

Maestro of the media

As FIA head of communications Matteo Bonciani is the conductor that allows journalists, drivers, teams and governing body to work together in harmony. A hectic life with shadow sides, but especially a lot of special moments and encounters.

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Images: Sutton

Matteo Bonciani (46) is the link between different parties. His phone is ringing off the hook and on the track, there is a steady run-up in his office. "I sometimes joke that I have to raise entrance fees." But the amicable Italian is happy to help everyone, both in the media center and in the paddock. Even during the winter testing in Barcelona, where he officially is not even in office and the FIA has no press activities, he has barely a moment for himself. "I actually thought it would be some sort of vacation, but I'm running my feet off." He says it with a smile because Bonciani knows that it is part of life in F1. When after several attempts we finally find a moment to talk quietly, an incident on the TV screen draws his attention. Rookie Lance Stroll flew off the track. Our appointment must wait because Bonciani understandably first wants to be sure that the situation is under control. Luckily there is nothing serious to worry about.

Head teacher

Bonciani always worries when he sees a crash and tries to find out as quickly as possible if the driver is okay. Even a spectacular crash that ends well has no attraction to him. This is partly because his grandfather was killed during the Mille Miglia. It happened before Bonciani was born, but there was always much talk about in the family. It also has to do with the special bond Bonciani builds with the drivers. Fortunately, in most cases when drivers see him it's good news, because they finished in the top three of the race. Bonciani has the task to direct them to the podium and the related press obligations.

At the press conferences Bonciani is in charge. As a teacher, he gives turns to the journalists who want to ask a question. If they forget to mention name and publication in accordance with the protocol, Bonciani is disappointed and looks at him sternly. He enforces authority; not by discipline, but by maintaining a good relationship with journalists. Young journalists he helps get started. "Unlike a team I have no interest in the outcome of the race by the FIA. My goal is to create the best possible working conditions. "

Calling

Bonciani is no petrol head. Journalism has always attracted him. Actually, he wanted to be a war correspondent, although he hates violence but through the grapevine he arrived in F1. Although he was reluctant to get started in racing, he could not resist the lure of Ferrari in 2000. He was part of the glory days with Michael Schumacher. His team boss at the time, Jean Todt, became FIA president in 2009 and enticed Bonciani also to make the transition to the automobile sports federation. His main mission was to strengthen the relationship with the media. Bonciani is committed to transparency and thus the door to his office remains open, and without charge to enter.

The international nature of the sport appeals to him. "In Formula 1 it is common that people speak several languages, whereas actually it is very special. In the press center, different cultures come together with a shared passion. I find that fascinating. "In recent decades, journalism has undergone many changes. "It used to be a profession with high regards, now they have it more difficult because

information is becoming freely accessible and can be spread by everyone. Therefore I have even more appreciation for reporters out in the field itself who check facts thoroughly. "

Bonciani calls it unfortunate that the press room today is not always filled as well. "The crisis has had a big impact. Many media can no longer afford to send people to all the races. "

It also is a big struggle for everyone to be away from home year-round. "For outsiders working in Formula 1 sounds like a great attraction, but there is a downside: it is difficult to combine with family life." He sees his colleagues more than his partner and children. Six months ago, his six year old daughter got a little brother. "Then it's tough to close the door behind you again. But it's also nice to be able to explore the world. "

Mythical

At any place Bonciani arrives, from Melbourne to Abu Dhabi, he looks at the positive side. That may be the environment, the attitude of the people, but also the history. "For example there are many stories written about the enormous challenge of the Nürburgring, so it got a mythical status. I love Japan, especially the culture. That's why I like to come to Suzuka, though it was also the scene of the worst moment of my career. "Bonciani refers to the fatal accident of Jules Bianchi in 2014. Nine months after his crash in the rain-soaked Japanese Grand Prix the French driver succumbed to his injuries.

Despite the dark sides of the sport Bonciani sees plenty of bright spots in order to continue to give it his all. He thinks it is too early yet to say what impact the acquisition of Formula 1 by Liberty Media will have. "The expectations in the paddock have been very positive. They listen well to what the people want. That such a large party believes in the sport, shows how strong Formula 1 is. All together we want to ensure that every fan has every reason to sit down for the start of a race. "

Soft spot for Netherlands

The enthusiasm for Formula 1 in the Netherlands impresses Matteo Bonciani, who as an Italian obviously is used to quite a lot. "Motorsport is deeply rooted in the Netherlands. There is a real passion for Formula 1. That was long before Max Verstappen, but he has rekindled it. Dutch media are not as chauvinistic as in other countries, but they do enjoy the most of their local hero. That is perfectly understandable and justified. "Bonciani remembers well his first encounter with Verstappen. "I had heard a lot about him, but did not know him yet. At the Autosport Awards, I took my place and a few seats farther was a young boy. I could not read the name tags, but we got to talking. He called me 'sir' and I said that was not necessary and told them who I was and what I was doing, when he said that I was an important person. From that moment there was a natural sympathy. He is very passionate and focused, but also very relaxed and funny. "