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Opening Extract from...

A Championship Year

Written by Jenson Button

Edited by Sarah Edworthy

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JENSON BUTTON

A Championship Year

EDITED BY SARAH EDWORTHY



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INTRODUCTION

The Phone Call

'I have some terrible news.' The voice was blunt.

Fairy tales usually begin with 'Once upon a time,' but this one, the story of my 2009 Formula One world championship season, started with an ominous voicemail message on my mobile phone: 'Jenson, please call me. We have to speak immediately.'

As with all life-changing moments, I can remember the circumstances in vivid detail. It was Thursday 4 December, 2008. I was at Gatwick returning from a training camp in Lanzarote. My mobile has the loudest message alert in the world, which is embarrassing when you accidentally forget to put it on silent. In that second when the seatbelt sign goes off, and everyone on the aeroplane switches on their telephones, mine went BING really loudly. As we filed off into Arrivals, I thought, 'Oh great, I've got a message.' It's always exciting to get off a flight and find you've got a message, isn't it?

Except that this one was from Richard Goddard, my manager. I could tell from the flat, serious tone of his voice that it wasn't a positive message. Something was wrong. I rang him and played it a bit stupid, light-heartedly saying, 'Hey Richard, what's up? What's the matter?'

He got straight to the point: 'I have some terrible news. Honda are pulling out of Formula One.'

At first I didn't believe him. I couldn't take it in. In shock, I dropped my mobile. I scrabbled around on the floor to pick up my phone while juggling hand luggage. I didn't say a word back to him. I had that tingly feeling you get all over when you're trying to absorb the implications of something horrendous. I stood there for what seemed like ages with my mouth open. Chrissy

Buncombe, one of my oldest friends who'd come training with me, as he often does, looked at me and registered exactly what Richard had said just from the reaction on my face.

I finally managed to say to Richard, 'What does this mean?'

'Well, it means we don't have a drive in Formula One in 2009 – he always says 'we' – and there aren't really many options. Let's confer later in the day. There are two seats available, but not in places where you are going to further your career.'

It was shattering news, so unexpected. I was thinking, 'Oh my God, after two tough years in the sport with Honda in 2007 and 2008, when the prospects of the 2009 season have always been the light at end of the tunnel... this is unthinkable.' I had finished the 2008 season 18th in the world championship table with just three points. I had reached Q3, the third and final qualifying session at each grand prix, in which the fastest ten drivers shoot it out for pole position, just once. It had been a dispiriting campaign, but I'd been able to bide my time in a dog of a car because I knew 2009 would be the turning point. The introduction of new technical regulations was as close to a clean slate as the sport had experienced for decades – and would put all teams back on a level playing field. Having abandoned the development of the 2008 car a third of the way into the season, the team had directed resources to concentrate on the design of the 2009 car. With Ross Brawn leading the technical side, and immersing himself in the genesis of a daring new design, the team had a big head start. The new car was still under wraps, but from the wind-tunnel figures I knew we were building a fantastic machine. The boys at the factory in Brackley, near Silverstone, were doing a great job. Thanks to these funny looking wings, we had recovered a lot of the downforce that you lose under the new regulations. We were going to be very quick. Everything was looking very, very positive... and then came this

news which picked me up and hurtled me down another slope on the emotional rollercoaster ride that I'd been on over the last few months.

Racing in 2009 had seemed such a formality; no one would have contemplated the nightmare scenario of a huge manufacturer like Honda pulling the plug on its Formula One operation.

As usual at Gatwick, I waited for my bags for a good hour, so I had plenty of time to think things over in Baggage Reclaim. As well as Chrissy, I was with Mikey Collier, my physio, and John Brame, my trainer, a triathlete who had just started to work with me on an intensive new programme designed so that I would start the new season fitter than ever before. We were exhausted after a challenging week of swimming, running and cycling, making the best possible use of Lanzarote's superb Olympic-standard facilities and gentle climate. When Mikey realised I had bad news to impart, he thought maybe I'd doubled the distance of the cycle race I'd challenged the team to join me on the next day around Silverstone ahead of a visit to the Honda factory at Brackley! Racing in 2009 had seemed such a formality; no one would have contemplated the nightmare scenario of a huge manufacturer like Honda pulling the plug on its Formula One operation. There were potentially awkward knock-on effects, too. Mikey and John work for me. I employ them. If I'm not working, nor do they, so it was an unsettling situation all round when I shared the news.

