



"logical step" of proposing marriage to his loving benefactor. In October 2009, the couple became the parents of twins, Max and Mia.

The story of Lauda's early career and the financial risks he took are so outlandish that even now they seem impossible. The son of a wealthy Viennese family, as a teenager he was refused permission to go racing. After showing a few signs of talent in the semi-suicidal *mélée* of junior single seater racing, he secured a loan from an Austrian bank to buy himself a place in the fledgling British March team, only for his grandfather – who happened to be a member of the bank's board – to veto the advance. Undeterred, he found another bank that was willing to lend the cash.

It was the March team which discovered Lauda's exceptional talent as a test driver. But during his two years there he had to find a sum which would be the equivalent, now, of 150,000 euros. Niki Lauda may not have been the first 'pay driver' in F1, but he is surely the most successful. It would not be until 1973, when he joined the BRM team, that he finally earned enough to start repaying his debts.

It was one of his first races with the British team, at Monaco, that first brought him to the attention of Enzo Ferrari. He had pushed his BRM into third place, ahead of Jacky Ickx's Ferrari, until sidelined by a gearbox failure after 25 laps. Watching at home on TV was Mr Ferrari, who was impressed. He instructed Luca di Montezemolo to invite the Austrian to discuss a deal.

"The problem about accepting the invitation was that I had agreed terms on a three-year contract with Louis Stanley of BRM only a couple of days before, at the Monte Carlo race," explains Lauda. "The next day Montezemolo called me and asked me to come down. He was in charge of getting me. Then we had the meeting with Mr Ferrari, so I told him I had this issue. He said: 'We are going to fix it, we'll look into the details.' In fact, it was easier than we had expected because BRM was deep in trouble and they hadn't paid me the little amount of money I was supposed to get. So, with the contract broken, I was free to sign with Ferrari for 1974."

Lauda has vivid memories of that first visit to meet his future employer. "At that time I had a small office in Austria where I was sharing a secretary with my cousin. Whenever I went off to a race I always told her to let me know immediately if Ferrari calls. Of course it was a joke, I never expected him to call. When I came back on Monday or Tuesday after Monte Carlo, she said, 'Ferrari called'. It was true, she had Montezemolo's number written down.

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"I drove down to Maranello in my car and Montezemolo picked me up at the exit on the autostrada, because I didn't know where to go. The first contract was pretty simple. I got paid very little, almost nothing, and naturally I started to take a lot of interest in the team, because of course I was completing the 1973 season with BRM. Things at Ferrari were really bad then. At the British GP they had brought only one car, for Ickx, and he was right at the back of the grid, down with the rubbish cars.

"On my first visit, before I signed anything, my question to Mr Ferrari was: 'How are you going to get this thing going quicker?' So Montezemolo showed me around the factory and the workshops. Then he took me to Fiorano, the test track, which was equipped with photocells every 20 metres and super-accurate timing equipment. There were facilities for testing a car in circumstances that no other team could even have imagined. When I saw Fiorano and the technical resources, right next to the factory, I realised that it would be stupid to have any doubts. That triggered me to stop discussing anything else, including money. I agreed to sign and said: 'Let's start using all this, let's get down to work!'

"I can't remember exactly how much money I was paid for that first contract, but it was hardly anything, maybe 30,000 euros in today's money. Whatever it was, it was never going to make me rich because I had to pay all my own expenses, plane tickets and hotels. For me the money didn't matter because this was the step up that I needed after March and BRM. It was also the end of having to pay to race, which is what I had been doing for three years."

By the end of 1974, with his first two wins behind him and Ferrari back on the road to success, the negotiations would become less amicable. "In 1974 I was doing well," says Lauda. "All the other drivers had advisers and managers, which I thought was not a good idea, so I looked after myself. I was my own manager. I knew that Ronnie Peterson's contract with Lotus was worth 300,000 pounds, a lot of money at that time. How did I know? Very simple. I asked him! Ronnie told me. Why wouldn't he?"

"It was very exciting to be negotiating with the 'old man'. He asked me down to Maranello for lunch, and with Mr Ferrari an invitation to lunch always meant something important was going to happen, positive or negative. He told me he wanted to renew my contract. I was asking for three million schillings, which is probably just over 200,000 euros now. It was basically the amount that I owed the bank on the loans I had taken out. I'll never forget that lunch, with Piero Lardi translating from Italian into English. When Piero repeated 'tre milione di schilling', the old



man got up and walked to the phone, to call Della Casa [the accountant] who told him what it was in lire. He was already screaming at me before he even put the phone down. 'Are you crazy?' he said. I replied it was the going rate, it was what Lotus was paying Ronnie Peterson. I could not sign for less. Over lunch, though, he agreed. That was the time he insulted me with one of those bad words of his. I figured that he was entitled to say that because he was paying. Then we were friends again. That was the start.

"Driving for Ferrari is everyone's dream, but I have to tell you that it's a lot more than just driving. I can stand the pressure of having to win, that's my job, but it's all the things going on outside, the pressure of being the focus of the media, especially the Italians, which make you tired.

"At the end of 1977, when Mr Ferrari called me for more negotiations, I had just signed a contract with Bernie Ecclestone to drive a Brabham, although Ferrari did not know that. Normally when I signed a Ferrari contract, it was just the old man and me. This time when I arrived at Maranello everybody was there: Forghieri, Montezemolo, Della Casa, [press chief] Dr Gozzi, everybody. The meeting this time was not in his office at the factory, it was somewhere in Maranello. As soon as I walked

in I realised it was going to be tough, with so many top people sitting there, because this time I was going to be telling them I was leaving.

"He asked me what I wanted. 'You're world champion and you're doing a great job, so we'll pay you anything you want.' I told him I wanted nothing, but he insisted: 'What do you mean? We'll pay you anything you ask. Just say how much.' I said no, I didn't want to continue, I had decided to change teams. For him, this was hell, because he had been expecting to pay me whatever I asked. What I told him was unexpected. And that was the end of it.

"Something I remembered about that meeting, something I will never forget, was leaving the room and walking downstairs, where [team manager] Sante Ghedini was waiting to take me back to my car. I felt wonderful, like walking on a cloud, because suddenly there was no pressure on me. It meant no more problems with the internal Ferrari politics, with the media and all those things I had been forced to accept for four years. The pressure of being a Ferrari driver in those days was so tremendous that leaving the building left me feeling very strange, as though a heavy weight had been lifted. I had got used to it and now it was gone.

"One problem I had, though, was a couple of days later when I came for a test, I walked out of the airport and suddenly my loan car was gone. Ghedini was waiting to pick me up himself, and he explained that my car had been taken away.

"Of course, that was typical of the old man, a little annoyance that he knew would irritate me. But let me tell you the simple reality. In my whole life

Left Niki Lauda in Spain in 1974 scoring his first GP victory. Right The world champion gets focused in the cockpit of his 312 T as two mechanics make strap adjustments during qualifying for the inaugural United States Grand Prix West in Long Beach in 1976