

Marcus Pye



Humble Pye

"There's no place to hide for champions in the 16th award shootout"

MICHAEL Schumacher is the best of the best. We all know that. Seven world championship titles in 11 seasons – the last five on the trot with Ferrari – have left an indelible legend in the history of this multi-billion dollar business which started out more than 100 years ago as sport.

Bizarrely, though, the German's record in Formula Ford 1600 was nothing to write home about. Certainly few pundits marked him out for superstardom on the strength of a solitary Festival appearance in 1988, when a collision (with Andrew Guey-Johnson) put him out in the heats.

Indeed, Schumacher's successes on the nursery slopes as a whole did not even vaguely hint that he would one day shine head and shoulders above his peer group in grands prix. Let alone get there...

Getting to Formula 1 remains improbable for most aspirants, regardless of their ability behind the wheel. Yet, regardless of the fact that finding a Formula 3 budget privately is beyond reach of all but the most affluent British competitor's families, there is no shortage of young talent striving to forge a way through. Battling to find that 'lucky break'.

Such a lifeline was thrown to Schumacher with a place in Mercedes-Benz's junior sportscar team for 1990. Along with his compatriot Heinz-Harald Frentzen and Austria's Karl Wendlinger, Schumacher was mentored by a senior team member (Jochen Mass in Michael's case) and the endurance racing wins started coming. He didn't look back.

Unfortunately, the current diversity of single-seater categories does nothing to promote head-to-head racing between all the hopefuls of a generation, and a clear path to the top. Instead, it fosters a multi-streamed 'system' in which they can actively avoid one another – and maybe the eyes of F1's scouts?

Professional motor racing should be about competition all the way, beating fellow rising stars or spiking the reputations of those already at their peak. Many did just that in the wonderful F2 of the early '70s, when grand prix drivers weren't too precious (or over-contracted) to race for the hell of it elsewhere.

Finding budgets for new waves of British drivers to climb the ladder has never been more difficult. Nor has determining who deserves support. That's why this year's McLaren Autosport BRDC Award has pitched the champions of formulas Renault, Palmer Audi and (for the first time) BMW together with EuroBOSS's record-pulverising champion-elect. And a couple of rivals capable of upsetting the form book.

There's no place to hide in the 16th driver award shootout. Nor should there be. But wouldn't it still be great to see Michael Schumacher and five F1 rivals (from the current grid, plus Friday testers) undertake a similar test on a level playing field? In a Minardi. Would the result be the same?



Last year's award finalists proved there's plenty of British talent

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