

It begins inauspiciously. I've strapped myself into a white BMW M5 Nürburgring Ring-Taxi next to Jacques Villeneuve. He's distractedly and unsuccessfully trying to click his seatbelt in place while fidgeting to get comfortable in his BMW-Sauber race overalls. He's also grappling with the unfamiliar electric rear-view mirror controls while simultaneously reversing uphill out of a narrow gap crowded with curious onlookers.

"Right," he says, flicking on the air-con. "Do you know where we're going?"

"What?" I reply. "Haven't you driven round this place before?"

"Er, no," he offers. "Have you?"

It transpires that *F1 Racing* is sharing Villeneuve's first-ever laps of the mighty Nordschleife, the 14-mile switchback that twists, dives and soars through the spectacular Eifel countryside. It's a track that was deemed so dangerous it was blackballed by Formula 1 back in 1976 – an era when breaking your legs was still thought to be a 'safe' shunt. In short, it's revered as the most challenging circuit in the world.

And Jacques Villeneuve, it turns out, has only ever driven the 'Ring on a videogame. Hardly confidence-inspiring, you'll agree, particularly as I glance over my right shoulder and notice that he's reversing dangerously close to a rusty old gatepost. But somehow,

in an instant, he neatly straightens up, clicks on his seatbelt, fixes his overalls and snaps the mirrors into place. From chaos, order emerges. Now, it seems, we're ready.

This venue has a special resonance for Villeneuve. His father, the fabled Gilles, longed to race at the 'Ring, but arrived in Formula 1 just as the old behemoth was being mothballed.

"Yeah, my dad really wanted to race here," says Jacques. "But he missed out by one year." For the son, too, this is a special moment. As one of F1's historic thrills, driving the 'Ring is a holy grail for racing drivers. It still doesn't seem right that JV has somehow missed out on the experience despite racing at the new Nürburgring since 1996. But he's keen to make up for lost time.

We sip a little of the car's massive 500bhp whack, easing out onto the track. For the first few corners, Jacques toys with the car, giving it a surge of power here, a hefty dab of brakes there. Occasionally, he throws it onto the kerbs just to see how much he can get away with. He leaves the car in automatic for the first lap, because he can't hear the engine note properly and also because he wants to focus on the experience itself, rather than worry about nursing the car. Later, he'll start flicking up and down the seven-speed 'box using the paddle-shift. For the moment, though, this is all about first impressions.

"It's a lot tighter than it looks in my videogame," he says as we accelerate down towards Flugplatz, a spot where the barriers tighten and the lazy run-off rapidly disappears.

"Wow, this must be great in a Formula 1 car! It used to have no guardrails, no?" He



Alton Towers? Forget it. Cooper gets the ride of a lifetime, courtesy of Villeneuve

looks a little shocked. But pleasingly shocked. Like it means something to him.

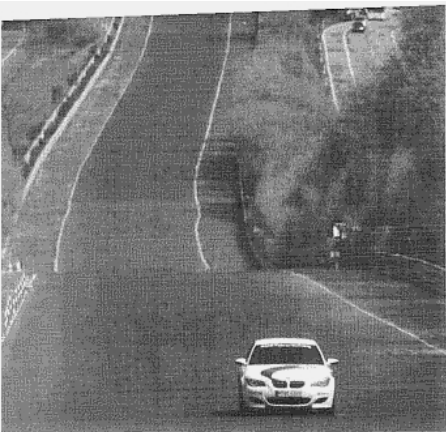
"This is gorgeous," he says as we descend into Fuchsröhre, a snaking series of fast esses that trail along the floor of a tree-lined valley. Get the line right here and you can kiss the lip of the apexes on both sides of the road while barely moving the steering.

"It's all about finding a rhythm," adds Jacques, looking ruefully at the narrow strip of grass separating tarmac from Armco. "Hmm, you could really crash hard on this track," he smiles. "But we've raced on worse – look at Monaco. And I remember Turn 2 at Estoril that was the same as this."

