



Forgotten F1 Teams – Onyx

You're listening to Forgotten F1 Teams, a mini series from Sidepodcast chronicling the rise and fall of some of those teams you might not have heard of. We've already covered four teams this series, and now it's time for our fifth: Onyx.

The team began life as Onyx Race Engineering, at the tail end of 1978. Founders Mike Earle and Greg Field had plenty of experience between them, having competed in F3, F2, F5000, and Formula 1. In fact, the pair had teamed up to build the Lec F1 team in the 70s, but that had come to an end after a Silverstone accident, and Onyx was their next challenge.

The new team entered F2 for a couple of years, finding a competitive driver in Riccardo Paletti. In 1982, Paletti moved to F1 with Osella, but Onyx wanted him back for their own F1 entry the next year. Paletti was killed, however, at the Canadian GP, and the lack of plans meant the team began to flounder. Greg Field sold his half of the team but even that didn't seem enough to secure their future. Finally, things began to look up when the March F2 team was outsourced, and Onyx picked up the contract.

After several successful years in the sport, 1988 saw the March team uncompetitive, and Mike Earle was anxious to get back into Formula 1. He began to form his own team, bringing sponsors Marlboro and Moneytron on board, the boss of the latter buying shares in Onyx. This new investor, Jean-Pierre van Rossum began to be very vocal about how the already established team was being run.

Nevertheless, with a Cosworth engine on board, the ORE1 was ready to take to the track in the hands of Stefan Johansson and rookie Bertrand Gachot. 1989 was their debut year, but they could have so easily missed their debut race. The cars weren't finished until the morning they were launched, and then immediately flown to Brazil for the first race of the season. Once arrived, the cars still had tweaks here and there, and in the end couldn't make it through the pre-qualifying sessions that applied in the late 80s. It wasn't until the fourth race of the season that the team made it through the preliminary rounds and onto the grid, and even then the car retired. However, progress was being made, slow but sure, and Greg Field returned to the team he had left. At the French Grand Prix, the cars suited the Paul Ricard circuit perfectly and qualified 11th and 13th. Johansson scored a 5th place finish, but of course, the momentum only lasted for the one race.

Whilst still desperately struggling to reach the grid each race, behind the scenes, confusion was starting to creep in. The Moneytron owner van Rossum was telling the press that he was spending cash on getting a Porsche engine, and encouraging top names to drive for the team, but in reality, he was starting to balk at the high cost of being involved with Formula 1. He finally announced that if Onyx didn't get the engine deal he was after in time for the 1991 season, then he would pull out of the sport. Before it came to that, though, he was making his influence felt within the team, suspending, and ultimately firing Gachot after comments he had made about the lack of testing he was allowed to do.

The team threw replacement Lehto into the car with no experience, so it was no surprise that he didn't get through pre-qualifying for the Portuguese Grand Prix. However, in Estoril, 1989, Johansson did manage to get into qualifying and on the grid, starting from 12th. He chose to do the entire race on one set of tyres, which saw him up to third. With the rubber wearing out he was overtaken by two Williams cars, but they both retired before the end of the race. A podium finish for the Onyx team!



There were no more results to come that year though, and development on the car had stalled. Van Rossem was gradually distancing himself from the team. Mike Earle and Greg Field both left, and although replacements were found, things were becoming more and more fractured. Despite having a year in hand to look for a replacement supplier, van Rossem stuck by his threat to quit once the Porsche deal fell through. Peter Monteverdi, a classic car collector, bought half the team, with the other half divided between businessman Karl Foitek and Ferrari dealer Bruno Frei.

For 1990, Lehto was kept on as a driver and he was to be teamed up with Karl Foitek's son. Gregor Foitek was driving for Brabham for a couple of races, though so Johansson was retained briefly. When Foitek arrived, Johansson sued for breach of contract. Former employee Alan Jenkins, jumped on the bandwagon and also brought a lawsuit on the team.

With the best result of 1990 being an unlikely 7th at Monaco, Onyx was in trouble. Monteverdi didn't have the cash to develop the car, and he wasn't prepared for how much work and how difficult running a Formula 1 team was. Halfway through the season, he changed the name of the team to Monteverdi, but it only lasted for two more races. With mounting debts, the cars were simply patched up rather than individual parts being replaced or developed. Karl Foitek pulled out of the team, and took his son with him. Onyx, now called Monteverdi, had no choice but to fold.

That's all for yet another team story in the history books of Formula 1. I'd love to hear your comments about this show, or about the team, via voicemail – 0121 28 87225 – or on the blog sidepodcast.com. I'll be back tomorrow with another Forgotten F1 Team.

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