

**“It’s been an enduring frustration that our sport has barriers to getting involved”**

PORTRAITS: JONATHAN BUSHELL

By the end of the year the FIA will have a new president and the Jean Todt era, which has lasted for 12 years, will be at an end. **Damien Smith** speaks to one of the two candidates, the current FIA deputy president for sport Graham Stoker, about his long-term strategy. Should he be elected, Stoker will oversee profound changes in motor sport, and here he lays out his plan...

**O**N DECEMBER 17 A LEADER for global motor sport will be elected in Paris. Jean Todt, president of the Federation Internationale de l’Automobile since 2009, has served his time and will step aside. The choice is between two men, both of whom can already boast years of prolific service to the organisation.

On the one hand there is Emirati Mohammed Ben Sulayem, 59, 14-time Middle East rally champion and a high-profile motor sport figure in that region, who is standing with Richard Burns’ former co-driver Robert Reid as his proposed deputy; and on the other is English barrister and Todt’s current deputy president for sport Graham Stoker, 69, whose ‘running mate’ is nine-time Le Mans 24 Hours winner Tom Kristensen. The ballot will be taken from the 203 voting members of the FIA and if Stoker wins, he will follow in the footsteps of another English barrister he knew very well: Max Mosley.

But Stoker is an entirely different character to the late co-founder of March, as *Motor Sport* discovered when we met him to discuss his candidacy at the Royal Automobile Club in London. Like Mosley, he came to the sport first as an enthusiast; unlike Mosley, he has more than three decades’ experience in motor sport governance to draw from and is far more directly qualified for this powerful role, ahead of what is likely to be the most challenging decade the world of motor racing has ever faced.

“My earliest memory is being given a model Maserati when I was five,” says Stoker, an urbane, affable figure, who once or twice during our interview fixes us with an eye surely perfected during his decades of combat in the law courts. “I was reading *Motor Sport* at school by the time I was 12 and became an avid fan, going to club races at Brands Hatch and eventually when I could afford it to Formula 1, watching Niki Lauda and Alain Prost thundering around Brands. I was twin-tracking that with my career in law, heading through law school to the Bar.”

Stoker soon had pretensions to compete, becoming a member of Porsche Club Great

Britain among other organisations and embarking on school courses via Jim Russell and Winfield in France. “Then it all came to a halt because I simply couldn’t afford to go any further,” he says. “I wanted to get into serious club sports cars, that type of thing, but it required a motorhome, a mechanic and investment in a vehicle. Others seemed to have connections and I just couldn’t square it with life and my obligations at the Bar, so I had to give it up, much to my upset and frustration. That’s when I moved across to the governance side. It’s been an enduring frustration that our sport has barriers to getting involved.”

From the mid-1980s, Stoker gained hands-on experience playing key roles in what was then the Motor Sports Association and as a competitions steward, before stepping up to the international stage in the early years of the new millennium. It’s some resume. Yet through it all he has kept a low public profile. Now he’s ready to step into the spotlight. But why? “After three terms with Jean and my history, I have got considerable experience,” he says, while refusing to be drawn into any comparisons with FIA colleague and now rival Ben Sulayem. “And that experience is strong and almost unique in terms of the role of governing bodies in sport. I’ve been involved with the Olympic movement, I negotiated when the FIA joined the IOC, so I understand that. I’ve also been involved in all the major motor sport decisions. I’m on my third Concorde Agreement now. All these type of issues I’ve been at the heart of. Now, I



#### Stoker on... Liberty Media

“The relationship has never been better. In the past there have been politics and polemics, but not any longer. It’s a strong partnership and we need to maintain it because it works astonishingly well. We have to keep that going. It’s vital.”

NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

don't underestimate the impact of the pandemic. Coming out of this we need an experienced team, we need to build confidence, with some sort of clear pathway to get the sport back strong. I feel I've got those skills. I'm not taking it lightly. I can contribute in a sensible and coherent way."

The FIA presidency has become a high-profile role, but it wasn't always like that. It was the famously autocratic Jean-Marie Balestre who made it properly 'public facing' during his volatile reign between 1985-93 (before which he was at the helm of FISA, what used to be the FIA's sporting arm). By the time Max Mosley succeeded him, the die was cast that the president was more than just a figurehead.