I rang my parents. My father, known as the old boy, and my mother Simone – who divorced more than twenty years ago – are always supportive. The old boy, a serious rallycross driver in the seventies and an F1 addict ever since the days of Stirling Moss,

comes to all the races; my mum attends Barcelona, Monaco and Silverstone and calls in or texts before and after each race. I thought I'd better call them to let them know what was going on before they heard it on the news. At first, both were emotional, but very strong, too, which surprised me – especially my father. I didn't expect his reaction to be so positive and practical. He was at The Ship and Castle, his local in Monaco, when he took my call.

'Dad, brace yourself. There's a possibility I may not be in Formula One in 2009. Honda are pulling out.'

'100 per cent pulling out?' he asked.

'Yes, 100 per cent.'

He was clearly dumbfounded, but he could detect my anxiety and he quickly managed to put a very positive spin on it, saying there's always something you can retrieve from a bad situation. Obviously, he wasn't feeling that strong and positive, because he later said he went back to the bar, sank his drink and went straight home to ponder life without Formula One. But he wanted to sound bullish in front of me and that helped me as I stood there – still at the luggage carousel – thinking my F1 career might be over. I could race in other series, but if you go into Le Mans and Touring Cars, people tend to forget about you in Formula One. It is hard to come back from a year out. I didn't know what to do, and actually there was nothing I could do. Uncertainty clouded everything.

I travelled back to Chrissy's house in London. Mikey was with us too. No one spoke in the car. Next morning I got up early and headed straight to the factory. It was a planned visit, but obviously now in very different circumstances. Originally I had challenged the team to race a lap of Silverstone on a bike. About 40 people were interested, but we called it off. No one was in the mood to be cycling around Silverstone in the pouring rain and 3°C.

I had intended to discuss the performance of the new car. Instead I went into the factory poised to chat with everyone, to raise spirits and help maintain morale. That makes me sound a bit like Prince Charles on a British industry tour, but factory visits are an integral part of a driver's role. I would like to go after every race to share my thoughts about the car and our performance, but the race schedule doesn't permit that. I probably go twenty times a year. The drivers' presence is a reminder of what the whole enterprise is about. A driver can push a team forward, inspire others by his own ambition. The guys always have lots of questions for me, and I bombard them with queries of my own. Our car is designed and built to compete against others; I'm entrusted with the fantastic job of racing it on the track. In between the drawing board and the race track, there's a long and close-knit chain of people giving their professional and emotional input. The Honda team comprised 700 hard-working, dedicated professionals, many with mortgages and young families. We're all involved in the process of trying to win – and in early December 2008 we all faced the loss of our jobs. I went to rally everyone, but deep down inside, I was not feeling optimistic at all. What chance was there of anyone buying the team less than three months before the first grand prix of 2009 at Melbourne, when the world was imploding financially? How could we possibly be racing in 2009?

I arrived at the factory. It is a hugely impressive glass and steel structure with state-of-the-art facilities for each department from design to engineering, workshop to component testing, carbon-fibre laboratory to the aerodynamicists' wind tunnel. I went round every department and I found it hard to gauge how to talk about the situation. The team had heard the news the same day as me, within an hour. I started by chatting to the guys in the engineering department. It's a big department

of about 50 engineers. It's quite daunting trying to make a positive speech when you're feeling emotional yourself. I tried my best, but the voice went. I was a bit of a wreck. They looked at me and smiled. Then someone stepped forward and bailed me out, 'Well, Jenson, obviously it's an emotional time, but we're staying positive, and as soon as you leave this room we're going to get back to work. Nobody will be interested in buying this team or putting money into it unless we can prove to them that we're worth the investment.' They were working as normal, pushing 100 per cent despite the uncertainty about whether the car would ever race. Honda to their credit hadn't just switched off the lights and locked the factory doors. They had resolved on a window of time to help the management secure the future of the team in some form or other. The budgets were obviously much smaller during this period than when Honda were fully committed to the race programme, but the focus in the factory was inspiring. It helped me tremendously. The sight of their strenuous endeavour encouraged me to think, yes, we can find a sponsor. I'd gone to the factory to boost spirits, but the guys ended up bolstering my faith that a solution would be found.

