

William A. Motta, Art Editor of *Road and Track*, is an accomplished painter and photographer. Years at the magazine have made him an astute observer of Formula One. Talking with him is a pleasure, because of his obvious love of his profession.

D.K. **I want to talk to you about your ideas on racing photography, because you are a picture editor and have been for so long. First, I would like to find out about your background. You graduated from the Art Center in the late '50s?**

W.M. Right. In 1957.

D.K. **And moved directly to *Road and Track*?**

W.M. I started free-lancing as an illustrator for *Motor Trend* and *Road and Track*, various magazines and NFL football.

D.K. **Where did the art come from, and where did the car come from?**

W.M. The car thing started at Art Center. I was always interested in cars — all kids are in high school. A lot of the projects, illustration projects, seemed to be involved with cars. As school progressed I became more and more interested in one of the instructors, a car guy, an advertising instructor named Harvey Thompson.

He had various European cars, and I wouldn't say he nurtured this love of cars, but he didn't discourage it. Anyway, I found that cars were something I was more interested in than other people in that field. So getting out and free-lancing as an illustrator and the *Road and Track* job as a part-time thing, I thought, well, this will last a few months or a year; and it's been 24 years, as of three days ago.

D.K. **Congratulations on the anniversary.**

W.M. Surviving this long, I guess, is part of the deal. The Formula One car has evolved considerably in that time. What it has come from and where it's going has been very interesting.

D.K. **What is your attraction to Formula One?**

W.M. That has changed over the years. Back in the '60s, when we were dealing with a few very famous people in that sport, a Stirling Moss, Phil Hill, Jack Brabham, they weren't known by anyone outside of the sport. Phil would come back to

the States after he'd won the championship, walk down the street in Santa Monica, and nobody knew him! He would go anywhere in the country, virtually any restaurant short of Le Chanteclair in New York, which was an auto-racing-oriented restaurant, and never be recognized. He goes to Italy, and people still recognize him on the streets. It's amazing. That is the big difference between perceived importance here and there. Still, if any of these Grand Prix drivers walk down the streets of Long Beach, nobody is going to recognize them.

D.K. **Is it just because so many of the races were basically European?**

W.M. That is part of it, and European cars were not a big deal here until the last 10 or 15 years. How many people had a European car and weren't involved with the sport? *Road and Track* was started in 1947 because of this interest in MG's and Jaguars. When *Road and Track* started, the Formula One car was in its infancy, as far as the international world championship. So *Road and Track* grew up with Fangio and Moss and Gonzales, people like that. We grew up together.

D.K. **A lot of people express negativity about the change in modern racing.**

W.M. Because money has become so important, because of the expense of moving these cars around. When we talk of the '50s and '60s we are talking about Watkins Glen, Sebring, Riverside, as far as the U.S. is concerned; they were on a one-race basis, so very little money was involved. There was a lot of sponsor involvement then too. The oil companies were deeply involved, where they aren't necessarily now. So as the cost escalated, and as you get more races in the U.S., the cost becomes prohibitive, and someone has to pay for it. The drivers are still there. I think you will find that there are drivers now who are as good as most of the drivers back in the '50s.

Cars are so much more sophisticated. So many other things are important — aerodynamics — that guys like Fangio don't stand out any more. A guy like Lauda could be the Fangio of this era, but who is ever going to know? Because the cars are faster, and there are so many other good drivers that the driver is not as important as he was in the '50s.

D.K. **When the driver could make up for a deficiency in the car by his handling of it and by his abilities?**

W.M. Back in the '50s, a guy like Fangio, even on the team with Moss, good as Moss was, Fangio was better. Everybody knew it and accepted it, even Moss. I don't think that will ever happen again, because the driver isn't the key element any more. The driver was, say, 75 percent of the race, and the car was 25 percent. How much has that changed? Tremendously. The other way around: 25 percent driver, 75 percent car.

D.K. **A mediocre driver in an excellent car has a good chance of being in the top three?**

W.M. Absolutely. And the cars have become so sophisticated that, some little thing goes wrong, and the car is out of the race.

D.K. **Like Arnoux in Detroit? The race in the bag, and the classic two-dollar part fails!**

W.M. Or Piquet at Detroit. Same thing, a tire. Screams into the pit for a quick change, and that was enough to lose the race. Where can all this technological sophistication lead the Formula One driver? Then there is playing with the locations of the tracks now. There is no tradition involved.

D.K. **That was a major part of Formula One.**

W.M. Sure it was. Tradition was important. Back at the Glen, who would ever have guessed at the heyday of the Glen that they would lose the race? That the race could be held elsewhere?

D.K. **The driving style is different. Although,**

certainly, to hold a car on a line at Indy speed is incredible.

W.M. No question about it. You take any Formula One driver, Teo Fabi is a good example, who doesn't have all that much experience as a Formula One driver, and he goes to Indy and becomes a sensational driver at Indy. He doesn't understand his success. What would happen if Lauda went to Indy with a good car? Would he be that devastating to the field?

D.K. **From what I gather, within a year or two we will find out!**

W.M. We will find out, yes. Maybe getting Indy back into the World Championship and getting the two Formulas back so they are interchangeable, that would be good for international racing.

D.K. **That would make a lot of sense. Make the publicity easier. Part of the problem was that no one knew how to spell Piquet here, or who Keke Rosberg is. But if they are running in a few major races the identification —**

W.M. Oh, it will come. I think they learned rather quickly how to spell Fabi. They learned how to spell Jackie Stewart.

D.K. **And Jim Clark.**

W.M. And Brabham. Brabham was one of the first to bring rear-engined cars to Indy, and what happens? They are all rear engined.

