Reading Time: 14 minutes

I could keep this very short and say that this is certainly worth watching, especially if you're a Formula 1 fan. Of course, I'm not going to, but hang on to that first sentence throughout.

This ended up on my BBC iPlayer account around November 2024, and normally would end up in the never-ending list of things I want to watch, but don't have the time to. For the most part, I find it a wonderful piece of documentary reporting, that not only tells the Brawn GP story, but the Formula 1 story of 2009 incredibly well. Whilst having Keanu Reeves narrate and host interviews seemed like an odd choice initially, it played out beautifully, pulling together the technicalities of the sport, to a less technical or emphatic F1 fan.

There's a couple of things that niggled me throughout the documentary, as well as some things which I think worked fantatically well in terms of story telling. If I hadn't been a motorsports fan most of my life, I wouldn't have picked up on at least a couple of these, but it does show what happens when you have outside agents trying to enter a sport which is by default very closed off. Let me explain.

The Premise

We all know that the world went to pot in 2008, and from a sporting perspective, Formula 1 was hit hard. The documentary focuses on Brawn GP, risen from the ashes of Honda's 9 year spell in the sport after becoming the engine manufacturer for British American Racing in 2000, but there was more than this. A number of sponsors not locked into long term deals were looking for ways out, and it was only because of the relative stability of the grid post 2005 that kept the sport functioning with 20 drivers and 10 teams.

I draw upon the name British American Racing for good reason. BAR, as they were colloquially known, were basically a team put together by BAT; British American Tobacco. Although tobacco advertising was still a thing in 2000, it would be on its way out quickly over the next 10 years. First in the European Union, and eventually elsewhere. It's a fun fact that despite bans on advertising on cars, Marlboro actually remained the title sponsor of Ferrari until 2022. Ferrari were, between 2000 and 2007 one of the few manufacturers who ***couldn't*** show their tobacco company on the side of the car, because of laws in the US allowing advertising of one cig brand on one motorsport team. Marlboro chose Team

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Penske, because they had more exposure in the US.

To call BAR then Honda a good team would be a stretch for most of its existence. After original team manager Craig Pollock claimed that they would win their first GP (Hold that thought), they finished 11 races out of 32 attempts by the two cars. Lead driver Jacques Villeneuve didn't even finish a race till 11 races in! They had a stellar season in 2004, then got a two race ban in 2005 for rules infractions. After that, BAT pulled out of the sport, and the team became Honda, who spent a couple of years displaying the worst liveries in the history of F1 (Including the split 1999 BAR car).

It was always going to be a case of if BMW or Honda were to be the first to jump out of F1, as they had in effect tried to build works teams out of privateer teams, to little success. BMW lasted until the end of the 2010 season, but the wheels were in motion from 2008 onwards, only accelerating at the end of 2009 (Which as mentioned in the documentary was key to Brawn GP's successor). Honda had enough of F1 as soon as they had to shut down their production lines, and pulled the plug. Honda were still represented across motorsport, most noticeably in America, where they became the sole manufacturer for the series after the end of the US Open Wheel Motorsport Split (Hold that thought too). I'm assuming that for Honda, being a manufacturer was one thing, but running a full F1 program, being at the time the most expensive motorsport operation int he world was too much.

Brawn GP: Memories from a Brit

Honda leaving F1 was national news. Honda's F1 operations were in Brackley, Northamptonshire, in what could be called the Motorsport belt of the UK. You could draw a 25 mile circle around Silverstone, and the majority of Formula One Teams, and associated industries would be based around there. Williams F1 would be 15 miles outside of this bubble, then of course you had Ferrari, Sauber, and Torro Rosso, based internationally. The loss of a single F1 team would have an impact not only on those in the team itself, but the success of local industries from grocery stores to those associated with the production of parts for these racing machines.

If you were anything more than a casual F1 fan, you would know who Ross Brawn was. Having come off of Ferrari's Golden Era with Schumacher between 2000 and 2004, Brawn was on podiums, interviews, and features. In all honesty, outside of team managers and drivers, he would likely be ranked as the second most valuable asset in the sport, alongside

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Adrian Newey.

I remember hearing the news about Ross buying out Honda to create Brawn GP at the literal 11th hour. This was before pre-season testing was broadcasted, and at a time when F1 Racing (Now GP Racing) and Autosport were your two real F1 news sources in the UK unless you were a real hardcore enthusiast about the sport. I was surprised, but not shocked about Ross buying the team, but like many, were wondering about who would power the cars. On the surface, you would expect Ferrari to help one of their old employees, but at the same time, the documentary showed that there was a bit of love lost once Ross moved to the Honda operation.

