

SENNA

Seven years in the making, 'Senna' is being touted as the best Formula 1 documentary ever made. Henry Hope-Frost spoke to the film's screenwriter Manish Pandey at a members screening held at Pall Mall in October.

Sunday 1 May 1994 is a day forever etched in the memories of motorsport fans across the globe. That afternoon, millions of television viewers around the world watched the great Ayrton Senna crash to his death while leading the San Marino Grand Prix for Williams at Italian circuit Imola. And the accident, one of the most high-profile sporting tragedies that ever unfolded, would change Formula 1 forever.

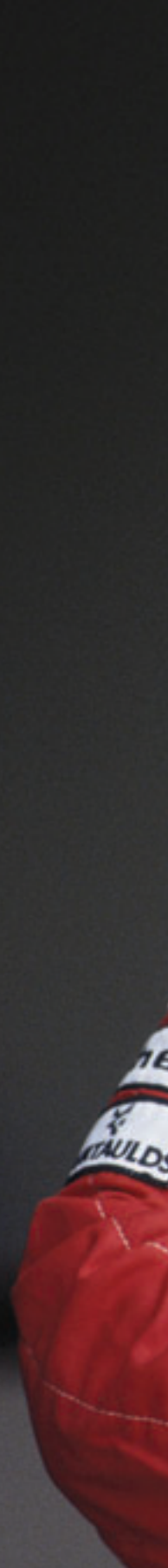
Senna's status in the sport was such that, 17 years after his death, he remains deified by most as the greatest racing driver who ever lived. His three Formula 1 world titles, 41 grand prix victories and 65 pole positions ensure his name resonates off the pages of any record books, yet for those not closely associated with Formula 1, the statistics tell only half the story.

Fortunately, the rest of that story can now be shared thanks to the release, earlier in the summer, of the award-winning British-made documentary film about the life of the enigmatic Brazilian. 'Senna' was a seven-year labour of love for the three Englishmen behind it: Screenwriter – and Senna devotee – Manish Pandey, Producer James Gay-Rees and Director Asif Kapadia. The trio worked tirelessly and against the odds – many a Senna-based film

has failed to get off the ground, even with Hollywood input – to make it happen. The powerful documentary-style tone, with unique layers of creativity woven into its structure, have ensured the film is already being touted by those who know (respected film critics and race fans alike) as the best Formula 1 film ever made.

How, then, did this low-budget masterpiece achieve such acclaim so quickly? Pandey, who spoke exclusively to *Pell Mell & Woodcote Magazine*, tells a fascinating story. 'I was never in any doubt about the suitability of the film's tragic hero,' he admits immediately. 'Senna's life and death were so improbable – almost like acts of God. He was a brilliant caricature of all humanity – good and bad.'

'The initial idea came from James [Gay-Rees]. He'd made a film with my wife some time before and, still armed with a three-film deal with Working Title, contacted me after she'd told him I was a huge Senna fan and could help. James' father had actually worked with John Player Special during their time as a sponsor of Senna and Lotus in the mid-1980s, so he knew all about him.' Despite no real knowledge of, or indeed passion for, Formula 1, James had read a haunting piece by Simon Barnes in *The*





Times on the 10th anniversary of Senna's death. Convinced of the merits of making a film about Senna, he went cap in hand to Working Title. 'James was receptive to a ten-page outline that I'd written,' recalls Pandey. 'It was based around three acts – the 'arrival' in Formula 1 at Monaco in 1984; the battles with McLaren team-mate Alain Prost and the politics of Formula 1; his final months with Williams – that I felt would build the tension to a suitable denouement.' The first hitherto insurmountable hurdle faced by Pandey and Gay-Rees was getting the Senna family to approve their project. They had rejected every proposal since 1995, so they were going to have to come up with something special. 'James and I got a meeting with Celso Lemos, the Senna family's business affairs guy, and Ayrton's niece Bianca,' says Pandey, 'so we met up in London to sow the seeds. 'They made us feel like they really liked what we suggested,' he admits. 'Celso hugged me afterwards and said simply: "I know you're going to make it! We now need you to meet [Ayrton's sister] Viviane..."' That first encounter with the woman who had ultimate say over what would happen took eight months to arrange.

'It was such a thrill to finally be able to meet Viviane,' Pandey says, 'although a cancelled flight meant it nearly didn't happen! We got to Brazil a day late, but were able to show her a series of four-minute sections we had put together in a laptop powerpoint presentation.'

