



F1 People – Frank Williams

Hello and welcome to the fourth episode of F1 People. This short series from Sidepodcast offers a biography of some important figures in Formula 1. This episode is about Frank Williams.

Francis Owen Garbatt Williams was born April 16, 1942. His father was an RAF officer and his mother a teacher, and headmistress. Their marriage broke down, however, and Frank was brought up by an aunt, and sent off to boarding school in Scotland.

After school, he worked as a travelling grocery salesman to fund his racing activities – a passion grown from rides in a friend’s Jaguar. In 1961, he began racing his own Austin car, and met Jonathan Williams, another racing driver. They moved to London and shared a flat, together with another young driver Piers Courage. Frank could not afford to keep his racing career alive, so he became Jonathan’s mechanic instead. Together they took part in Formula Junior events and moved on to Formula 3. Frank tried to revive his driving career within Formula 3, but by the end of 1966 he had retired with the idea of starting his own business.

Frank Williams Racing Cars was born. In 1967, he purchased an old Brabham chassis and entered a race at Brands Hatch as a team owner. He entered Formula 2 and F3 with moderate success, and he used the same tactics to move into Formula 1. He gave a race drive to his old friend Piers Courage, Piers died in 1970 at the Dutch Grand Prix. In 1972, Williams expanded his F1 team to running two cars, for Henri Pescarolo and Carlos Pace. In July, the team introduced their first constructor car, but Pescarolo crashed it on its very first appearance.

Frank struggled for sponsorship and money for the next few years, and was forced to take backing from Walter Wolf in 1976. The oil tycoon began to rule over the team, so Frank took his best engineer Patrick Head and left. They formed Williams Grand Prix Engineering.

Again, they purchased a March chassis while building up the car, and by 1979, Williams was running two FW cars. Clay Regazzoni took the FW07 that year and won their first victory at Silverstone. More wins followed, despite driver squabbles, and in 1980, Alan Jones brought Williams their first World Championship. They won just the constructors title next year, and just the drivers title the year after.

In March, 1986, Frank and colleague Peter Windsor were travelling from the Paul Ricard circuit in France to the airport, and they were involved in a car accident. Windsor escaped with minor injuries, but Williams, who was driving, was paralysed and has been in a wheelchair ever since.

The team gained engine support from Honda, and the Williams-Honda cars were strong in both 1986 and 1987, featuring Nelson Piquet and Nigel Mansell as their drivers. In 1988 Honda left them for McLaren, and after a year with an inferior engine, they returned as Williams-Renault for 1989. This partnership saw a couple of World Championships in the early 90s, but the success was marred by the death of Ayrton Senna. Frank’s desk is adorned by a black and white photo of Piers Courage and one of Ayrton Senna – the only two drivers to have died in Williams cars.

Williams continued to win championships, and be competitive, and many put this down to Frank’s hard-working but humble nature. He asks everyone within the team to call him by his first name, and he invokes a kind of loyalty in his staff that has seen some of them work for him for 30 years or more. After the Ferrari domination began in the late 90s, Williams slipped down the grid somewhat. These days, they are a high profile team, but continue to struggle for pace, loitering in the mid-section of the grid.



Frank was awarded a CBE in 1987, and became a Sir in 1999. He is also one of the few non-French people to win the prestigious Legion D'Honneur for his success with the Renault team. Frank is very proud of the fact he owns the only truly independent team left – a team who exist solely to race in Formula 1.

That's everything you need to know about Frank Williams. Don't forget to tune in tomorrow for the last episode of F1 People.

sidepodcast.com
YOUR WEEKLY F1 FIX