

Chapter 1

The Fatal Forest

Trees border the track at Hockenheim. Not the random oaks and beeches of an English copse parted by glades and dells, but thick, evergreen, coniferous forest. The canopy is so dense that the light barely penetrates, and the pines grow so plentifully that not even tanks can pass. When the Americans arrived in 1945, their M4 Shermans were confined to the roads, tearing up the asphalt and smashing down wooden buildings.

No one minded trees when the circuit was built in the 1930s. After all, racing cars crash on corners, rarely on straights, and Hockenheim had wonderful straights; they were long, narrow and very fast. The whole circuit, in fact, was little more than an oval: two parallel straights—each about two miles long—connected by some fast corners. The trees, which were only a foot or two from the road's edge, heightened the drivers' sense of speed while muffling the music of their engines. At the south-eastern corner, they had put in a hairpin loop, forcing the cars to slow down as they passed the grandstands. It gave the spectators a better view, and—if there was going to be a crash—it would happen right in front of them.

Death of Champions

Hockenheim was the Nürburgring's poor cousin, a second-tier track which hosted minor events. The 1968 Deutschland Trophäe was a Formula Two race, part of a small-scale series that was little more than a proving ground for Formula One. The Formula Two season filled gaps in the grand prix calendar and gave up-and-coming drivers a chance to shine. But this was Germany, where cars and racing are deeply rooted in the national psyche, and any race can draw a crowd. Additionally, there would be some Formula One stars on the grid. They included Graham Hill and his mythic Lotus teammate, Jim Clark, a double world champion recognised as the best driver of the era—perhaps of any era.

There had not been a more natural driver since Fangio, and Fangio himself rated Clark above all others. If perfection is possible in a racing car, then he was it. Clark never seemed to work; there was no visible effort. The car was always where he wanted it to be, always under control. His movements were so fluent and coordinated that he made everything look easy and everyone else an amateur. Clark's tyres lasted longer than those of other drivers. He finished races with more fuel left in the car. At the factory, the mechanics could identify the gearboxes from his car—there was no visible wear. He was beautiful to watch; this was automotive ballet, motor racing as high art. Clark had been in accidents, of course, but they were other people's accidents, and he always walked away. He had never suffered the least scratch.

Clark had made the perfect start to the 1968 season with his twenty-fifth grand prix victory in South Africa, beating Fangio's record and becoming the most successful driver of all time. At Hockenheim, the crowds had turned up for him—and they were lucky. He should have been driving a sports car at Brands Hatch, but, thanks to a last-minute contract tussle, he had switched to the German event. The Lotus team had come to Germany to keep their sponsors happy, but their

The Fatal Forest

principal, Colin Chapman, wasn't going to attend; he was skiing with his family in Switzerland.

Clark was a 'graded' driver: an established Formula One competitor, allowed to race in Formula Two but ineligible for European Formula Two Championship points. This rule allowed stars such as Rindt, Stewart, Clark, Hill and Brabham to strengthen Formula Two grids without blocking the championship chances of regular Formula Two contenders. Jochen Rindt was the outstanding Formula Two driver of 1968, winning six races in Roy Winkelmann's Brabham BT23C, including four Trophy rounds, but as a graded driver, he could not score points. The title fight was led by the Matra works drivers Jean-Pierre Beltoise and Henri Pescarolo.

A hypothetical constructors' title would have gone to Brabham ahead of Matra and Ferrari, while a teams' title would have been won by Matra Sports, followed by Roy Winkelmann Racing, Ferrari, Frank Williams, Matra International and finally—in lowly sixth place—Gold Leaf Team Lotus. Small wonder Chapman considered the race unimportant, except as an opportunity to display the team's new Gold Leaf livery.

Clark deeply disliked the Hockenheim circuit. Over dinner with Graham Hill, he had prophetically said, 'Anyone who goes off into the trees hasn't a chance.' In practice, the results were disappointing: Jean-Pierre Beltoise was on pole with 1 min 59.3 sec, Henri Pescarolo was second, Kurt Ahrens third, Piers Courage fourth, Derek Bell fifth, and Chris Amon sixth. Jim Clark was a distant seventh, with Graham Hill in fifteenth position.

