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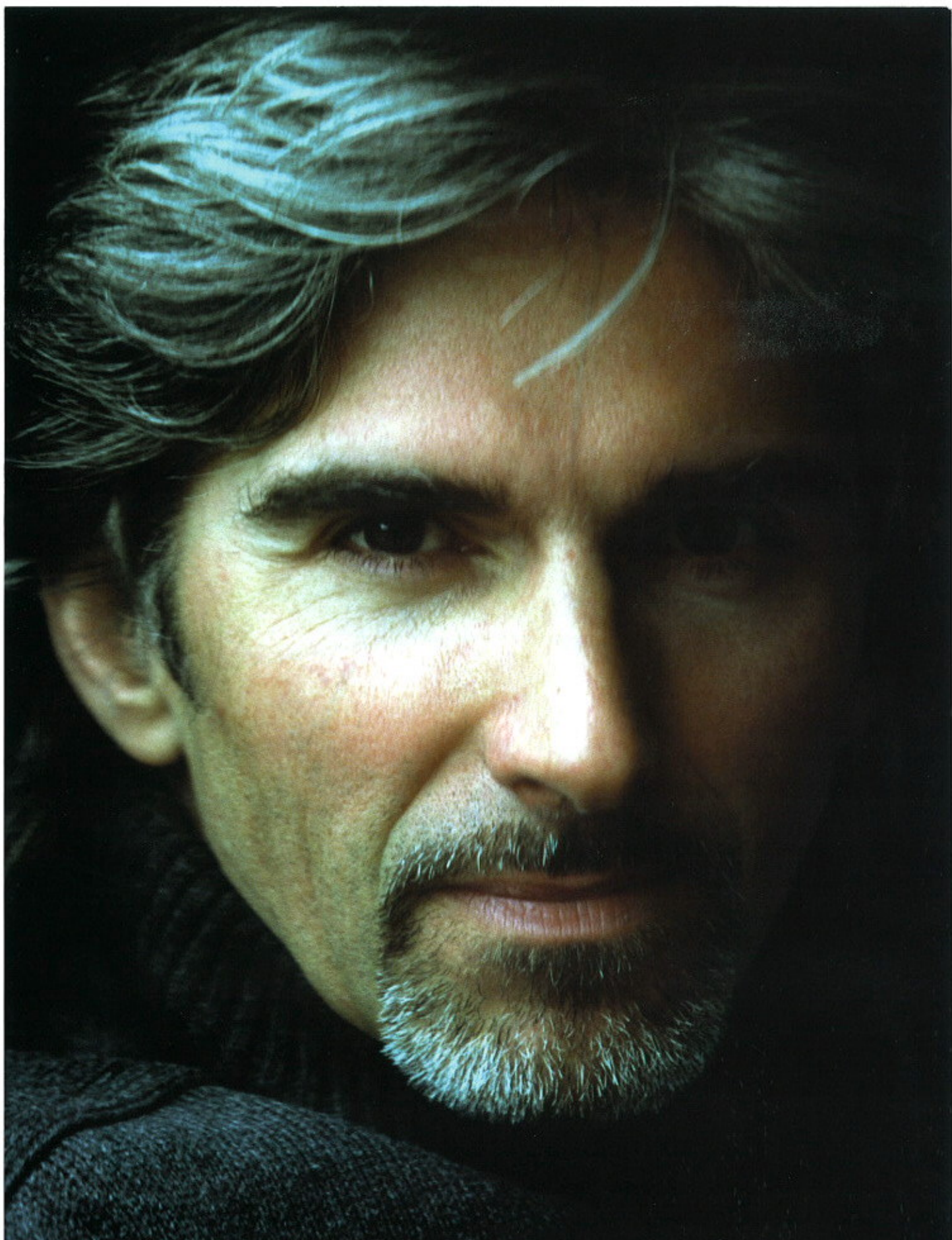
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We ask Damon Hill how he's been keeping busy since retiring from Formula 1. Photograph by Malcolm Griffiths.

"I even have to do up my own seatbelt now!"

YOU'D THINK THAT HAVING RETIRED, Damon would have found it hard to wean himself off the Formula 1 circuit, but he says that it was quite the opposite, "I think I went out and did some gardening when the first race was on TV. As far as I can remember the race was in Melbourne... and I can't even remember who won! I have to say that it did feel a bit odd not being there, watching it from home when I was used to being where the action was, but the great thing was that if I lost interest, I could just turn the TV off!"

