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Senna Versus Prost

Malcolm Folley

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SENNA VERSUS PROST

MALCOLM
FOLLEY


CENTURY · LONDON

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To Rachel, Sian and Megan for brightening each day more than they will ever know

PROLOGUE

JE NE REGRETTE RIEN

Paris, summer 2008

Almost noon and the streets in the prosperous 16th *arrondissement* will soon be bustling with people seeking out a restaurant for lunch. But for now there is hardly a person in sight and no one within fifty yards of the address I have been given in a quiet road not far from the Place des Etats-Unis. The gigantic thick wooden double doors, guarding the building, look capable of delaying the progress of an invading army, but, fortunately, on closer inspection one is slightly ajar.

Once inside, there is a cobbled courtyard leading to a set of garages in the distance. On the left is an apartment belonging to the concierge of the building and beyond this there are double doors opened by an intercom situated on the facing wall. There is no obvious indication which apartment I am looking for – and so the wife of the concierge, deaf to my knocking, is startled to find a stranger in her home as she prepares lunch. I explain in halting French that I am expected. Brusquely, she accepts my apology and walks to the intercom and pushes the button for the top floor apartment.

Silence.

An unwanted thought occurs: is this the right address . . .

Or, worse, have I come a day after our scheduled appointment?

Reluctantly, the woman tries the buzzer again. And this time a voice answers: another woman. Gratefully, I hear a click as the main doors open to grant access to the lift. On the fourth floor, a housekeeper waves me into the only apartment. In the high-ceilinged entrance hall there is a table displaying a golden miniature racing car with an inscription. It turns out to be the only piece of motor racing memorabilia on display in the home of Alain Prost, four times world champion.

'I was never close to the trophies anyway,' says Prost, after showing me into his drawing room. 'I have my four cups I received from the FIA for winning the world championship. I have four helmets I wore in those championship years – and that's it. The rest I gave away.'

Prost looks to have stepped from a time machine. Older looking, yes; but his dominant features from photographs of twenty or more years ago remain the same. His hair is still a shock of curls, if cut shorter and greying at the temples. His crooked nose still creates a prominent and easily caricatured profile, while his smile is warm and accommodating. His fingernails are bitten to the quick, just as they were when he was driving, and he is small enough not to look out of place in the weighing room at Longchamps, the Parisian racetrack to which thousands of English flock each year for the running of the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. 'It is true, I have not put on any weight,' he says, laughing. 'I am fifty-seven and a half kilos, and if anything Malcolm Folley I might be a little lighter than when I was in Formula One.' At fifty-three, it is an enviable trick.

Tony Jardine, who was team manager at McLaren when Prost first drove for the team in 1980, the year before Ron Dennis and John Barnard arrived to reshape the team's history, had called him 'Little Napper'. Teams were small and intimate then, and Prost was bright eyed and new to the game and watched in bemusement as Jardine, an art school graduate, caricatured him as Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte perched on a front wheel of his McLaren. Perhaps no one ever really improved on the imagery of that epithet, for Prost possessed an imperious superiority in a racing car that enabled him to conquer the world unchecked; at least until Ayrton Senna materialised. But it was not as 'Little Napper' that Prost was to be known, but rather by another nickname given to him by Pierre Dupasquier, from Michelin, which struck a universal chord and accurately described the elan and intelligence of his undramatic driving style. Prost became simply: *Le Professeur*.

As one of a small number of sportswriters who travelled the world with the Formula One circus writing for English newspapers, I had been acquainted with him throughout most of his career as a grand prix driver. He was media-savvy from the beginning, but he will tell you that he was an innocent abroad in comparison to Senna. Indeed, it was Senna who had a fulltime travelling press officer, Betise Assumpcao, a multi-lingual, effervescent Brazilian with a swift mind and a faster tongue, who later married Williams director Patrick Head, with whom she has two children. From 1990 Betise ensured that all of Brazil's media, print and broadcast had a daily bulletin on Senna's activities because he was coherent with the law of economics that prevented all but a handful of journalists from his South America *Senna Versus Prost* heartland from following him in person. She was an invaluable ally to Senna, who also kept a large office and a substantial staff in São Paulo.