The young and inexperienced Derek Bell would later excel in endurance racing, winning five Le Mans 24 Hours and three Daytona 24 Hour races. 'I was having a cup of tea in front of this log fire at the hotel and in walked Jim and Graham [Hill]. My jaw dropped because Jimmy was somebody I had

Death of Champions

so much respect for. We sat there having a drink and chatting, and Jimmy said, "Come with us tomorrow." He was very charming. It was only my second or third race, so it meant a lot to me. He said he qualified seventh and asked me where I was. I told him I was fifth and he said, "When you come up to lap me, don't get too close." This is my hero, a world champion, and he's talking about me lapping him. I said, "You must be bloody joking; why do you think I'm going to lap you?" He told me his engine was misfiring.'

It was a cold and wet April Sunday with puddles on the track and poor visibility. Max Mosley, who drove a Brabham in that race, remembered, 'The first corner was thick spray. I was thinking, "This isn't a good idea." All you could do was steer by looking at the tops of the trees, because you couldn't see where the track went.' That would hardly be a problem for Clark; he was brilliant in the wet—brilliant in any conditions—but he was struggling with a car which had a persistent misfire. He had only managed seventh on the starting grid. According to Clark's head mechanic, Dave 'Beaky' Sims, 'The problem was, it was freezing. It was so cold that it was affecting the fuel metering units. The drive belts were breaking.' Additionally, Lotus's Firestone tyres were performing less well in the conditions than the Dunlop and Goodyear tyres used by other teams.

In the early laps of the first heat, Clark fared little better than in practice, falling back to eighth place. 'Suddenly Jim's car broke out,' said Chris Irwin, whose Brabham was two hundred yards behind. 'It looked like something mechanical.'

Wilfried Kolb was the track marshal at Post Sixteen. 'It all happened so quickly. The back end of the car snapped to the left, Jimmy's hand went up to correct, the car ran broadside towards the side of the track, the left side, where my post was. There was a lot of spray, then I could see that the Lotus was heading for a tree. One big tree among all the other trees,

The Fatal Forest

and I could see that there was just no way that Jimmy was going to be able to avoid it. The car hit the tree, side-on, and broke into three pieces. The engine and gearbox flew about eighty metres along a small wall which spectators could stand behind; the front part disintegrated and slid down the tarmac; and the cockpit part, with Jimmy still inside, ended up on the left of the track. Jimmy's head was still, on one side. I was frozen. It looked so bad. In those days, you didn't have doctors at every post like you do now, so I had to radio for one to come.'

The doctor arrived within minutes, but there was nothing he could do. Clark had been flung out through the open cockpit, breaking his seat belts. His body lay face down on the forest floor, with his legs still halfway inside the chassis. They put him in an ambulance, but he was declared dead on arrival at the hospital. Among other injuries, he had a massive head wound and a broken neck.

There has never been an official inquiry by the German police, or anyone else, and they did not have time to secure what would ultimately prove to be a crime scene. Because Chapman considered Formula Two races to be unimportant—little more than a branding exercise for Gold Leaf, the team's sponsors—Lotus had sent only four men to Hockenheim that day. They were the drivers: Jim Clark and Graham Hill, along with their mechanics: Mike 'Carnoustie' Gregory, who looked after Graham Hill; and Dave 'Beaky' Sims, who looked after Jim Clark.

Sims recalled: 'Graham was still going around, so I asked the marshal who took me in the pace car, "Can you call the pits and tell Michael Gregory the mechanic [to] tell Graham to come in? Please, in, in, in." They shortened the race, and then I was still [out] there.'

When Colin Chapman heard the news in a telephone call from Hill, his first concern was to stop the police from

Death of Champions

examining the wreckage. In clear contravention of German law, he ordered Graham Hill and the Lotus mechanics to remove as much as they could immediately. Sims recalled: "Then Graham came out [from making the call], and he says: "All right. OK, Beaky, what we've got to do is get the truck here, get it loaded. Don't open the truck to anybody." He had to go and identify Jimmy. Then me and Carnoustie, we went back to the hotel in the truck and then with the police. The police car said, "You can't leave the place. You can't leave Germany." Yeah, it was a law. Death. Yes. It's murder, manslaughter."

Colin Chapman flew directly from St Moritz to Hockenheim, arriving at 1:00 in the morning. Chapman's immediate reaction was to blame Sims for the accident. As the mechanic remembered: "We were still up, and he went and he said, "What the hell have you done?" I said, "Jesus. It was a crash." He says, "Right. OK." Graham was there, and Graham told him to calm down. "Let's get this sorted." Chapman said, "I want the truck out of here now." I said, "We can't. The police car's in front of it." He said, "I don't care. We've got to get it out of Germany." Half an hour later, the little Volkswagen police car disappeared. "He [Chapman] jumped up and says, "Get going." We go, "OK." We said, "We'll keep off the autobahns and go west. Go to the coast, make for Zeebrugge, Belgium."

