

WEEKEND SPORTS WEEKEND

An American lesson for the sulking superstars

From Simon Barnes in Tampa, Florida

LET me tell you about a group of fish called cleaner wrasse. They live by helping other fish. They clean them; they eat the parasites and fungus that infest them. Larger fish that could make a single swallow of cleaner wrasse seek them out and submit to their attentions.

The relationship is essential to both fish. Cleaner wrasse even set up "feeding stations," and the bigger fish visit them for this mutually essential cleaning process. All in all, it is one of the world's nicest examples of symbiosis-mutual dependence.

There are many others, as I have been observing here at the Super Bowl. The symbiosis of media and professional sport is a fully realised concept over here, and it reaches its ultimate expression during Super Bowl week. If there was no sport, sportswriters and broadcasters would not exist. And were it not for public interest, professional sport would disappear.

How do "the public" follow their interests in sport? They

read about it in newspapers, hear about it on the radio, watch it on television. Interest is fuelled by the media's constant flow of information and comment and, from that interest, sport makes its money.

No media means no public interest which means no pro sport. No pro sport means no sports media. We need each other. I wish more people in sport would realise this; it would make life so much easier.

Instead, we have the England rugby union players going on strike for money and refusing to speak to the media. We had the England football team in Cagliari refusing to speak to the media. Gazza allegedly wasn't even talking to his own ghost-writer. Any player that spoke to a press person was a scab.

And we have, I hear, increasingly dreadful relations between the England cricket team in Australia and the media people out there with it.

has been withdrawn, as if co-operating with the press were a favour sportspeople perform from the kindness of their hearts.

I have a fantasy. I would love to take a party of British sportspeople to the Super Bowl as media people. Micky Stewart; Will Carling; Gazza; dozens more. Are we media people disliked over here? Hated? Are we, at the biggest annual sports event in the world, even tolerated?

Hal! At the Super Bowl, we are made love to, ravished, glutted with information, surfeited with access to polite and articulate college educated athletes. This is the easiest and politest story of the year.

The big names at the Super Bowl are the hottest people in sports. They are millionaires. Yet they give up an hour of every day of Super Bowl week to speak to the press. The locker room itself is available to all the media people after the

Much of the usual co-operation game.

You can speak to any superstar millionaire you want, and all for free. Some of them enjoy it; some see it as a trying chore; all see it is part of the job. That is because it is part of the contract. Players who duck these responsibilities get fined, very large amounts.

I spoke to an American reporter about the breakdown in relations ships between media and athletes. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't these guys want to be rich and famous?" They do, certainly, but only on their own terms. Steve Ovett refused to speak to the press for years, then he held a press conference to launch a new line of clothes.

Margaret Thatcher talked about the "Oxygen of publicity." British athletes prefer to suffocate under their own sulking. This is a bad deal for everybody. Players lose; media lose; public loses; sport loses.

An amateur athlete has no need of public attention, for the public do not pay his wages. But once your charge admission, and more so, when you begin to earn money, directly or indirectly, from sport, your need the public. And that is what the media are for. You ask the Super Bowl superstars.

Bob Willis, when England assistant manager in the West Indies, was asked by a traveller if he would like anything taken back to England. "Yes. About 50 media people.

Fine. But who would hear about England's doings then? Who would care about England cricket? What sound does a falling tree make in a deserted forest?

People in British sport have their zoology wrong. They know media and sport have a relationship but they see it as parasitism. But it is symbiosis. If a species of fish refused to have anything to do with cleaner wrasse, it would simply go extinct. Think about it, chaps.

Yong, Dassler dazzle in Milan

MILAN, Mar 14: German Uwe Dassler became a double victor and young Australian Julie Majer won the women's 2000 metres freestyle final at the season's first World Cup swimming meeting on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

Dassler won the men's 200 freestyle in a time of one minute 48.17 seconds, ahead of fellow German Christian Tölgner and Australian Ian Brown. Dassler had already won Tuesday's 800 freestyle, the opening event of the meeting.

Majer, 15, won the 200 freestyle in two minutes 1.86 seconds, beating Briton Ruth Gilfillan into second place by less than one tenth of a second in an exciting finish.

An AP report adds: World champion Yong Zhuang dominated the women's sprint and two Italian men and a British woman set national records on



YONG ZHUANG

the opening day of the World Cup in Milan.