Officially, the role is described as "the external face of the FIA, acting as the voice of the institution and taking part in all ceremonial events. He/she takes executive decisions on behalf of the FIA in areas delegated by the FIA bodies and ultimately the General Assembly." Balestre and Mosley, within the sphere of F1, appeared to stretch that brief, although during the 1990s heat from the European Commission on

monopolies legislation led directly to the federation's infamous sale of its F1 commercial rights to Bernie Ecclestone for £100m - a relative snip. Even so, the FIA today remains more than simply a sports regulator, as Stoker acknowledges.

"If you think of some of the other federations like FIFA they've still got all their commercial rights," Stoker points out. "The IOC is a great example. It's non-profit, but they've got all their commercial rights, too. Obviously in the F1 world pursuant to the arrangements they struck with the European Commission they had to divest that through a contract. Essentially it's a lease. Other assets we hold in different ways.

"The important thing to remember is first we have a regulatory function, and secondly if we do get involved in any kind of financial benefits we use it on a non-profit basis for the good of the sport, and there's nothing wrong with that. That's what FIFA do to grow football. That's what the IOC do, they grow all the sports around the world. We do the same with our funds, for the good of the sport and not only at the elite level."

## "What do you do, end global sport? That can't be right"



### Stoker on... sustainability

"Our solutions are based on a sport that is all about efficiency. Efficiency is driving not only the development of electric vehicles, which has caught the imagination of politicians, but also the internal combustion engine, too. They tell me the current hybrid F1 engine is running at 53% efficiency - no one has ever built an engine that efficient. Wind turbines run at 22%. New-generation biofuels can capture carbon from the atmosphere and that's what we've got to do."

It's here we get to the core of what Stoker stands for and what he wishes to achieve if he is elected. "Not only at the elite level" is key, following his own pathway from motor sport's grass roots that remain at the heart of his motivation. That's an awful long way from the Mosley model. "One of the hallmarks of my period at the FIA is that Jean came to me to set up the whole grassroots training and developing programmes that now exist," he says. "That's all my task. And that goes way back to when I was the MSA's chairman of the Motor Sport Council. I went to visit our clubs, 750 of them. It took me three years, and I went all round Great Britain. What came through was the power of grassroots and how we can help with training or grants. So that's what we've introduced."

As a known quantity, in governance if not in public, it's no surprise that Stoker's vision for motor sport is based on tried and trusted principles - and being a lawyer, on logic too. "You've got to build a pyramid," he says. "It's not rocket science, it's history,

and history has demonstrated it works. If you get a strong pyramid with a strong grassroots base and an active club scene, you get talent going up through the pathways all the way to the elite level. It works and it's sustainable. I'm in charge of 146 countries around the world where motor sport is being run. They've all got different stories. Some have built the pyramid in reverse. They come in with an elite event, government paid and now they think 'we've got to build grassroots underneath'. What we've got now is a comprehensive system of support by training programmes run by experts pulled from the clubs. We've also got centralised training. We've got best practices and a whole range of tools, a comprehensive grant process in place which backs up the clubs. When you put all that together what you are doing is building a stronger sport, for everybody's benefit."

His priorities too are predictable - and for good reason. "Our sport where men and women can compete together is very unusual," he says. "Sailing and horse racing and eventing, I think, are the only other sports in which you can do that. We also have a remarkable industry other sports don't have; high-tech engineers who can come up with solutions to big challenges. We have a very high profile in the press and international media, connecting to people from those who have been interested for years to young kids coming in."

Gender equality, diversity and an openness to all has to be a given in 2021. "I worked with Susie Wolff on her Dare to be Different campaign and we've taken that over and taken it forward as our FIA Girls on Track programme, which runs all around the world and is having a real impact," says Stoker, who also cites the rise in esports as a levelling route into the sport. Where Lewis Hamilton's eponymous commission found a problem in the lack of black representation in the UK motor sport industry, Stoker says he sees "exciting solutions. You've got to remember that I look at it from the point of view of 146 countries around the world. A whole range of nationalities. We've got to get into a position where your background has nothing to do with whether you succeed in the sport. That's the aspiration a sport should have and we can do that now."

