

PEOPLE

Racer who bucks the formula



INTERVIEW by
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Far less flamboyant than his famous father, Damon Hill underplays his talent and regards the sport as 'just a form of entertainment'

FOR A man accustomed to parking in grid formation on the toughest motor-racing circuits in the world, hotel car-parks can prove pretty baffling. Damon Hill appears in the lobby staring in bemusement at a piece of paper.

"Sorry I'm late," he says distractedly. "They've got a strange parking system here and I've been given this bit of paper to check in with; God knows what I'm supposed to do with it." He shrugs and scrumpled it into the top pocket of his denim jacket.

"We have met at the Forte Crest hotel next to Heathrow airport; Hill is about to catch a flight to Portugal where he is testing before the final stages of the Formula One World Championships, due to finish today in Australia.

He is in high spirits, anticipating the next few days in Estoril. "It's only a test, but I get a big buzz because it's an opportunity to play with the car, to tinker with it and to make it that bit better. It's just an expensive toy, really, and I suppose I'm an overgrown kid."

As if to prove it, he suddenly leaps up from his chair and goes to the window, pointing excitedly at a rainbow, the only concession to nature amidst the building sites and angry mish-mash of roads outside. "Look, it's landed right in that field and the other end is..." He presses his face against the window and peers round the side but cannot see anything. "Do you know, I think the other end is behind us, which means we're actually in the rainbow."

He comes back to the table and takes a huge blue sweet from a jar. "I wonder what these are like," he says, popping it in his mouth. The next five minutes are virtually unintelligible as he tries to talk through the blue brick. "Where were we? Oh yes, cars," he says. As if they could ever be far from his mind. He compares his passion for "playing with racing cars" to collecting model aeroplanes. "Obviously, it's taken to a much more serious level because we are investing our careers in it and there's a lot more at stake."

Your life, for example? He nods and purses his lips. This year has been exceptional. The motor-racing world is still in shock following the death of Ayrton Senna, the Brazilian world champion and Hill's team-mate with Williams Renault. His death at Imola came one day after that of Roland Ratzenberger, the first two deaths for 12 years in grand prix racing.

"It was particularly shocking for some of the younger drivers who could not remember any fatalities. You have Roland who was new to Formula One and driving one of the least competi-

tive cars; it was tempting to put his death down to inexperience. But then the very next day you have the most experienced guy dying in almost identical circumstances and it made every driver feel vulnerable and think 'Jesus, it could happen to me'."

Balancing up whether it is worth the risk is part of every driver's life. "From time to time it becomes borderline. Ayrton's death put everyone below the point at which you think it's worth doing because the pain of something like that negates the enjoyment."

After the initial shock, though, they all trooped back to the track. I ask Hill if he gets a kick out of the risk. He frowns and looks pensive. "I suppose, put crudely, that's right. A lot of drivers try to make it sound like a more spiritual thing. But the basic truth is you get a big buzz out of driving a racing car very quickly."