Prost was for the most part a lone agent, dependent on his team's publicity machine and a coterie of trusted journalists from France to spread his message. He had a pleasant and open relationship with those of us from the British media. He has always felt undervalued in France, and winning his four titles in British teams, three for McLaren and his last for Williams, did not elevate his status. 'Because the relations between the French and the English people are always a little tricky, it is perhaps difficult to be a French driver in an English team,' he suggests, drawing on centuries of turbulent Anglo-French history. 'But because I never had the French mentality, I always had a good relationship with the English people and English teams I drove for. I always said I don't like some French attitudes. Sometimes, to be honest, I never felt one hundred per cent French!' Prost was the first Frenchman to be Formula One world champion – and still the only one – but there is no residual sense of patriotism in his achievement. 'Being world champion for France was never my target,' he says.

His willingness to invite me to his home in Paris to discuss and answer questions on his relationship with Ayrton Senna for this book is an example of the man's generosity of spirit. But his collaboration is possibly motivated by another unspoken force. His invitation for me to be here with him is a reflection, perhaps, of his desire to ensure his voice is heard amid the clamour of testimony that he suspects, rightly, will be heard through these pages as a ringing endorsement of Senna's passion for driving on the limit; and sometimes beyond. No matter.

Prost's recollections and opinions convey in this modest attempt to recreate a stormy, vibrant and wholly unpredictable chapter of Formula One an authenticity that cannot be denied. He never asked for a transcript of our interview, nor demanded any access to the words being ascribed to him. It is to be hoped that his trust is rewarded through the honesty and balance of this account of two compelling champions colliding with the inevitable, ugly consequences of two juggernauts coming together on a

autobahn.

'Ayrton was different, nobody really understands this,' says Prost, who is dressed in jeans and a brown, long-sleeved Lacoste sweater. 'You can say all good things about him, and he had lots of qualities, but you cannot compare him to a normal racing driver. Never. Ayrton was completely apart. You do not realise that immediately. It takes time. I don't know if I can remember one precise day, but, slowly, I realised that his motivation was not just to beat me, but it was to destroy me. I was not prepared to die in a racing car. Honestly, I never felt that another racing driver had any value to hurt me at all.'

Ironically, Prost had pressed for Senna to be appointed as his new team-mate ahead of another Brazilian, the vastly experienced and politically adroit Nelson Piquet, a three-times world champion and a couple of years older than the Frenchman. 'I had nothing against Nelson, nothing at all, but I thought it better for the team to have the younger driver,' says Prost. As a competitor, Senna had already assumed the way to the summit of Formula One was to target the man with his flag planted on the highest peak. With two world titles, as well as two near misses to his credit, Prost was the acknowledged master of all he surveyed when the Brazilian joined him at McLaren for the 1988 season.

The first season they were together, they were virtually invincible. McLaren won fifteen of the sixteen rounds of the world championship, with Senna claiming eight victories to seven from Prost without a team order to be heard. There had been a moment or two of friction, notably in Portugal where Senna drove Prost to within inches of the pit wall at screaming full power, but peace was maintained. Just. Yet the writing, if not Prost's car, was on the wall. Senna's political acumen, on top of all his driving attributes, made him the most formidable F1 driver the world had encountered. The second year, uncivil war broke out between the two men. '1989 was really a nightmare,' admits Prost. By early summer, he felt obliged to tell McLaren team principal Ron Dennis that he was leaving the team. 'In effect, I was driven out by Senna . . . by Honda a little bit . . . and by Ron,' he claims.

'I realised in 1989, and even later on when I was driving for Ferrari, and then later still Williams, that Ayrton's motivation was much more than I thought. It was something you could not understand, you could not expect. When you want to be good in life, you need to be challenged. That is a good experience. But if I have learned anything it is this: it is forbidden to have enemies.

Life is short and you must be very careful with the relations you have with people.'

His lessons had been absorbed in a hard manner. Prost's older brother, Daniel, died of cancer in 1986; and he came from a time when men, tragically, still lost their lives in racing cars with an unhealthy frequency. 'You can have people challenging you, you can have rivals, but you can't have enemies,' says Prost. 'I felt from 1989 Ayrton made me an enemy. It was not correct. As I said, I was not prepared to lose my life against another driver.'