The whole situation was a wake-up call. I had taken it for granted that we would be racing in 2009. In retrospect, I think Honda had too. I had signed a new three-year extension to my contract only weeks before Honda had announced it was pulling out. Early pre-season speculation and whispers were all about how good the car was going to be. I was pretty confident in my own ability and I assumed I'd be around with the team a lot longer. So Honda's withdrawal was a huge jolt, a life-changing moment. I couldn't just go and find another job. It was going to change my life completely if I wasn't racing in Formula One. I had achieved one grand prix victory in Hungary in 2006, but

I was nowhere near finished. I had the same dream that I'd had ever since I was eight years old: to win the Formula One world championship. I had been working towards that dream for so many years that the prospect of no car, no team, no Formula One future put everything into a completely different and frankly horrifying perspective.

The Uncertainty

Honda's sudden exit precipitated fears within Formula One that other manufacturers would pull out too. Right up to the nanosecond of being informed of Honda's action, however, I had only heard positive vibes from them. The 2009 season was looking very promising and as everyone can now see the car that we'd built was incredibly competitive. I don't know if people at Honda went back to the big bosses and said the 2009 car was looking good but they couldn't be certain how it would measure up against the opposition or if the worldwide issue of selling road cars meant that they could not afford to be seen to be spending so much money in Formula One. It is very unusual for the Japanese to take any action that involves such public loss of face. Jessica Michibata, my half-Japanese, Tokyo-based girlfriend, said she was very surprised at what happened. We suspected that Honda must have had serious problems back at base, which was confirmed when company president Takeo Fukui gave a speech explaining the need to offer the team for sale. Fukui san – who is a massive motorsport fan of both motorbikes and cars – was very emotional as he declared that Honda had to protect its core business activities and secure its long-term future at a time of mounting uncertainty within the motor industry. Fine, I understood why they withdrew, but it was a bit late in the day

to inform a racing team – although I'm sure that's because they had been trying to find a solution.

The most difficult year had been 2007. Back then, the team had no leadership or direction. All decisions, big and little, went to committee. I couldn't see things ever getting done, never mind anything getting better. That's when Richard Goddard and I pushed hard to get Ross Brawn on board. He was then on a year's sabbatical from Ferrari. We worked hard to impress upon Honda the need to tempt him back into Formula One with a new challenge. At first, he was linked with Red Bull, but at the end of November 2007 he was named as the new team principal of Honda F1 Racing. What a coup!

There were already many talented people at Brackley, but Ross's arrival in 2007 lifted expectations.

As technical director, Ross had overseen a record seven world championship successes with Michael Schumacher both at Benetton (1994 and 1995) and at Ferrari (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004). He is renowned for his organisational genius in the factory and for spontaneously adapting race strategy from the pit wall according to whatever dramatic circumstances a race produces. From his appointment onwards, I was confident that things would turn around. He radiates enormous influence. He doesn't need to say anything. He's a big bear of a man and his presence at the factory seemed to inspire everyone to push harder. The workforce have real belief in him and respect for what he achieved at Benetton and Ferrari. They can see what heights can be reached in Formula One. It seems a 'dream team' emerges wherever and whenever he is in charge. There were already many talented people at Brackley, but Ross's arrival in 2007 lifted expectations. Meanwhile the team was testing Lucas

di Grassi and Bruno Senna, young stars from GP2, the Formula One feeder series. They still hadn't settled on my teammate for 2009, but a willingness to blood novices suggests a strong, forward-looking outfit that is prepared to take risks.

