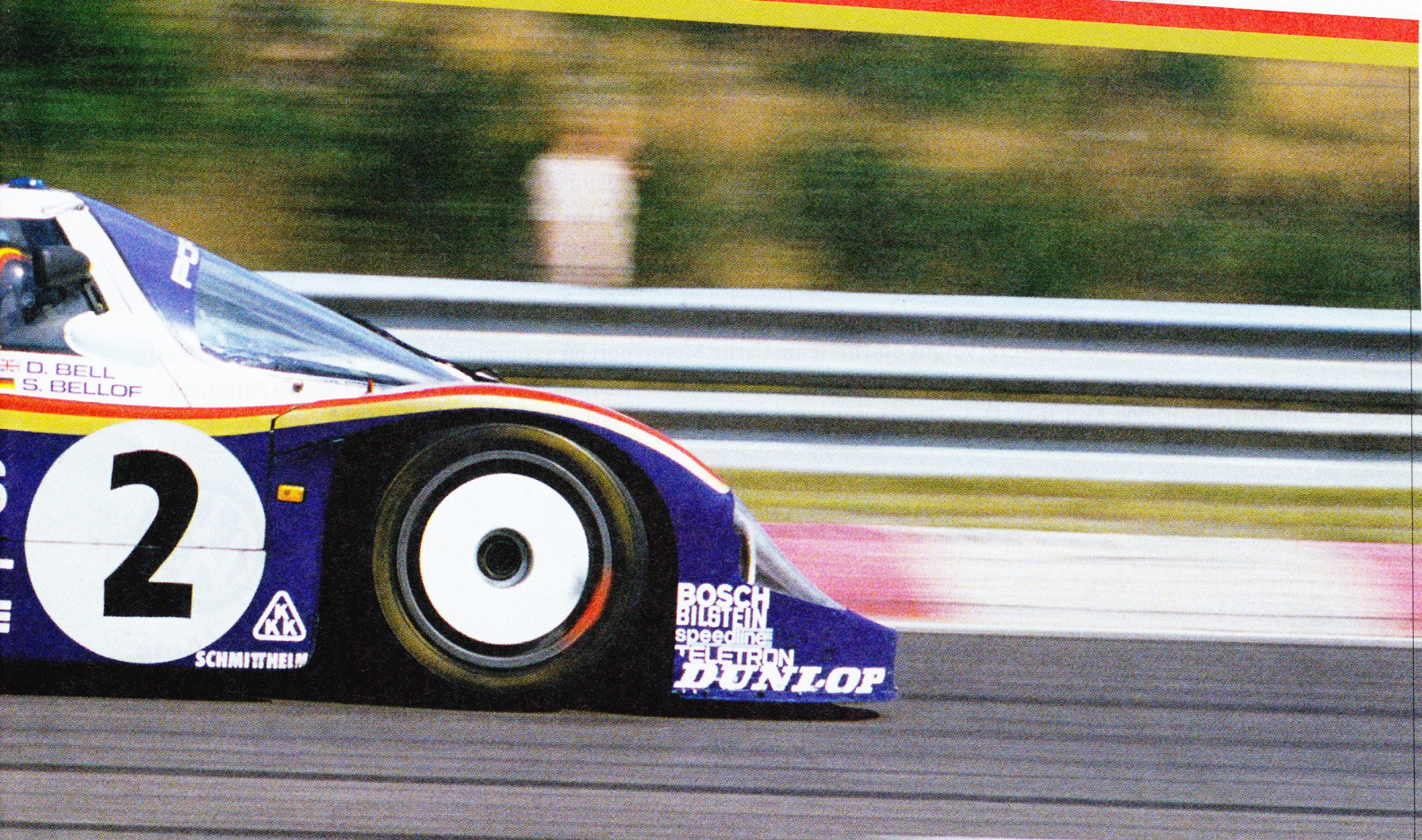
BELLOF

GERMANY'S LOST F1 SUPERSTAR

25 years ago a rash move in a sportscar cost a promising Formula 1 driver his life. *GARY WATKINS* remembers the career of Stefan Bellof



Bellof showed blinding speed in the Porsche





Bellof could have won at wet Monaco in 1984

The name Stefan Bellof wasn't known by too many fans lining the fence at a damp Silverstone for the opening round of the European Formula 2 Championship in March 1982. It was familiar to British motorsport officialdom, however. Just over four months earlier the German had been excluded from the Formula Ford Festival at Brands Hatch, whereupon he made a promise to said officials: "You better watch my career, because I'll be back here next year and I'll win my first Formula 2 race."