Sims and Gregory managed to cross the border into Belgium before the border police had been alerted, and they left Germany without difficulty. Things changed, however, when they reached the port of Zeebrugge. A customs official insisted on seeing inside the truck, and the two men, reluctantly, had little choice but to agree. Some photographs were taken, but the mechanics were eventually allowed onto the ferry, which took them back to England.

The remainder of the car was taken back to the Lotus works in Norfolk and later delivered to the Royal Aircraft

The Fatal Forest

Establishment at Farnborough. Chapman asked Peter Jowitt, who was both the RAC's chief scrutineer and an investigator for the British government's Air Accidents Investigation Branch, along with Bob Martin, who was the racing manager of Firestone (Lotus's tyre supplier), to produce a private report for him. They quickly concluded that the crash had been caused by a sharp object on the track puncturing a tyre, something outside the control of Lotus. This exonerated Chapman, and it has been the 'official' explanation until now.

I had some sense of what had been lost, because I had seen Clark race four years earlier. 'There's a Formula One race at Goodwood,' my father had said early one morning. 'It's a strong field. Would you like to go?' I did not know what Formula One was, but my father had no interest in horses, so I guessed it was a motor race. I had no particular passion for cars, let alone motor sport, but I nodded and said yes.

Goodwood turned out to be an airfield, which immediately appealed to me. Light aircraft were landing and taxiing, and there was already a sizeable crowd. As we walked from the car park towards the track, we could hear metallic voices from the Tannoy and the sound of a powerful engine being repeatedly revved. It was raining—though not heavily—and my father said it would take more than that for the race to be cancelled.

We bought plastic cups of tea from a van and took our places in the grandstand, which was little more than scaffolding covered with planks. We stood beside a wide, sweeping corner, and we could see the start-finish line in the distance. I now know that we must have been at Madgwick. It was a good choice; we could see more than half the circuit from there, and Madgwick was a fast, challenging corner where there was bound to be some action.

The love of sport, like the love of music, arrives early. First impressions are often the most vivid. I remember every detail

Death of Champions

of that day: the screams of unsilenced engines, so powerful that I had to cover my ears; the pungent smell of hot Castrol; the squeal of tyres as drivers braked hard and late for the corner; and the faces of the drivers, still visible in the days of open-faced helmets.

Most of all, I remember three cars hurtling towards us and two of them touching. One spun away, but the other came straight towards us, so fast that I was certain we would be killed. The car sliced through a line of straw bales and struck an earth bank directly in front of the grandstand. It hit so hard that I felt the impact through my feet. Steam rose from the wet grass that had been thrown over the engine, but there was no fire.

The driver got out, removed his helmet, and looked briefly at his buckled car. His face was expressionless—no sign of fear or anger, nothing other than curiosity. Then he turned and began to walk back to the pits.

‘That’s Bruce McLaren,’ said my father. ‘It wasn’t his fault. Innes Ireland’s car spun and clipped his Cooper.’

The race was the Easter News of the World Trophy, a forty-two-lap event with a prize of £350. It was then the opening meeting of the Formula One season. It was won by Jim Clark in a Lotus-Climax 25, and Lotus cars came second, third and fifth. On the drive home, my father explained that there was natural justice in the results: Jim Clark was the greatest racing driver in the world, and Lotuses were the finest cars.

Four years later, I was listening to the radio when they announced that Jim Clark had been killed at Hockenheim. The news seemed obscene, unthinkable, and I could not immediately process it. After all, Clark was a god, and only mortal men die in accidents.

The death of Jim Clark was motor racing’s JFK moment. Since the Munich Air Disaster of 1958, a British sporting hero had not been killed at the peak of their career. Everyone

The Fatal Forest

would remember where they were when they heard that the King of Formula One was dead. Some said it was the day the sport grew up; others thought that if a maestro like Clark could die, who was safe?

Following Clark's death, Colin Chapman immediately replaced him with the British driver Mike Spence. Within a month, Spence had died in a turbine-powered Lotus which slammed into a concrete wall at Indianapolis. There was no evidence of structural failure, but an examination of the car showed that illegal materials had been used.

