

Too much too young

Jackie Stewart billed Jan Magnussen as the next Senna. Then he sacked him. How could arguably the biggest talent of the 1990s have failed so dramatically in F1? Andrew Benson unravels the mystery

Jan Magnussen is under few illusions about his Formula One career. "I let myself down," he says, "and that always hurts. I planned to be world champion and it didn't happen."

In another life – or perhaps even in this one had history taken a different course – Magnussen's plan might have worked; certainly he would still be in grand prix racing now. Instead, Jackie Stewart sacked after just a season and a half a man he once described as "the most talented young driver to emerge since Ayrton Senna".

Ten years on from the Dane's F1 debut, it is still hard to comprehend. Stewart and his son Paul ran teams at most levels of motorsport for more than a decade and employed many of that era's most successful drivers, among them Juan Pablo Montoya, David Coulthard, Rubens Barrichello, Johnny Herbert, Gil de Ferran and Dario Franchitti. Magnussen, they insist to this day, could have outstripped them all.

"On pure speed," Paul Stewart says, "the only one who comes close to Jan is Rubens. Rubens is clearly a very talented driver, but on raw ability I would put Jan ahead of him. Jan had the potential to go beyond all that. You really believed it."

In equal machinery, Magnussen has beaten Barrichello, Giancarlo Fisichella, Ralf Schumacher and Jarno Trulli, who by the end of last month had 18 grand prix wins between them. He was stunning in the junior categories, won races in Germany's DTM touring car championship against a host of big names, and impressed some of those he worked with in a brief dalliance with the US-based Champ Car series. So when Magnussen joined Stewart Grand Prix at the start of 1997 it

seemed merely the latest step in a preordained route to the very top.

Born in Roskilde, some 30 or so miles west of Copenhagen, on July 4 1974, it was soon obvious that Magnussen was unusually gifted. At the age of 11 he abandoned his first love – motocross – in favour of karts, not least because "it hurt less when you fell off". He won three world championships – two junior and one senior – by the time he was 16. Switching to cars, he won six of the last nine races of his debut season in British Formula Ford in 1992 before taking a sensational win at the Festival, despite starting his heat from the back, using the outside of the daunting Paddock Hill Bend as his favoured overtaking spot.

It was at Brands Hatch that weekend that this writer first met the 18-year-old Magnussen. I went on to follow his career more closely than almost anyone else. I reported on his brilliant F3 season in '94, was at the Norisring DTM race when he broke his leg in a scooter accident and covered all his grands prix.

I liked him immediately. In scruffy yellow overalls he was so obviously different from most other aspiring drivers, well-groomed and mouthing platitudes in their desire to please team owners and sponsors alike. For one thing, Magnussen did not have any sponsors. He was shy and monosyllabic, but direct and engaging. Short, with blonde hair and rosy cheeks, he looked barely old enough to hold a driving licence, but in the awning attached to the team's tatty motorhome was a young woman with a baby boy. This turned out to be his girlfriend and their son Kevin, born a couple of weeks before.

A comparatively low-key year in

Vauxhall Lotus – he won 'only' four of the races – was followed by a move to Formula Three with Paul Stewart Racing in 1994. The ultra-fastidious Stewarts, all crisp white shirts and stiff collars, were not enamoured of Magnussen's haphazard approach out of the car, but they could, as F3 team boss Andy Miller points out, "see a spark that you can't teach" when he was in it.

Magnussen's achievements that year will likely never be matched – he won 14 of the 18 races – yet he saved his best drive for the end-of-season Macau Grand Prix.

He ruined his chances of overall victory in the two-heat event by crashing in qualifying and ending up 18th on the grid. By the end of the first race he was fifth. He won the second, passing Schumacher and Fisichella on the way.

Things have changed now, but during his early career Magnussen had a distinctly maverick approach to being a racing driver. He smoked, made no secret of his distaste for going to the gym and paid little heed to commercial niceties.

The stories are legion, among them an occasion during his F1 career when he was in the Czech Republic to promote the Ford Ka, which he had driven to a press conference. The inevitable first question was what he thought of the new model. "It's one of the worst cars I've ever driven," came the honest, if somewhat ill-advised, answer.

The problem – although it hardly seemed like one at the time – was that he was just too damn talented. He did not have to try – he just got into a car and blew everybody away. While other drivers hustled hard off track to keep their careers going, Magnussen's natural ability >>



Main shot: Magnussen was all at sea with Stewart. Above: lone outing for McLaren at the '95 Pacific GP promised good things. Below: Jan and Rubens practice hand-to-mouth coordination. Bottom: just one point for JM during season and a half with Stewart – but Verstappen didn't do any better