Zhuang, a 18-year-old Chinese, won the final of the 50-meter freestyle in 25.57 seconds, edging Germany's Regina Dittman and Alison Sheppard of Scotland.

The winner was 0.76 seconds off the world mark of Romanian Livia Copanu, set in 1989.

Luca Sacchi was 0.10 off the European record as he set the new Italian mark in the men's 400-meter medley, in four minutes, 12.15 seconds.

He led German Christian Gessner by more than five seconds.

His teammate Luca Bianchin set an Italian record in the 200-meter backstroke final, finishing ahead of Soviet Vladimir Selkov and Canada's Mark Tewksbury, in 1:57.43 minutes.

Joanne Deakins swam Britain's fastest 200-meter women's backstroke - two minutes, 11.65 seconds, but ended up behind Germany's Dagmar Hase, who won the final in 2:10.40.

The Soviet Union had three winners, Dmitri Volkov and Elena Volkova in the men's and women's 100 breaststroke and Alexander Popov in the 50 freestyle.

Volkov had no opposition in the 100-meter breaststroke. Volkov was timed in 59.73



UWE DASSLER

seconds, the only swimmer to go below one minute.

Soviet Alexander Popov won the 50-meter freestyle final in 22.18 seconds, 0.42 off the world record.

Canadian swimmers took the men's 100-meter butterfly and the women's 400-meter medley.

Marcel Gery won the butterfly final in 53.86 seconds, ahead of Soviet Vladislav Kulikov.

Nancy Sweetnam edged two Australian women in the medley, in 4:39.32 minutes.

Julie Majer scored the only Australian win of the day in the women's 200-meter freestyle, edging Scotland's Ruth Gilfillan in 2:01.86 minutes.

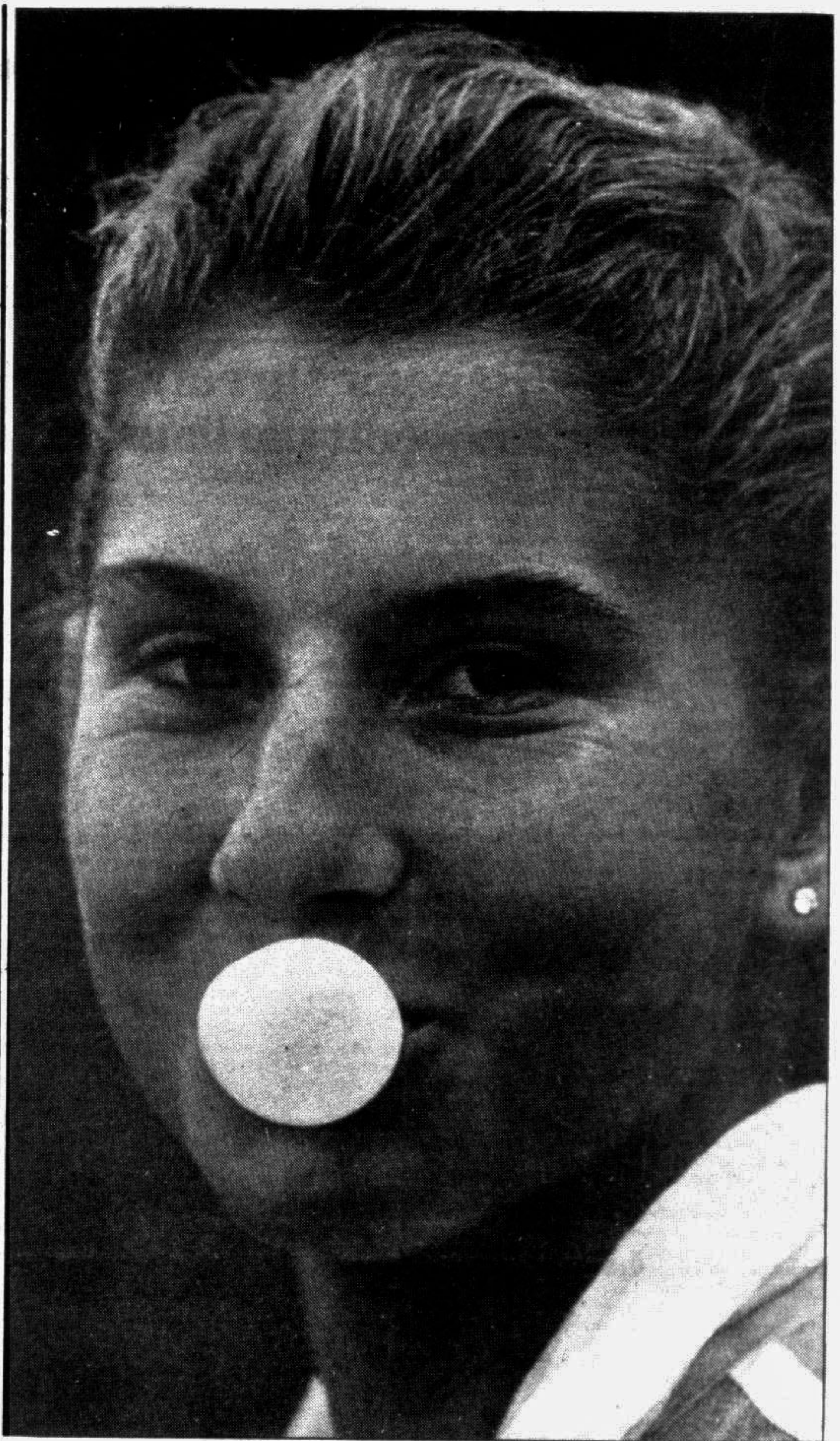
World champions Giorgio Lamberti of Italy and American Matt Biondi withdrew at the last minute from the two-day competition in Milan's 25-meter Samuele pool.