The 24-year-old kept to his word and pulled off a shock victory on his F2 debut with the German Maurer squad against the fancied Honda-backed Ralt and Spirit teams and the factory Marches. Bellof had never been to Silverstone before, yet he qualified ninth and drove through the field in tricky conditions to become only the second driver to score a first-time-out victory in the 18-year history of the formula. Two weeks later, he did the unthinkable and made it two from two, winning from pole at Hockenheim.

Bellof was barely out of the headlines thereafter. There were more starring performances in F2 (though no more wins) through 1982 and '83. A move into sportscars with the Porsche factory team in 1983 yielded a string of victories and the 1984 World Endurance Championship. By then he was racing in Formula 1 with Tyrrell and might have won what was only his sixth grand prix, the famous foreshortened '84 Monaco event.

There was a Marlboro contract for '85, more giant-killing performances

aboard the normally aspirated Tyrrell and a meeting scheduled with Enzo Ferrari. Bellof's career appeared to have an unstoppable momentum.

Then came the accident in a WEC race at Spa-Francorchamps on September 1 that claimed his life, and, in the minds of many, robbed the world of a future F1 champion.

Bellof's phenomenal talent touched a lot of people in his short career. There's a queue of people ready to tell you 25 years on that he would have become Germany's first F1 world champion years before Michael Schumacher

Manfred Jankte, who as Porsche motorsport boss signed up Bellof for the Stuttgart marque, is one of them.

"If Stefan had finished his career we would have experienced the Schumi miracle in Germany long before it finally happened," he says. "He was such a talent and made it look easy. I have few doubts that he would have been world champion."

It was the patronage of people such as Jankte that helped propel this karting graduate from Formula Ford to F1 in the space of four seasons. There was a line of team owners, sponsors, journalists and motorsport bosses who, mesmerised by his talent and infectious personality, were ready to help out a driver they were adamant was destined for the top. Racing was in the blood of the young Bellof (his father rallied and elder brother Georg also raced as high as F3 level in Germany) but there wasn't the money.

First to step up to the plate to back Bellof was Austrian racer Walter Lechner, who was just starting out in his career as a team owner.

BELLOF IN F1



Bellof made his F1 debut with Tyrrell in 1984, making the most of the wet conditions at Monaco that year to transcend the car's lack of power and finish third. He was fourth at Detroit in 1985

"I had a friend who said, 'There is this real talent I know, you should give him a chance,'" recalls Lechner. "We found a bit of money from everywhere. Some of the budget came from Stefan's father and I had some sponsorship from Valvoline."

"I gave him a race at Hockenheim at the end of 1979 and there was no doubt he was a real talent. Stefan was the first guy who really came out of karting in Germany and it showed in his driving." Bellof won the national FF1600 title in a Lechner-run PRS chassis in '80, while continuing in karting and completing his mechanic's training. It wasn't until '81, says Lechner, that he "really focused on motorsport".

That was the season that Bellof's career took off. There was victory in the 'international' section of the German FF1600 championship with Lechner, who decided to put his young charge out in a couple of European SuperVee races. Results included a second place to the all-conquering SuperVee hero John Nielsen at Mainz-Finthen.

It is Lechner who tells the story about the Formula Ford Festival, and he swears it's true. Bellof had just been excluded from sixth place in his quarter-final for contact with a couple of rivals when he asked his team boss to communicate his feelings.