We accelerate hard out of Kallenhardt and drop into a rhythmic series of downhill esses. "This is what I really like on tracks – when they flow from corner to corner. We never get that any more. I'd love to take a

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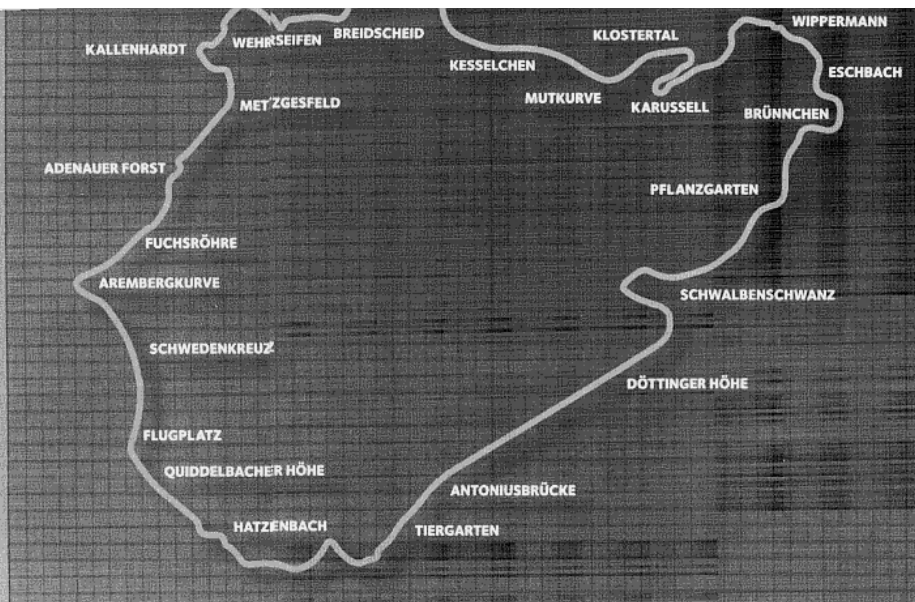


As the taps wide open, JV guns the 500bhp M5 down the straight at Döttinger Höhe

Formula 1 car around here. This must have been so tough back in the 1970s."

I point out that this particular sequence was often cited by Jackie Stewart as the track's most dangerous section. Back in the 1960s, with no protective barriers, the lip of the track simply rolled away into the valley – where the tops of the tallest trees already sit at head-height. Villeneuve gives another of those pleasingly shocked smiles: "You mean they just ran out of road? There was nothing to stop them? So where would they crash? In the trees? Wow! We all complain about safety now, but we'd all really shut up if we saw this place."

We head past Bergwerk – scene of Lauda's infamous shunt – the pivotal double-apex right-hander that connects the sinewy first half of the circuit to its faster and more flowing second, and press on towards ▶



The Nordschleife 14.17 miles of switchback glory

Following Niki Lauda's fiery smash in 1976, the Nürburgring was removed from the F1 calendar. But today it still enjoys near mythical status. The layout includes 73 corners, and a simulation by BMW has today's BMW-Sauber F1.06 cutting the timing beam in 5m15.80s. Here, though, are the official records.

FORMULA 1

Clay Regazzoni

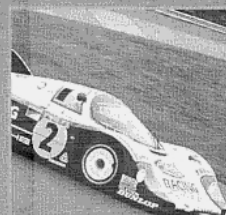
- Ferrari 312T
- 7m06.40s
- 119.80mph
- German GP 1975



SPORTS CAR

Stefan Bellof

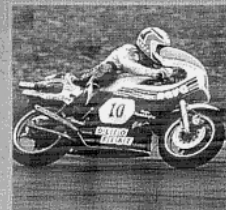
- Porsche 956
 - 6m25.91s
 - 120.75mph*
 - 1000km race 1983
- * Track 1.24 miles shorter than it was in '75 and '80



MOTORCYCLES

Marco Lucchinelli

- Suzuki 500
- 8m22.20s
- 101.65mph
- German GP 1980



Minimal safety margins of the past amaze JV – here at Eschbach and Brünnchen – as much as the circuit challenge

JACQUES AT THE NÜRBURGRING

Karusell, the track's most famous corner.