Fortunately for the intrepid film-makers, Viviane Senna was sufficiently moved by what they showed her to grant them tearful approval. 'That was an incredible thing for us,' recalls Pandey. 'And, what's more, she then emailed Bernie Ecclestone to ask him to help us with the Formula 1 archive footage to which he owns all the rights. Within a month of meeting Viviane, we

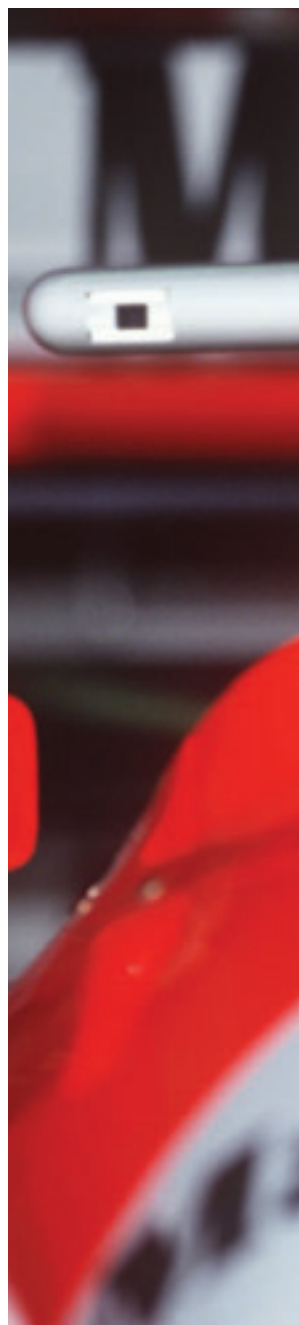
were in Bernie's office listening to him say: 'We'll see what we can do...'. He was fantastic. With Ecclestone onside, a hunt for a director began. Oscar- and BAFTA-winning director Kevin MacDonald had initially been approached, although he declined, on the basis he was not passionate enough about the subject. He would, however, remain closely involved – to the eternal gratitude of the film-makers.

The man finally chosen was Asif Kapadia, himself a BAFTA-winning director. Although, as Pandey reveals, it took well over a year to get Kapadia to meet the Senna family – a must given that they insisted on directorial approval at all times.

It was a frustrating time for Pandey, who felt that the momentum was slowing. The cause was not helped by the fact that they had to re-pitch to the family. 'Celso had left, and the new guy, Ricardo Garrasfa, didn't like the idea at first,' says Pandey.

'Fortunately, he was convinced once he had seen the pitch.' With Kapadia on board, and Universal having given the green light to the funding of the Working Title project, work started on sourcing the archive material for the film. Based at Biggin Hill in Kent, Ecclestone's Formula One Management operation controls just about everything to do with the world's fastest and most glamorous sport, including the vast archive of footage amassed over umpteen years. 'Thanks to the 'tireless efforts' of Ian Holmes, over 5,000 hours of footage was sifted through. 'We brought in a wonderful editor, Gregers Sall, to help sort it all out,' says Pandey. 'And, with Asif confident we could make the entire film using just archive material – and, crucially, no talking heads – we were full-steam-ahead in the early part of 2009.

'We then recruited Oscar-nominated film editor Chris King for a couple of



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months to help tighten up the making of the first cut. He brought a precision to the process – and cut out stuff that we didn't even notice.' Fast-forward to the spring of 2010 and the Senna family was presented with the first cut of the film at the Cannes Festival. Pandey recalls it was a nerve-racking but wonderfully emotional moment. 'After the birth of my son, it has to be the most emotional day of my life,' he admits. 'We found a tiny cinema in Cannes to show it to Viviane and Bianca. It was very tough to watch – we were tired after months of work – but so rewarding. There were a lot of tears in that little cinema and Viviane hugged me afterwards, saying tearfully: "You did it. You captured his humanity and genius".' The final surreal moment for me came at the British premiere. Bernie told me he would come, which was such an honour. Nobody at Working Title or Universal believed me, but come he did. And outside on the street afterwards, a voice from behind me said: 'Oi you, come here!'. It was Bernie and he hugged me. His only words were, "Thanks for doing it – you told it like it was!"' The captivating and emotive production that was a hit on the big screen in July and was shown at the club in October is a fitting tribute to Ayrton Senna and represents a poignant boost to the legacy of a charismatic champion. This writer sat open-mouthed in a packed auditorium on the opening night, transfixed still further by a man about whom he already knew a great deal. 'Senna' does that to you. Pandey's next project, entitled 'Ferrari – La Scuderia' centres on 1950s British racing heroes, Ferrari team-mates and great friends, Mike Hawthorn and Peter Collins. If it's half as good as 'Senna' it will be utterly magnificent....

*To hear about motoring film screenings email
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