

Some Rich Guys Are People Too; A Formula 1 Tale

Ever since the age of nine I've been a Formula 1 fan. Growing up in the southern-midwest, it wasn't always easy to follow it on television. Occasionally there would be a race on The Wide World Of Sports, out of a St Louis station. Jackie Stewart was my favorite driver at the time, it must have been around 1970. My mother loved racing, and used to take me to the dirt-oval sprint-car races that she found so exciting. I soon found them boring; driving around in a circle until they wrecked didn't hold any allure for me, but what did was the fact that there would be strange girls my age there.

My father on the other hand disliked all types of auto racing, even though as a youth he and his older brother would race model Ts'. He was famous for saying, "if one of those races ever came to my town, I would get in my car and drive as far away as possible." My reaction would be, "Oh, you must be talking about NASCAR Dad". It would inspire me to try to debate him over a few beers at the local Canadian Legion Pub in south-western Ontario, where I grew up in my teens. However hard I tried, I could not get him interested in F1. I lost him to a drunk driver/socialized health care system in 2002. The stress from having him in a coma for a week was unbearable, and I suffered 2 back- to-back heart attacks. While I tried to heal, I was totally inconsolable for two years afterward.

In 2004, I decided to try to go to both Montreal and Indy for the F1 races. The most affordable way for me to travel though was to fix my dads car, a '95 Buick Regal, and take it. The brake lights would not work, and I had to take the steering-wheel off and replace the turn indicator switch.

I drove all night from Windsor, to Montreal, which was a ten hour trip. I arrived at eight in the morning Thursday, the day of the pit walk-through, and paid for my campsite. It was \$125.00 for four days. I was so excited that I didn't even set up my tent! Somehow I managed to find my way to the subway terminal, and got to the gate just in time to catch one of the busses that was leaving for the pits. My general admission ticket was \$90.00 Canadian. How neat it was to drive around the Circuit de Gilles Villeneuve, the driver was really booting it too! It was a gloriously sunny day in Montreal, and life was starting to feel better.

The next day, early before Friday practice, I happened to wander up into the inner casino hairpin grandstand in section 34. I went all the way to the top and sat right in the middle. Later in the day a fan sitting next to me told me to remain there until the real ticket holders show up,

and then just go sit on the aisle. Every day, until three quarters of the way through the race, I sat up in that same seat with my cooler of beer and food, watching it all. It's been the closest I've ever come to a religious experience.

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Montreal is a fabulous city, I have to say that I have never seen so many good looking women in one place before. It would be a dream come true to be able to live there, but the winters can be pretty rough. I took my guitar downtown one night and played like a street busker. The din from the street was quite loud and no one could really hear me play, but, I still made a dollar and a half in 15 minutes.

Wandering through the crowded downtown area, taking in all the sights and old architecture, I heard the sound of a saxophone being played, so I followed the music and came upon a little girl playing a huge baritone sax; it was as big as her! I stayed and talked with her for about an hour.

Every day was better than the previous one and at the end of the weekend, tuckered-out on Sunday night, I found myself in a gentlemen's club (rare for me) just down the road from my campsite. It was just about empty, the way I prefer them to be. A woman resembling a slightly older Shannon Dougherty, (a dark haired U.S. actress but without the Picasso-like eyes), was getting ready to shoot pool by herself. Immediately smitten, I asked her "bonjour madame, you and I ...shoot pool?" "Oui" she said, and then proceeded to break, wearing only a button down-shirt and very small panties!! I let her win, said "Merci", and went back to my table and sat down. Then I waited for her to get up on stage, figuring she was a dancer. I asked a passing waitress when she would be on stage and she replied "oh, she is just for private dancing."

Mulling it over in my head for about six point five seconds I checked my pulse, which is always too high, I then quickly finished my beer and headed for the door. I went straight back to my tent and to sleep. It was about ten p.m.

