

OneLauda

The years between 1964 and 1974 were dark ones for Ferrari, but the arrival of Luca di Montezemolo and Niki Lauda changed all that and turned the Prancing Horse once more into the team to beat. The inspirational Lauda explains how it all came about...

For all the romance and glory that we associate with Ferrari today, a glance at the history books reveals that in Formula 1 competition the Scuderia has not always held the dominant position against its rivals that is almost automatically expected of it today. In fact, this is a team which has utterly lost its way more than once, staggering through some depressingly lean periods of failure. None of these dark chasms was deeper or longer than the ten years which followed John Surtees's world championship in 1964.

Analysing the reasons for the blunting of the Ferrari sword reveals a variety of weaknesses. Some of these were practical, for example the determination to run F1 and sports car campaigns on financial and human resources that were too thinly stretched. Others were emotional, most notably the understandable but ultimately damaging decision by Enzo Ferrari in the early Sixties, following the death of his beloved son Dino, to withdraw his presence from race meetings and to rely for information on the second-hand impressions of underlings who had their own jobs to protect.

It would be 1974 before Maranello's racing fortunes changed, and responsibility for the transformation will always be linked to the skills and flair of three men. Mauro Forghieri, "father" of the excellent three-litre flat-12 engine that had won its first grand prix in 1970, provided the engineering savvy. To organise the turnaround, Ferrari entrusted

responsibility for co-ordinating the team to the youthful hands of Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, an aristocratic scion of the Fiat/Agnelli group who, at the age of 26, had only recently completed his law studies in the United States. And leading the revitalised driving team would be Niki Lauda, a no-nonsense Austrian whose ambition was matched by a sharp intellect and a valuable talent for developing racing machinery.

In 1974, Lauda was just 25 years old. He would race for Ferrari over a period of just four years, but what years they were to be. His 15 victories reversed the team's descent and brought him the first two of his three drivers' titles. Pushing Forghieri's magnificent cars to the limit under the pragmatic direction of Montezemolo, he inspired the race staff to new heights. His courageous comeback from near-fatal injuries inflicted in a fiery crash at the Nürburgring in 1976 attracted admiration from all around the world and helped to burnish the heroic image which has become synonymous with Ferrari over six decades.

In later years, working under President Montezemolo as a consultant, Lauda would play an essential role in helping to recruit both Jean Todt and Michael Schumacher to serve Ferrari. Though no longer retained by his old team, he is still in demand today as a television pundit, a job that takes second place to the NIKI airline which he runs from Vienna airport. His commercial pilot's licence is in regular use and on the day of our visit

he is preparing for the flight he will be taking to Frankfurt the next day as chief officer.

Sitting behind the desk in his office on a sunny Monday morning in February 2010, Lauda does not have the appearance of a business tycoon. Although he turned 60 last year, he still sports the jeans and cashmere sweater that he favoured in his racing days. The face, of course, is unique, and not just because of the over-bite that brings an image of Bart Simpson to mind. The Nürburgring conflagration left him with disfiguring scars to which he has never paid the slightest attention – he has rejected approaches from a dozen plastic surgeons anxious to make him "normal". One ear is missing and the famous red baseball cap (sponsored, of course) is the only concession to hiding all that damage. Vanity is not a Lauda shortcoming.

Nevertheless, he is still a good customer for the medical profession, boasting to us of the two metal hips which were fitted in April 2009. Problems with his kidneys some years ago forced him to seek a donor, and the first volunteer to step forward was his second son, Lukas, who donated an organ. When that kidney in turn started to fail, an offer to replace it came from his companion Birgit Wetzinger, whom he had met when she was working as a cabin attendant with NIKI. By a happy (and rare) coincidence, Birgit's tissue sample matched, enabling a successful second transplant to take place. With his first marriage long behind him, in 2008 Lauda took what he describes as the