D.K. **I would like to talk about making pictures of racing. As art editor of *Road and Track* do you have any idea how many pictures of racing cars you look at in a year?**

W.M. Hmm. Good question. We probably get a minimum of 100 shots, probably more like 300, or 300 from about five or six photographers: David Phipps, Geoff Goddard, now John Blakemore, Nigel Snowdon, Jeff Hutchinson, various people. So you can say we probably get at least 1,000 photographs from each Formula One race. When



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William A. Motta
Niki Lauda, 1978

you multiply that by the number of races in the schedule.

D.K. **When I first talked with you, you had several feet of slide sheets on your desk from Long Beach.**

W.M. Yes, Long Beach. Because a lot of local photographers are involved and send their stuff. It is easy to get two or three feet — 15, 18, 20 thousand photos.

D.K. **And you can basically print about six pictures?**

W.M. Yes, five or six photos are what you are dealing with. What happens then, unfortunately, is you start culling very savagely. Computer photographs, the laser things, are beautiful, but you can't use them much. Any kind of trick is good once, and then it is passé. What makes one photograph better than another, that is a really tough deal. You look at 15,000 photos from Long Beach, and if you are lucky a half-dozen shots stand out from the others. Those that say something journalistically about the race — more than just aiming and pointing a camera. Another significant thing is what the autofocus cameras are going to do to this whole business. They are terrifically competent. The Canon Sure Shot and the Nikon Autofocus, everybody has one. It takes just as sharp a photo in the pits as the regular Nikons or Canons. It allows you to get a grab shot that you couldn't get if you had to focus in a short time.

It's not like walking up to a driver and sticking a big strobe light in his face, firing it off, and having the guy blind for the next 30 seconds. Doing that is rude and stupid, and hurts everybody. It's a problem of intrusion into the driver's concentration. A little flash like the autofocus is small enough that it lights up the inside of the helmet, gets sparkle in the driver's eyes. It allows you to get an impromptu shot that can be good. Technol-

ogy is going to change the way we look at Formula One racing photos and what we perceive as good.

D.K. **I guess part of the definition of being a good photographer is the consistency and the ability to deal with a lot of situations?**

W.M. But how do we relate to this guy who is lucky in the new age of equipment that has made him a good photographer?

How do you avoid getting a photo that is the same as they are getting? That's tough.

D.K. **There is a certain ability of problem solving that the top-level photographers have.**

W.M. But there are so few that do more than just document what is going on in front of them. Very few put their own personality in the photos.

Guys like Klemantaski did unusual, dramatic photography because they were prepared. They knew the races, they knew the track, they knew the drivers. They anticipated what might happen. The one image that made Klemantaski important, or others in that period, wasn't that they had to have 300 photos from the race. Maybe they had two dozen, maybe less, but every one of these was carefully planned and executed.

D.K. **You bring up a process that I think is fascinating. It is the combination of logic and intuition, and how photographers use that. The problem we discussed with those autofocus cameras: Is it almost entirely intuition?**

W.M. It's luck. There is a certain amount of intuition, but to get a photograph that is important, you have to know the drivers, know who is doing what in qualifying. It has to be a piece of journalism. Blakemore, Snowdon and the rest of them out there getting their photos printed, are the guys who have done their homework. They know which drivers are in contention, where to be in the pits, who possibly could win the race and where

to be in case he is coming close to the end of the race. He knows the potentials of the cars and the drivers in those situations. He anticipates and is right there with the right equipment to do it, with autofocus or not. What we are seeing are fewer and fewer outstanding photographs, at least in Grand Prix racing, because the driver is becoming less and less seen. You may have noticed that very few drivers even have their names on the cars. You have to keep track of the numbers on the helmets.

D.K. **The color of the helmet?**

W.M. Yes. And sometimes even that isn't relevant. The helmets are no longer distinctive. Time was when you knew Graham Hill's helmet, knew Stewart's and Clark's, even Gurney with a plain dark helmet. Everybody's helmet was important. Now, it's amazing, almost as if they don't want to be known or develop personalities.

D.K. **Talking about lack of color and personality, with Lauda as the exception. . . .**

W.M. I think that's true. Who else can you name now that has the kind of color and did the outrageous things that Innes Ireland and Moss would do? They were really crazy when they got away from the race track. Now drivers get into their executive jets and fly off to the next race. You don't know anything about their private lives, their families. They just don't do the colorful things that I suppose we'd like to see our heroes do.

D.K. **As an editor, given unmarked slides, could you tell whose photographs you were looking at?**

W.M. That is getting harder to do.

What we are doing at *Road and Track* is trying to back away from the cars a little more. We spent the last year or two getting all these images of the technological advancement of cars, sort of overlooking the broad photo of a place like Aus-

tria, or whatever. We are discovering that we need to get back to that and show what the place is like.

D.K. **That is one of the attractions of road racing, that it is essentially a landscape art, whether in the city or countryside. You take photos yourself?**

W.M. Yes. Probably shot as many covers for the magazine as anybody.

D.K. **What are your motivations behind your work? Both photo and painting?**

W.M. I enter the subject at various levels. I want to historically preserve some of the images for the library, for reference later. Try to anticipate things that are going to be journalistically interesting for the story. Third, to get things that I can use as a reference for paintings.

The photographer is being pressured to deliver and make a living. They are trying to tell a story with their photographs, so they can sell them. I don't think many of them think as artists in negative space. But for the Klemantaskis and Weitmans, that was part of the discipline of taking photographs, thinking about where those elements are in relation to this format, on that ground glass.

D.K. **And it changes in a millisecond!**