

Rory Byrne wants cars to go slower

Rory Byrne's job as chief designer for Ferrari's Formula 1 team was to make cars go faster. No the 69-year-old South African's job is to make them go slower - and safer.



Cajoled out of semi-retirement two years ago, the former East Rand petrol-head - who was hired by Ferrari at the insistence of motor-racing legend Michael Schumacher - is now on a very different track.

For 20 months he has assisted a team of top engineers and actuaries to design and implement Discovery Health's Vitality Drive programme, a points-based driver monitoring system that aims to make South Africa better drivers.

Using telematics - a data-communication system similar to that used by Formula 1 teams to monitor driver and car performance - Vitality's members can be monitored and assessed on their driving behaviour. For good driving, members can get up to half their fuel costs back and the system gives constant feedback to drivers on how to improve their driving.

The results, says Byrne, are noticeable. Participating members have consistently improved their driving, resulting in fewer accidents. It is reassuring to think that the man who helped Michael Schumacher to be a better driver is now working his magic on drivers in a country with one of the highest road fatality rates in the world.

"I am confident that if you extended [the Vitality Drive system] to every driver in the country you'd have a noticeable and consistent reduction in accidents," he said.

Soup-up cars

Byrne has been around the globe since he gave up his career in chemistry to pursue his early passion - souping-up cars.

In the 1960s, while living in Bedfordview, on the East Rand, the newly qualified chemist pimped his 1964 Ford Anglia 105E for friend Eric Adamson to race on the Onyx production car circuit.

In his first race, Adamson came second, beating the lap record, and the pair felt "Hey, this was fun; we'll do some more of this".

Byrne quit his day job and set up a car-equipment shop in Alberton.

But modifying road-going cars into racing cars was not enough for the ambitious young adrenalin junkie. In 1971 he built his own racing car to compete on the Formula Ford circuit.

"By the end of 1972 I realised that, to further my ambitions in motor racing, I needed to go to the UK," he said.

Soon after he got his first job as a racing-car designer at the Royale Formula Ford racing team. An offer to join Toleman Group Motorsport's design team followed and at Toleman, Byrne was rapidly promoted to the Formula 1 team, which, he said, faced huge challenges.

"When [Toleman Group] started in Formula 1, we were seven seconds slower than the last team that qualified. We started at the bottom and worked our way up," he said.

In 1986, Toleman was bought by Benetton - where Byrne teamed up with Schumacher - to start one of the most successful eras in motor-racing history. Schumacher went on to win more races and championships than any other driver, and Byrne led his teams - first Benetton, in 1995, then Ferrari, from 1999 to 2004 - to six constructors' championships.

"That was exhilarating. It was really challenging. The first few years were really tough. But once we started winning I got a helluva buzz from that," he said.

By 1996, Byrne had had enough of the English weather and felt he had achieved his goals in motorsport.

Phuket

His contract with Benetton was up and he decided to exit the track. He had met his second wife, Pornthip (they were married in Johannesburg in 1998) and the couple chose to live in Thailand, Pornthip's home country.

Byrne wanted to start a scuba-diving business and enjoy island life. A quieter, more peaceful pace beckoned. But it didn't last long.

Soon after the couple arrived in Phuket, Byrne got a call that would change everything.

It was 1996 and Schumacher had been given free rein to build a team of design engineers for Ferrari. He wanted Byrne on his dream team.

Says Byrne: "I got a phone call from John Todd, of Ferrari, inviting me to join them as chief designer. I said I'd think about it and 10 days later I was in Maranello [Italy, where Ferrari is located]."

With no engineering background except what he "picked up as I went along", Byrne readily admits he had "no flair in car style".

Happily, he says, Formula 1 cars are designed purely for performance.

Byrne stayed with the team until his "official" retirement from Ferrari in 2004.

Today he is still a Ferrari consultant, but spends a month a year in South Africa, working on the Discovery drivers' programme and visiting his family. But finally his island-life dream is catching up.

After being diagnosed with prostate cancer three years ago, Byrne set up a detox and rejuvenation centre in Phuket, espousing the raw fruit, no meat diet he says helped cure him.

"I had an MRI scan in December and I am cancer free."

He and Portnhip run the centre together.

He spends time teaching his sons, Sean, 12, and James, 5, to scuba dive, and the family go skiing in the Swiss Alps.

Byrne's life is not completely quiet: the man who started out in a souped-up Anglia, now drives a Ferrari F430. It's his favourite car so far, he says, having owned three.

"The F430 is the most exciting."

Source: *The Times* via I-Net Bridge

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>