

CLASSIC DRIVER

Gary Ayles went from racing motorsport legends to transporting them around the world

Lead

For racer-turned-businessman Gary Ayles, winning is everything. Regardless of whether he was strapped into a now-priceless McLaren F1 GTR, or pitching for a multi-million-pound logistics contract, his appetite to be the best is stronger than ever. Here's Gary's story...



There are some people you meet in this world that you know you're going to get a wonderful interview out of, one full of behind-the-curtain stories of some of racing's elite, and tales of business deals that opened up more doors than they could ever dream of. As I pulled into Lanzante's Petersfield facility ahead of meeting Gary Ayles, a man who has rubbed shoulders and door mirrors with Touring Car legends and Le Mans racers alike, and is now [co-owner of Bespoke Handling](#), I knew it was going to be one of those 'pinch me' kind of days.



We had organised two extremely special cars from Gary's past to join him as models for the shoot, both of which were almost identical to the ones he raced in period, intending to bring back fond memories of fierce battles and victories during his multi-decade-long career. Gary's career spanned many disciplines, which saw him compete at the highest level of closed-wheel racing during arguably its most innovative and successful years. He raced Nissan Primerras in the British Touring Car Championship, Peugeot 405s in the Italian Touring Car Championship, wrestled a Ferrari F40 LM, and even competed alongside the drift king Keiichi Tsuchiya in a McLaren F1. Quite the résumé, but before we get all whimsical on the outrageous McLaren F1 GTR and plucky Peugeot ITCC car we'd brought along, I was intrigued to find out where Gary's love for cars all started.



"I was never much of a lover of school and would often find ways to borrow Mum's car for a little drive to the seaside at Brighton. Of course, once Dad got a phone call from a rather confused police officer who had found a child driving their car, they were quick to get it out of my system. I was booked onto the young driver's academy at Brands Hatch. It completely worked, and my mind was completely focused on racing from that point." Gary would go on to finish second in his first full season in the Formula Ford 1600 Junior Championship in 1985, labelling him as a 'star of tomorrow.'



After Formula Ford came Formula 3, and Gary had secured a test with Dick Bennet's West Surrey Racing, who were running a young flying Finn by the name of Mika Häkkinen at the time, but a crash that resulted in Gary breaking both of his legs would eventually lead him towards the world of Touring Cars instead. In 1991, Gary raced with none other than BTCC royalty Andy Rouse as his teammate, driving the Kaliber liveried Toyota Carina for ICS Team Toyota. The next few year saw Gary head overseas to continue his touring car journey. "I had the opportunity to drive with Peugeot in the Italian Touring Car Championship, as they wanted some international names to join their field of highly competitive Italian drivers. It was incredible. Racing with the likes of Emanuele Pirro, Johnny Cecotto, Roberto Ravaglia and my then teammate, Fabrizio Giovanardi, made for some fantastic races."

As we walked around the Peugeot 405Mi ITCC, the very car that Gary's rival and teammate Giovanardi raced in the 1993 season and kindly loaned to us by Lowe Classics, a smile radiated from Gary's face. "We used to have some fun in these things, we never had the power of the BMW or the dynamics of the Alfa Romeo, but when you got in the groove with the Peugeot it was a brilliant race car. I did always fancy a go in the BMW though!"



Speaking of BMWs, it's hard to ignore the monstrous McLaren F1 GTR parked parallel to the Peugeot. Powered by the mighty 6.0-litre S70/2 V12, the BMW powerplant helped it along the way to win multiple championships and gruelling race events, many of which included Gary as a driver. Although the example we had here, kindly wheeled out of Lanzante's workshop, wasn't the exact car Gary raced, I couldn't help but ask him just how it felt opening up that mighty V12 down the Mulsanne Straight for the very first time. Gary's response was exactly what I was hoping for: "I remember laughing to myself and thought a boy from Pound Hill in Crawley has done alright here! Le Mans is a gruelling race, but that iconic straight, in a then-million-dollar car, at 200mph, truly was spine-tingling. I still get goosebumps now." Gary expressed he had similar feelings when he first laid eyes on the Ferrari F40 LM as the famous white garage doors of Ferrari's Fiorano Circuit opened, revealing the beast he'd be driving for the very first time. "With that excitement, comes pressure, and , as many drivers will likely admit, I regret not taking the time to enjoy the moments like these more, as at the time winning was all that mattered."



In 1997 Gary raced a McLaren F1 GTR at that year's FIA GT Championship, running a gorgeous livery headlined by Parabolica Motorsport. Against all odds, this privateer outfit achieved a stream of top-six finishes against the factory teams, marking one of Gary's proudest racing moments. As his mindset began to shift from racer to businessman, Gary founded and managed a string of successful Touring Car teams, before finding his way into the vehicle logistics industry, and I was intrigued to see if there were similarities to his time on track. "Of course, because you want to win. You want to be the best out there, regardless of whether I'm in the car, on the pit wall, or delivering a car, the desire to be first will never go away."

Motorsport is a different world in terms of logistics - you can't compete if the car hasn't arrived. I vividly remember walking along the lines of trucks, tyres, cars, spare parts, hospitality tents and just about everything in between thinking, "Where the hell did all of this stuff come from?" As a racing driver, I never thought of how this equipment travelled the world and appeared when we needed it. But now I understand."



Founded in 2017 with his business partner, Fabian Daffern, the business has grown and matured to handle some of the world's most expensive and exclusive cars. "What we do is sexy in the world of logistics, and our understanding of these cars stems from our motorsport background and our knowledge of handling these cars, we aren't phased whether it's a one-of-one hypercar or priceless Formula One car."

There is a clear connection between Gary the racer and Gary the businessman. The desire to dominate his rivals is clear, and the relentless drive to think outside of the box, challenge complacency and remain one step ahead is how this relatively small outfit has become partners with McLaren, Gordon Murray and Lotus to name just a few. "If you do the same job as someone else, you'll only ever be as good as them. When you're a racing driver, if you drive the same way, or have the car set up in the same way, how can you ever expect to win? Trying new things, testing the limits, and taking different routes are the keys to success for me."



As our time wound down, and one of Gary's knowledgeable drivers carefully loaded the Peugeot onto one of Bespoke Handling's branded trucks, I was keen to find out what was next for Gary and the business. "If I'm honest, I'd like to go back into race management and start my own team again. Some moments are so special, arguably better than hitting the limiter on the Mulsanne or barrelling across the kerbs to overtake Will Hoy, and once you've felt those feelings, it's distilled inside of you."

Photos by Elliot Newton

Gallery

