



Who do you think you are?

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It has often been suggested that the reason why many people take up golf in middle age is because it is the one sport where you can still entertain the delusion of being in possession of a rare, if untrained, talent that, if properly nurtured, or simply discovered, could lead to competition at the highest level.

With the purely athletic sports such as running and swimming you can become disillusioned almost before you are old enough to develop illusions in the first place, while any code of football is a cruel instructor that middle-aged decrepitude sets in much earlier than most non-sporting types would believe.

In tennis and cricket you can last that little bit longer, especially if you can convince yourself that guile rather than physical power is the key to success (be a spin bowler or wicket keeper if you really want to kid yourself).

But golf, it's said, is the one major sport where you can fool yourself deep into middle or even old age. Unless, of course, you've played it since youth and have the torment of a rising handicap.

There is another sport, however, indeed a whole range of sports, where the older you are the more you can convince yourself that whatever the years may have taken away in terms of agility, eyesight and so on, they have given back in wisdom and skill. That, of course, is motorsport. The remarkable sight of middle-aged and older men strapping themselves into leathers or spine-challenging sports cars is often attributed to a Freudian compensation for failing powers. But surely there is an additional, if not exactly alternative, explanation: just as the most desperate park sportsman still occasionally believes his alter ego is Wayne Rooney or Shane Warne and the old rocker or karaoke king may still be waiting for their big break, the ageing petrolhead feels he is still engaged, however distantly, in the same sport as the superstars on two or four wheels.

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But for how much longer? While fans of two wheels can see resemblances between their own machines and those ridden by stars at the top of their sports (look at Superbikes), in F1 the stars are now piloting the equivalent of spacecraft. The technology and engineering seem to have more to do with computing than with the internal combustion engine. And this disconnection seems to grow greater year on year. Efforts by the sport's governing body to curb the impact of advancing technology and create a 'level playing field' seem to have had the perverse effect of accentuating the part played by ever more ingenious applications of esoteric science.

Does it matter? Not if as a governing body you feel you are marketing something to Hollywood movies, complete with CGIs, product placement and stars with impossibly remote and glamorous lifestyles.

But if you believe that the long-term health of your sport – or product, if you must – depends on some identification of the fan with the performers, then today's success may be transitory. "Who do you think you are – Stirling Moss?" still has a resonance. Could the same be said for any current driver?

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