"Stefan was so disappointed," remembers Lechner. "He didn't speak English at that time, so he asked me to give that message to the clerk of the course." Next to help out was another stalwart of the German racing scene, Bertram Schafer, who had run Stefan's brother Georg in 1979. ▶

◀ “Georg always told me that he had a younger brother who was much better than him,” says Schafer. “We did a test and I knew straight away that Stefan was the guy. The only problem was finding the money to run him.” Famed German motorsport journalist and broadcaster Rainer Braun, who was working with Bellof in an unofficial capacity, found a budget from wealthy motorsport enthusiast and sportscar entrant Georg Loos.

Schafer admits that he wasn’t “happy with the deal”, but on the other hand “there wasn’t another way to get Stefan

on the track”. Schafer reckons he ended up losing money, but says today that it was worth it. Bellof won three times from seven starts in his Bertram Schafer Racing Ralt-Toyota RT3 and ended up third in the points despite missing four races.

Schafer’s alturism didn’t stop there. He could have tried to take his young charge into F2, but he knew he didn’t have the resources to do Bellof’s talents justice. That’s why he put him in contact with the F2 team from which he had already ordered two chassis for the following season. Maurer Racing was the plaything of wealthy drinks scion Willy Maurer; after taking its first victories in 1981, the car looked like a championship contender with its beautiful Gustav Brunner design.

“I needed paying drivers and knew I couldn’t run Stefan the following year,” remembers Schafer. “I told Maurer he’d better sign him before anyone else did.”

Maurer gave the young charger a try-out after the end of the 1981 season at a test at Paul Ricard. Also present were the experienced Mike Thackwell – already an F1 driver, remember – and Monaco Formula 3 winner Alain Ferte. Outgoing Maurer driver Eje Elgh was present and was amazed by what Bellof’s performance.

“When I saw what Stefan was doing in that car I was never been more sure of anything in my life,” says the Swede. “I went straight to Maurer and told him to sign this guy. I told him that Bellof would be a world champion some time in the future.”

Jankte, too, had a eureka moment the first time he saw Bellof race. Braun was still helping out Bellof, even though the young charger had signed an eight-year management deal with Willy Maurer, and had invited the Porsche bigwig to the Nurburgring F2 race.

“I remember watching him on the old Nurburgring in the wet,” recalls Jankte, “and you didn’t need a stopwatch to tell he was quick.”

Bellof was blessed with innate car control that was apparent every time he climbed into a racing car. It was as clear to see at the wheel of an 800bhp Group C Porsche as it was in an underpowered Tyrrell 012.

Bellof claimed pole position on his debut aboard his Rothmans Porsche 956, and by a cool two seconds. He won the race, too, sharing with veteran Derek Bell. Next time out, at the Nurburgring, he claimed another pole, this time by five seconds on a 12-mile version of the Nordschleife.

The chances to shine in F1 were few and far between, but in the wet and on the streets Bellof was in his element. Put the two together and you get Monaco ’84. It is a matter of record that Bellof was closing on second-placed Ayrton Senna’s Toleman, who in turn was moving in on the leading McLaren of Alain Prost. What would have happened had the race gone on will never be known. Even Brian Lislles, who engineered Bellof throughout his Tyrrell career, won’t tell you that his charge was going to win, but he does have one thing to say: “There wasn’t a mark on the car after the race.”

