



Martin Brundle 30 years on

# Back in the old routine

Three decades after tussling with Ayrton Senna for the British F3 title, Martin Brundle is reunited with the Ralt RT3 that played a pivotal role in his fledgling career

writer SIMON ARRON | photographer JAKOB EBREY



ALL THAT'S MISSING is the old shanty café on the outside of Woodcote, the paddock's preferred bolthole in the days when Ralt RT3 swarms buzzed around Silverstone. The pit garages have grown a little since then, but – absence of egg, chips and beans apart – almost everything looks period-perfect.

Nestling behind door number nine, 30 years on from its heyday, is a predominantly blue RT3... and strolling towards it, in stealth-black overalls, is the man who once raced it. On October 23, 1983 he finished third at Thruxton and finally had to concede the British F3 Championship title to Ayrton Senna. For Martin Brundle, though, the RT3 symbolises rather more than distant defeat in a corner of Hampshire. "Without that car," he says, "I was destined to become a Toyota salesman in West Norfolk. Because of it, I ended up in Formula 1."

British F3 has attracted criticism in recent years, because of increasing costs and dwindling numbers. Grids weren't always huge in 1983,

either, but still the campaign is discussed in reverential tones. And that's because of the fierce, two-way battle that defined it. Between them, Senna and Brundle won 18 of the 20 races. The sole exceptions were Silverstone on June 12, where Brundle won but wasn't eligible for UK points, having opted to run European tyres in a race that counted for two championships, and Oulton Park on August 6, where they collided.

As Brundle mentioned in a recent *Motor Sport* podcast, that Silverstone race was pivotal. He could have taken the option of easy British Championship points while Senna chased overall honours on sticky, Euro-spec Yokohamas (worth more than two seconds against the UK Avons), but that victory ended a run of nine straight defeats and gave him a psychological lift. He'd become confident that he could now beat the Brazilian in a straight fight... and Senna was aware of it, too, having crashed while attempting to keep up. That tilted the balance of power at a critical moment and henceforth there would be two stallions in what had hitherto been a one-horse race.

Brundle is at Silverstone to be reunited with his old chassis, which was recently restored after being found in tatty condition in Sweden.

Graham Fennimore is racing it this year in the Historic Sports Car Club's Classic F3 series and it looks pretty much as it did when Brundle last drove it for Eddie Jordan Racing (although its ground-effect skirts have been removed for the sake of contemporary compliance).

Fennimore was once a career-minded single-seater racer, a front-runner in Formula First, Formula Ford 1600 and Vauxhall Lotus, but the money eventually dried up and so, consequently, did opportunities. "In 1997," he says, "Luciano Burti got through 68 sets of tyres en route to winning the British Vauxhall Lotus title with Paul Stewart Racing. I finished seventh in a car run by my dad – and we used 18. They were good times, but we were outgunned by professional teams with proper budgets."

He was tempted back at the end of 2003, for a one-off event in a Caterham Seven, and with backing from long-time mentor James Taylor he began racing regularly once more, clinching a clutch of Caterham titles before embarking upon his present project.

"The Ralt has been completely rebuilt," he says, "but we have used as much original material as we could. That made it more expensive, but we wanted it to be as accurate as

possible. It looked quite unloved when we found it, with lots of bits in the wrong places, and finding the correct stuff was one of the hardest tasks. Eventually, though, we talked to enough people who knew people."

BRUNDLE DIDN'T NEED ASKING TWICE about a test drive – and his racer son Alex, born seven years after dad drove the Ralt and a British F3 competitor in 2010, is also kitted out for a stint at the wheel. "I've only previously seen this car in photographs," says Brundle Jr, "and can't believe how simple it looks in reality. When I first climbed in, I was amazed how high the driver sat. You can almost turn around to see whether your rear tyres are blistered."

On the night before the test, son quizzed father for a few tips. "I couldn't remember a single thing about driving the car," Martin says, "because 1983 seems an awfully long time ago. I knew it handled sweetly, but beyond that my mind was a blank. As soon as I climbed in, though, and slotted my feet beneath the steering rack, it began to feel familiar. Within three or four corners of leaving the pits, it all came flooding back."