The Italian meeting is the first stage of the eighth-event 1991 swimming World Cup, with prizes of 5,000 dollars to the winners of 12 titles-six for men and six for women.

Final standings will be based on the best results of each swimmer in four events out of eight, with the winner of each race earning nine points, second place seven and third-place six points.

The World Cup continues in Bonn, Germany, on March 16-17 and in Malmö, Sweden, on March 19-20.

The final stage is scheduled for Victoria, Canada, April 12-13.



Bubbly Monica Seles of Yugoslavia last week took over from Germany's Steffi Graf as the world's top ranked woman tennis player according to the WTA computer.

Williams team is back on the right track

As his two cars lined up on the starting grid in Phoenix last Sunday, Frank Williams looked back with satisfaction on the 15 years he has been in the forefront of Formula one racing, winning 44 races and the world title four times.

Then again, being the man he is, he is more likely to have looked to the coming season, one in which he seems finally to have a fighting chance to challenge for the constructors' championship and the drivers' title.

By his own exacting standards, last season was lacklustre, and although his team finished second in 1989, he was only seventh in 1988. This was after winning two consecutive titles, in 1986 and 1987, powered by the Honda turbo-charged engine. Then Honda took off and went to McLaren, and Williams stop-gapped with a Judd engine. Renault came along for the 1989 season and the British-French partnership has been improving with every race.

In the middle of all these ups and downs, Williams had a trauma that would shatter most people's lives. Driving back from a test session in southern France, on March 8, 1986, he crashed his car, and he is now confined to a wheelchair. It shattered his life, of course, and his wife's account of the tragedy in her recently-published book brings tears to the eyes.

But Williams has always made light of the whole affair, pointing out that he is still a privileged man: "Others would have lost their job," he says. "Nobody can sack me and I am still doing what I love best: going racing every other Sunday."

He still runs the team, together with his long-time partner, Patrick Head, the technical director. Williams is the only team boss who still seems to enjoy the grit of the sport. He is a common sight in the pits, where he follows the race through headphones and the time monitors, and he is just as likely to pop up in more unexpected places.

For instance, you'll see him at the bottom of Eau Rouge, at Spa, at the end of the straight where the cars must climb the hill, the drivers' necks and spine taking a fearful beating, before swinging left, then right over the brow of the hill: it's a connoisseur's spot. Or in Hungary, where he watches the race from behind his motorhome in the paddock.