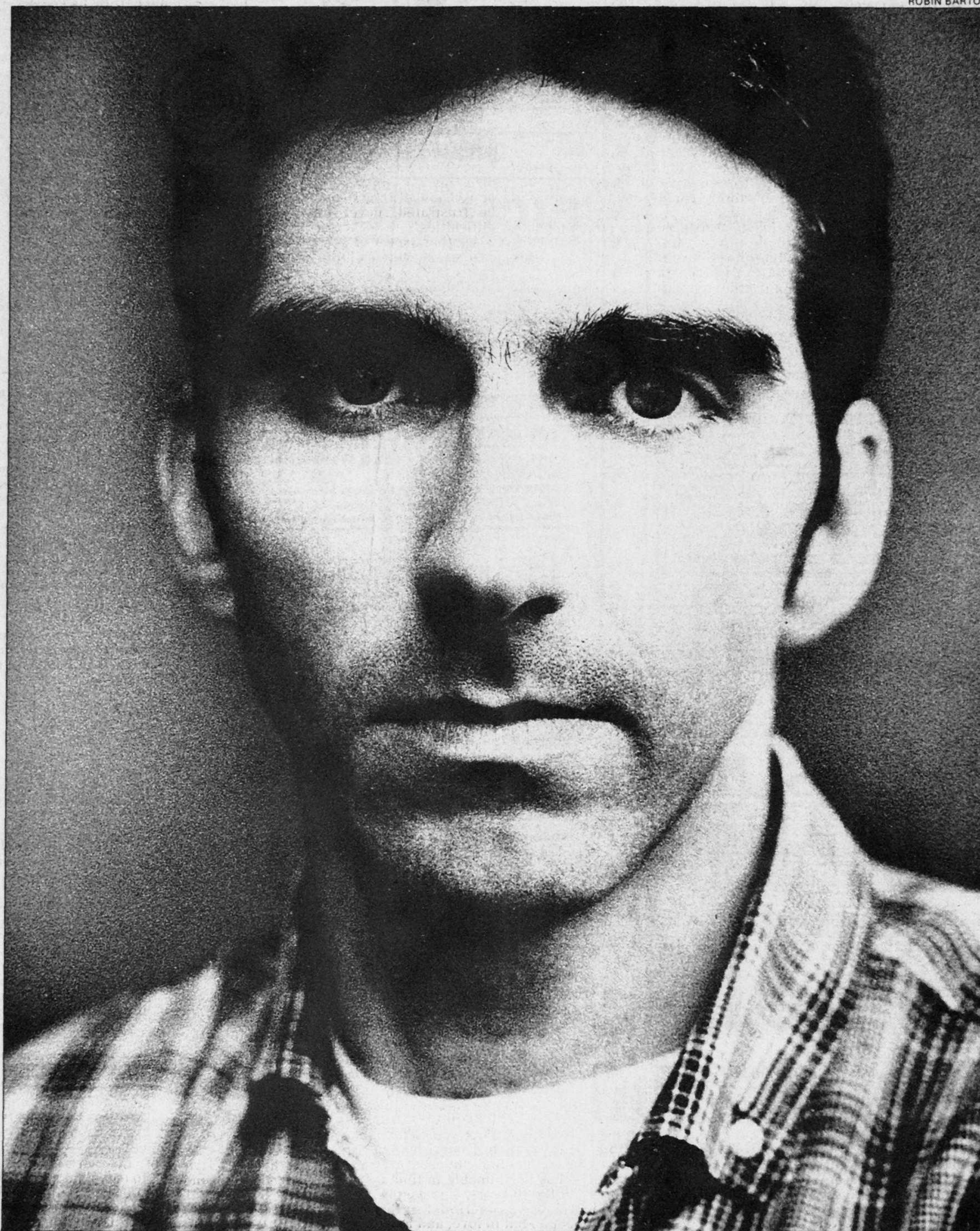
But Hill is not so drunk on the buzz that he is unable to see motor-racing in perspective. Unusually for a top sportsman, he ruthlessly strips away the glamour. "It should never be forgotten that motor-racing is really a very superfluous activity. Frankly, it's not going to make a great deal of difference to the history of mankind. It is just a branch of entertainment."

HE IS doodling on a piece of paper in front of him: tiny rectangular boxes with circles in the middle; they look like miniature cars encasing the heads of drivers. So intent is he on this piece of paper that I spend much of the conversation addressing the top of his aggressively shorn head. The new haircut is part of the "no-more-Mr-Nice-Guy-image" announced by Hill in July.

"I don't get any credit for being polite and diplomatic so I'm going to ditch that tack," he said sullenly. Since then he has been involved in verbal battles with his main opponent, Michael Schumacher, who last month dismissed him as a "little man" consumed by unrealistic ambition. Whatever the outcome of today's grand prix, Hill's performance at Suzuka last weekend illustrated how unfounded such remarks are.

He says he uses such attacks as fuel, claiming that he drives better when he is feeling "hacked off". He knows in himself that he is a world-class driver. "I know I've got the ability to compete at the front of Formula One. What really annoys me is that even when you do achieve things, there are always people ready to detract from them."

Hill is in a peculiar position. Up until now he has always lived in the shadow of a driver of quasi-



ROBIN BARTON

Fueled by criticism: Hill uses his opponents' attacks to spur him on, claiming that he drives better when he is 'hacked off'

godlike status. First it was his father - and, as acts go, Graham Hill is a pretty hard one to follow. He was the only man to win two Formula One world championships, the Indianapolis 500 and the Le Mans 24 Hours. "Beat that, you buggers," as he used to say. With his moustache, lacquered hair and devil-may-care attitude, he made it all look a bit of a lark. Hill is far less flamboyant than his father.

