

## NIKI LAUDA

### **The great racing driver faced a new challenge running the Jaguar Formula One team.**

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When Niki Lauda was asked to wear a suit for the launch of the Jaguar R3 racing car, he refused. ‘No,’ he said, ‘there’s no need. I’m different: I only have one ear.’

This may have been an exaggeration – his right ear, though small and shrivelled, is still recognisable as such – but, says Jaguar’s public affairs manager Nav Sidhu, ‘We both knew what he meant.’ Lauda’s near-immolation in the German Grand Prix 26 years ago, and his comeback to win a second and third World Championship, sets him apart in a sport with no shortage of heroes. Lazarus can wear what he pleases.

So when Lauda appeared before the international motor-racing press in a disco-lit hangar in Milton Keynes, it was in his customary of uniform of jeans, V-neck jumper, well-cut jacket and – his own red badge of courage – the Parmalat baseball cap which he wears to hide the scars on his head. He had, unusually, put on a tie (at his wedding he had to borrow one from his best man), and though the effect was undermined by the fact that one of his fly buttons was undone, the discovery is unlikely to have fazed him. Despite being born into a prominent Viennese family, he is a blunt, down-to-earth man who expresses himself in what he calls (with a chuckle) ‘straightforward Austrian-English words’, and his mission statement is refreshingly simple: ‘Don’t talk bullshit and have a million meetings – do something.’

Lauda’s employment by Jaguar at the age of 52 represents yet another come-back. After finally retiring as a driver in 1985, he threw himself

heart and soul into his own airline, Lauda Air, only to be ousted in an acrimonious take-over fifteen months ago. Last February, with the encouragement of his old friend Bernie Ecclestone, he agreed to move from Vienna to London and take charge of Ford's Premier Performance Division, of which Jaguar is part.

Initially, Lauda's job was to co-ordinate the work of Jaguar Racing and its two key suppliers – Cosworth, who make its engines, and Pi, who provide its electronics – while another ex-driver, Bobby Rahal, handled the actual running of the team. In August, however, Rahal returned home to America, and Lauda took on the additional job of team principal – having, some believe, done some acrimonious ousting of his own.

On arrival at Jaguar's Milton Keynes headquarters, the enormity of the challenge facing Lauda is not immediately apparent. In the reception area, gold and silver trophies gleam like the gifts of the Magi. The workshops are, disappointingly, just as spick and span: instead of grease monkeys sprawled under grimy chassis, immaculate technicians fuss around state-of-the art equipment. Rubber tubing spills from something closely resembling a washing machine, as if an alien had been through the heavy-soil cycle; there is even one of those fiendish lasers for cutting James Bond in half (though its function here is to measure the precise symmetry of a car).

Pry a little closer, however, and you find that this jaguar has paws of clay. The silver trophies are merely for Formula 3; the gold, for a single event – the German Grand Prix – won three years ago by the team in its previous incarnation, Ford Stewart. Although that victory generated great excitement at the time, it proved a false dawn; Jaguar had a miserable season in 2000, and did only marginally better last year, finishing eight out of eleven in the constructors' championship. Lauda believes that the

team needs to rise to fifth or sixth position this season if it is ever to challenge the giants of Ferrari, McLaren and Williams.

It is hard to meet Lauda without feeling a degree of apprehension. So badly was he burned in his accident at Nurburgring that, he says, ‘My wife could only recognise my feet. She screamed and had a nervous breakdown.’ Despite this, he refused to have more than the minimum of plastic surgery – just enough, famously, to allow him to drive in the Italian Grand Prix six weeks later.

In the event, it is the parts unscarred by the flames which strike one most: the pale hands, and the blue eyes (one admittedly opening wider than the other) rendered all the more intense by the surrounding skin, which – dark and mottled – suggests the underside of an ancient bar of Fruit & Nut. Staring from beneath his baseball cap, he might be a tortoise peeping from its shell.

This may seem disrespectful to a man who inhabits a world of hares and who, in his racing days, regularly outstripped them all; but the more one observes him, the more true it seems. It is not that he is shy, simply that he keeps his own counsel: he will answer a fusillade of questions without flinching, allow his face to crack into a smile at one of his own jokes, and then, before you know it, retreat into some hidden, private place.

His gospel is above all one of self-reliance – or, in Laudaspeak, ‘If you are in the shit, always try to solve the problem yourself.’ He tells the story of a friend who rang him to make a business appointment: ‘I knew I couldn’t go, because I had my kidney transplant coming up, but I didn’t tell him that – I said it was my appendix. Why worry him with my personal problem when he can’t help?’