"Graham and his team have done a stunning job. The car looks right, but as soon as I went out it was obvious that it had been screwed together properly, too. The balance was the same through left- and right-handers and it braked in a straight line.

"You can no longer bang it flat through Cope in fourth, because the skirts are no longer there, but you can still take Becketts flat – which probably indicates that the skirts didn't actually do all that much back in the day! □



Senna leads Brundle at Silverstone in 1983 and, below, WSR boss Dick Bennetts chats to the Brazilian in the pits

## VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

West Surrey Racing boss Dick Bennetts looked after Senna in 1983

REMEMBER IT AS A VERY HARD season, because we had a young, fast driver who never wanted to finish second. That caused us a fair bit of work...

"Ayrton first drove for us in the non-championship Thruxton race at the end of 1982. We bought a new car for the following season and Ayrton wanted to know where the old one was, because he'd liked it and wanted to use it again. I guess I could have saved a few grand, but by then I'd sold the '82 car to Gerhard Berger.

"That run of nine wins at the start of the season was fantastic, but then things turned and Ayrton had a few shunts simply because he was unprepared to accept second place. I had to sit him down a couple of times, because he kept throwing away points and the championship became a lot tighter than it should have been.

"EJR was given an engine upgrade during the year and it took us a while to find out, although the

clues were there because we were having to run less downforce to keep up on the straights. We had ours done before the final race at Thruxton, then went through the car several times with a fine-tooth comb, to make sure nothing was amiss. I told Ayrton it was as good as we could make it, so the rest was down to him. He won that race quite easily to secure the title, but his best performance was probably in Macau. He was busy testing F1 cars at Paul Ricard and didn't arrive until Wednesday midnight, a few hours before first practice.

"I think he was the only driver who hadn't walked the track and we had no prior data, because it was the first time F3 cars had been used there, but despite the jet-lag he took pole and won the race.

"I remember the 1983 season for a huge battle, both on and off the track. Martin was clearly very good while we had a driver whose huge raw talent was complemented by a computer-like brain and great intelligence."

"MY MIND WAS A BLANK, BUT WITHIN THREE OR FOUR CORNERS OF LEAVING THE PITS IT ALL CAME FLOODING BACK"



It didn't feel as powerful as I remember, but they run bigger silencer boxes now. The RT3 was always a momentum car, though. You had to think about every movement you made, because you didn't want to do anything that might interfere with forward motion.

"Now as then, though, it's as beautiful to drive as it is to behold. I was really looking forward to having a go and it has been a very poetic experience. As I was driving, I found myself wishing Ayrton had still been around to bring his RT3 out for a play."

Senna and Brundle both graduated directly to F1 in the wake of their F3 duel, with Toleman and Tyrrell respectively, but for the Brazilian such a move had always appeared inevitable. His rival's situation needs to be put in context.

After beginning his circuit career in touring cars, Brundle dabbled with single-seaters from 1980 – when he competed in Formula Ford 2000 – and landed a fully BP-funded F3 drive with David Price Racing for the '82 season. Things went well enough, the rookie taking a couple of victories en route to fourth in the final standings, but that wasn't enough to keep his seat.

"I went to see David early in 1983," he says, "and he suggested I should talk to Eddie Jordan, because BP would be sponsoring only a single-car entry for Calvin Fish and DPR simply didn't have anything for me. At that stage I had very little. I'd won a £5000 Grovewood Award, but that was about all I could offer.

I went to see Eddie, took some local press clippings to show him and offered him the Grovewood money plus a Citroën Familiale seven-seater that had been sitting unsold on the family dealership's forecourt, to use as a team car. That's how we got started, but beyond that it was a matter of blagging our way through the year, doing small deals wherever we could. We got help from Tom Walkinshaw, Silverstone, insurance broker Tim Clowes and others – all the usual suspects."