When news about their fast testing times came through, it was a look up and pay attention, but not spit out your tea moment. That came when the Australian GP qualifying came around. Like most people, I watched it on the re-run rather than be up at silly AM, and this really was a ‘holy mackerel’ moment. Despite being a massive fan of Virgin trains, and Virgin Megastores (Which had been sold off 18 months or so prior to the 2009 Australian GP), Richard Branson had this thing of rubbing me up the wrong way. I think the documentary highlights some of this, especially when it came to his demands being akin to finding an offer for ‘yellow label’ groceries at your latest supermarket.

2009 was a transition time for F1 in the UK, moving from ITV back to the BBC as broadcaster. The F1 on ITV experiment wasn’t ‘bad’; in fact, it was a massive step up from being incorporated into BBC Grandstand, and a lot of the on air team moved over (Except, sadly James Allen, who had started to warm UK audiences after Murray Walker’s retirement). The last F1 race on ITV saw the craziest championship finish in series history, with the phrase ‘IS THAT GLOCK?!?!?’ forever etched into viewers minds. Why they ended the season with ‘Welcome to the Black Parade’ as a montage is beyond me, but having ‘Old Auntie’ back in charge of F1, with more dedicated coverage is welcome.

You see a lot of this in the documentary. Although F1 did have thier own digital F1 service for a brief period, the UK rights holder to F1 until 2012 had not one, but two roles. The first was to provide the feed to UK Audiences, but also the ‘world feed’, which was used in many English speaking countries. I assume that this is the reason why there are so many BBC Sport based interviews in this documentary.

Who Made This Documentary? Not F1 / Nor the BBC

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What surprised me when researching this piece, that despite the inclusion of so many BBC interviews / commentator sound clips, the documentary was actually commissioned by Disney+. *Perhaps* a reason for the use of all the BBC based content was due to the fact that back in 2009, FOX had the rights to Formula 1 coverage, under their Speed TV Channel (Which became FS1 in 2013). Mickey Mouse and Cleatus (Or heck, Digger if we're staying true to Motorsport coverage), historically don't get on, so even though you see the odd Speed microphone in pictures, it's not actually them asking the questions. I don't know the full ins and outs of F1 broadcasting, but I do know that most drivers have historically done interviews in a 'pen' style format, but the UK rights holder (Until Sky Sports F1 at least), would record audio that could be used almost universally as a 'world feed interview'.

Recognising that it was a Disney+ documentary, and not a BBC commissioned one (Despite it ending up on BBC iPlayer, a free UK VOD service), makes me understand a bit more of the way that the documentary was designed and produced. It is something for a casual / interested F1 fan, explaining some of the key concepts of racing, engineering and the like. Most F1 fans for example know that before you race, you go qualify, but qualifying rules, especially in US & world motorsports can vary dramatically, from single lap, to race ins, to night / day aggregated times, to the immortal 4 laps of Indianapolis.

How would Disney+ get the level of access needed to make this a decent 4 part series? ESPN, whom are 80% owned by Disney are the current rights holders to Formula 1, and have been since 2017. As the US tries to grow the sport, this is the sort of thing, along with Drive to Survive that Formula One Management (FOM) love. Ironically, even though Bernie Ecclestone is interviewed heavily for this documentary, he wouldn't have allowed it in his days, before Liberty Media bought F1 essentially from him in 2017. Liberty Media have been very active in encouraging participation in off track docu-series, and this is, quite honestly a great example of how a sport should work. Looking back at significant stories, and also looking at opening up a sport which for many years felt like a 'gentlemen's only club'.

First. My Gripes

I don't have too many gripes about this documentary, but I have a few, which managed to tick me off a bit. Remember those 'hold that thought' bits from earlier? Here we go:

- Remember when I mentioned about BAR claiming that they thought they would win their first Grand Prix? This would have made a perfect companion piece. Brawn GP

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wouldn’t have existed without BAR (Or sadly, Ken Tyrrell passing in 1998, which would have seen a different lineage). So many motorsport teams over the years have been formed due to takeovers / mergers etc, and F1 needs to embrace this more. Heck, part of the storyline shown was the fact that Brawn GP were claiming that they were the same team as Honda, just with a different name on the door! A comparison between Melbourne 1999 and Melbourne 2009 would have been fantastic.

