

# *“Why I survived, I have no idea. It’s just luck and circumstances”*

Thierry Boutsen reflects on a career that mixed success with some huge crashes at the highest levels of single-seater and sports-car racing

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In the Benetton-Cosworth, heading for third at the 1987 Australian GP. Below: 1990 Hungary win in the Williams-Renault FW13B



Clockwise: 1985 Daytona 24 Hours win with Wollek, Unser and Foyt; WM after 1981 Le Mans crash; BMW 530i, 1979 Spa 24 Hours

At first it's hard to imagine a 12-year-old Thierry Boutsen sneaking the keys to his mother's Fiat 600 for a joyride, such is the Belgian's calm, pragmatic demeanour. With an earnest smile and a lithe figure that still fits his 1985 Arrows A8 Formula One car, Thierry holds a professional yet approachable air that seems at odds with the sort of renegade behaviour that could be associated with some racing drivers. Yet he took that Fiat out across the fields and now, aged 67, is letting loose 900bhp at San Marino – before pushing the car across the line in a slightly cheesy re-enactment of his second-placed finish at the '85 Grand Prix.

"I was caught by the police, who brought me home," he reminisces. "My father was laughing to death because he knew what I was doing – there were a lot of fields around. My mother waved her finger, telling me never do it again. I said 'okay, okay, okay'..." The smile turns into a grin: "The next day I did it again."

It was the first tangible step towards a decade in F1, at Arrows, Benetton and Williams, and more than 20 years in sports cars, including a win alongside Bob Wollek at the inaugural Group C outing: "My parents say I started my professional career when I was three years old. I was so motivated. I was going with my bicycle from Brussels on the train to Spa and Nivelles-Baulers to watch the racing, then riding back.

"But there were two problems in Belgium. First of all, to race you had to have a pilot's licence *and* a driving licence, which meant being 18 years old. Second, karting set a really bad example there. François Goldstein was a five-time world champion in karting but he never succeeded in car racing. So I thought to myself, 'If I do karting, then I will end up the



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same as him – and I want to go to Formula One.' So I started from scratch when I was 18."

Thierry enrolled at Pilette Racing School alongside an engineering course, which neatly dovetailed into a 1977 debut in Formula Ford, first with a Hawke 1600, then a Crosslé 30F: "I had no mechanic, so I did everything myself – building, preparing and getting the power out of it. It was a different time. I was so lucky to live like that. I had my own Mercedes truck and my Formula Ford inside it, pulling a caravan behind. I was the happiest man in the world."

In his second season, Thierry took the Benelux FF1600 title with 15 out of 18 race wins. "That's when I thought 'maybe I can get some money,'" he recalls. "I had some sponsors through my father, who had a shop selling high-end hi-fi and TVs, and made friends with the bank manager. Thanks to my engineering diploma I could borrow quite a bit of money to start with, although it was a big risk."

Was that the moment when he could see F1 in his future? "I was never dreaming of something, I was just working in order to get there. At that time, I spent 80% of my time looking for sponsors, and 20% concentrating on driving. It was on a day-to-day basis.

"And that's when Jacky Ickx came to me. He wanted to be my manager, and because he was sponsored by Marlboro it was not too difficult to get the marketing team on board. Marlboro Belgium was small compared to the rest of Europe, but they were pretty active and very helpful. I still had to find a job to pay for the car, so I met Robin Herd at March Engineering, explained my situation and he invited me to work as a mechanic. Well, basically as a cleaner," Thierry says through a smile, "but after sorting parts and organising the shop, eventually I got the chance to build my own car there. It took about three months. I knew



every bolt and every detail on that car. It was extremely interesting, to have that perception and understanding of the technical side."

That secured Thierry a Marlboro-liveried Ralt foothold in the '79 Formula Three season, which developed into a Martini works drive the following year, when he placed second in the European championship, six points behind Michele Alboreto. But Thierry left Alboreto behind in Formula Two. Driving for March in 1981, he clocked up wins at the Nürburgring and Enna-Pergusa, and was second in the standings. With Team Spirit Honda in '82, he added Spa to his wins but fell to third in the rankings at the final race: "I was leading at Misano, but my tyres were blistering and I had to pit. I lost the championship there, and then I was out of a drive. I didn't want to do F2 again. I wanted to concentrate on F1, but couldn't find anything immediately, and I had to wait. I was not in a comfortable position."

Meanwhile, he was building a reputation in sports-car racing: "My first 24 hours I did

with a Golf GTI in 1977. It was unbelievable, we had 160-170bhp and we went absolutely flat all the way around the old Spa circuit. Only at La Source did we brake and change to third. It was an extremely dangerous track and you would have these big cars coming past at huge speeds, but it was really enjoyable. I enjoyed any type of motorsport. I even did a rally, and I've done the Tour Auto in historic cars four times. I would have loved to do Indy, just to experience a totally crazy thing at 300kph."