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FOLLOWING SENNA'S INITIAL WINNING streak and that breakthrough turnaround at Silverstone, teams headed for a thinly supported Cadwell Park race, where – with his nemesis sidelined by a practice mishap – Brundle finally scored a UK maximum. A fortnight later at Snetterton the pair clashed, but Brundle pressed on to win while Senna retired. The Brazilian had the upper hand in the British GP support race at Silverstone, where Brundle finished second, but the positions were reversed in the subsequent fixture at Donington Park. The next stop was Oulton Park, where Brundle led until

Senna tried to outbrake him from several lengths back on the approach to Fosters Corner: contact was made and his car rode up and over the Englishman's as the two spun to a halt, Brundle pincered in his cockpit by Senna's left-hand sidepod.

The incident was captured by video cameraman Steve Jones – now raceday press officer at the Cheshire track – and can be found 1min 10sec into a much-watched YouTube clip.

EJR's hurdles soon extended beyond matters financial or Brazilian. Immediately after Oulton, the team headed to the Österreichring to take part in a non-championship event supporting the Austrian GP. Brundle beat a high-class field, but during the return journey the team's truck was involved in a road accident and tumbled into a ravine. Two of the three travelling crew members survived, but Brundle's chief mechanic Rob Bowden was not so fortunate and his death had a huge emotional impact on the small, closely knit team.

Much of its equipment was destroyed in the incident, but supporters rallied around and, less than two weeks later, Brundle and team-mate Allen Berg lined up on the grid at Silverstone, where the Englishman qualified second, 0.06sec behind Senna, before finishing in his slipstream.

Brundle won the next three rounds – Senna

crashing at Oulton Park, suffering a blown engine at Thruxton and then taking second at Silverstone – and between times also scored a dominant victory in a European Championship race at Donington Park, where Senna was an interested spectator. "Ayrton came to find me in the paddock afterwards," Brundle recalls, "and said to me, 'That showed how good we are'."

The pair were almost neck and neck going into the Thruxton finale, Brundle leading by a single point but with more to lose in terms of dropped scores (the best 17 results of 20 counted – and at that point he'd been on the podium in all but two events, one of them being that Silverstone Euro victory).

"I needed to win the last race to be sure of the title," Brundle says, "but before the finale Ralt came up with some fresh developments. I was given revised pull-rod front suspension and Ayrton got some new sidepods, which I thought were rather more useful. [Ralt founder] Ron Tauranac did later apologise..."

Senna qualified on pole, three tenths clear of Davy Jones and fractionally more than half a second ahead of his title rival, and they went on to finish in that order, the Brazilian taking the title by nine points.

"It felt very disappointing at the time,"

Brundle says, "but that season shaped my career and, as history subsequently proved, the best man won." 📺



Fennimore's Taylor Made Joinery-backed team has endeavoured to ensure period accuracy

**"IT WAS A MATTER OF BLAGGING OUR WAY THROUGH THE YEAR, DOING SMALL DEALS WHEREVER WE COULD"**



Spot the difference: Brundle in action at Silverstone in 2013 and, above, tackling Thruxton in 1983



## QUIBBLING RIVALRY

Fragments from a chat between the author and Ayrton Senna: Oulton Park, September 11 1983

“TWO DAYS BEFORE THE [LAST Oulton Park] race we were testing at the circuit. The car was quite good,

but then a rear stub-axle broke at Druids – a quick corner, fifth gear – and there was a big impact. The car was finished and I hurt my right hand, so Dick [Bennetts] decided to hire Richard Trott's chassis. The team spent the next day setting it up. They worked until halfway through the night and there was no chance to test any more. We went straight into practice and managed to be second, although the car wasn't handling very well.

"At the start Martin got into the lead and I just kept pushing. With seven or eight laps to go I got quite close through Cascades and tried a manoeuvre. Unfortunately things went wrong. He didn't see me and we both touched and went off. It was just a race incident, but the stewards didn't see things that way and I was very disappointed. I felt again that I was in England, racing against Britain.

"Earlier in the year we'd had a big moment at Snetterton and that was very clearly [down to] Martin, but nothing happened. After Oulton I said to Dick that we had to take care. We couldn't afford to get close to him because anything that happened would be our fault, for sure. If we're not very careful they'll do everything to take away our championship."



To hear Senna talking to Simon Arron about his battles with the UK establishment, tune in to our tablet edition