

Staying on track

British Formula One star Sir Lewis Hamilton equalled Michael Schumacher's record seven world titles in 2020, but will he go down as the greatest driver of all time?

Fittingly, Sir Lewis Hamilton posed next to a sign that read "Danke Michael" when he moved level with the great German's record of 91 Formula One wins after victory at the Eifel Grand Prix in Nurburg, Germany in October 2020. At the next race weekend in Portugal, Hamilton pulled level with the combined number of wins clocked up between bitter rivals Alain Prost and Ayrton Senna. The Frenchman and the Brazilian drove in a different era to Hamilton, making it hard to compare – and of course Senna's career was tragically cut short – but when Schumacher first took to the track in 1991, the greatest-of-all-time debate centred around 1950s legend Juan Manuel Fangio, Prost and Senna. Fangio's five Formula 1 drivers' titles stood as the best for 46 years, so very few people thought Schumacher's record seven would ever be matched. But then came Hamilton, and reaching his peak at the age of 35, there seems to be no stopping the high-flying Brit – on and off the track.

There are a few immediate similarities between Schumacher and Hamilton: both were aged 34 when they won their sixth F1 title, both did so in their 13th season and both won championships with

independent teams first. Hamilton now has a slightly higher career win ratio (35.7% to Schumacher's 29.7%), but he is in his pomp.

Speaking on the Australian Grand Prix's *In the Fast Lane* podcast in 2020, F1 commentator Murray Walker said that it was difficult to compare due to varying conditions, but that Hamilton's "fairness" made him stand out above the likes of Senna, Schumacher, and Fangio. "Fangio took a lot of beating, [as did] Jim Clark, Sir Jackie Stewart – I could go on – but which is the best I really don't know," Walker said.

"I used to say Fangio. I think I'm going to have to say very shortly Lewis Hamilton... He's got at



Left: Winning in Sochi, Russia as Champion elect in 2019, Sir Lewis Hamilton has won six titles in eight years at Mercedes

managed to find peace and being centred and just being happy. And I've been able to focus on weaknesses in training."

Hamilton did eventually catch the virus, keeping him out of the Turkish Grand Prix in Sakir in the first week of December, but he knew catching it earlier could derail his title challenge, so he pretty much removed himself from society. "I've never really been home [before]," Hamilton says.

"In my winter, I go to the mountains [in Colorado], which I really see as my main home, because it's a house and it's full of love and memories from people, the family that come every winter. Where I live in Monaco, it's been somewhere I go back to and I'd call home but it lacks those memories. I'd be there for short periods of time. So it's not been the easiest."

Hamilton created a bubble which fundamentally included only

least three years... in which case, he's got at least another three championships ahead of him, so statistically he will become the greatest.

"But he's also in my opinion – and this is very contentious indeed – better than either Schumacher or Senna because both of them, Schumacher and Senna, adopted at various times in their career, highly debatable driving tactics.

"Lewis Hamilton has never been anything like that. He's always driven as clean as a whistle.

"He's an extremely nice, gigantically talented driver, and I don't think we've ever seen anybody like him before."

It's been a challenging year for many reasons and Hamilton "lived like a hermit" to avoid COVID as his Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff describes it. "It's definitely been a challenge," Hamilton told the BBC late in 2020.

"But I know it's the same for so many people around the world. I've managed to find myself very comfortable on my own. I've

one other person; Angela Cullen, his physio. "We're very much aligned in terms of things we like to do," Hamilton told the BBC of his relationship with the New Zealander, who lives in the French Alps with her husband and two children when not on tour with the Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula One Team.

"We are both on a plant-based diet, so we're learning a lot together, and there's things I raised that maybe she didn't know, and vice versa."

As well as optimising his body, Cullen has also helped Hamilton work on his mind, supporting his meditation. The British driver found the "perfect zone of clarity" throughout the Spanish Grand Prix in August. "It is going to be hard to raise the bar," he says.

"But it's not like I am new to this. I know what I need to do to get myself in the right headspace and physically in the right place also. I don't really see keeping consistency being an issue, but it is much smaller increments.

Despite his record-equalling championship in 2020, Hamilton is most proud of fight against racism, where he has become a figurehead in the Black Lives Matter movement.

In the wake of the death of George Floyd, Hamilton persuaded Mercedes to paint their cars black which is a big statement, given the team had raced with silver cars since the 1930s.

When Hamilton retires, there is no doubt that he will devote the rest of his life to equal human rights. And there is no doubt that the man who was knighted in the Queen's New Year's Honors will do it from a very powerful pedestal – as the greatest Formula One Driver of all-time. ■

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