



Lewis Hamilton: ready for glory

McLaren team 2008:
Hamilton and Heikki Kovalainen



Hamilton in action



Celebrating a podium finish in Monaco, 2007



Winning the Laureus World Breakthrough of the Year

Life in the fast lane

Not many sportsmen get to write an autobiography at the age of 22, but then Lewis Hamilton isn't your ordinary sportsman. James Descombes talks racing and travel with the F1 superstar.



Hamilton at the wheel

After his first season in racing's top division, Lewis Hamilton became the most successful rookie in Formula One history.

For much of the year he led the pack, only to lose out on the F1 World Drivers' Championship, finishing the final race of the season an agonising point off the top of the leaderboard.

With the experience gained from his first season, Hamilton's hoping to go one step further, following in the tyre tracks of British racing legends like Jackie Stewart, Nigel Mansell and Damon Hill, so I asked if the pressure was more intense second time around.

"The greatest pressure comes from within. I want to win and be the best that I can. I want to win the Drivers' World Championship."

Even though this is just his second season in racing's top division, the expectation

levels are high. So how does the country's number one feel as Britain holds its breath for another F1 racing champion in November?

"It is nice to know others have great expectations of me, I hope I don't let anyone down. I'll keep working hard to do the best I can."

Hamilton's been preparing for glory from a young age: a little Lewis got his first taste of life behind the wheel on holiday; and he hasn't looked back since.

"I found my excitement of racing cars while on holiday in Ibiza when I was three years old ... it was the highlight of the trip for me.

"When I was seven, my father took me to a local kart track ... I had a fantastic time and it felt natural right away. I knew from that moment that this was what I wanted to do." ▶



Hamilton at the Italian Grand Prix, 2007



A young Lewis on the track

Hamilton went through the junior ranks, impressing at every level before reaching Formula One. At the age of nine he walked up to McLaren team manager, Ron Dennis, and told him he was going to race for them; three years later he was signed.

Being an F1 driver has its perks (and we're not talking free parking), "I have a Mercedes-Benz GL, it is a wicked car", Hamilton says when I ask about his personal car collection, before topping that with, "my dream car is the orange McLaren F1LM

that sits waiting for me at the McLaren Technology Centre".

And he doesn't just travel in these awesome supercars, a flick through Hamilton's passport would turn up airport stamps for some truly amazing countries.

"I'm pretty fortunate in that I have had the opportunity to visit some pretty cool places already, but there are so many places I would love to go and really spend some time in, so you can experience them properly.



Celebrating a win at the Japanese Grand Prix, 2007

"One place I've not really spent much time is South America, I'd definitely like to go back to Brazil when we are not racing, to take a look around."

When I ask Lewis, who grew up in not-so-sunny Stevenage, what country's impressed him the most, he sings Japan's praises.

"Its culture is quite unique ... every time you go you feel like you are experiencing something new."

And, when not doing the day job, it doesn't take much for him to relax on holiday.

"I have the kind of personality where I don't need much help to chill out, it is not something I find difficult! I like to be with my friends and family somewhere peaceful, some good music and good food. I am not that hard to please."

With Hamilton, you get the feeling that, while it may not be hard to please him off the track, on it is a different matter.

When it comes to sport, us Brits suffer more than most, whether it's football, boxing, rugby or cricket, we've had our fair share of near misses, so Hamilton's success would undoubtedly make him a British hero, something he is very humble about.

"I don't see myself as a hero, to me a hero is someone who has achieved something against adversity.

"I am incredibly proud to be a sportsman that British people want to follow, that for me is really exciting, but at the end of the day I have my dream job and I am very fortunate, that shouldn't make me a hero but thank you anyway."

He may still be young, but Lewis Hamilton looks set to continue taking the racing world by storm. I certainly wouldn't bet against him having to write another autobiography.

To find out more about Lewis Hamilton's rise to the top of Formula One, pick up a copy of his brilliant autobiography, *Lewis Hamilton My Story*, out now and published by HarperCollins. ■