The car was still under embargo, but we knew it was strong. During the winter, I spoke to my race engineer Andrew 'Shov' Shovlin more than to Ross Brawn. Shov and I have worked together since 2003, back when the team was called BAR-Honda. 2009 would be his sixth season as my Senior Race Engineer. We're great mates and very close, which we need to be in order to understand each other in the heat of battle. Over the radio, it is Shov who tells me important facts, lap times of drivers in front and behind, and orders me to push. We tend to talk less than other driver-engineer partnerships because he knows I like it that way. But we get on so well. We're always taking the mickey out of each other, because you do with your mates, don't you?

I had also spent time at the factory with the aerodynamicists, running through the blizzards of data and sifting the reams of information and feedback from the wind tunnel. Formula One teams live or die by the data we get from our cars, whether from scale models in the wind tunnel or from telemetry while the car is testing or racing. I took great heart from the fact that we'd worked out why the 2008 car was such a failure, not only aerodynamically but also mechanically. All the little niggly problems that had plagued us over the past few years had been solved.

I think the Honda management expected Ross to turn everything upside down, but he found the systems in place were very, very good. The team lacked nothing in brainpower and resources. Areas like quality control, craftsmanship and component checking had many experienced people in place, seasoned veterans of multiple F1 campaigns as well as any

number of bright young things. He didn't need to initiate any major changes, just a difference in approach – tweaks and fine-tuning rather than coarse adjustments. The preparation, design and systems were all first class and meticulously executed.

Good cars don't happen by accident. They are the result of a supreme organisation of talent as well as a million and one gizmos, widgets and grommets working together harmoniously.

At the weekly concept meetings at the factory, which Ross chaired, designers and engineers would bring ideas to the table and sit around and discuss which way to go forward on development and design. Good cars don't happen by accident. They are the result of a supreme organisation of talent as well as a million and one gizmos, widgets and grommets working together harmoniously – a thing of beauty when it happens but notoriously hard to achieve. As soon as Ross was on board, there was a buzz about the future. It wasn't going to happen overnight – car design is a long process – so the 2008 season was our year of sacrifice, but, boy, could I see light at the end of the wind tunnel. And then, Honda's shock announcement.

While everyone at the factory tried to ignore the uncertainty surrounding the team's future and press on with that complex process of designing and testing and re-designing and re-testing that would eventually produce the 2009 car, I juggled three options. One was to seek a drive with another team. The problem was that the game of musical seats that determined who drove for which team in 2009 was all but over. While it would have been interesting to have driven for either of the two teams that had vacancies, neither of them would have furthered my career and helped me win the world championship. The second

option was to hang on in at whatever became of Honda F1 and fasten my seatbelt for the white-knuckle ride that would be helping the team to find a sponsor in time to line up on the grid in Melbourne on 29 March. Failing that, the third 'option' was to take a year out.

The suspense was unsettling. Richard and I chewed over these possibilities endlessly. Always at the back of my mind was the car. It was so frustrating to think that we might not make it to the grid in this car, and that it might not turn a wheel in anger. I knew it was good. I'd seen the investment from Japan; I'd been in on the Brawn-led development right from the start. I'd felt the quality and knew that it went right through the entire Honda F1 organisation. I couldn't believe that no one would want to buy a team of hardworking, dynamic engineers. In the end, there was no decision to make. We stayed loyal to our team and, with a shake of the hand and firm look in the eye, determined to focus on getting that car to the grid in Melbourne.

The hat was brimming with names of potential buyers, headed by Sir Richard Branson, Dr Vijay Mallya, Achilleas Kallakis the Greek shipping magnate, Carlos Slim, the Mexican media tycoon (who a few years ago had been declared the richest man in the world); and Prodrive, the motorsport engineering group associated with World Rally Championship entries led by Dave Richards, himself the former team principal of the team when it was BAR-Honda. Richard, my manager, was on the case and would never let it go. He was pushing very hard to help interest a buyer in securing the team while keeping me informed as much as he could about which parties were shaping up, what the respective implications would be, and how much Honda would help us out with transitional financing.