- Long term F1 fans are not stupid. One of Ross Brawn’s greatest races on the pit wall, Hungary 1998 was rightfully shown, but the commentary was spliced from elsewhere. Murray Walker was commentating that race (I even went back to check), and there was no F1 English ‘world feed’ back then that I can tell. I can only assume that as Jonathan Legard was calling races for BBC Radio 5 Live at the time (Who had the rights to radio commentary in the UK), they used some of the stuff from him, but there’s no way of me telling unless I took a trip to Portland Place, London, and went through some archives!
- There was a time when F1 races didn’t have light synced ‘beeps’ before the start of a race, as if you needed waking up before the start of a GP. Back in 2009, these didn’t exist, yet someone (FOM?) decided it needed including. For a long time F1 fan, this was just annoying.
- Quite rightly, they talked about FOTA and the Grand Prix World Championship / GPWC (As the breakaway series was officially to be known as) war with FOM and the FIA. I don’t know if this is because of the fact that ESPN is the US F1 rights holder, the fact that IndyCar is actually beating F1 in ratings in the US at the moment, or if FOM just want to ignore US motor racing history, but there’s already been an Open Wheel ’split’, and it occurred in 1995!There is so much that could have been discussed about the harm to both sides of the split over time (Yes, CART was popular for a few years, and yes, the Indy 500 was and is still big, but nowhere near levels pre-1995), but it was ignored. Even a simple question to Bernie about it would have been enough. He did business with Tony George, the man who caused the split by bringing the US Grand Prix to Indianapolis from 2000 to 2007 (And was on the GPWC calendar). But nothing. If this was targeted to a US audience, then there would be plenty of fans screaming at their streaming sets for sure over this admission.
- Brawn finished P3 and P4 in the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, which was the last race for the team. Yes, the championship has been won, but after all the struggles in the back half of the season, the team finished well enough to have deserved a mention. At this time, there were still a lot of questions about the ultimate future of the team, despite

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the Mercedes rumour-mill, and it would have been nice to tie together some of the loose ends here.

- Taking this a step further, Red Bull scored a 1 – 2 in Abu Dhabi. If you want to talk about a passing of the touch to the team who would win the next four championships in both Driver and Constructers terms, this would be it. Although not strictly in the remit of the documentary, it's lost that 2009 was the first time the main Red Bull team won a Grand Prix, after a Red Bull Minardi won in 2008 at Monza, so this wasn't just one team shining for the first time, but a progressive changing of the F1 guard.
- I got a little annoyed about the post-text about the team being sold to Mercedes, whom became a dominant F1 team. It would have been so easy to mention that it took another rules package to bring Mercedes to the front of the pack again, as Red Bull became the Aero team of the early 2010s. Accuracy is important throughout, even at what may seem to be a 'throw away' epilogue.

The Positives (There Are Many)

I don't actually like many motorsport documentaries. They are either too technical, or designed in such a way that the audience are perceived to be idiots. It's not just motorsport documentaries. Films suffer the same issue. Whilst I hope the new F1 movie will be better than the 2001 classic Driven, there's often more bad than good when it comes to the genre. I must admit I loved the Ferrari – Ford documentary & film, and the Senna movie is one where it's almost impossible to fault, shy of not providing tissues to everyone going into see it at movie theatres.

Keanu Reeves as the documentary's host: Great choice. Someone serious enough to be taken… Seriously, but also not afraid to get those he's talking to to open up and speak more freely. I have always been a firm believer in using the full English lexicon in my conversations, including words that would get me censored in the UK before 9PM. Recognising that there's a lot of potty mouth language used in F1 (Something which FOM almost embraced with beeping, then clamped down on for some reason), Reeves tried to get his participants to speak openly, freely, even with the occasional bad word. Good. This is the approach that is needed more open.

Spending as much time as the documentary did about the dire state of Brawn GP's finances was a key thread that needed to be discussed, and I'm glad that they went into the detail they did. Not doing so would have made the FOTA / GPWC role of Brawn GP non-understandable, and would have dehumanised the documentary. The fact that after scoring

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a 1 – 2 at their first ever GP as the new team, then having to cut 50% of the team that put the same car together is a hard reality to get your head around, and I think that this was handled tastefully, but with the gravitas that was needed.

Little ‘easter eggs’ about the whole Honda >> Brawn GP process really played out well in my opinion. I’m a fact checker when it comes to a lot of TV things, and I went to check the pound coin that was allegedly given to the Honda partner as a part of the deal. It was legit. The only thing I think was missing was the crash test process, which would have been hard for the team with the re-engineering of the car, and the dire budgets, and it may have been nice to explore it. Certainly not a gripe though, as that veers into the technical. The application of the Virgin stickers onto the car, in Melbourne really shows how the team were operating like a 1994 Simtek, just minus Taki Inoue. Again, a great visualisation of the finance issues.