Even his driving, fast and fearless as it was, had something tortoiselike about it: a reliance on willpower and calculation rather than flying by the

seat of his pants. 'I've worked closely with three drivers who I would rank as the greatest,' says Jaguar's technical director Steve Nichols: 'Prost, Senna and Lauda. They were all very different characters, but the thing that set Niki apart was his iron-willed determination to succeed – and I haven't seen any diminution of that in him as a team principal.'

In his 1985 autobiography, *To Hell and Back*, Lauda outlines what he calls his 'system': in essence, a sublimation of emotion so that all one's energy can be channelled into dealing rationally with the problem in hand. Asked whether he has found his team's recent performances frustrating, he says no: 'I'm not a dreamer who says, "Do this and you suddenly have a car which is winning a race."' It's really hard work which can be simply analysed: we know the steps that we have to take.'

Intriguingly, the book describes the system as a carapace: 'I am not prepared to let my feelings run riot,' he declares. 'I'm too sensitive, too emotional to let that happen.' He qualifies this today by saying that his brush with death at Nurburgring allowed him to open up in his personal life, if not his professional one: 'Before the accident, I was so focussed on racing that I was a very unpleasant person. Afterwards, I could still focus on it, but I was able to split myself: I was more easy-going with my wife, more friendly and funny. It made me in general terms a nicer person.'

The desire to race at the highest level was not always there, though the fascination with driving was. At 15, without a licence, he was hurtling down the public highway in the huge trucks belonging to his family's paper business. 'I used to get up every morning at 3, without anybody knowing,' he explains. 'I knew one driver who said, "I'm tired in the morning, so you can drive"'. So I drove until 5 or 6, and when the light came up we swapped seats.'

By 18 he was racing Mini Coopers, and two years later graduated to Formula 3. His business skills developed alongside his sporting

prowess: disowned by his family, he had to hustle for sponsorship to support his career, and borrow sums which – had he failed – would have bankrupted him. At the start of his Formula One career, he had to pay March to let him drive for them; by the end of it, he was earning twice as much as his rivals. He also became an adept politician, surviving the Borgia-like intrigues of the Ferrari team and, in 1982, leading a successful drivers' strike.

These qualities were needed in spades when, after discovering the thrill of flying as a private pilot, he decided to start his own airline, based in Vienna. 'Austria is dominated by Austrian Airlines, and it was always going to be a tough battle,' explains Wayne Miller, a consultant who spent four years working for Lauda. 'There was the same relationship between them and Lauda Air as we have between British Airways and Virgin: the traditional carrier against an innovative airline with a dynamic chairman. There was a great spirit in the company, with young, dynamic people and very few boundaries. Niki really does know how to create a loyal following.' (This was confirmed at the press launch of the R3, when I overheard Lauda discussing a repeat presentation for the Jaguar workforce with the drivers Eddie Irvine and Pedro de la Rosa. Was it necessary, they asked him, for all three of them to be on the platform? Yes, he said, it was.)

Starting with a single 44-seater Fokker 27, Lauda Air expanded into a successful public company. In the late Nineties, however, it was hit by rising fuel costs and the weakness of European currencies against the dollar. Lauda's old enemy, Austrian Airlines, seized the opportunity to buy a 36% share in the company, and in November 2000 managed to manoeuvre him out.

At the time, Lauda inveighed bitterly against the business ethos of his native land, but now he is able to view the experience more stoically.

Asked whether he feels a sense of failure, he says no: ‘After all, I built Lauda Air from nothing – against a state monopoly – to 22 aeroplanes. They wanted to run it their own way, which can’t work, so I left – which is logical if things happen that you can’t control. But I’d done it long enough.’

Does he find the British easy to do business with? He laughs. ‘No. The British are very polite, they’re very friendly, but I would like to see a little bit more self-criticism. If something goes wrong and the shit hits the fan, it is “It’s him” – “It’s him” – “It’s him”.’ He mimics a line of buck-passers.

By way of illustration, he cites the late James Hunt, who was one of his greatest friends. ‘When we started out, we couldn’t finish any of the races. James said, “Don’t worry, Niki, it’s very simple – take the excuse book.” And he gave me a little book which said, “Shock Absorbers – Tyres – Engine – Oil”. So I said, “What the fuck is this?” And he said, “When you don’t finish, just open it up, pick one thing, and tell it to them: that’s the way you survive.” So I said, “Are you nuts?”’ Instead of taking the book, he persuaded Hunt to throw it away; they both went on to become World Champions.