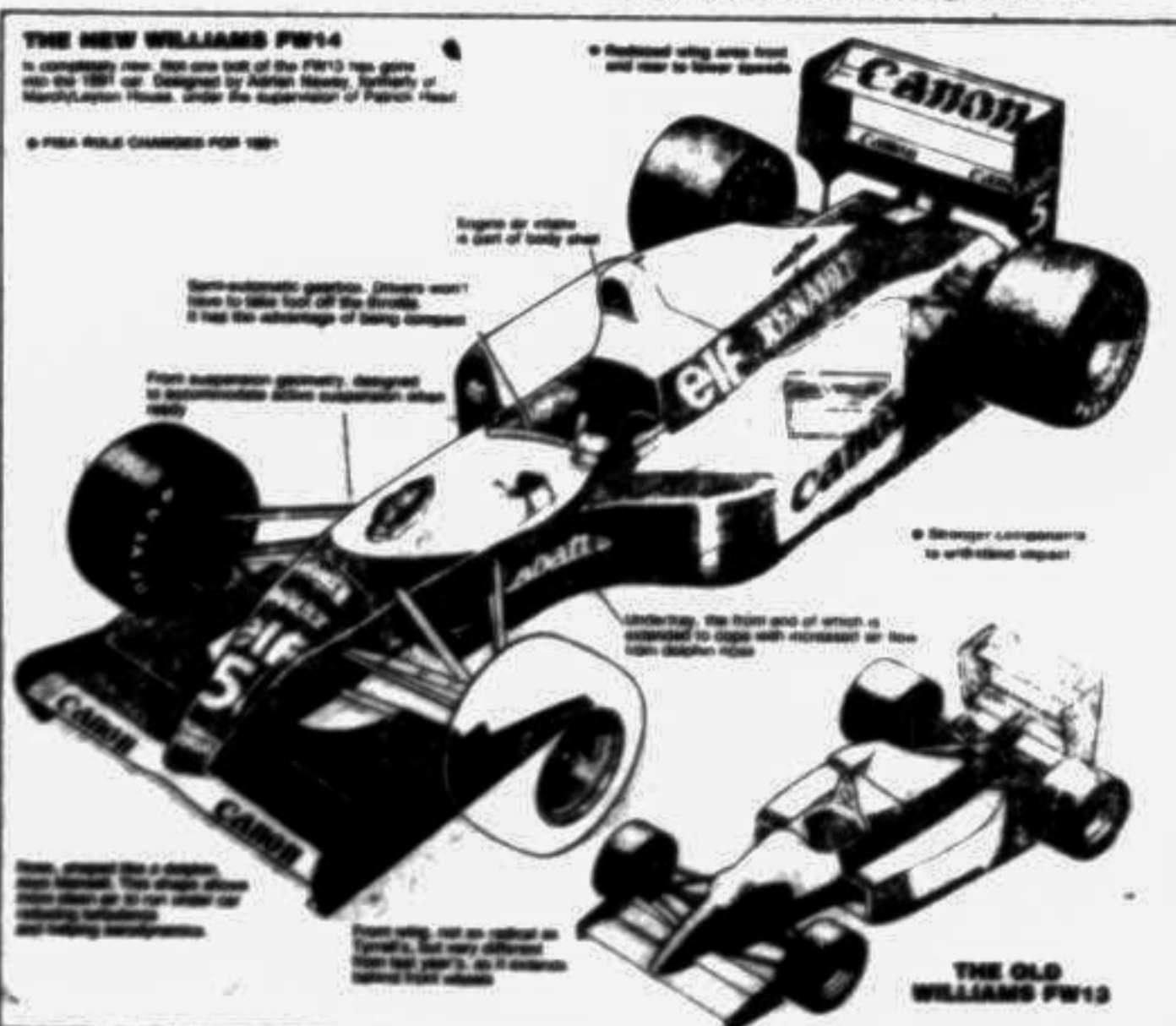
His disability weighs him down. By the time race day comes, his eyes are that much redder and he is less inclined to shoot the breeze with the hangers-on in the pits. It is as if what little physical energy he can muster is directed, together with his huge mental resources, on his cars on the track, willing them to win.

It has been some time since all the ingredients at Williams were right. The skill is not so much in the ingredients, but in how and in what proportion they are used. Last year, the engine was good, the chassis may be less so, the drivers drove to their potential and the race-team leadership seemed a bit preoccupied by trying to sign Jean Alesi, Nigel Mansell, Ayrton Senna and finally Mansell again.

Now the Renault engine seems excellent; the dolphin-nosed chassis and semi-automatic gearbox look like win-

With the Formula one grand prix season opening in Phoenix on Sunday, Norman Howell examines the challenge of the Williams team, led by Nigel Mansell

ners; Mansell could sneak the world title from under Senna's nose; and Williams himself, freed by the need to sign a top driver, should be able to devote his energies to getting the team to win races.