On some days the news looked positive; on others, it looked anything but. We'd have three days of feeling positive and

then four days of accepting that whatever scenario we were entertaining was not going to happen. You never knew which way it was going to swing. It didn't help that there was a lot of stuff going on in the upper echelons of the sport which we weren't party to. Honda's billion-dollar exit had prompted headlines like 'F1 in crisis!' And there were broader political issues. The Team That Was Once Honda had to line up on the grid in Melbourne in some shape or form, or Bernie Ecclestone would be penalised for not having twenty cars on the grid.

'Jenson, it's Frank. How are you feeling?'

One of the first people to call me after the initial news broke was Frank Williams, who had been responsible for giving me my Formula One break in 2000. 'Hope you are okay. I'm sure it will work itself out.' He was very positive. It was good to hear from Frank. When he gave me my Formula One debut I was nineteen, though twenty by the time of the first race in Melbourne. He was very paternal and he'd told me: 'Always work to be as fit as you can and spend time with the team, always pushing forward.' Frank's advice even fitted this strange set of circumstances. The team remained incredibly focused. Sometimes they didn't know as much information as me, which is probably just as well. But Frank was right, you've got to push the team and stay as fit as possible. That is what I did. I spent another week in Lanzarote with Mikey and John, putting in the training hours – although I discovered how hard it is to train when you don't know what you're training for.

My family – mum, the old boy, my sisters Tanya, Samantha and Natasha – my mates and my girlfriend were all unerringly positive. Perhaps it's her Japanese upbringing, but Jessica is very philosophical and believes in star signs – which I don't so much. She was very confident things would turn around. She is a fashion model and a popular personality in Japan – her blog

gets more than 100,000 hits a day! We met in a restaurant in Tokyo in February 2008 while I was fulfilling a PR engagement for Honda. She was with a female friend of mine. Later I spoke to my friend, got her number and called her a couple of times just for a friendly chat. We didn't meet again until the Japanese Grand Prix last year in November. I invited her. She came along, and... yeah! She's been with me through the really difficult winter months. She's very matter of fact, very positive. Overnight it felt like I'd known her for years. She understood me so quickly. And she absolutely loves racing. It's so important to me that my girlfriend cares about what I do.

I kept the old boy informed as much as I could. We never, ever, spoke in negative terms. In fact, we never dwelt on the subject at all. I was headlong into training. Triathlon is an all-consuming discipline which I had taken up when things were going badly at Honda. When it comes to training I have the lowest boredom threshold, but the mix of running, cycling and swimming is the perfect challenge. It was tough underachieving at race weekends but I found training and racing in triathlon got rid of the frustration, because there is a direct correlation between effort put in and reward taken out. If I achieved a goal, or a new personal best, it was down to me, not the bike, the trainers or the goggles! Triathlons give me a buzz, and I relish the hard training because I'm the one in control.

I didn't speak to any other driver during the winter. In our free time, we drivers are friendly, without being friends exactly – except perhaps for the poker gang led by Robert Kubica and Giancarlo Fisichella, which can involve Tonio Liuzzi, Fernando Alonso, Nico Rosberg, Adrian Sutil and Rubens. The driver I speak to most often is David 'DC' Coulthard. As fellow British drivers, we always got on well. We both made our Formula One debuts courtesy of Frank Williams. Our motorhomes were

parked in the same FIA-alloted area at European grands prix and we are neighbours in Monaco. In his new role as BBC pundit alongside Eddie Jordan, he's been very encouraging. But I would rather hang out with my close friends Chrissy Buncombe – who runs Halycon Events, which organises corporate hospitality packages at grands prix – and Richie Williams, who races in Porsche Supercup, one of the motorsport categories that follows F1 around Europe. So they are always at a grand prix, and it's a good little family.

Ever since the age of eight my life has been precisely attuned to the rhythms of the motorsport calendar, and now it was 'on hold'.