As he pours sparkling mineral water into two glasses, he concedes that his career, and his life, were informed by the calamitous events of Formula One's desperate summer of 1982. He was stripped of his innocence – and cavalier attitude – in a matter of months during which Gilles Villeneuve and Riccardo Paletti were killed and Didier Pironi so badly crippled that he never drove a Formula One car again. Villeneuve and Pironi, both close friends of Prost, both Ferrari drivers, and once thick as

thieves, were not speaking at the time of Gilles' death. Villeneuve justly accused Pironi of betraying a pact at the San Marino Grand Prix at Imola – an accusation Prost would level with similar justification at Senna at the same racetrack seven years later. 'After Imola, Gilles was calling me every day,' says Prost. 'He was angry with Pironi and Ferrari, absolutely furious. Later on I would fully understand his feelings because I had this with Ayrton. At the next race in Belgium, Gilles went too far in the car in practice. He killed himself because of that dispute with Didier.'

Pironi's career in Formula One lasted just three months longer. During practice for the German Grand Prix at Hockenheim, Pironi drove his Ferrari into the rear of Prost's Renault that was invisible to him because of blinding spray being flushed in his face. Pironi had been out in the heavy rain earlier than most other drivers. He was pushing his Ferrari near the limit for lap after lap. 'Didier was hot, the car was good,' recalls Prost. 'He had strong possibilities to be world champion and he had a new girlfriend. He was strong – at the top.' And then – disaster. Pironi became airborne after he hit the back of Prost's car. When his Ferrari thundered back to earth it broke around him like a balsawood model. Prost, rushing back to the wrecked Ferrari, heard the medics discussing the need to amputate one, or both, of Pironi's legs that had been mangled in the footwell of his car. Prost says he pleaded loudly with the doctors: 'NO . . . NO . . . NO.' Pironi was in agony, but, with or without Prost's protestations, his legs were spared.

As he came to terms with the latest catastrophe, Prost, a saddened and disillusioned man, took refuge in the tranquillity of Renault's motorhome. He had seen two men's lives stolen by accidents and now a third was being cared for by medics in terrible pain and facing an uncertain future. He wondered to himself if the risks were worth taking any more, no matter that driving a racing car was the most natural instinct in the world to him. He shared his anxieties with key figures in the Renault team and they granted him the space to come to his own decision. 'I really thought about not going back in the car,' he admits.

An hour passed, maybe less, but Prost's mind had crystallised. He announced he would continue to drive, but with a rider. 'I told them that from now on I would do things my way,' he remembers. 'From this point, I changed the way I drove. I realised this day that from now I had to be more careful.' He would later call his autobiography, written just three years afterwards with his friend Jean-Louis Moncet, *Maître de Mon Destin*: master of my own destiny. 'I remember 1982 as a defining moment. When Didier was in the hospital in Paris I went to see him many times. Every time, he liked to show me his leg. I felt sick.'

In later years, Prost chose to face ridicule by refusing to race in heavy rain, at Silverstone, then at Adelaide, rather than risk being party to another horrendous accident like the one which destroyed Pironi's career and reshaped his life. 'Everyone thinks I don't like driving in the wet, but it was almost my preference before this accident with Didier,' explains Prost. Four years after crashing at Hockenheim, Pironi died in a powerboat accident. 'He was still living the same way, you know, going over the top.'

Prost was now being prudent, or as prudent as you can expect from a man piloting a racing car at speeds approaching 200mph. He explains his changed mentality like this: 'When you have a child, and I already had a son before this terrible summer, okay motor racing is your passion, it's your job, but you want to come home at the end of the day.' He would retain this philosophy through his career, and you will hear through these pages from many drivers, and team personnel, how Prost won races as

slowly as possible. 'I spoke to Frank Williams once and I said to him: "I want to drive all the time if I can at ninety-five per cent. Maybe for one lap I will use ninety-nine per cent, but that you must accept."' Prost releases a slow chuckle: 'Frank did not like this, perhaps.' But here is the strength of Prost's deception at the wheel: how *slow* is a man who wins fifty-one grands prix?

Senna, however, fooled no one. His style was to drive every lap as hard and uncompromisingly as the last one. Prost says now, just as he did all those times when he was feeling the heat from the Brazilian, 'Ayrton went maybe too far in the way he was thinking and driving and competing,' he sighs, and his voice carries a sombre note.