As it happens, the Jaguar team currently has an excuse with a capital E. For the past two seasons, it has lacked its own wind tunnel – an essential piece of equipment in aerodynamic design work – and has had to make do with one in California. (‘We’d find something wrong with the car,’ says Eddie Irvine, ‘and have to wait three weeks to get an answer to it.’) From this month [February], that will change, as a new facility opens up in Bicester: Jaguar Racing must put up or shut up.

The R3’s predecessors, it is generally agreed, were reliable but slow. I put it to a senior member of the Jaguar staff that, given that last season’s problems lay with the car (which, though inherited, was Lauda’s

responsibility) rather than the team, it was unfair that Bobby Rahal should have been the one to go. ‘You’ll have to draw your own conclusions about that,’ he said. ‘But you could probably write a book about it.’ Motor racing, he added, is like politics: ‘It’s full of strong personalities, and the first rule is to keep power.’

Rahal, a former Indycar champion, is a popular figure (‘a very polished interfacier – very affable’), but he and Lauda appear to have been on a collision course from the start. ‘When Niki Lauda’s appointment was announced,’ remarks one motorsport correspondent, ‘a lot of people said, “One of the will be gone by the end of the season”.’ Lauda’s great advantage was to have the ear of Jaguar’s chairman, Wolfgang Reitzle; Rahal’s great mistake was to try to sell Eddie Irvine.

Although Lauda would only ever select a driver on merit, it is clear that there is a special bond between him and Irvine. For one thing, Irvine was a protégé of James Hunt’s, and he and his boss can sometimes be seen on the town together, re-enacting the excesses of the Lauda/Hunt Formula Fun team. ‘What makes their relationship so good is that they come from the same mould,’ says Nav Sidhu, ‘though Niki is probably a more hard-core version of Eddie.’

Nothing, therefore, could have been more calculated to irritate Lauda than the discovery that Rahal had secretly been negotiating Irvine’s transfer to the Jordan team. According to Lauda, ‘Bobby defended the issue by saying that it was no more than a joke, but unfortunately jokes like this with existing drivers do not work very well. I stepped in and ended whatever discussion was taking place at the time.’ (Lauda, for his part, infuriated Rahal by giving the Arrows team permission to use the same engine as Jaguar, the Cosworth V10.)

In the end, Lauda claims, commitment was the decisive factor: ‘Bobby Rahal had a lot of other jobs he was doing, flying forwards and

backwards to the United States. A Formula One team doesn't work like this: Frank Williams and all these guys, they're there twelve hours a day, and that's what it takes if you want to beat them. I never wanted to take this job, but if you're in charge of the whole group and suddenly someone's missing in the most important part of it, the logic is to do it yourself.' Rahal was dismissed from Jaguar without having completed a full season.

On the ground, the extension of Lauda's role has met with guarded enthusiasm. 'Motor racing needs stability and needs direction,' says Jaguar's chief designer, John Russell. 'We call seasons campaigns for a good reason – this is the nearest thing to war without going out and injuring people with weapons. Niki is an aggressive and tough guy, and hopefully he will give us that stability.' One of his colleagues, however, reveals a degree of scepticism: 'We seem to have this thing about three-times champions,' he says. 'Jackie Stewart was one, and so was Bobby Rahal, and now we've got Niki Lauda.'

There was scepticism, too, about Lauda's decision to try out one of the team's cars for himself during pre-season testing at Valencia. Eddie Irvine and Pedro de la Rosa were clearly anxious about being shown up by their boss. 'I've asked the guys to make sure that he goes as slow as possible,' joked Irvine at the R3 launch, to which de la Rosa added, 'I'd love to see him crash – honestly.' On the day, Lauda spun off twice in three laps – but still insisted that the experiment was worthwhile, since it gave him a better understanding of what his drivers were dealing with. 'I was told by the engineers that I went into the corner as quickly as Pedro de la Rosa,' he added mischievously. 'The difference is that I didn't make the corner.'

Elsewhere in Spain, another Lauda can be seen in action this season – Niki's 20-year-old son Matthias, who has recently begun racing under the

management of his older brother Lucas. This is the subject of such tension in the family that at first their father would only discuss it off the record, though he subsequently relented.