Awakening just before dawn, it was raining and cold outside. Packing up my things and departing the campsite, there was only one last terrifying bridge to cross. I was then making good time towards home. All the way back; there just wasn't anything on the radio worth listening too. Past Toronto on the 401 highway, (a death trap in bad weather) I finally settled on a Neil Young

anthology. Coming into London, Ontario, there was a phrase in one of his songs that went; “you have waited your whole life for this one moment.” *How quaint*, I thought, *I’ve had at least one of those*. Just then a bell went off in my dad’s car, “darn turn signal, man I’m getting old” I said aloud. But it wasn’t the turn signal, it was my gas getting low, so off the road I turned on exit 74.

Pulling into a brand new Huskey gas station, I pumped my gas and went inside. There were only a few people inside including the clerk, and I noticed that they had pickled eggs. It was afternoon now and I hadn’t eaten a thing all day, so I decided on three pickled eggs and a bottle of water. At the counter the girl said that the eggs were seventy five cents. “For each one?!” I shrieked. (In my peripheral vision I noticed a man assisting another man, who happened to be handi-capable). *That’s nice*, I thought, *that must be his nephew, or someone close to him*. “Fine, ring me up, I just came from the F1 race in Montreal, might as well splurge a little more”. Something made me do a double take, and focus my eyes on the three gentle men who were now getting ready to leave. Time seemed to slow down dramatically as I gazed at the man in the center. I said to myself, *it can’t be... that cannot be who I think it is. I must be on some hidden camera television show. But how in the world did they find an actor with such impeccable bone structure?* As that thought evaporated, it was replaced by the thought of, *oh my god.. it’s him!!!* The man’s friends were escorting him towards the back of the store, and in a matter of a few seconds they would have their backs to me. I cleared my throat and said, “Frank....sorry about Ralf” (Ralf Schumacher, a Williams F1 driver had been disqualified for brake ducts at Montreal) At that point all three men stopped and turned around. The one man acknowledged me by waving his hand and smiling. “Were you at the race?” one of them asked me with a big smile. “Yes I was, and I had the best time ever, thank you”

“Glad to hear it” he answered. There were a few more pleasantries exchanged, and then the three of them headed off toward the exit. Turning to the counter girl, I asked her if she had any idea who that was. “No.” she said.

“It’s Sir Frank Williams!!!, owner of Williams F1!!!” She gave no visible response.

“Maybe worth a billion dollars!; wait... I’ll be right back!, I think I have one shot left in my camera!!!”

Without paying for anything, I ran out of the store. I tore through the cluttered car and came up with the 30 year old Minolta I bought at a thrift shop for \$6.99. I raced toward the back of the station lot, while checking for the green light on the back of the camera. I was expecting to see a limo, jet-helicopter, or at least a semi-truck with a logo on it, but there was nothing. As I was bent over trying to catch my breath, lamenting, I said out loud “nobody is ever going to believe this...Noobody!”. Out of the corner of my right eye, maybe fifteen feet away, was a sight I’ll never forget. His driver was putting his wheels into the trunk of a Ford Taurus, and Frank was sitting in the passenger seat with his door open!! Fighting off a heart attack, I made my way over to the car. “Please, could I get one shot with Sir Frank?” I squeaked, hoping that I hadn’t gone too far already.

“Sure no problem”, his assistant answered with another friendly smile. As he made his way around the car, I leaned in and said, “Sir Frank, what an honor it is to meet you.” He answered a question I posed to him, and then I reached down and shook his hand. As I looked back up, his driver snapped the shot. All the way back home I was beside myself with delight! I was feeling tremendous and elated about just meeting a Formula one hero of mine. Towards the west the

skies were threatening rain again. I checked myself in the rear-view, it was then I realized, I was wearing a Ferrari shirt.

Indianapolis was my next stop. I didn't want to take my dad's car across the Detroit/Windsor border, so I took the tunnel bus and rented a Toyota Echo in downtown Detroit. It would have been a boring drive had I not stopped at a Meijers store and purchased a Motorhead CD. I was then set for tunes for the whole weekend.