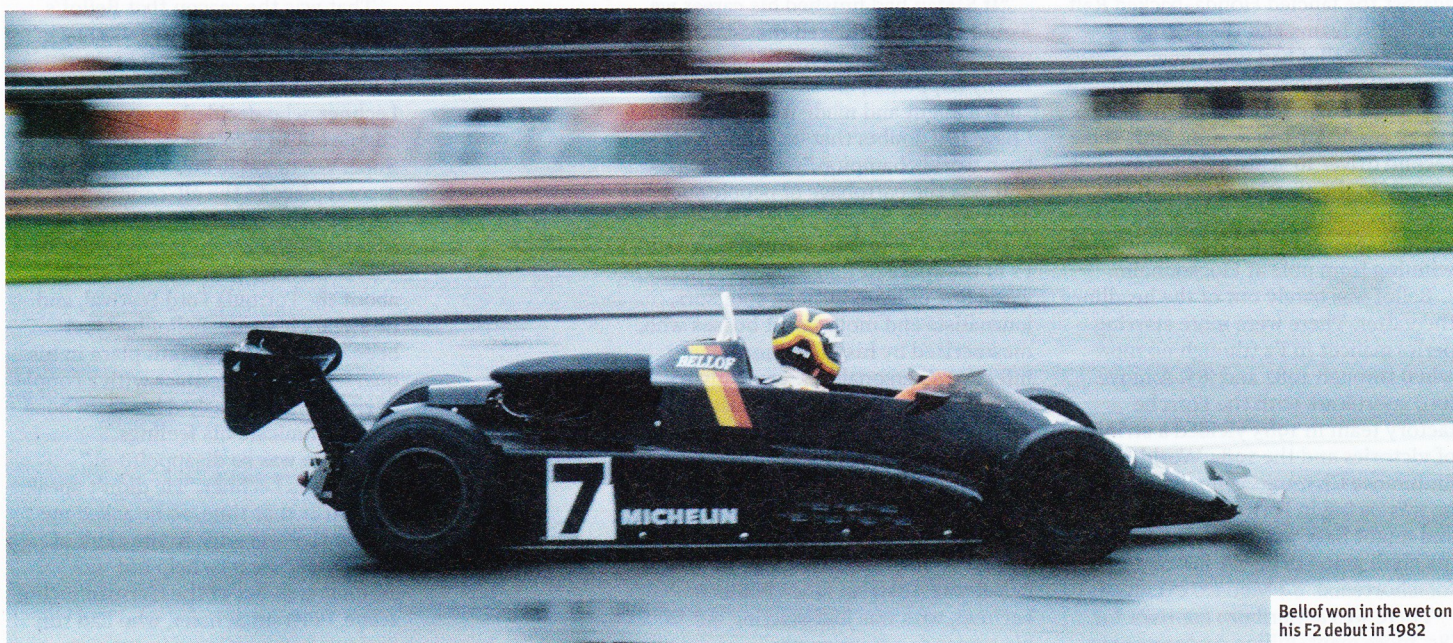
These were the performances of what Paul Owens, de facto team principal at Maurer, calls “a very gifted driver”. Schafer describes him as “so naturally talented”.

Owens tells a tale from Bellof’s debut at Thruxton in 1982 that sums up the German’s talents.

“I’ll never forget telling him watch out at Church because of the big bump,” says Owens. “Stefan came in and said, ‘What bump?’ He liked a lively car. He always ran a harder set-up



Bellof partnered Derek Bell in Rothmans Porsche



Bellof won in the wet on his F2 debut in 1982



Ken Tyrrell gave Bellof his Formula 1 break

than anyone else and that suited a ground-effect car. He could deal with it; other drivers couldn't."

Everyone who worked with Bellof agreed that he took satisfaction from driving a racing car as fast as it could go. "He was different to other drivers," says Schafer, "If he won or crashed, it didn't matter to Stefan. Driving fast was what mattered."

Norbert Singer, famed chief engineer at Porsche, reckons that Bellof "enjoyed driving a little bit over the limit". Derek Bell reckons that his team-mate only had one speed: "11 tenths".

Bell was sharing with Bellof at the Nurburgring in 1983. They were leading and no-one else bar the factory Rothmans cars had a look-in, yet Bellof continued to lap the daunting 'Green Hell' at record speeds. Two laps after posting fastest lap, he flipped at the famous Pfanzeltgarten.

Singer has always believed that the accident occurred when his driver went slightly off line. A year later, Bellof told a different story when passengering Tyrrell personnel around the old 'Ring.

"He told us that he was going quicker and quicker and that all the engineers said he shouldn't go flat over the rise," recalls Liles. "Eventually he did take it flat and promptly took off."