‘The boys came to me and asked if they could take my Jaguar and drive to Prague,’ he explained. ‘I had no idea why – I thought they wanted to screw some girls there or something. Then they came to Vienna and Lucas said, “I didn’t go to Prague, I went to Prin and organised for Matthias to test drive a Formula 3 car. And do you know why I had to lie to you? Because you were sitting in a restaurant with us and reading the newspaper, and Matthias asked you, ‘Is there any chance I can try a racing car one day?’ And you without even looking up from your newspaper said, ‘Fuck you guys, there’s no way’. And that pissed us off so much that I decided to arrange it myself”.’

Their father laughs. ‘I was surprised that they did it – but on the other hand I thought, “Shit, this is not bad, I would have done the same thing”. The real problem is Marlene.’

Although Lauda claims to have felt little fear in his racing days – ‘After the Nurburgring I had some difficulties, but it took me one practice and it was fixed again’ – he is, to his own amusement, plainly intimidated by his ex-wife. (The couple divorced ?? years ago, but remain close.)

‘Marlene hates racing like you would not believe,’ he says. ‘I married her and three months later I nearly killed myself, so whenever I raced afterwards she said, “Do whatever you want, but I don’t want to know.” She feels it in her stomach – when I drive with her in the car and go quicker around a corner, she screams. If she finds out that we boys are helping Matthias, she will just kill us.’

By the time of my second interview with Lauda, the news of Matthias’s exploits had leaked out. It was the first testing day of the season, at the Spanish Grand Prix track near Barcelona. And Matthias had come to

watch the R3 being put through its paces. ‘My mother was angry,’ he admitted. ‘She started crying. She always hoped that I would do something normal and not be a racing driver.’ Had his father given him any career advice? ‘He just said it’s my life. If I’m doing good, fine; if I’m doing bad, leave.’

It was not an auspicious day for testing. The hills overlooking Barcelona were shrouded in mist, and the rain in Spain seemed to be falling mainly on the motorway to the Circuit de Catalunya. ‘50 kph’ was the speed recommended by flashing electronic road signs; Irvine and de la Rosa were hoping to record around ???

In the pits, the now familiar standards of cleanliness pertained: indeed, had the mechanics swapped their green Jaguar overalls for surgeons’ gowns, they might almost have passed for the cast of *ER*, mustered around the operating table. The car stood under a gleaming lighting rig, attached to its own life-support system – sensors measuring everything from air input to fuel pressure – while a man with an aerosol and a fistful of tissues dabbed at already immaculate bodywork. ‘When you’ve got sponsors paying \$?? million each,’ Nav Sidhu explained, ‘they don’t want to see oil smeared on their logos.’

As the morning passed – the weather improving, but the track so wet that it gave few clues to the car’s capabilities – Niki Lauda hovered on the edge of the action, hands thrust deep in his pockets, chatting to Jaguar’s MD Guenther Steiner or watching the mechanics, ever approachable and ever isolated. Later, leaning alone on the pit wall, he had the look of a sage who has spent decades in profound thought, and feels not released but weighed down by the wisdom he has garnered.

There is no doubt that he will give Jaguar his best shot. ‘Whatever I do,’ he says, ‘even if it’s crazy things, I try to do it perfectly. Some

people have great ideas, but you have to do everything to the last detail to win. That really is my strength.'

Will it prove enough? 'I'm sure that he has the potential if he's given the backing,' says Stirling Moss. 'He's a very, very capable man: he's a fighter, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly. But however brilliant he is, it depends on so much more – whether you can get the right driver, and wind-tunnel, and designer – and one can't judge without knowing what his budget from Ford will be. The one thing I'm confident of is this: I don't know anyone more competent to make Jaguar work.'

As the afternoon testing session began, a posse of rival cars emerged from the pits and swept away like Tolkien's Dark Riders unleashed upon Middle Earth. Eddie Irvine pulled on a flameproof balaclava, donned his helmet, and stepped into the R3. The garage door swung up, the tyre covers were removed, and the engine fired with a reverberation that you could feel in your sternum. A moment later the car was a red tail light vanishing into the distance. An observation of Lauda's came to mind: 'In the end there's only one man driving the car, whatever the car is: it's the driver that gives the result, not the aerodynamics.'

The mechanics stood on the side of the track, arms folded, suddenly powerless, waiting in silence for their ring-bearer to return.