Indianapolis was interesting, but not in the same way that Montreal was. For instance motel rooms in Montreal are upwards of four hundred dollars a night on race weekend, they are all downtown, and you have to take the subway to the track. At Indy the motel rooms are thirty dollars a night, and they are less than a half a mile from the track. For my ticket and camping, right across the street from the speedway, it was \$110.00 U.S. I was pretty stoked!

The fans at Indy were very friendly. Making my way through the crowd Thursday, I tried to find the autograph booth. I wanted to say hi to Bob Varsha but ran into Mario Andretti, who was

busy signing things for people. He was one of my mother's favorite drivers, and very friendly, so I patted him on the back three times. Then I came upon the pavilion where Derek Daly and Stefan Johanson were talking, and taking questions from a fairly large crowd. Having had a few beers at this point, I decided to ask a question when the guy with the mic came by. "Ahem, gentlemen, as you both well know, the Formula 1 rumor mill is always grinding, any truth to the rumor that Jacques Villeneuve might be picking up a drive sometime soon?" They both thought it over for a few seconds, along with the crowd of about a thousand, and then Stephen answered; "You know I doubt that will happen, but it would sure be great for Jacques if it did".

Then it happened. He did drive a couple races for Renault in 2004, and got signed with Sauber for 2005! I was right on the money with that one, hey, it's not easy being a smart drunk.

For the whole weekend at Indy I had my run of the place. It put in in mind of my childhood; roaming all through the old base-ball stadium in Detroit, in the sixties and seventies. My father (an engineer with The Corps) was friends with the treasurer of the Detroit Tigers, and we went to every game for free.

I watched from all around the speedway: at the start finish line, on the grassy knoll, I looked out from the bridge that goes over the track; that was really cool to see the cars going underneath you. Some other fans had lifted up the netting just outside of the chain-link, to get a better glimpse of the track. At one point Michael saw me and a few other fans looking through the fence during practice, gave the red car a little juice, and wagged the back end a bit.

Race-day, I had finally settled on a grandstand seat where I had a view of the cars for about 45 seconds! It was a great seat except that there were no big screens anywhere around, and I had to rely on my hearing, which is quite bad, to stay abreast of the out-of-sight action. A girl next to me said that Ralf had crashed and was hurt bad, and that the medical truck was taking a long time to get to him. I was quite upset by that, as I'd had a similar experience when I was 17. It seemed that those four words spoken to Frank at the gas station were prophetic.

In the process of leaving the track on Saturday after qualifying I had a medicinal puff. Then I met a few local tifosi (a Ferrari fan). 'Keith', showed me a picture on the back of his digital camera of a slender man dressed in silver driving a brand new Harley. "That's Michael", he said. Protesting, I said "what...no way, Michael wouldn't be seen in McLaren type colours, and do you think they would let him drive a bike around in the states?"

"Yep, he came in yesterday with a police escort, we may get a glimpse of him if we are in the right place, he hasn't left yet". I had no reason not to believe him. He didn't seem like a nut case, and his camera looked expensive. The three of us, him, his Mexican looking friend and me, were waiting to see Michael leave; the speedway was getting quite empty at this point. The old yellow-shirted ushers, all wearing identical Indy caps, were trying to herd us along. The Ferrari fan kept saying that everyone but Michael and Ross Brawn had left. So we walked really slow and waited. It was getting quite late at this point, and he and his friend said goodbye.

I walked real slowly out towards the street, my back was screaming at me. There were about seven or eight local corn-fed tifosi loitering around, just past the 12/13 turn grandstand overpass, (one guys Ferrari shirt was very old and faded) who were also trying for a look at Shuey if he happened to drive by. The Indy-capped yellow-shirts were yelling at us to leave, or at least get on the sidewalk. All of a sudden who comes driving up but Jean Todt, driven by the stocky mechanic with the goatee! He rolled down his window, called us over and signed some of their stuff. Me, not really being into autographs, handed him my little free program and he signed it. "Merci Jean", I offered to his surprise. He must have had a good feeling about Indy fans after that.