This wasn’t a story told from one angle. It had Christian Horner, Bernie Ecclestone, heck Luca di Montezemolo! Getting Luca involved was a masterstroke. Christian has a habit of complaining about everyone, everything, and anything, but with Luca, there was some real anger and passion involved. Remember Ferrari was a Timo Glock away from winning the 2008 Drivers World Championship, and had it not have been for Brawn GP and the double diffuser, may have had a chance in 2009. This multi layered storytelling is something which to be honest ESPN do so well across the sports they cover, and I’m glad that the Wordwide Leader’s input into this shone through the way it did. Luca obviously had a big story to play with FOTA, but involving his anger around the double diffuser was a masterstroke that may have been missed with a lesser detailed company.

Courtrooms meetings in random places and press conferences are as much about F1 as the racing itself. This was covered to a tee. From meeting Honda, to the appeals court, to meetings on yachts, to Bernie being Bernie, this was covered with the detail needed, and the drama attached to it. Allowing the key personnel to tell it through their own eyes, rather than narrating it made a huge impact. This is where Keanu shone through again. You couldn’t haver the Brawn GP story without the FOTA story, and making sure one doesn’t overtake the other, whilst not ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room again, has a lot to do with ESPN’s track record of great storytelling when they decide to (Unless it’s Hockey: Right Canada?)

Going, for the most part race by race, and session by session was really useful. It allowed both Button and Barrichello to explain their highs, lows, frustrations and heartache.

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Emphasising rule #1 of being a racing driver (Beat your teammate), and the growing anger and despondency by Rubens was played out wonderfully, though it did make Button look a bit too ‘corporate’, or even ‘wimpish’ at points. This was a ***MUCH*** different button from 2000 (Where I can remember his SNAFU at Monza under the safety car), or his playboyesque approach to F1 whilst at Benetton, which could have been explored more, but wouldn’t have added too much to the story. The fact that Button was been portrayed as someone almost buckling under pressure whilst Rubens almost was fuelled off of it, added a lot to the story, especially in an era where F1 drivers were almost seen to be cut and paste models.

Showing the team dynamics alongside the driver’s is key too. It’s a lie that engineers share data. Rubens would have known this from his Ferrari days, drivers will always hold back some key intel, and in the 15,000 datapoints mentioned by Jock Clear, so many are irrelevant if driving styles are different, as was highlighted between Button and Rubens. I would argue that Cambergate could have been explored a tiny bit more: The reason not being speed, but the fact that this could have helped Button with tyre temperatures, giving him more faith and grip in the car. Brawn being so clear on his team orders stance had to be emphasised, especially after the Schumacher era with Rubens as a clear No.2 driver. You ***could*** argue that Brawn had to say this, as at the time team orders were illegal in F1 (Anyone remember “Fernando is faster than you. Can you confirm you understand that message?” Anyone?).

Giving the correct time of day to the Hungarian Grand Prix incident with the spring from Rubens’ car hitting Massa’s helmet was both neccessary, and executed tastefully. Many won’t remember that on the 29th April 1994, Rubens almost died after hitting a kerb and having a horrific crash during practice for the San Marino Grand Prix. After literally having his life saved by Professor Sid Watkins (He had chosen on his tongue), he regained consciousness in the infield care centre, and had his countryman, Senna looking down at him. The shots of Rubens running across the track to check on Massa invoked some memories of elder Brazilian F1 drivers looking out for their younger countrymen, and without mentioning Senna’s name, you could see that duty of responsibility on Rubens. This was one of those crashes that you will always remember, and… Yeah. It was a lucky one for Massa. It didn’t need more words, but the visuals just said everything.

A couple of those little personal stories, and bringing in Hamilton’s father Anthony in Part 4 (As Button’s own father John had died in 2004) really provided the cherry on top of the icing

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on the cake. This is where a documentary takes you from informing (Or re-informing) you, to making things something real and relatable. The ‘I don’t think he’s got it’ line, alongside being at every single bloody race that season. It shows how the heart and the head can always fight, but how important that faith can be. The Interlagos Beer story, the pep talk in disguise. Awesome (Remember though, Bernie says: When you drive, never drink!)

Conclusions

All in all, there’s not enough good that I can say about this. Disney+ / ESPN have outshone themselves here, like they have done so many times. I get why this wasn’t a 30 For 30 documentary due to its length and audience, but it is up there with the best from that series.

My gripes wouldn’t be noticed by 90% of the audience. Some of them were just ‘meh, this is a tad annoying’, and others being akin to research budget money running out, but this is just one idiot’s opinion. There’s likely something I’ve missed or glazed over (Like Brawn not being the only team to piss off FOTA), but the core product here is excellent. I went from allocating 15 minutes to see how things went to watching all four episodes back to back. I don’t do that often.

Peace And Love xx

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