

EXPERIENCE

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KEEPING UP WITH F1 SUPERSTAR LEWIS HAMILTON



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FAST COMPANY

At five, he showed an uncanny gift for auto racing; by 23, he was the youngest world champion in F1 history. But what does Lewis Hamilton do when he's not behind the wheel?

BY STEPHANIE PLENTL | PHOTOS BY KURT ISWARIENKO



The night before our interview, Lewis Hamilton is on the 10 o'clock news. In a preseason test race in Jerez, Spain, the Formula One champion found his brakes compromised and was sent careering into a barrier.

Unscathed and smiling (and with only minor damage to his newly unveiled Mercedes W05), the 29-year-old Briton talked reporters through what he casually calls a "hiccup." It's a reminder of the very real risks behind one of the world's most glamorous sporting industries. Hamilton, however, was calm and analytical in the face of danger – as conditioned to perform under stress as the exceptional car he's been entrusted to drive.

"I'm fearless, and I have been since I was a kid," he tells me the next morning without a trace of bravado. Admitting that he'd gone to bed with several aches, he feels fine now; he's sitting with Roscoe, his cherished British bulldog, at his feet. In Hamilton's downtime – when he's not hurtling around a track at 250 km/h – he chases thrills in other high-intensity sports. "I'm an adrenaline junkie," he enthuses. "This is how I want to live my life. I like to touch the edge of excitement."

Star Recruit

In 2012, the Mercedes AMG Petronas team elected to harness the Hamilton spirit, luring him away from McLaren where he had cut his teeth. It was during his tenure there that he won the 2008 World Championship. Not so much a dream come true as a prophecy fulfilled: At the age of 10, Hamilton met McLaren boss Ron Dennis at an event and politely informed him, "One day I want to be racing your cars." Three years later the precocious adolescent signed Dennis's contract as a go-kart driver, and at 23 he became the youngest F1 world champion in history.

Despite his dazzling rise through the ranks of racing, Hamilton is humble – quick to express his gratitude, both in interviews and on his social media channels. His genuine candor is an endearing trait in a notoriously egocentric sport. "I'm very privileged," he says sincerely, this time in reference to the Challenger 605 aircraft he rewarded himself with last year. The jet saves time between home (in Monaco) and work: "My office is in so many different places – it can be in Japan or Geneva for an appearance, going to the UK to develop the new car or systems, or when I'm flying to a race. My own plane is the best means of travel to my office: There's no traffic." >



Hamilton customized his Challenger jet to match his candy apple red '67 Mustang.

Early Impulse

Undoubtedly, it's his father – Anthony Hamilton, who professionally managed his son for 18 years – who most often inspires the racing driver's appreciation. "My dad has been my biggest driving force in getting to Formula One. Of course Ron Dennis was very important, but my dad kept me on course and instilled the values necessary to be world champion." As a young boy, Hamilton felt his first adrenaline rush in the car with his father on the streets of his hometown in Stevenage. "My dad used to drive fast. I wouldn't look at the road – I used to watch him, how he handled the road and the gear stick." Poignantly, Hamilton's choice of driver number for the 2014 season – 44 – was inspired by the number plate of his father's car.

To vanquish Hamilton's fears, his father threw him into the ring – literally. "He put me in the boxing ring when I was seven or eight with a rough kid from our area. He was two years older and he beat the living daylights out of me. I came out of the ring, nose bleeding, and I said to my dad, 'I don't want to go back in there.' But he made me go back in. When I did, I hit him so many times. I didn't give him a second to hit me back. Since then, it's been a case of 'never give up.'"

Bold determination aside, Hamilton confesses to a natural talent that he discovered at just five years of age. He was on a family holiday in Ibiza and got behind the wheel to race round a tiny go-kart track. "From the first lap, I picked up the knack of accelerating and braking," he says, still clearly bemused. "It was like the technique was already instilled in me." His father bought him a go-kart and soon he was racing competitively, winning

repeatedly and attracting attention from the bosses at Formula One. "I used that technique for my whole go-karting career. It was like I was born to do it. I felt at home."

Off the Grid

For a man who spends an average of 600 hours every year traveling by air, home comforts have to be established where they're possible. Hamilton customizes his helmets and his cars, and his Challenger jet was no exception. "Every plane at the airport is boring: white with a stripe. I wanted to have the coolest one, so I used the same colors as my car, a 1967 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500, in candy apple red and metallic black." Naturally, his two bulldogs Roscoe and Coco always travel with him: "I put down a towel for the dogs to lie on. I take my shoes off and I'm asleep before takeoff. Roscoe and Coco sleep and snore the whole way, whether it's a two- or ten-hour flight. It's just the most relaxing way of getting from A to B."

With the introduction of stricter car regulations in Formula One for 2014, Hamilton has been busy dropping weight in pursuit of increased performance on the track. "I've had to lose five kilos, and it's not been easy as I'm a fussy eater. I love chicken and rice, pancakes and Haribo sweets – but I've not had any sugar for three months. My trainer is on my case every day." But Hamilton admits that he feels fitter than ever before, his hopes for 2014 emphatically clear: "Winning the World Championship is what I live and breathe for. I'm on the right team, with incredible people around me. I just pray that I have the wind behind my back to help carry me through." ■

SOCIAL CALL

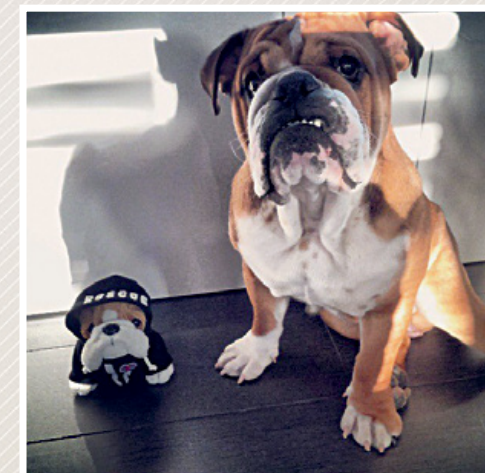
It's little wonder that Formula One racing drivers attract such intense public devotion: Their lifestyles are a heady mix of passion, speed, risk and reward. Because of Hamilton's open attitude toward his celebrity status, he's actively developed a social media presence that's attracted over two million followers to date. "No one can prepare you for the magnitude of fame. It's been difficult," he admits. "When fame came, it caught me completely off guard. I was so underprepared. For years, I tried to run away from it, to avoid cameras and keep my privacy. Then I realized it was impossible to do so. There are young kids who look up to me, like I looked up to other drivers in awe. So now I embrace it and I hope that I create a good image." Hamilton takes us behind the scenes of some of his latest Instagram posts – sharing, in his own words, the moments that inspired them.



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01 Mandela. For me, he was the most inspirational individual who's ever lived. **02** This is my dad and me looking out over Monaco. It's about the bond between father and son. We're saying: 'Look where we've come from and where we are now.' And it's all because of him. **03** Roscoe is my best mate and most loyal friend. A Japanese fan made that little toy. **04** Sightseeing by skateboard in Rio – enjoying the nightlife. **05** This is my favorite way to relax. When I'm playing, it's just me and my music.



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