Maybe twenty seconds later a cop-car came roaring up squealing hard on its brakes. The cop jumped out of his cruiser; fingering his waistline pro-wrestler style, looking a lot like the Simpsons chief Wiggans with a crew-cut, put on his hat and started screaming at the top of his lungs in his southern accent at the nine of us. “Ahh already told yew f*cking sons 'a b*tches ta git th'hell outa he'ah, if'a yew all doan git th'hell outa he'ah, ah'ma goona arrest all'a yew sorry f*cks!!!!

Well they all scattered like chickens, while I deliberated if I should tell him he could have an international incident on his hands, me being a high-dignitary from Canada and all (well, high anyway). How would he ever explain that one to his cousin Cooter, the chief. I didn't realize it right away but this was a signal that something was up, and the track was not quite empty yet.

Instead I walked across the street and ordered a hot dog with fried onions on it from the little shack/cafe. I sat down in front on the grass and started eating, but I had this uncanny feeling, like a calm before a storm, that something was about to happen.

At this point the street was deserted, and it was now dark out. As I chewed the dog, the sound of a distant rumbling pricked my half-deaf ear. I stood up, and here came Michael on his bike, he pulled up to the stop right in front of me, looked left, then right, then he turned left and throttled past me on his way towards downtown. I wanted to yell, “careful on that bike at night.” For I knew the repercussions of motorcycle riding at night; I was hit head-on on my BSA, by drunken teens in their dads fifties Plymouth in 1978. They were speeding and didn't have their headlights on, so it was unavoidable. What saved me from permanent paralysis, along with being a tough kid and fate, was my helmet and handlebars. Thanks again British Steel!

I figured that buying some film at a Walgreens drug store, down the street from the track, was the first order of the night, to be ready for my new plans for tomorrow. Then I headed off to downtown, to a blues bar with some good music. The Slippery Noodle always proves to be a good time, it's also the oldest bar in Indianapolis. In the middle of town, in the roundabout, there is a huge statue depicting the civil war. It is impressive.

The weekend at Indy was sunny and hot. Along with my substantial intake of ale, I was able to get to sleep and wake-up quite early. The only thing I didn't like about the camping, I was informed by the parking attendant, there were no showers this year. He told me that there was a

'Flying J' truck stop perhaps fifteen miles down the highway, where you could grab a shower; at a price of course.

After driving around on the freeway in a circle for an hour at least, I finally found the truck stop and was informed that it was twelve dollars for a shower! That was out of the question.

Returning to my tent, I noticed a fast-running shallow stream of pretty clean-looking water just down a short cliff from my tent, in the shadow of three or four monolithic oil-tanks. One tank had a gigantic mural of a pitting Indy car on it. I checked the cleanliness by cupping some water in my hand. It seemed pristine enough, so I grabbed my soap shampoo and towel.

Rising from my last rinse feeling re-born, I looked up at one of the other campers, a shirtless F1 fan, who was standing up on the bank. "Hey, you've got to try this, it's great!", I said. "Yep, I was there fifteen minutes before you", he laughed.

Sunday morning I was up before the sun. Donning my brand new Indy cap I had bought at the same place as my camera; Value Village thrift store in Windsor, Ontario for one dollar and fifty cents, and in my complimentary F1 shirt from Montreal, I headed across the street to the speedway.

Not realizing only workers and staff were allowed in, I walked right by the yellow-shirts as if I was one of them. Standing near the entrance where the Ferrari fan said Michael had entered before, I got my camera ready just in case. As the sun started to rise, one by one the mechanics from all the teams started walking by me. "Hey good luck today fellows" I called out, checking my old camera from time to time to see that the green light was still on and it was still operational.

From maybe 50 yards I could see that David Richards was on the move. He was coming at me fast, but I still got a great shot of him!

All of a sudden who comes up but Peter Sauber! “Peter, hi how are you; what no cigar?” He didn’t have his trade mark stogie with him.

“Ahh, it is too early” he said in his neat Swiss accent.

