

The BOSS route

Driving an old Benetton at national level could be Scott Mansell's ticket to GP glory, as Damien Smith finds out

TALK CURVE

HISTORIC MOTORSPORT INSIGHT

Mansell on a charge at Donington. Racing an old F1 car is cheaper than a season in F3, he reckons



FACT FILE

Mansell's outright lap records

Brands Hatch*	38.032sec (116.06mph)
Silverstone**	47.404sec (124.47mph)
Donington**	55.859sec (126.14mph)
Zolder	1min20.068sec (111.1mph)
Lausitz	1min32.059sec (110.23mph)

*Indy circuit **National circuit

You are an ambitious 18-year-old with your sights locked on Formula One. But you are one in a thousand racing drivers, all of whom are clambering for a foothold on a slippery slope. There is more than one route to the top, but which one do you take? You could choose an obscure path: it might lead to a dead end, but then again it could bypass the junior single-seater frenzy completely and leave you within reach of the pinnacle.

Yes, the EuroBOSS series for pre-1998 F1, Indy and F3000 cars, is well off the beaten track for career drivers. These spectacular cars are usually the preserve of rich amateurs, but Scott Mansell insists it could be his ticket to the top.

"At the start of the season I did have my doubts that I was doing the right thing," he says. "Now I'm sure it's right."

Mansell – who is no relation to his famous namesake – had planned to be more conventional this year and compete in Formula BMW. He had already raced and impressed in the Benetton B197 run by his father Kevin, an established car builder and historic racer. When they realised a season in a 700bhp F1 car was only slightly more expensive than a year in a 140bhp one-make series, a plan formed. "This experi-



'Over 700bhp and no driver aids is great for Scott's experience'

ence has got to give me an advantage," says Scott.

For his father, 2004 will not be a year of great profit. Mansell Snr makes his living running these cars for customers, but has sacrificed a season to run his son, with financial support from Zig-Zag, a cigarette rolling paper company.

The ex-Jean Alesi racer, which

finished second in the 1997 British Grand Prix, is a long way from its original spec. A 4-litre Judd V10 sportscar engine has replaced the Renault V10, and the complex electronic hardware and software is gone. The paddle gearshift has been replaced by a conventional sequential unit and now there's no power steering or fly-by-wire clutch and throttle. The hydraulic differential has survived, but the compact six-man Mansell Motorsport team does not have the high-tech programme to map the variable limited slip that created the effects of traction control, designed to sidestep F1's ban on driver aids back in '97.

"It's better this way," says Kevin Mansell. "To have over 700bhp with no driver aids is great for Scott's experience. It does create problems, though. For example, braking distances are superior to the speed a driver can get down the gears without the paddle shift. Scott has no time to heel and toe."

Even without the electronics, the Benetton is still high maintenance. "We can't 'life' parts like they do in F1, we have to rebuild everything after every race," says Kevin. "We are lucky to be situated just off the M42 with lots of companies around us who can test components for us."

Driver and team have to be really

very careful when there is so much at stake. When a new Judd costs £55,000, a season for a lower-budget set-up like this can soon be cut short.

But the care has paid off. "We've only had one failure in a race, and even then Scott stopped before any significant damage could be done," says Mansell Snr. So the bill for an eight-race season? Around £200,000 – that's half of a contemporary Formula Three budget.

F1 driving experience is all very well, but Scott Mansell needs to get noticed if he is to achieve his aim of graduating to the new GP2 grand prix support series next year. Four wins and five outright circuit lap records (see above) should help.


Mansell Snr claims that people are taking notice. He even reports interest from other young drivers hoping to follow in Scott's footsteps next year. But the jury remains out on how he will stack up against his peers. An answer to that question could be on the horizon, and if it is a positive one, that unlikely EuroBOSS path to the top might not be obscure for much longer. 

photo: John Coley