

RITE OF PASSAGE: MACAO'S FUTURE CHAMPIONS



ALAN JONES, THE FIRST OF 12 FUTURE FORMULA 1 WORLD CHAMPIONS TO HAVE TAKEN ON THE MIGHTY GUIA CIRCUIT, PICTURED IN MACAO IN 1977 (IMAGE: PRIMOTIPO)

When Alan Jones lost two laps having an electrical fault cured during the 1976 Macau Grand Prix, the gritty Australian could hardly have imagined that he was starting a trend.

Over the five decades since, no fewer than 12 Formula 1 world champions – Jones included – have battled it out on the Guia Circuit for Macau Grand Prix glory. Yet only two of them earned the sweet taste of victory in a race that has become renowned as the greatest prize for up-and-coming drivers.

Those two were Ayrton Senna and Michael Schumacher. When Senna triumphed in 1983, the great Brazilian was already on the verge of F1; indeed, he arrived in Macao only the night before qualifying because he had been taking part in an F1 test in France. Despite this, he claimed pole position in his Marlboro Theodore Racing Ralt-Toyota, run by West Surrey Racing, and consummately won both heats of an event that made history: this was the first Macau Grand Prix run for F3 cars, representing the beginning of an unbroken 37-year run.



THE LATE, GREAT AYRTON SENNA FAMOUSLY WON THE FIRST YEAR OF THE FORMULA 3 ERA IN MACAO IN 1983 (IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES)

Schumacher's success came in 1990, and has gone down in folklore due to the German's battle with fellow future world champion Mika Häkkinen. The Finn's West Surrey Ralt-Mugen Honda led home Schumacher's WTS Motorsport Reynard-Volkswagen in the first heat. Häkkinen only had to follow his rival home in heat two for aggregate glory, but an ill-advised overtaking bid at the last gasp left him in the barriers.

It is often forgotten that Schumacher won the first heat on his maiden visit to Macao in 1989. When Heinz-Harald Frentzen hit the wall at Lisboa Bend, Schumacher moved in front to claim victory. But in heat two, the WTS Reynard began losing gears. Eventual winner David Brabham was the first to pass, and Schumacher eventually had to retire with only first and fifth gear available – not tremendously useful for the challenging mountain section on the Guia Circuit.

Häkkinen is not the only fledgling superstar to have fallen foul of a clash with a fellow future world champion in Macao.

In 2004, Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg both arrived for their second attack on the Macau Grand Prix, Hamilton with the Dallara-Mercedes of Manor Motorsport and Rosberg with the Dallara-Opel of Team Rosberg.



MICHAEL SCHUMACHER'S WIN OVER FELLOW FUTURE WORLD CHAMPION MIKA HÄKKINEN IN 1990 HAS GONE DOWN IN FOLKLORE (IMAGE: MGPOC)



RIVALS ON TRACK BUT PARTNERS IN THE KITCHEN, TWO FUTURE WORLD CHAMPIONS FACE OFF OVER THE EGG TARTS PRIOR TO THE 2004 MACAU GRAND PRIX (IMAGE: MGPOC)

With the event now run to a new format – a qualification race setting the grid for the Grand Prix in place of the former two-heat aggregate system – Hamilton put himself on pole for the main race thanks to a bold move on team-mate Robert Kubica at the start of the preliminary race around the outside of the Mandarin kink. Rosberg soon passed Kubica to finish second.

Come the Grand Prix, Rosberg got the jump on Hamilton and seemed to have a comfortable advantage at the end of the first lap. Then he braked too late into Lisboa and nosed into the barrier – and Hamilton ran into the back of Rosberg! While the German was out, his future Mercedes F1 team-mate at least recovered to finish 14th.

Rosberg's father Keke was similarly destined not to win on the Guia Circuit. He joined Macao third-timer Jones on the grid in 1978, back in the days when the race was run for Formula Atlantic cars. Both were already established as promising F1 drivers, but little could either know that Rosberg would get his big break at the Williams team for 1982 as replacement for Jones, who had retired from the sport one year after winning the 1980 world title, or that Rosberg would emulate him at the first attempt.

Ironically, Rosberg – who had driven for Theodore's F1 team in 1978 – was at the wheel of a Team Harper Chevron B42, with Jones in Theodore Racing's March 782. Jones had already experienced the first of two time-consuming spark-plug breakages when Rosberg's engine blew up, just after passing eventual race winner Riccardo Patrese.

Two years earlier, Jones had smashed the lap record by a remarkable nine seconds while recovering from his early electrical failure to finish fourth in Theodore's March 722. This car, driven to Macao victory by Vern Schuppan in 1974, is now on display in the Macau Grand Prix Museum. In the 1977 event, Jones put Theodore's Ralt RT1 second on the grid

and jumped Patrese to lead at the start, but his engine cut out on the mountain section.

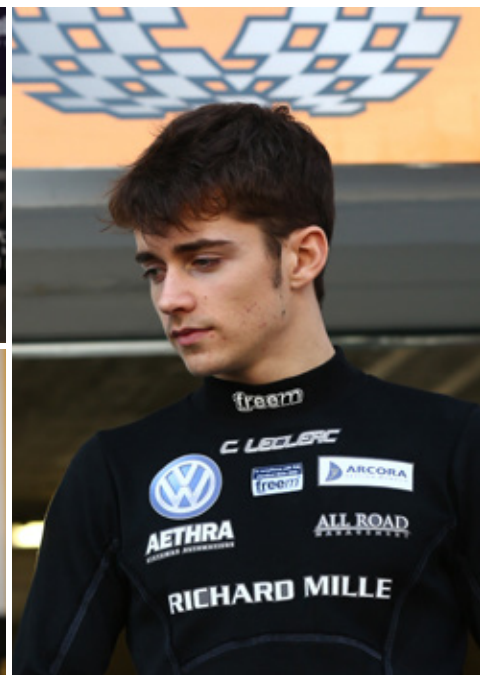
Two more future Williams F1 world champions competed in Macao, each on three occasions. Damon Hill's peak came on his final attempt in 1988, when he piloted his Intersport Racing Ralt-Toyota to sixth and third in the two heats to place second on aggregate. Jacques Villeneuve's best showing was his second visit in 1992, when he was third in each heat to take the same position on aggregate for the TOM'S-Toyota team.

And then there was Jenson Button, who was just a few months away from making his F1 debut with Williams when he arrived in Macao in 1999 to race his Promatecme Dallara-Renault. He did a superb job on his first visit, but eventual winner Darren

Manning was just too strong. Button lost out in a battle for second with Macao's own André Couto in heat one, but escaped a collision with the local hero later on to claim the runner-up position.

Red Bull's future titans were similarly out of luck, although Sebastian Vettel was a solid third on his first visit in 2005 with his ASM Dallara-Mercedes. Max Verstappen famously charged his Van Amersfoort Racing Dallara-Volkswagen from the back of the grid to seventh in 2014 after crashing in the qualification race.

With George Russell, Lando Norris and Charles Leclerc currently among Verstappen's F1 rivals, it's almost certain that the 13th, 14th or even 15th Macau Grand Prix alumni to become world champion are already in action at the sport's top level. 🏁



WITH NO FEWER THAN 13 MACAU GRAND PRIX ALUMNI CURRENTLY COMPETING IN F1, THE SAR'S REPUTATION AS THE PLACE TO SPOT STARTS OF THE FUTURE REMAINS STRONG (IMAGES: MGPOC)