

F1 People – Murray Walker

Welcome to F1 People, a mini series of short shows chronicling the lives of important people in the world of Formula 1. Today we're going to look at Murray Walker, not a traditional F1 People subject, but an important one nonetheless.

Graeme Murray Walker was born on the 10th October 1923 in Birmingham, England. His father raced motorcycles professionally before the war, and was pretty good at it. Murray's father also became a commentator for the BBC, working with them for 31 years. Walker decided to follow in his father's footsteps, trying out the motorcycling route but realising he was never going to be as good as he wanted to be. At a particular race in 1949, his father was preparing to do the commentary, but had to step down at the last minute. Walker stepped in, and was overheard by a BBC producer in the crowd. He was invited for a commentating audition ahead of a Goodwood meeting, and got the job instantly.

Walker also took over his father's role as motorcycle commentating when he died in 1962.

Whilst commentating on the race weekends here and there, Walker made ends meet by starting a career in marketing. His creative flair saw him promoted through an advertising agency, and this double life suited him. He worked on occasional F1 commentaries until the late 1970s, and in 1978 he was given the job full time.

In 1980, Walker was teamed up with James Hunt, who had recently retired from Formula 1. Initially, the pairing was awkward, with Hunt being somewhat of a playboy and Walker perhaps slightly disapproving of that. But as the years went by, they became an incredible partnership, the first to really bond a commentator's art of conversation with a driver's expertise of the sport.

Walker retired from the advertising industry in 1982, making commentating his full time concern. He began to get a name for himself as having the "commentators curse". He would discuss the action out on track and often say how well a certain driver was doing, and then moments later, the driver would crash or suffer a mechanical failure and have to retire. It became such a common theme that some drivers actually asked Walker specifically not to mention them during a race, so their luck would hold out.

James Hunt died in 1993, but Walker continued to commentate. The next year saw the death of Ayrton Senna, an event which Walker himself describes as the blackest moment of his career. He found it very tough to talk about the accident during the race, as he didn't know the outcome, and the pressure of having so many fans awaiting news was incredible. However, Walker got through these and other similar tricky events with aplomb and was therefore top of the list when ITV won the rights to F1 coverage in 1997. He and all the fans switched channels with ease, and Walker was teamed up with the newly retired Martin Brundle. This pairing mimicked the James Hunt success with Brundle providing the insight.

Murray Walker retired from F1 commentating in 2001, at the United States Grand Prix. He was presented with an original brick from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in recognition of his work. This is a rare honour and something Walker treasures to this very day. Despite his retirement, Walker remained a public figure within motor racing. He became the voice of the Grand Prix Masters series in 2006, he commentated on Supercar races, and filled in for a couple of F1 commentators when they weren't available – in both the UK and Australia. In 2006, Honda signed Walker up as their team ambassador for half of the season, meaning he was a corporate front for the team, welcoming and entertaining VIP guests.



When the announcement came this year that the BBC had won the rights to F1 back from ITV, Murray Walker was the first name that sprung to everyone's lips when talking about who would fill the commentators role. He's done plenty of work for Radio 5live since retiring and commentated on the odd race. Whilst Walker said he doesn't want to return and do a full season, he would be more than happy to do the odd Formula 1 feature.

Walker has been married to the very private Elizabeth for almost 50 years, and himself turns 85 this year. Whilst admitting that he is slowing things down gradually, he's also very open about the fact that he loves the limelight and the attention.

Finally, if there's any doubt that Murray Walker is a legend in F1, you just need to know this. When the upcoming Hollywood film about Michael Schumacher was announced, there were rumours that Murray would be played by Bruce Willis. You don't get a better compliment than that.

That's all for today's episode of F1 People. I hope you enjoyed the show and will join me again tomorrow when we look at another VIP in the world of Formula 1.

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