“Well I’m from Windsor, Ontario, they sell Cubans up there eh?” His eyes lit up.

“Oh yes, I like the Cubans, but also the Dominican Republics too, they are very good” We talked a bit more, and he posed for a picture with me with a big smile. What a good apple!

A few moments later Giancarlo Fishichella came up, and posed with me for a photo.

Then Jensen Button came up and I said “Jensen, hi, how are you?”

“Great”, he answered smiling.

“Jensen, have you heard of a band called the White Stripes?”

“Why yes I have”, he answered in his regal English tone.

“Well they are one of my favorite bands, and every time I hear the song ‘The Hardest Button to Button’, I think of you.” At that point he cracked-up, and I got a shot of he and I shaking hands - what a cool chap!!

Then Sato arrived, and I implored him to stay on the track and not crash (he finished 3rd).

Yarno Truli then made an appearance and I commented on how cool his long hair looked with

the 'Tweety-bird' ponytail.

Moments later Ross Brawn came up, stopped, chatted with me, and I got a picture shaking hands with him.

Next was Ruebens, with yet another photo.

Then Fernando Alonso came up and I asked him, “do you hear those drums Fernie?”

“Wats dat?” he answered back in his exotic Spanish accent.

“Off in the distance” We both looked as I waved. “The drums seem to be getting louder, do you hear them?”

“M'jes.. oh jes” he replied, keen I guess to my Abba reference .

I even got a shot of the Shoe on his V-ROD!

One by one just about all of the team owners and drivers passed by and I had a word with all of them, and had my picture taken with them. They were great sports and very friendly well, all but the Mickey- Dee boys, they were a bit aloof as I imagined they might be. It did nothing to ruin my day though.

The trip to Indy was very important to me because back in the early seventies my mother called up to tell me to be sure to watch the Indy 500. She knew the guy who would be driving the pace car, and she would be at the race.

I made some popcorn and sat down to watch the race. I kept watching, hoping to see a shot of my mom whom I hadn't seen for a few years. I missed her a lot during those last years apart. Finally the race wound down, and as the car pulled into the winners circle surrounded by fans I saw her!!! There she was, with her light red hair blowing in the wind smoking a cigarette. She looked terrific! It was the very last time I ever saw her alive.

Concerning the photo of me and Sir Frank, I had it blown up and on the back I wrote, 'hello Sir Frank, sorry about the shirt. I got it for fifty cents at a yard sale. Thanks for speaking with me at the 'crossroads'. Could you please sign this picture when you get the chance, and send it back to me in Canada? your friend, etc. After all, I was going to Indy for the next race on the calendar and you never know, I could just run into him again.

At the Indy pit-day walk-through, Williams were the first to open their garage doors. I waited until one of the older mechanics was talking to the crowd, in front of the roped-off area. Then, reaching across five people deep I handed him the blown-up photo in its sleeve from Blacks Camera and said, "excuse me sir do you think you could give this to Frank he might want to see it."

“Certainly sir”, he said.

I had no idea what would happen to the picture after that. One scenario that went through my mind was that the mechanic would open it up, see the red shirt I was wearing, think it was a computer-generated prank, and then throw it away. I was pleasantly wrong about that.

Back at home in Canada, days turned into months as the F1 season wore down. I would check my mail box every day, and it was always the same...nothing. “Nobody loves me”, I would lament. “My life sucks, and nothing but bad news ever comes in that darn mail-box.” Then one day, perhaps three or four months after the race at Indy, I walked downstairs on a cold November morning. Wiping the sleep from my eyes I opened up my mail-box. I pulled out a large brown envelope addressed from Grove, England with, **PLEASE DO NOT BEND** stamped on it. “I don’t know anyone from England”, I said to myself... then I went weak in my knees.

Back upstairs I carefully opened it up and there it was, the picture of me and Sir Frank. It was signed **FW** above the Taurus, in the clouds at the top. Words cannot describe the way I felt that day, and every time I look at that photograph. Some rich guys are people too.

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