Spence was replaced by yet another British driver, Jackie Oliver. A few weeks later, while practising for the French Grand Prix at Rouen, Oliver's Lotus disintegrated on a fast straight and ended up in three separate pieces. 'The back of the car just snapped away from me,' Oliver recalled, echoing what had happened to Clark. Oliver was uninjured, but the car had clearly suffered a catastrophic structural failure. Chapman, always the gamesman, cheerfully warned rival driver and team owner Bruce McLaren that the same thing might happen to him.

The 1968 French Grand Prix was one of the races that would change Formula One permanently, and for all the wrong reasons. Unlike Hockenheim, a few weeks earlier, there were many photographers and cinematographers present, and we have an excellent film record of the entire race. On the second lap, heavy rain began to fall, and there was soon a lot of standing water on the track. The ability to be quick in the wet is considered, justifiably, to be one of the skills that make a great racing driver, and a shower can create exciting racing. Once the tarmac is wet, horsepower no longer matters, and it becomes a driver's race: who can best cope with the suddenly treacherous, changing, slippery conditions? Who can find the dry places, off the racing line, where a brave driver can gain a place or two? Who can figure out where the water will

Death of Champions

first begin to drain? Few spectators would want to see races completely abandoned because of light or moderate rain, but deep standing water is a different matter. Today, Formula One races are red-flagged (stopped) when rainfall exceeds 3.5–4.0 millimetres. Heavy rain creates three risks: loss of adhesion, aquaplaning and reduced visibility. Of the three, poor visibility is the most serious hazard. Open-wheel racing cars create huge plumes of spray in heavy rain, and visibility for other drivers can be reduced to practically zero.

In 1968, the attitude was ‘carry on regardless’, and races were rarely stopped for rain. Newsreel footage of the French Grand Prix showed drivers battling through impenetrable spray and, on the third lap, Jo Schlesser slid wide at the Virage des Six Frères and crashed sideways into a bank. The fuel tank of his Honda burst open, and the car was instantly enveloped in fire. Magnesium components in the chassis began to burn so fiercely that the track marshals’ fire extinguishers had no effect, and fifty gallons of burning petrol spilled across the full width of the track. The race, however, was not stopped. Drivers merely slowed and then, cautiously, drove through the flames. That fact alone tells us how changed Formula One is today. In contemporary grands prix the safety car is almost always deployed whenever there is a hazard on the track. In 1968, the marshals at Rouen saw no problem in leaving drivers to pick their way through a wall of flame while another driver was being incinerated in his car.

Schlesser had no chance of survival and marshals had to wait until the flames had burnt themselves out before they could remove him. The newsreels showed horrific scenes of his charred and lifeless body being dragged to the side of the track as other cars raced by. Bob Danvers-Walker, the ‘voice of British Pathé’, gives us the tempo of the age with a laconic remark: ‘French racing driver, Jo Schlesser was taking part in his third grand prix, it was his last ...’ There is not a trace

The Fatal Forest

of emotion in his voice, but the effect of the newsreel on audiences was, nevertheless, seismic. When Senna was fatally injured in 1994, however, the commentary was very different.

Honda had entered Formula One as an engine manufacturer and team owner in 1964 and won their first grand prix with Richie Ginther in 1965. By 1967, they had signed John Surtees, a former Formula One world champion, as their sole driver, and he took their RA300 car to victory in the Italian Grand Prix. It was the car's debut and Honda's second Formula One win. The 1968 RA302 was an advanced design with an air-cooled engine. Surtees described it as an 'underdeveloped death-trap' and refused to drive it, reverting to the older RA301. For the French Grand Prix, Honda hired the popular local driver, Jo Schlesser, to take over the newer car. Schlesser was forty years old and had only driven in two previous grands prix, one in 1966 and another in 1967. Both were at the Nürburgring, and both were in a Formula Two Matra. The Frenchman leapt at the chance of racing before his home crowd and was prepared to ignore the advice of his vastly more experienced teammate. Schlesser's horrendous death was shown on cinema and TV screens across the world, leading to loud calls for changes which were difficult for Formula One to ignore. This was the accident that finally prompted a change in Formula One and led to a progressively safer culture.

Ironically, the uproar surrounding Schlesser's crash may have helped to deflect attention from Lotus, who were reeling from two deaths and a near-death over a matter of weeks. There was, of course, nothing new about structural failures in Lotus racing cars. In 1960, during the Belgian Grand Prix at Spa-Francorchamps, a Lotus driver was killed and two more were seriously injured over the same weekend. During the race, the steering column of Mike Taylor's Lotus 18 snapped at 150 mph. He survived, but with career-ending injuries