Three hours into the 1981 Le Mans, however, Thierry was doing 217mph on the Mulsanne straight when his twin-turbo WM-Peugeot P81 suffered suspension failure: "It was very scary. The car just lifted up at the back, turned and spun. I hit the Armco on the right, left, then right again. It took 800m to stop. That's a long time, and the car was just filling with dust. Sadly a marshal was killed. Why I survived, I have no idea. It's just luck and circumstances."

Thierry walked from the car unscathed, unfazed and poised to lead the Rondeau team

in the 1982 World Sportscar Championship – until a retirement alongside Henri Pescarolo in the Spa 1000km dropped them out of contention: "Then, one Friday morning in 1983, I got a call from Reinhold Joest, who said, 'I'm at Monza, doing the first race of the Group C championship, and one of my drivers can't make it. Would you like to drive for me?' So I jumped into my car and two hours later I was there, after averaging 250kph [155mph] from Monaco to Monza in my BMW 635CSi.

"I got to the track, and then I saw a Porsche 956. I said to myself: 'Wow, what a nice car. My God, I get to drive this?' I was with Bob Wollek, who was a big, big star in racing and me just a beginner, but he was a fantastic person, really nice. He had a very strong character and I got on very well with him.

"That afternoon I did a few laps to familiarise myself with the car. The next day, I got better and better, faster and faster, and in the race I was matching Wollek's times. We were very consistent. We overtook all of the factory cars,





## CAR AND DRIVER REUNITED

The Arrows A8 in which Thierry Boutsen clinched an unlikely second place at the 1985 San Marino Grand Prix was restored by Parabolica Racing just in time for a re-enactment of the Belgian driver pushing the car over the line at this year's Imola event. Chassis A8-06 was driven at six races, including at Brands Hatch, Mexico and Australia with Thierry behind the wheel.

Former BMW-Williams engineer Ernest Knoors was part of the restoration project: "With up to 1200bhp for as little as 545kg, you could have wheelspin in fourth gear! But we tend to run it a little less than that, and formulate our own fuels to use in it." After a few quick laps around the circuit, Thierry adds: "I was really shocked by the power, I was not expecting so much. It's a little bit less than 900bhp, which is just... pfft! But it's such a nice track here, with ups and downs."

The restoration begat the founding of Parabolica Racing, with the support of Dusseldorp BMW, and has inspired a larger business with other projects, including some more recent BMW-Williams Formula One cars. The Arrows is now for sale; see [parabolica-racing.com](http://parabolica-racing.com)



and we won the Monza 1000km. For me, it was the spark. Suddenly, I was getting calls from five different Formula One teams.

"There were some who just wanted to give me a test drive and that was it, and others that were offering me the rest of the season. I had the most active discussions with Jackie Oliver at Arrows, but when he said I had to pay for the seat, I replied: 'Uh-oh, I don't have any money, but I will look for it.' I got big, big help from the motorsport community in Belgium, and I had to borrow from the bank once again: \$500,000, which at the time was an enormous amount. When I turned up for my first race, at Spa, my car looked like a Christmas tree with all of the sponsors. There was not 10cm<sup>2</sup> left white on the whole thing."

Thierry's four seasons with the Arrows team brought a mixed bag of results, with seventh-place finishes in Detroit and Canada in his opening year, then a fifth in Austria in 1984. "The turbo car that year wasn't very competitive, so we ended up going back to the DFV, but 1985 was better. I had some great qualifying and, of course, the podium at Imola."

He also took fourth place at the Nürburgring, and sixth at Brands Hatch and Kyalami, but it was that second at the San Marino Grand Prix that has stuck in the collective memory. Martin Brundle, Nelson Piquet, Ayrton Senna, Nigel Mansell and Stefan Johansson had all run out of fuel with just a few laps to go.

"Maybe you can do 80 laps, maybe you can do 70," Thierry waves his hands with resignation. "It was just a pure guess from the engineers, and we had no fuel gauges in the cars. I saw these guys slowing, then mine started going 'pup-pup-pup'. I took the chicane and that was it, we rolled to a stop 100m from the finishing line. I pushed the car and ended up only just in front of Patrick Tambay – he had been about a minute behind me!" When Alain Prost's McLaren-TAG was found to be underweight, Thierry was bumped up to second place.

"I had a similar situation at the Spa 1000km in 1986," he continues. "The 956 was a very nice car to drive, but Brun Motorsport didn't have all the latest parts from Porsche and the fuel consumption was a bit heavy. I was on pole and led the whole race, then halfway through the last lap I ran out of fuel. I managed to get it going by weaving the car from side to side, but coming out of La Source I got first and second gear, and then the engine quit completely. I'd had 15 secs advantage over Derek Warwick, and finished with half a second on him. That time it was very well calculated." He takes a breath and gives a small laugh. "These were totally different days."