Formula One is nothing if not good at keeping up appearances, so despite the havoc that the credit crisis was causing to the motor industry, it was seemingly business as usual in the pre-season build-up. Other teams were launching their cars, Donington was given the green light as a venue for the British Grand Prix and the usual rumour-mill about the respective performances of each car was spinning with almost invisible speed. I preferred not to know about any of it. There was a tangible excitement about a new era, ushered in by new regulations which put all the teams back on a level. But I couldn't yet see a way to being part of it. I cut myself off. I didn't log on to Autosport or F1 Racing or anything on the internet. If I wasn't racing, I wasn't interested in racing at all. It was too painful. I avoided the motorsport magazines, which previously I had devoured hungrily. I shunned racing altogether. I was just training and keeping in touch with the factory. It was strange. Ever since the age of eight my life has been precisely attuned to the rhythms of the motorsport calendar, and now it was 'on hold'.

I rarely spoke to Nick Fry, the Chief Executive Officer of Honda F1 Racing, who was previously CEO of British American Racing before Honda bought out the team in late 2005, two seasons after my arrival from Renault in 2004. Nick knew where I was. He knew exactly where I wanted to be. It was not necessary to keep calling him, pushing him on points, so I just left him to it. I didn't speak much to Ross either. They knew I was focused on driving for the team. They knew I was prepared to play my part in helping the team secure its future, which was obviously to take a wage cut. By the end of the 2009 season, I will have earned some twenty per cent of what I would have earned under the terms of my previous contract with Honda. But I didn't – and don't – care. It helped the team, and it helped provide me with a car that I love to drive. Money means nothing when you have the chance to race in a front-running car with the world championship in your sights.

The potential buyout options now blur into one. I heard about Ross Brawn's offer of a management buyout from Richard. Other parties were still interested, however. Analysing the options, we agreed the management buyout offer was positive. It meant Ross would stay around and apply his inimitable focus to make it the best team in the world. But, with a small privateer team, you worry about money, and the sums that could be invested in development and upgrades for the car throughout the season. Maybe a tycoon-style buyer was a better option? It was hard weighing up which direction was best.

In the end, the management buyout with a little help from Honda won the day. Meanwhile, a deal with Mercedes-Benz had been swung to supply engines. Ross had actually rung Mercedes on the very day Honda pulled out, which shows how badly he wanted to see his first car race. The question soon arose as to what name to give the team. Ross considered 'Tyrrell', since the team's

DNA goes back via BAR-Honda to the late Ken Tyrrell's team, which had enjoyed its heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Jackie Stewart behind the wheel. But the feedback was that 'Tyrrell' was a name that no longer resonated with a modern F1 audience. A subsequent brainstorming of generic names produced Pure Racing, but that would mean we'd be the Pure-Mercedes team which Mercedes vetoed. At that point, Caroline, a secretary in the team's legal office handling the contracts, said: 'Why not Brawn?' I thought this was a very positive move. Brawn is a good strong name, not only in the literal sense but also because Ross is a legend in the sport – although people have turned it into Prawn Racing! With Ross owning the team and his name emblazoned across the car, he couldn't possibly screw up, could he?! As an engineer-turned-owner, he takes a lot of pressure, but he can handle it. He never looks ruffled. He's handled pressure for many years in Formula One. I think the buyout has made him even stronger. Now that Ross owns the team, he's become more of a facilitator than a designer. He has turned the team around. The name has puzzled a few observers, however. In Bahrain, I read an article in a local paper the day after the race. The columnist wrote that, of course, people will buy a Ferrari road car if Ferrari is racing in F1. But he couldn't figure out why someone would buy a shaver just because they sponsor an F1 team!

On the evening of Wednesday, 4 March Ross called me to request I come to the factory the next day. He said we were doing the shakedown test on Friday. 'We need to do it if we're going racing and we can afford to do it,' he said. On Thursday morning I arrived to find the entire workforce assembled in the car bays, the area where the cars get fondled. Ross stood up with Nick Fry and announced we would be racing in 2009, that our name would be Brawn GP and that we would have our shakedown at

Silverstone the following day. Ross's speech prompted whoops of joy, but it was that last-minute. After weeks of uncertainty, worry, frustration and stress, it was a massive relief to read the official announcement released on 5 March:

> Honda Motor Company Limited and Ross Brawn are pleased to confirm that they have reached agreement to secure the future of the former Honda Racing F1 Team. With immediate effect, Honda will pass ownership to Ross Brawn, Team Principal of the new Brawn GP Formula One Team.
>
> Brawn GP has agreed a partnership with Mercedes-Benz High Performance Engines, Brixworth, UK to supply the team with its 2.4-litre Mercedes-Benz FO108W Formula One engines.
>
> The team can confirm that its race driver line-up for the 2009 season will combine the talents of two of Formula One's most experienced drivers in Jenson Button and Rubens Barrichello. The race-winning drivers continue their partnership at the team for a fourth consecutive year, forming the most experienced driver partnership on the grid with 423 grand prix starts between the pair.

We also knew, however, that there would be cost cutting and job losses. It was an uneasy situation. Some people were very happy, others worried about their futures.

The Car

Silverstone was absolutely freezing for the shakedown. Budgets being what they were, we had a little tent to base ourselves in. It was like Formula Ford days again with a limited number of people present for a private testing session. No press. No fans.

Just team members. To hear the Mercedes engine fire up in the crisp spring air was a very special moment. It was very emotional to see the car hit the circuit for its maiden run. The BGP 001 was testimony to the collective pride of the team with its common spirit, courage, stamina, ambition and dream. Throughout that day, every single team member came up at some point to see the car go round.

To hear the Mercedes engine fire up in the crisp spring air was a very special moment. It was very emotional to see the car hit the circuit for its maiden run.

The purpose of a shakedown is to run through a systems check on a new car and collect base data. It was amazing, at last, to drive the car, even though I couldn't get a feeling for how good it was when fully unleashed because we ran the shakedown on the club circuit at Silverstone – the school circuit – and not the grand prix track. We had no problems at all. It was a breeze. It was the first time out with the Mercedes-Benz engine and we very quickly ironed out the drivability issues with the engine. Working with Mercedes under the time constraints turned out exceptionally well. New partnerships can require familiarisation periods as engine manufacturer and chassis constructor learn to work together, but it was never a case of Brawn GP and Mercedes-Benz. It felt like we had been working together as Brawn-Mercedes for a decade.

I have never got into a car for a shakedown feeling such a buzz. How often does a driver get to try out the first car of a team making its Formula One debut? Well, a lot of established Formula One drivers wouldn't want to, but Brawn GP wasn't really a new team except in name. Yet there was something new in the air – a freshness of approach and a feeling of pure

excitement. The BGP 001 was painted in its new unfussy yellow and white livery. I like simple colour schemes, especially after the busy ones we'd had previously at Honda. The look and shape of the car appealed to me. The nose was very different to that of any other car. Everything was perfect. It all fitted together so well. You could see passion shining from the eyes of every member of the team as the car ran on the circuit for the first time.

Every previous car I've been involved with had been a slight rush to get ready. But when the mechanics put the engine cover and side pods on the BGP 001 – and we're talking fitting pieces together to within 0.1mm of each other – everything matched beautifully. There were no overlapping parts. Everything about the car had been thought out so carefully. There wasn't a single area that I could say was not perfect. This is almost incredible when you think the car had been designed for the Honda power unit, not the Mercedes. The gearbox was higher than it should be for the new engine. Everything had to be modified and thrown together at the last minute. It was thrown together very well I must say!

A seat fit can be a laborious process that takes a couple of days. You sit in a cockpit and wait as a foam mixture grows and hardens around you, taking a perfect mould of your shape in order to form a solid, supportive, comfortable seat. Often the first attempt is botched. You trim it, but still it doesn't quite work. You try again... and again. You need a few attempts to get it right, but this time it was all so easy, just a morning's work. They trimmed it up and it felt so comfortable. I sit much lower in the BGP 001 than in previous cars, which also makes me feel more comfortable. So it was all coming together nicely: my first drive at Silverstone, in the ideal position in the cockpit, in a great seat. None of those eve-of-season niggly little comfort issues was there. I was in a great place to concentrate on improving our performance.