I had offered to take Prost to lunch, but generously he arranged for his housekeeper to prepare a meal in order that we should not be disturbed. The dining room, along the entrance hall in the opposite direction from the drawing room, was sprinkled with original pieces of art, subtle and tasteful, as you would expect. Nothing about Prost, then or now, has ever been ostentatious. We talked as we worked our way through mozzarella and tomatoes, followed by haricot beans, thinly sliced pork, with a dessert of strawberries before finishing with coffee, all brought to the table by his housekeeper silently at work in the adjacent kitchen. An impeccably mannered man, Prost is the perfect host.

After all these years, he remains puzzled by the memory of Senna's lack of respect for his own safety; or that of others. 'You know, Ayrton was prepared to be in a crash and maybe kill himself, or hurt himself,' he suggests. 'It was always his rules. If they are your rules, it follows you believe they are right.'

By dying young, Senna lacquered his life with a romantic veneer that has protected him from ageing or from being accountable for his past, or his future. Others have manifested this subterfuge: did James Dean ever make a bad movie? Is Princess Diana ever going to be seen grey or wrinkled?

Prost knows he cannot compete with the ghost of Senna. He accepts and understands this as the inevitable consequence of being the survivor of the deadly duel they once waged. In most eyes, Senna's daring, commitment and mystique will leave him always revered ahead of Prost. One powerful example: Lewis Hamilton, now the chosen one at McLaren-Mercedes, and the youngest world champion in Formula One history with endless possibilities stretching before him, grew up in Hertfordshire idolising Senna, not Prost. 'I recognise that and I find that normal,' says Prost. 'I don't want to challenge it. What I didn't find normal was that at one stage people around us were not very objective. I was hurt quite a lot. Ayrton has never been hurt in his career, never. I mean, psychologically. He has been hurt only once – and that is terrible, of course. But I had many, many tough moments. That is what I learned in this part of life, the part that is over.'

Yet after his retirement at the end of 1993, Prost started to receive innumerable telephone calls from Senna. 'Clearly Ayrton asked someone who knew me for my number, because he never had it before!' laughs Prost. 'He told me he was not motivated against the other drivers and pleaded with me to come out of retirement. I told him that he was unbelievable.'

But there were more meaningful strands to the conversation, offering an insight into his mood and mind in those final weeks of his life. Senna told Prost he was intensely worried about safety issues because of the new regulations, and he was bothered by his switch to an unfamiliar Williams team, and an uncomfortable car that only the previous season had been driven to the world title by the

Frenchman before Senna staked a claim to it. 'Okay, we had one page of a book, Ayrton and me,' says Prost, sombrely. 'Obviously, I had some tough moments, but it was part of our history. If he wanted a new page, this was something that I could understand. After all, I was retired. And I would no longer be a threat on the racetrack. I really had some sympathy because Ayrton was feeling so bad. He seemed to be troubled by many things, professionally and personally. It's important to know he was a completely different man – and a completely different driver.'

Neither Prost – nor the world – would ever discover to what extent Senna had changed or the truth behind his downbeat mood. On 1 May 1994, Senna was killed when he was leading the San Marino Grand Prix, with Prost describing the scene for French television station TF1 from a trackside commentary booth. 'You have no judgement any more, you are not in a rational state,' he recalls. 'It's an unbelievable destiny.'

Three years later, Prost came back to Formula One, only this time there was to be failure and perhaps a degree of humiliation. His ill-fated attempt at running his own Formula One team was, by his account, little more than a French farce. 'It was not a good idea,' he admits. 'The day before I signed an engine deal with Peugeot I didn't want to do it any more. We were having a strategy for five years, but every day they were changing the deal.' Only a call from Jacques Chirac, the President of the Republic, persuaded Prost to go ahead with the announcement.

'The President said, "Please, Alain, do it for France. Be sure, that we will be behind, we will do our best." This was not the case. The president of Peugeot changed – and the company decided to go rallying. Then the National Assembly changed to the other side.' At the end of the Peugeot deal, he admits to having to pay Ferrari \$30 million dollars a season for engines. 'We had no more help,' he says. 'I had a big experience of how France works.'