"Jumping from Formula One to the Porsche every second weekend, it was very good schooling. I'd get used to a different engine, manufacturer or type, like turbo or normally aspirated... No big deal. It's an easy transition." Moving to Formula One teams Benetton in 1987, Williams in 1988, then later Ligier and Jordan, Thierry also spent time alongside some

of the sport's biggest names. "Whether it was Marc Surer, Gerhard Berger, Riccardo Patrese, I was just concentrated on my driving, on my career. We all had our different set-ups: with Riccardo we were similar, with Gerhard there were quite a few differences. With Alessandro Nannini, he had no interest – he didn't even take part in the debrief, he'd just say 'I do like Thierry, I do like Thierry' and that would be it."

Berger had moved from Arrows to Benetton in 1986, and Thierry took that seat in '87 when the Austrian switched to Ferrari: "Gerhard was quick, but he was very inexperienced when he joined, coming from Alfasud racing via F3 into

But I have to find an engine – there are just no spares, not even drawings for that RS1 V10."

In 1990, he took a podium at the season-opening United States Grand Prix, placed fifth in Brazil and Mexico, and fourth at Monaco. "I loved Monaco," Thierry adds. "It's so tricky, so complicated, you need your best at every single centimetre of the track." At Imola, he led for 17 laps until retiring with a gear-selection issue, but he got his 1990 season win at Hungary with a close strategy call: "I knew that the team was not so well prepared for a tyre change in the middle of the race, so I decided to drive gently to the end. Everyone else stopped for tyres, but by the time they caught up with me, they'd already worn them out. It worked very well. I was lucky to have a very good engine. Renault was probably the best as far as torque was concerned, and out of the last corner nobody could pass me."

It would be Thierry's third and last F1 win, with the Belgian then moving to a troubled Ligier and taking an ill-fated drive at Jordan in 1991 and 1993, respectively. Sports cars had always remained in the background, so he returned his attention there, along with a brief interlude in the Super Tourenwagen Cup as Ford Motorsport's lead driver: "Touring Cars was a disaster, the Mondeo was not a good car. It was 2WD, then 4WD, but it wasn't a good car in itself – not enough power. I was just waiting for Porsche to be ready with the 911 GT1, so I had to do something in between to keep going." Alongside Bill Adam and Hans-Joachim Stuck – "fun guy, good racer, I got on with him well" – Thierry took second in class at the '97 Daytona 24 Hours, and continued with Champion Racing for an overall US Championship win in 1998.

He had also signed for Toyota, to drive the formidable GT-One at the 1998 Le Mans 24 Hours. After taking the lead from the other works Toyota in the night, a win looked inevitable until gearbox trouble knocked them out with just 90 minutes to go. A year later Thierry was leading once again

when, on lap 173 and in the middle of the night, he came into contact with a GT2 Porsche on the approach to the Dunlop Chicane: "I had already decided that if I won Le Mans, that would be my last race; if I didn't win, I'd continue until the end of the year, and that would be it." At nearly 185mph, the Toyota pitched upwards in a terrifying echo of the Mercedes-Benz CLRs earlier that weekend: "I flew in the air and it was pitch black. I'd hit the brakes, so the engine stopped and there were no lights. You don't see anything, you just wait... And wait... And wait... And then, 'Bam!' You have no idea where you are, or what's going on." He gives an accepting shrug: "But I got out of the car and everything was fine." It's an understatement, with three broken vertebrae and a compressed spine, but he expertly spins this near-death experience with positivity, and a subtle dash of competitive bite: "I was very lucky to have this accident at the end of my career, not at the beginning... But I should have won Le Mans four times."



Boutsen/Geoff Lees/  
Ralf Kelleners Toyota  
GT-One retired from  
Le Mans in 1998 with  
gearbox problems

Formula One. It was very nice to drive with him, and I was especially proud to beat him in almost every qualifying session – 13 to three, I think," he adds with a smile.

"The Benetton was an amazing car," Thierry continues, "designed by Rory Byrne and Pat Symonds. The downforce was well balanced between front and rear, so it was exceptionally stable." That first year, he finished eighth in the championship. In '88, he was fourth, with five podium finishes: "The B188 was probably a better car, but not as nice to drive. I really loved the '87 car, and three years ago I bought the one that I used at the end of the season. I restored it and drove it at Le Luc in France and at Spa."

The momentum appeared to continue at Williams, as Thierry replaced Mansell and joined Patrese in 1989, with blitzing wins through the rain at Canada and Australia securing fifth in the championship: "I won my first F1 race with that car. I later bought it and have been taking it apart to get it running again.