He's bullish too on the most obvious threat to motor sport, which is already shaping what comes next. "Environmental issues are going to be absolutely vital - we have to grapple with them and we are doing so already," he says. "But we've got a great



Graham Stoker came to the sport as an enthusiast and sees the grassroots level of racing as a vital pool for future talent

## Route to the top

- **Born: 1952**
- **Profession: Barrister specialising in areas of sport and international law. Has a master's degree in international law and politics from LSE.**
- **1985: Joins RAC MSA as a volunteer. Serves judicial committee on which he eventually becomes chairman. Also becomes a steward for events.**
- **1994: Chairs a tribunal on Alfa Romeo's front splitter in the British Touring Car Championship, right.**
- **1995-2001: The BTCC's first permanent steward.**
- **2000: Commissioned to report on the 2000 British GP mudbath fiasco. Puts forward plans that lead to Silverstone road traffic plan development to transform access.**
- **2001: Elected as chairman of MSA's Motor Sports Council; joins FIA when elected to serve on International Court of Appeal.**
- **2004: Elected in Rome to join World Motor Sport Council as representative for UK. Also gains superlicence to steward for F1, WTCC, GT and WRC.**
- **2009: As Jean Todt becomes FIA president, Stoker becomes deputy president for sport. Remains part of the core leadership team through three terms, forging development strategy to link grassroots to elite motor sport.**



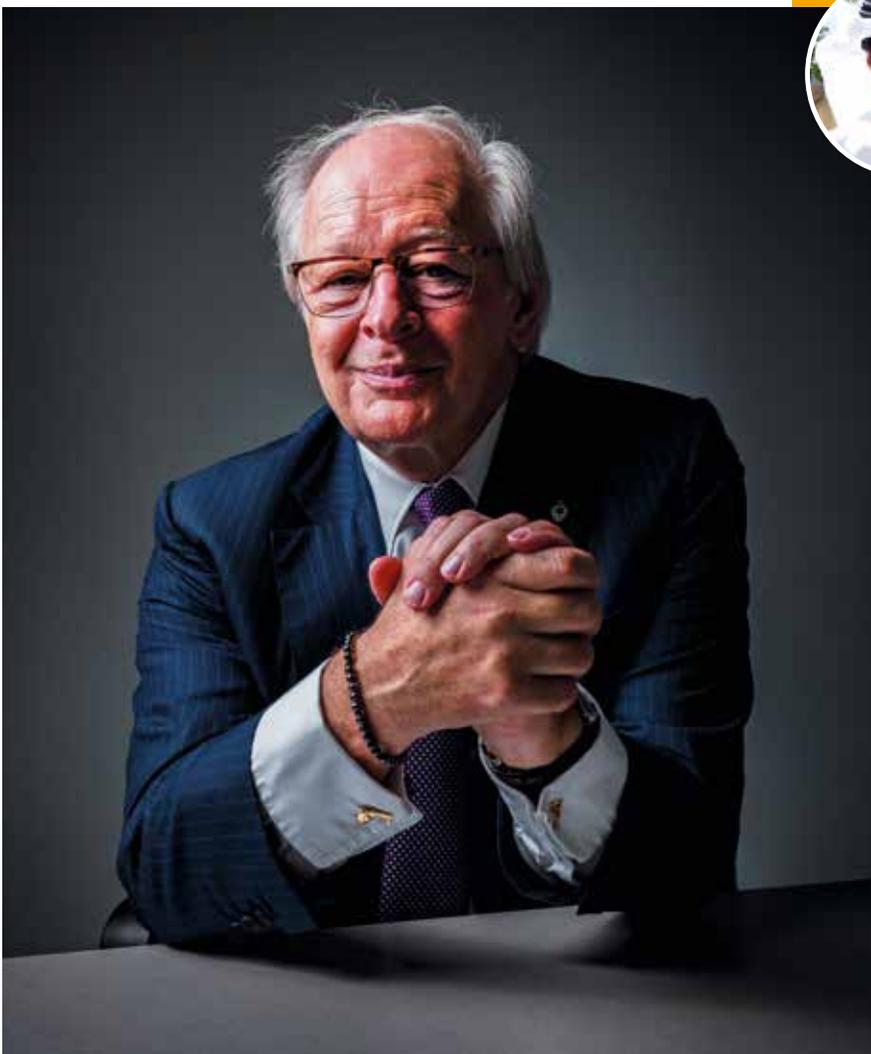
story to tell. Many politicians don't know the contribution we are making. You can't say it enough. The ones I have talked to, it's transformational for them. I'll be at the COP26 climate summit with our colleagues at Formula E, because we should be there telling the world what we are doing. Our solutions are based on a sport that is about efficiency. That's the key to it and always has been. And efficiency is driving not only the development of electric vehicles, which has caught the imagination of European politicians, but also the internal combustion engine too. They tell me the current hybrid F1 engine is now running at 53% efficiency - no one has ever built an engine that efficient. Wind turbines run at 22%. But the one thing we need to look at is what we burn in these F1 engines. New-generation biofuels can capture carbon from the atmosphere and that's what we've got to do.