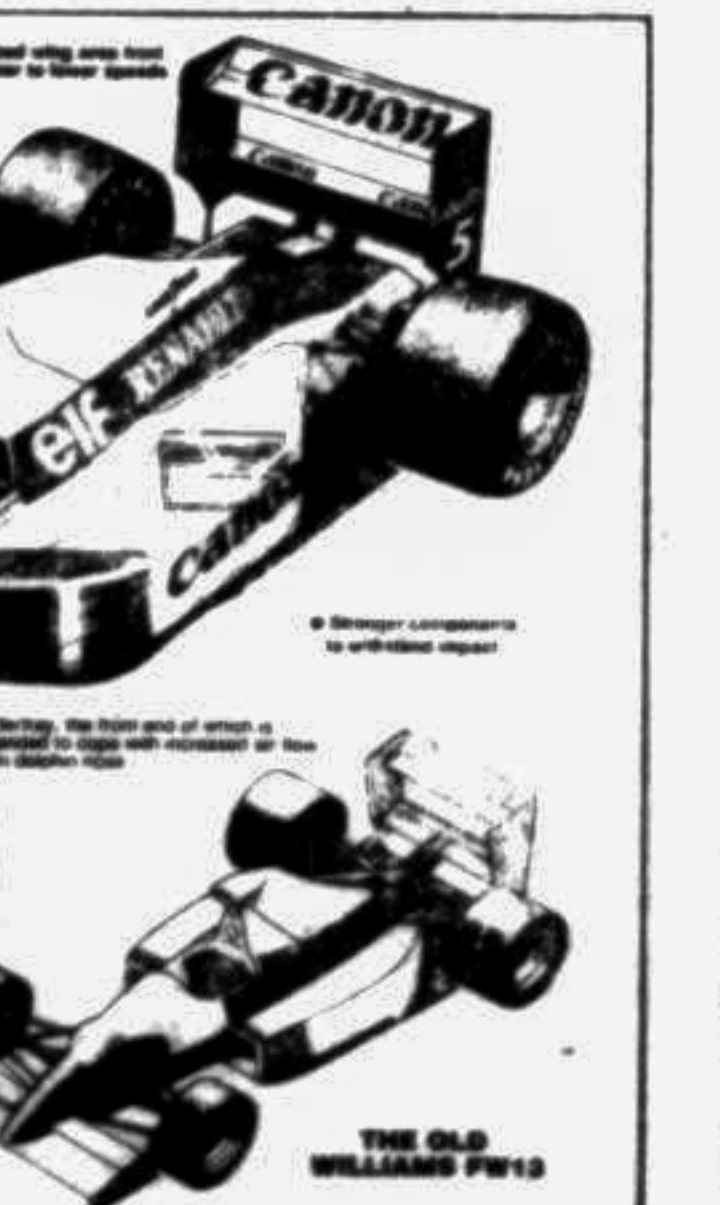


Williams is bullish on his prospects: "I think this year's car is a big step forward for us, especially if compared with last year's. It's a little smaller, and it's quite conventional, but the big difference is in the

gearbox, which is a semi-automatic six-speed unit."

Williams admits the gearbox is similar to Ferrari's, except that at Williams the concentration is more on the hydraulics than on the electronics, something that let down the Italians in the early part of last season. "The point still is that drivers can change a little faster and can keep both hands on the steering wheel when tackling bends," Williams says.

It may be coincidence that Mansell is back at Williams after two years at Ferrari, where he practically tested from scratch the John Barnard-designed revolutionary push-button gearbox.



Williams acknowledges his contribution in an amusingly understated way: "I am pleased to welcome Nigel home. He was here for four years before going to Ferrari. And that was quite an

education for him, a sort of finishing school. He is now more mature, very determined, constructive and has a sense of humour, too."

More seriously, Williams admits that Mansell has been putting the team under pressure: "He knows he hasn't much time to win a world title. So he has been pushing us to build him a winning car and a title-winning team."

Mansell seems to have sharpened up at Ferrari, and he gives the impression of wanting to be more involved in the running of the team. He is eager to race the new car, although he is worried about reliability, an aspect of grand prix racing which has often conspired against him.

"We have a new car, quite radical in concept, a new gearbox and a new engine, all of it late, so I am a little pessimistic about all of these new elements not letting me down. Still, the proof is in the pudding," Mansell says.

The team is certainly ready for a title. Riccardo Patrese, the No.2 driver, will be a steady team-mate for Mansell, who is not good at living with those who threaten his pre-eminence. Another steady hand will be that of Peter Windsor, the new team manager. He has long been associated with Williams and now the whole team seems balanced and eager to win.

