



THE DAY



LEWIS BECAME WORLD CHAMPION

So you thought Lewis Hamilton won the championship on the last lap in Brazil? Think again. He was officially crowned at a lavish gala in Monaco, and *F1 Racing* went backstage to watch it happen

WORDS STUART CODLING PICTURES STEVEN TEE/LAT & FIA

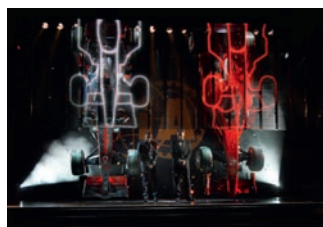
The look on Lewis Hamilton's face says, 'Don't interrupt.' The new world champion is staring intently at a small TV screen perched on top of a flight case in the wings of the Sporting Club de Monaco. If he'd just been evicted from the Big Brother House, this short video sequence would be called his 'best bits'. As it is, Hamilton's just a few metres – and several long minutes – away from being officially crowned FIA Formula 1 World Drivers' Champion. And the screen is showing a spectacular video montage of his title-winning season – including, at the beginning, the unmistakable voice of Ayrton Senna. Hamilton has always made clear how much he admires and respects the man he always calls his idol, and he's focused on every distinctive, accented word. It's a very private

backstage moment – an unscripted glimpse of emotion on an evening when everything runs like clockwork. These are the wings of the 2008 FIA Gala, and Lewis Hamilton is moments away from getting his hands on the trophy he's dreamed about all his life.

"Ah! You can make yourself useful. Just stand over there..." says an FIA representative. Minutes after sneaking in through the tradesmen's entrance of Monaco's Sporting Club, *F1 Racing* has inadvertently stumbled on stage – and is directed to join a line of people facing the empty auditorium. "Congratulations to the FIA GT2 Champions, Toni Vilander and Gianmaria Bruni." A trophy is presented, the lights go out – and the biggest challenge is actually ▶

trying not to trip up the stairs as you leave the stage. That's just one small reason why everything is prepared in such painstaking detail. The prize-giving portion of the evening lasts for just over an hour on the Friday night, but it's the subject of six full rehearsals, starting on Wednesday. We've gatecrashed number five. But with an audience that includes royalty as well as the great and the better-than-good of motorsport, the gala runs to Formula 1 standards of presentation and timekeeping. *F1 Racing* settles in to a chair set for 'Monsieur Bernie Ecclestone' and watches the rest of the preparations.

By the time the guests begin arriving at 7.30pm, everything is in place. Backstage, there's a moveable feast of championship-winning racing machinery, each waiting for its cue: Yvan Muller's SEAT Leon, Sébastien Loeb's Citroën C4, and, hanging nose-down from the rafters, Hamilton's McLaren MP4-23 and Felipe Massa's Ferrari F2008. Amid the throng of high-level lawyers, bankers and deal-makers, Max Mosley cuts a presidential figure, gliding to and fro, greeting distinguished guests. The small-talk is all about how good the snow is in Zermatt and there's a VVIP room with a guestlist so exclusive that even



Lewis is crowned, and (below right) views the 2008 footage with Stefano Domenicali



some team principals can't get in. Felipe and Rafaella Massa arrive hand in hand, but Kimi Räikkönen's nowhere to be seen, a delayed plane accounting for his tardy arrival midway through dinner. By then, Max Mosley is flanked by Anthony Hamilton and Ron Dennis. A place at the president's table might be viewed as a consolation prize for not ending the evening in possession of the constructors' trophy.

Meanwhile, backstage, motorsport's cherished silverware – the F1 constructors' and drivers' championship trophies – sits on a black cupboard occupying one wall of a cramped room, glittering in the low light. The rest of the shelves are occupied by carefully filed glass trophies for the other championship winners, each space demarcated by a label so that the right trophy finds its way into the

“There's a VVIP room with a guestlist so exclusive that some team principals can't get in”

right hands. In the corner, a flipchart carries a stage-plan for each championship, with clear instructions on where to stand and what to do: “Trophies will be presented on your left. Leave the stage at the beginning of the next movie from the side of the stage. SMILE!”

If it weren't for the dicky bows and sharply cut suits, we could be backstage at any F1 podium. Lewis, Kimi, Felipe and Stefano Domenicali are briefed on where to stand, where to walk off – and from which side their trophies will be presented. The atmosphere is relaxed – friendly even. Kimi and Felipe are low-key, hardly thrilled to be celebrating the fact they didn't win in 2008. But Lewis and



Domenicali chat away happily as they wait to be called out.

Massa and Räikkönen slip out on to the stage while the others hang back, captivated by the footage. He may not be grasping the biggest trophy, but Massa gets the loudest cheer of the evening. In the wings, a rueful look creeps over Domenicali's face as he watches the Ferrari mechanics sprint down the Singapore pitlane to retrieve Massa's fuel hose; Hamilton smiles but shakes his head slightly during the replay of the first corner at Fuji. As the events of the season finale unfold, they exchange a knowing look that hints at shared hardship.

Suddenly, Queen's *Don't Stop Me Now* pounds out of the speakers. The two F1 cars descend behind an LED curtain; Ferrari's team principal and the new world champion stride forward into a cloud of dry ice. As the curtain rises they look at each other as if to say, “This is the moment we've been waiting for.” For Lewis it's the affirmation of the monumental self-belief that drives him. There are no speeches but Hamilton commands the stage, staring intently at his trophy while the applause rings in his ears. That ‘don't interrupt’ look is back on his face; he's transfixed, staring at his own signature, which is now forever etched in a spiral of greatness that begins with Giuseppe Farina and passes through his idol, Ayrton Senna.

Then he gathers himself, smiles and faces the cameras – thinking, perhaps, that soon he'll have to set about winning it all over again. **FO**