"We're a sport, but we're a sport that can help meet these challenges and deal with social change in a positive way."

A vote for Graham Stoker sounds a little like 'more of the same', especially given his

central role in Todt's presidency. Take his view on the relationship between the governing body and F1 promoter Liberty Media. "It's never been better," he says. "In the past there have been politics and polemics, but not any longer. It's a strong partnership and we need to maintain it because it works astonishingly well. We have to keep that going. It's vital."

How about scheduling a gruelling 23 grands prix in just 35 weeks next year? Again, he won't rock the boat. "I'm very proud we can do that in a Covid world," he states. "I've been involved at the sharp end of this, with all the things we've put in place. I was in Australia in 2020 when they cancelled the race. We thanked and said goodbye to over 1000 marshals, then I flew back. All of a sudden the whole thing closed down, but we then started work. We reached out to the World Health Organization, we looked at the way we run our sport and we were one of the first to start back up, all around the world. On sustainability, F1 is reflecting on that and committing to carbon neutrality. We've got all the plans in place. ●



## The opposition: Mohammed Ben Sulayem

The other nominee for FIA president used to be the best-known motor sports competitor from the Middle East – and arguably still is. But the 14-time regional rally champion has also become a figure of power and significance out of the cockpit during the Middle East boom that has changed the face of motor sport over the past two decades.

Dubai-born Mohammed Ben Sulayem was the first Arab to be elected to the World Motor Sport Council and has served as FIA vice-president

since 2008. Like Graham Stoker, he is working to develop motor sport through training and knowledge transfer and has started that process during his time as president of the UAE's national governing body and his chairing of the Motor Sport Development Task Force that was set up in 2013.

Ben Sulayem is well connected, influential and respected as a politician who knows his way around the FIA. He is an imposing adversary who Stoker will not underestimate.



### Stoker on... the grassroots

“One of the hallmarks of my period at the FIA is that Jean came to me to set up the whole grassroots training and developing programmes that now exist. And that goes way back to when I was the MSA's chairman of the Motor Sport Council. You've got to build a pyramid. It's not rocket science, it's history, and history has demonstrated it works. If you get a strong pyramid with a strong grassroots base and an active club scene, you get talent going up through the pathways to the elite level.”

What do you do: end global sport? That can't be right. What you've got to do is have global sport, but do it in a sustainable way.”

He also claims to be one of the architects of the revolution that is about to sweep through the WRC. “I'm a rally man,” he says, while pointing out he lives near the Brechfa stages in Wales. “I was behind the innovation fund decision to back the new WRC hybrid engine formula. The reason is, I feel strongly that when you look at rallies nowadays they are often supported by tourist money, they are in beautiful countryside and it strikes me as incongruous that we weren't showcasing hybrid technology. We talked to the teams, it was difficult with the impact of the pandemic, so we've actually paid for the research into the hybrid unit. I think it's going to be transformational. The other thing about rallying is it has a fabulous volunteer and enthusiast base, and they are active and supportive around the world. I was at the Safari Rally and it gripped the country [Kenya]. So properly looked after I'm confident rallying has a great future.”

Stoker rejects the ‘more of the same’ label. “We are full of fresh ideas,” he insists. “I want to ratchet up the whole development side of the sport, so people can get into it in a more accessible way. There is a place for people in our sport regardless of background, connections, what country you come from. This is what drives me.”

Whatever you think of Todt - opinions will be divided on his time at the helm - no one can deny the effort he put in, as Stoker witnessed. “Jean doesn't rest over anything,” he says. “He looks at every detail and he works through it to see if it's the best.”

But that association with the outgoing president could play for or against Stoker, who will be busy on the campaign trail lobbying FIA members between now and December 17. Is he Gordon Brown to Todt's Tony Blair? Will he convince members that the deputy is now ready to lead? Some might argue that a fresh set of eyes, perhaps a ‘disruptor’, might be what the FIA and motor sport needs.

What Stoker is not is a chip off the Mosley block, despite the barrister parallel. He appears to be a safe pair of hands, and at a time of uncertainty, there's much to be said for that. The sport will find out if that is enough just before Christmas. ◉