Damon was a late starter to Formula 1, aged 32, but racing had always been in his blood - his father, Graham, was a successful racer who won two World Championships, the Indy 500 and the Le Mans 24 hours.

Unlike most Formula 1 drivers who start their careers very early with karts, Damon started racing bikes seriously in 1981. "At one time I was racing bikes on Saturday, cars on Sunday and then was a despatch rider for the rest of the week - my senses were pretty finely tuned by that lifestyle." His first passion being for bikes, he had only discovered his talent for racing cars when his Mum persuaded him to take a course of driving lessons in a racing school in France, thinking that cars would be safer than bikes. Damon remembers, "I'd spent all my money on my bike, so I said that as long as I didn't have to pay for it, I didn't mind doing it - it was much to my surprise that I found that I was quite good! To have all of your dreams fulfilled in three or four laps was amazing. In fact, the moment you go up the pit lane, and the first time you go up the straight, is just awesome."

After only half a season of single-seater racing in 1984, he was voted 'Best Newcomer' and over seven hard seasons, he fought up through FF1600, F3 and F3000, won 22 Grand Prix and became World Champion in 1996. A long and rocky road, but well worth it. "It's a complete fantasy world being a Grand Prix driver and I think I knew that, but I had a great time. It was really thrilling to drive the most amazing cars under the best circumstances, against great racing drivers."

But Damon recognises that changes have to be made to Formula 1 to boost its appeal: "They need to do something to make racing more exciting to watch. Formula 1 is a shiny, lovely-looking thing from a distance, but when it comes down to it, if you sit down every Sunday and give up two hours of your life to it, there has to be a good reason, doesn't there? If it's got the same person winning every time, it's not really racing, is it? As it stands, Michael Schumacher could go on for another five years at least. And while he's still winning, why not? But then again, who knows what he would do with his life if he did stop because he really does enjoy his driving - or maybe it's all those trophies!"

Of course, Damon does keep an eye on the young talent moving up the ranks and gives them advice - he is currently looking after 23 year old Steven Kane from Northern Ireland. "As always, there is a lot of talent around, but to get through all the obstacles to get to Formula 1 is extremely difficult and takes a lot of backing from a good team. It's the hungry ones who make it - like Jensen Button - and Steven Kane is desperate to win.

I am giving him as much advice as possible, but you can't just wave a magic wand. It has to come from the driver himself."

Damon himself has been repeatedly praised over the years for his dogged determination to win - it was one of the qualities that Frank Williams was watching out for when he was looking to replace Mark Blundell as test driver for his F1 team in 1991. This determination has led to success in many different areas of Damon's life. When he first retired he said, "As for the future, my passion to be successful, and to give my best to whatever I turn my hand to, is undiminished." This drive has led to the creation of 'P1 International', a private members' club which he co-founded in 2000. Membership offers not only access to a fleet of around 40 supercars but also access to a diverse calendar of exclusive events including track time with Damon, as well as preferential access to private jets and motor yachts.

"I thought that there were bound to be people out there who couldn't justify spending tens of thousands of pounds on a car if they didn't get to use it all that often, or maybe they're in the market to buy but haven't yet decided which direction to go in. P1 gives them the chance to try out the whole spectrum of Ferraris, Porsches, and the best cars from Aston Martin, Bentley, Noble and more. I like to call it a 'chocolate box of cars' - and they can take a bite out of every single one if they like! Then, if they find one they like, they can either go and buy it or they can stay as a member of P1 and carry on enjoying the different cars. That said, many of our members decide to do both!"

"It's great for me because I'm hopeless at making my mind up! I keep trying different cars, but as they all have different personalities and are weak or strong in different areas I always end up undecided."

Damon is able to focus more time on family these days; "Life after Formula 1 is good," he says, "I always make sure I have time for a game of golf and it's been great to be able to spend more time with my family; it's very time consuming having four kids. As my eldest has Down's Syndrome, I also spend time raising money in whatever way I can." That includes playing guitar in concerts to raise money for the DSA. In fact, Damon's musical experience extends much further than that - he actually recorded a track with Def Leppard in 1999. He explains, "I actually met Joe Elliott in Dublin and he dared me to play the guitar for their album and I held him to it! I think I was actually recorded playing the last bar in the last song on their platinum album...I'm still waiting for my platinum copy! That said, I don't think I could ever be a rock star - I know when I'm beaten and there are much more professional and better qualified musicians out there!"

Businessman, musician, family man & golf fanatic, there is life after Formula 1, but there is one thing that still strikes Damon as weird - "Doing up your own seatbelt!"

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