The Pfanzeltgarten crash and his fatal accident at the wheel of a privateer Brun Porsche at Spa, precipitated by a rash lunge down the inside into the first left-hander at Eau Rouge, have given Bellof a posthumous reputation

as a crasher. The testimony of his colleagues suggests the contrary.

"I don't ever remember having to repair a car Stefan had crashed," says Owens. "He was a trier, absolutely, and he would be the first to attempt a corner flat if he thought it might be possible, but I wouldn't have said he was a crasher."

And the response to the 'crasher' theory of Brundle, Bellof's Formula 1 team-mate? "Wasn't I the one who kept smashing up Tyrrells?"

"Massively fast" is how Brundle describes Bellof, "though to turn that into real success he was going to have to apply a lot more control to his driving". Brundle recounts a tale from Detroit '84, a race in which he ultimately finished second.

"Ken [Tyrrell] was convinced that Stefan was quicker than me," he remembers. "We had a system in those pre-radio days whereby if one of us thought we were quicker than the other, we would hold our hand up past the pits. I saw Stefan's hand up, even though I had a queue of turbos on my nosecone. So convinced was Ken that Stefan was quicker that he brought me in for a fresh set of tyres. The next lap, no doubt trying to prove he was faster, Stefan put it into the pitwall."

"Bellof would have had to hook up with a Ross Brawn-type character like Schumacher did to achieve real success. He had the raw speed, but needed to consistently show the control that he proved was there that day at Monaco."

Formula 1's lost talents

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN...



JEAN-PIERRE WIMILLE

The red Alfa Romeo 158 roars out of Woodcote, its driver looking impossibly relaxed at the wheel after over two hours of racing. The chequered flag falls and Jean-Pierre Wimille wins the 1950 British Grand Prix. He will go on to take the inaugural world championship.

That day never came for Wimille, who was killed in a violent accident after rolling his Gordini during practice for the Gran Premio General Peron in Buenos Aires a year earlier. Had he survived, he would have been Alfa Romeo's lead driver in 1950 having raced for the marque since 1946. It could have been 41-year-old Wimille who was the first world champion instead of Giuseppe Farina.

Wimille was a proto-Prost. Smooth, very fast and wily, he won the Swiss, Belgian, French and Italian grands prix and might have been a multiple world champion had he lived. Instead, he is largely forgotten. **EDD STRAW**



TONY BRISE

Monaco, May 1975: Nick Jordan, chief mechanic at the Modus Formula Atlantic team, has converted Tony Brise's car to F3 spec for the GP support race. Brise qualifies on the back row for the final after a plug lead falls off in his heat, but he carves through the pack and, astonishingly, is trying to take second place when he crashes.

Two weeks later: Brise makes his debut for Graham Hill's F1 team in Belgium and qualifies seventh, ahead of world champion Emerson Fittipaldi's McLaren. Four months later: Brise sees off Mario Andretti and Al Unser in the Long Beach F5000 race, before his driveshaft breaks.

Jordan once told this writer: "Tony had treated his mechanics terribly, but he matured a lot when he got married to Janet. It was like he was a different bloke." It was the difference between a good driver and a potential great.

When the ground rushed up to meet Hill's plane on Elstree Golf Course, it ensured that potential would never be realised. **MARCUS SIMMONS**



BERTRAND FABI

Bertrand Fabi wasn't one of the favourites ahead of the 1985 British FF2000 season. He hadn't set the world on fire when he arrived in the UK for the previous winter's BBC Grandstand series.

Fabi didn't notch up his first victory until round nine, but there was one observer who saw his potential long before that – the guy running his closest rival. Dennis Rushen, who fielded Martin Donnelly that year, "knew inside three races that we weren't going to beat him".

Rushen has no doubts that Fabi, who also won the EFDA Euroseries in '85, was on his way to Formula 1: "He would have made it; he was the bollocks."

The world was robbed of a huge talent when Fabi was killed testing a Formula 3 car in February 1986. **GARY WATKINS**