How much did Prost lose? 'A little, for sure; but I don't care or think about the money.' It is the boldest of statements, as sources in France suggest that Prost's losses ran into millions of dollars. Instead of dwelling on the financial hit he took, Prost is embittered by the politics that conspired to hasten the downfall of his team. The return to Formula One by Renault in 2001 signalled the end for him as a team proprietor; their clout within the French Establishment meant his vision could no longer be sustained.

These days he is an avid cyclist and he races cars on ice ovals during the winter, and he has looked into proposals that one day could bring the French Grand Prix, ousted from the 2009 world championship calendar, to the streets of Paris. He is available to his three children, Nicolas, twenty-six, Sacha, eighteen, and twelve-year-old Victoria. 'Being in Formula One, you are a mono-maniac,' he says, and there is a real validity to his argument. 'When you are involved, there is a lot of money and there is feeling from inside the paddock that this is the centre of the world. I would advise those in F1 to take a step back, look outside.'

'I never considered myself a star. I never had a full-time manager. I always took care of my own contract. Today, I take care of my business. I suppose I could have gained much more money in my career, but I cannot complain. Was Ayrton a star? He was living in a country where that decision was taken away from him. He was a star; and also, he had the entourage. In France, Michel Platini, Yannick Noah and Bernard Hinault were not stars. We are living in a country where we do not have stars . . . well, Johnny Halliday is a star!' His point is this: the French public's affections are more

easily seduced by the exploits of an ageing rock star in leather trousers than by the performance and sporting heroics of the nation's most successful sons.

All these years on, Prost regards Ron Dennis as a respected friend, having long ago repaired his differences. 'I defended Ron through last year's spying scandal with Ferrari as I did not think it was fair how he and his team were treated by the FIA,' says Prost. 'But as you saw with Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton in 2007, Ron still thinks he can handle two strong personalities. But he can't. Always he takes sides. Apart from that he is fantastic.'

Prost's world is now one without public controversy or intrusion, and he rides anonymously through the Parisian traffic on a motor scooter without worrying about a past life as one of the fastest men ever seen behind the wheel of a car. An afternoon has passed, old arguments and broken promises between himself and Senna have been relived. Two highly controversial crashes between them at Suzuka in Japan have been dissected and blame apportioned; and as you will discover these debates are not one easily resolved. Two litres and more of water have been consumed during our rendezvous. Yet even after all that has been discussed it would have been a dereliction of a reporter's duty not to ask Prost one final time: 'Do you ever wish you had not supported Senna's appointment at McLaren?'

He looks me in the eye and, silently, begins to try to make some sense of those times. Those faraway battles that ripped at his emotions, but yet took him to a place of sustained excellence. Those fast and dangerous moments that introduced him to ecstasy and agony in extreme measures. And when he had sifted his memories, Alain Prost spoke words that must be taken for the truth. 'Maybe I am strange,' he says. 'But I never said to myself: "Shit, I have done a mistake." Never, never. Even today. I don't regret anything.'

'If you ask who was the best between Ayrton and myself, I am sure there would be more people saying Ayrton. At the time, you also remember how Gilles Villeneuve was so exceptional in his attitude; and spectacular to watch at work. Keke Rosberg and Jean Alesi sometimes had this attitude, this attitude that everyone remembers in Ayrton. But Ayrton was closer to me than people think. In the way he drove, he was much more precise than people suppose. He had a charisma that attracted him to others – I was more normal. On the track, there were times when he could do something more and the people liked that. I understand. But this is also part of decision-making, part of a way of life and a way of driving.'

'I am here – and that is all I can say.'

'Many times I considered myself lucky to finish a race because it was so dangerous. There is always a story behind the story.'

You know, the fact that Ayrton could be considered a better driver than me is something, to be honest, I really don't care about. It is not going to change my life.'

It is an unpalatable realism, perhaps; but it is no less a reality for that. As I left Prost, smiling warmly, I returned to the street through the huge doors and in need of a taxi to take me to the Gare du Nord for the Eurostar to London. On my mind were the words he delivered almost as a postscript. 'After everything that happened, it was still a fantastic story, wasn't it?'

It was – and it is.

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