

AYRTON SENNA

For the racing driver Ayrton Senna, there was no such thing as second or third place. Instead, there was winning or losing. As he said, ‘When you are fitted in a racing car and you race to win, second or third place is not enough.’ What might have seemed arrogant coming from another man seemed like a perfectly rational statement by someone who was undeniably one of the greatest drivers who ever raced—and quite possibly the greatest. He was attracted to the adrenaline of the sport like a moth to a flame, claiming ‘the danger sensation is exciting ... the challenge is to find new dangers’. His premature death was both a tragic end to an illustrious career and a realization of every rule that he ever stuck to in his brief, glittering life.

Senna was born on 21 March 1960 in São Paulo, and began racing from the age of 4, when he developed an interest in go-karting. A runner up in the Karting World Championships of 1979 and 1980, he moved to England to begin his career in racing, eventually participating in his first Formula One race in 1984 in Brazil. He finished ninth, but his fearless, near-visionary approach to racing, where he seemed entirely at one with his machine, led to his being noticed and tipped for greater things. These duly arrived in 1985, when he scored his first victory in the Portuguese Grand Prix, and in 1986, where he won the Detroit Grand Prix. It was here that he established one of his signature gestures, namely driving a lap waving the Brazilian flag every time that he won a race. A man who genuinely loved his country, taking every opportunity to extol its people, character, and setting, he was a truly beloved son of Brazil. The only blemish to a flourishing life and career was a divorce from Liliane Vasconcelos in 1983, after a two-year marriage.

Putting his personal difficulties behind him (he quipped ‘women—always in trouble with them, but can’t live without them’), Senna was in the big leagues of motor racing, transferring to the Marlboro-McLaren team in 1988, and collecting accolades and trophies by the score, most notably winning the World Championship in his first year. He also encountered the man who became his greatest rival, his teammate Alain Prost. Prost, a man nicknamed ‘The Professor’ for his cool, analytical style of racing, could not have been more different to the fiery and instinctive Senna, and their bitterly heated clashes, most markedly in the 1989 penultimate race of the season, became the stuff of legend. Senna, in particular, blamed the FIA for what he perceived as a bias against him. Controversy continued; when interviewed by Jackie Stewart in 1990 and asked why he was so prone to colliding with other cars, Senna angrily disputed the question, claiming that Stewart should understand the pressures drivers were under.