Then last year he was number two to Alain Prost in the Williams team. But instead of giving Hill credit for coming to within tenths of a second of Prost, the critics said Prost was using just enough of his talent to keep ahead of his team-mate. This year he was

paired first with Senna and then, unexpectedly, Nigel Mansell came back. That really rankled.

"It can be a blow to your morale when suddenly someone else is brought in out of the blue to deliver the goods that perhaps they perceive you aren't delivering. They wasted precious little time before getting Mansell back."

Nevertheless, Hill has done much better than Mansell this season. He even won the British Grand Prix at Silverstone, something his father never achieved. "I've now won eight out of 31 grands prix, which puts my winning average above both Ayrton's and Alain's."

As a child he had little interest

in the sport and, as he writes in his book *Damon Hill's Grand Prix Year*, to be published next month, he loathed traipsing around circuits to watch his dad. But he became fascinated by motorbikes and was thrilled when his father gave him a monkey bike. So while his two sisters rode horses, Damon and his father staged mock trials over the slag heaps at the back of their house in Shenley, Hertfordshire.

The Hill idyll was shattered one foggy November night in 1975 when Graham crashed his Piper Aztec plane, killing himself and five other members of his team. At the time Damon, aged 15, was studying for his O-levels at Haberdashers' Aske's School.

"The irony of it was that he had just retired. I couldn't work it out. He'd been a racing driver all those years and then he dies in a plane crash. It instilled in me a fear of ever feeling comfortable and relaxed. I learnt then that life owes you nothing."

He has a degree of religious faith, however, and believes in an afterlife. "To me, my father is still alive. He's not as obtainable as he was but I know his spirit is there. Just as I know Senna's spirit is still there. You could call it fame, but I don't think it's as cheap as that. It is something that runs far deeper."

Hill talks haltingly because he thinks carefully about what he says, avoiding glib patter and

struggling to find the right word to describe his feelings. He says he changes character behind the wheel of his racing car: "My wife says she doesn't know the person who drives my car. It's not in my nature to be confrontational but once I'm in my car, I'm completely different. Socially, however, I don't want to go on an ego trip; just because I can do some neat little trick like driving racing cars doesn't make me a better person."

He came to racing relatively late. After collecting three A-levels, Hill drifted into business studies. "No disrespect to South Bank Polytechnic, but it was probably the worst time of my life. The thought of going into middle management depressed the hell out of me. *Telegraph* readers will turn in their graves, but I'm afraid I just took the grant cheque and left."

He became a dispatch rider and raced motorbikes at weekends until his mother, Bette, believing that four wheels were safer than two, paid for him to take a course at a racing-car school in France. At first he did not show a natural aptitude, but with a combination of hard graft and determination he eventually fought his way into Formula One. "He is like his father in that respect," says Stirling Moss. "Neither Graham nor Damon were born winners like, say, Jim Clark, but both had the character to mould themselves into top drivers."

Hill describes himself as obsessive. The other day, for example, he decided to mow the huge lawn

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at his new house in Ascot, where he lives with his wife, Georgie, and two young sons. "All I could find was a tiny mower with a six-inch barrel but by then I was absolutely determined. It was completely bonkers and bloody boring, but nothing would induce me to stop. It took me all day."

His elder son, Oliver, aged five, was born with Down's syndrome. It was a terrible blow but one he met calmly. "We were prepared to take on the responsibility of having a child and if that's what we got, so be it." Hill talks proudly about him, saying that he now attends a mainstream school. "He's very bright and enjoys school. What's more, the children really love him and take care of him there. They know he has a special condition, although I don't think he's aware of it yet. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Meanwhile Joshua, nearly four, is already showing an alarming tendency to follow in his father's and grandfather's footsteps. "He keeps saying: 'Me do that,' whenever he sees any hair-raising sport like tobogganing on television." Hill says this does not bother him because he has no intention of allowing Joshua to do any such thing. "Not while I'm around to stop him. I know it's hypocritical but I just can't help it. He'll have to find some other outlet."

As for Hill himself, he has no intention of quitting yet. "I'm not sure what drives me more: the desire to win or the fear of losing. Of course I want to win, but the strongest emotion of all is being beaten. That is the one that really kicks you in the pants."