

Future is orange

From Mad Max to World Champion, Max Verstappen remains the future of Formula 1, according to **James Roberts**, after securing his maiden title in 2021

Max Verstappen first appeared in the pages of the prestigious motorsport monthly *F1 Racing* in November 1997. He was less than a day old, pictured with his proud parents who were standing next to his crib.

Fast forward almost 19 years and Verstappen appeared in the same magazine as its cover star for the first time. The headline accompanying the youthful Dutchman in the April 2016 issue was: 'The face of F1's future'. It was remarkably prescient. Last December, the Red Bull ace beat seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton in a dramatic last-lap shootout to claim his first Formula 1 World Championship.

The remarkable story of how Verstappen grew up to become a national hero and global superstar can be traced back to the reason his birth was publicised in the first place.

Born on 30 September 1997 in the Belgian town of Hasselt, close to the Dutch border, Max Emilian Verstappen was perhaps always destined to be a Formula 1 driver. His father Jos Verstappen competed in over 100 F1 races in a career spanning 1994 and 2003. Known affectionately by fans as 'Jos the Boss' he never won a Grand Prix, but twice appeared on the podium.

Right: Max Verstappen of Red Bull Racing talks in the post race press conference during the 2017 Malaysian F1

In addition to inheriting his father's racing attributes, Max also has his mother to thank, as she was talented behind the wheel too. Sophie Kumpen started go-karting at the age of ten and climbed through the ranks to win top honours in karting, competing against other youngsters that would become stars, including future F1 champion Jenson Button.

With racing in his blood, young Max followed in his parents footsteps and was soon setting the karting tracks alight with his blistering speed and razor-sharp talent.

His rise through the sport was meteoric – but not without controversy. Recently footage has resurfaced of a 2012 disagreement between Verstappen and a karting rival when the pair were about 14 years old.

The two racers have made contact on track after a hard-fought duel. A disgruntled Max describes the clash as "not fair" while his fellow competitor shrugs it off as "just an incident." His rival back then is the same one he's been battling for race wins in Formula 1 this season – Ferrari's Charles Leclerc.

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CHRISTIAN HORNER

For the past decade Verstappen and Leclerc have been competing against each other, but this year a rejuvenated Ferrari means the battle between them is for the greatest prize of all: the honour to be World Champion. Red Bull's Verstappen is defending the title he won last year, while Monaco-born Leclerc is gunning for his first crown – and Ferrari's first championship since 2007. For now the rivalry is friendly, but as they proved in karting, tensions between them could easily flare up if they collide on track.

After winning the world karting championship in 2013, Verstappen did one season of single-seater car racing in Formula 3. His speed attracted the interest of Red Bull and for 2015 they gave young Max his Formula 1 debut at their junior team: Toro Rosso.

At the season-opening Australian Grand Prix, Verstappen became the youngest ever starter of an F1 race, at the age of 17 years, five months and 15 days. Despite retiring from his maiden GP with an engine problem, at the next round he immediately proved he could compete against the world's best. He qualified sixth on the grid and scored points with an impressive seventh-place finish in the heat and humidity of Malaysia.

Five races into the following season Red Bull made a dramatic decision. Unimpressed with their incumbent driver Daniil Kvyat

they decided to swap seats and promote Verstappen to Red Bull in time for the 2016 Spanish Grand Prix.

It was only the 24th race of Max's career and now the Dutch driver was in a car capable of winning a Grand Prix. And remarkably on his debut for Red Bull, he did just that. Standing on the top step of the Barcelona podium, Verstappen sprayed the champagne to become the youngest winner of a Formula 1 race at 18 years, seven months and 15 days. He eclipsed the previous record held by Sebastian Vettel by over two and a half years.

Speaking to *F1 Racing* magazine at the time of his first cover story, the 1996 world champion Damon Hill was impressed with the young rookie: "To be honest, I'm flabbergasted," said Hill.

"If you had put me, aged 17, in F1, I would have looked a complete twit. I hadn't got a clue what I was doing, or where I was going. Max's debut has been stunning, it really has."

While Verstappen's talent was evident, his tender years did bring with it moments of immaturity and numerous clashes with rivals. One of the most notable was the crash with Dan Ricciardo on the streets of Baku in 2018. The two Red Bull drivers were running first and second in the race when their coming-together eliminated both of them from contention. Later that year Verstappen suffered another high-profile collision when he attempted to overtake a back marker. When the gap to Frenchman Esteban Ocon closed at Turn 1 in Brazil, Verstappen aggressively forced the issue – but that led to the Dutchman spinning out of the race lead. ▶





When cameras spotted Max squaring up to his rival in the paddock after the race, it made headlines around the world. With experience, these incidents have significantly reduced, but Max's driving was in the spotlight once again last year in a titanic scrap with Lewis Hamilton for the world title.

Hamilton's Mercedes team have dominated Formula 1 in recent years, but in 2021, Red Bull had a car that was a match for the all-conquering Silver Arrows. The championship battle between Verstappen and Hamilton will live long in the memory.

Above: Verstappen celebrates victory in Miami in 2022 with his partner Kelly Piquet and mother Sophie Kumpen

They made contact numerous times throughout the season which kept both sets of supporters – and neutrals – enthralled.

Their epic duel for supremacy came down to the final lap of the season, which Max snatched from Lewis in controversial circumstances. In this instance Max was blameless, the ire from Mercedes was in the handling of the race's Safety Car regulations.

Hamilton graciously shook Max and his father Jos' hands before the podium in recognition of their lifetime ambition to win a world title. It's never an easy journey.

When I last sat down with Red Bull team boss Christian Horner, in an interview for *The Official Formula 1 Magazine* I asked him how he was able to manage a driver like Max.

"He's very straight-forward actually," said Horner.

"He's totally honest and doesn't stand for any bullsh**t. When you put facts in front of him, he gets it. He understands it and [if something is wrong] he recovers from it very quickly. He's remarkable in that respect and is one of the easiest drivers I have worked with over the years. He's binary almost – you just always know what you've got with him."

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DAMON HILL

His down-to-earth, no nonsense approach has endeared Verstappen to many fans around the world — and none more so than in his home country. Wherever Formula 1 visits on its global tour you can always guarantee there will be a legion of support from the Orange Army that travel en masse to watch their hero at every race.

From Abu Dhabi to Zandvoort, you can always spot the partisan Dutch fans, as they are bedecked in orange t-shirts and caps showing their unwavering support for their national hero. The country's interest in Verstappen is huge and TV viewing figures for the sport of Formula 1 have rocketed. ▶



On a recent visit to the Netherlands I spoke to a local fan who summed up the impact of his popularity on the sport.

"I never used to watch F1. Ever," she said. "Now, because of Max, I never miss a race."

Above: Verstappen enjoying the pre-race entertainment ahead of the Belgian Formula One Grand Prix at Spa-Francorchamps in August 2016, aged 19 Left: Verstappen is crowned world champion for the first time at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi in December 2021

Now into his eighth season, Verstappen is once more thrilling audiences in the Netherlands and around the world with his daring driving, high-speed skill and wheel-to-wheel bravery.

Having started his Formula 1 career with the Red Bull family, prior to the beginning of this season he agreed a deal that will extend his stay with the team through to the end of 2028. It's remarkable to consider that as Hamilton is only three years from turning 40, Max is only 24 years of age. He will be the face of Formula 1's future for an even longer time to come. ■