About all, it is British, and Mansell, like so many British sportsmen who try their fortune in foreign fields, never liked being away from home. His "comfort zone" (being able to understand all that is said around him), as he calls it, allied with the sagacity of Williams, the efforts of Head and Renault and the organisational skills of Windsor, should cocoon him in the perfect environment for him to drive to his best.

Williams has also given him the official No. 1 slot, something that he has never had. It means he has, among other things, total priority on the spare car. More than that, Frank Williams can't do. The rest is up to the driver.

Mediate hopes to continue winning ways

ORLANDO (Florida), Mar 14: Rocco Mediate is ready to get back to work again, reports AP.

"Yeah, things are a little different now," Mediate said before teeing off Thursday in the first round of the Nestle Invitational.

"There are a lot more people want to talk to me now, things like that," said Mediate, who climaxed a climb from mediocrity with his career-first victory two weeks ago in the Doral Open.

"But it's been fun," Mediate said of his new-found celebrity. "I guess it's part of my job description. I'm having fun."

And, he said, there's every reason to believe the fun and the good times will continue to roll.

"I'm anxious to get started again," said Mediate, who is coming off a week's break from competition. "I just want to get back to where I was two weeks ago, get myself in contention and have a shot at it."

That's where he's been all season.

Mediate followed five years of relatively undistinguished play with an exhibition of the most productive golf of the season.

In seven starts this year, he has six finishes in the top 10, hasn't finished worse than 13th and leads golf in money-winnings, scoring average and two other statistical categories. "I'm not even thinking of it as a streak," Mediate said before tackling Arnold Palmer's Bay Hill Club course in the Nestle.

"I know it can't last forever," he said. "But I've got my game at a level it's never been at before. I want to try to keep it at that level. There's no reason to think I can't pick up where I was."

parts are good enough they can pick it up."

He shrugged, then added: "Maybe I'll never play at that level again. It'll be a heck of a challenge to find out."

He also faces the challenge of one of the strongest line-ups of the year, a 124-man field led by the host Palmer and Nick Faldo, the Englishman who won both the Masters and British Open last season.

Faldo, making his first start of the year, leads an international contingent that includes Ian Woosnam of Wales, Bernhard Langer of Germany and Sandy Lyle of Scotland.

And, of course, there's Greg

Norman, the Australian victim of Robert Gamez 176-yard 7-iron shot that found the cup for a winning eagle-2 on the final hole of this event a year ago.

Gamez, who rode that dramatic triumph to Rookie of the Year honours, is back to defend.

Other leading contenders include Paul Azinger, US Open title-holder Hale Irwin, Curtis Strange, Larry Wadkins, Tom Watson, Ray Floyd, Corey Pavin, Tom Kite, Wayne Levi and Steve Pate, the winner last week in the wind-blown Honda Classe.

Nigeria may back Moroccan Cup bid

LAGOS, Mar 14: Nigeria may reconsider its bid to stage the 1998 World Cup soccer finals and back Morocco, Nigerian Football Association (NFA) chairman Yusuf Ali said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

"The Confederation of African Football is trying to persuade Nigeria, saying the Moroccan government is very serious and that we should co-ordinate," Ali said.

"We could back the Moroccan bid," said Ali, who is likely to discuss the issue soon with sports minister Yohanna Kure. Morocco just missed losing the 1994 World Cup, losing by three votes to the United States.

Nigeria, whose bid for the 1998 finals was received by FIFA four days after the February 8 deadline, is among nine countries bidding for the event.

Apart from Nigeria and Morocco, the others are Brazil, Chile, England, France, India, Portugal and Switzerland. They must all confirm or withdraw by March 31. An AFP report from Paris

says: Sports Minister Roger Bambuck, alarmed at French professional football's billion Franc (200 million dollar) overdraft, has called for a cut in the first division from 20 to 18 clubs in two years.

Bambuck said realistic accounting should be brought in and warned that any club which was not a working business proposition would be barred from next season's championship.

"They must prove they will be able to get through a whole season," he said on Tuesday. Bordeaux, the top side of the Eighties, is currently fighting to avoid going into receivership with debts of 60 million dollars.

Bambuck has set up a meeting with government officials and club representatives next month to try to reach a compromise on staggered payments of tax and social security payments which make up most of the debts.

Players are resisting attempts by club presidents to cut wages and shed about 100 jobs.