Although we're powering uphill out of the valley, the car's glorious 5.0-litre V10 once again pushes us up to top speed. We slam into Mutkurve (Courage Corner), a fearsome left-hander over a blind brow: to our right the landscape vaults the barriers and tumbles down into dense scrubland.

"There was no guardrail here, either?" he asks. "Nothing? You'd be doing 190mph in a Formula 1 car here. It would be so easy just to take off."

At the Karussell, Villeneuve enthusiastically drops the car into the famous concrete basin with a satisfying *whumph*. He's like a giddy kid playing with his new toy and it's clear that he has been particularly looking forward to this moment. He's really starting to push a little more – the M5 strains on the limit as JV pulls it out of the banking. The M5 locks into the groove, dancing from kerb to kerb as the tyres squirm under braking.

For a moment, we're both silent. Jacques tops the brow of a crest and dives downhill into the Wippermann, Eschbach and Brunnchen corners. It's a classic sequence – the corners blend seamlessly together; a place where your exit from one determines your approach to the next.

"It's beautiful! An amazing track, but I start to forget things from about this point in the videogame," he adds. "Normally, I restart it whenever I crash – so I never finish the last bit!" Hmm, that's reassuring.

We pull onto the back straight and Jacques quickly stretches the legs of the M5. Very soon, we're effortlessly travelling at maximum speed.

"I don't think the kink is quite flat, Jacques," I mutter almost under my breath.

"You sure?" he fires back instantly.

"I think so."

"Okay, it's a good thing you told me! We were doing 270km/h [168mph]!"

We begin our second lap. This time the moments of indecisiveness are replaced by growing confidence and longer, steelier bursts of throttle. "Mmm, this car's got good grip," he says, throwing it into the opening series of corners known as the Hatzenbach.

Like most classic Nordschleife bends, it's a series of slowly unravelling ess-bends that really encourage rhythmic 'feel' over raw technique. It's also slow and wide enough to enable you easily to ask a little too much of the car and hope you'll get away with it.

"How cool was that?" I say as the car flicks out of the final ess.

"It was great!" he beams back. "I'd absolutely love to race here – it's the best track I've ever seen. And not just because it's long but because every corner is something special. And you just know it would be different in the cold, or the shade, or the rain. It's a living track. It's great."

By now, he's applying a racer's instinct to the track. Right-foot braking, the ball of his foot

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under my breath!"



BMW M5 statistics

Engine type V10, 4999cc
Power 500bhp at 7750rpm
Torque 383lb ft at 6100rpm
Transmission 7-speed SMG semi-auto 'box
0-62mph 4.6sec
Top speed 202mph (unlimited)

ART

JV particularly enjoys the sequence (right) of bends at Wippermann, Eschbach and Brännchen



covering the brake pedal, he's started using clues on the track surface to take some short-cuts. It means that whenever we see a particularly rubber-streaked kerbstone or spot where a patch of grass has been worn away, it becomes an opportunity to yump the car aggressively in a bid to shave off some lap time.

Jacques has started to realise just how complex this place is: "There are a few corners around here where you just couldn't drive at 10-tenths because they're too bumpy; unless you braked early, you'd risk braking with your wheels in the air – and then you'd lose control. You need to keep a small amount of margin, mainly just for all the bumps. Maybe, at the end of the day, you could try it at 10-tenths – but you might get hurt big time."

Could you overtake here in an F1 car?

"It's not very wide," he says. "You certainly couldn't overtake through any of these ess-bends. In fact, you probably couldn't race a Formula 1 car around here at all because there are too many places where you'd just take off."

There's another long silence as we manoeuvre through Adenauer Forst, a tricky blind chicane, and blast out into Metzgesfeld, as close to a straight as you can really manage on this track.

"This is what I love in race tracks. I wish they were all designed like this – you really feel like you're going somewhere. This is amazing. The guy who designed this track... words fail me. I mean, they probably didn't even design it properly, they just followed the landscape."

Do any of the F1 tracks come close to measuring up to this experience?

"No. You get it a little bit at places like Mont Tremblant in Canada, Mosport Park, Elkhart Lake, Mid-Ohio – the big tracks that follow the landscape; the shape of the bumps or the trees or the mountains." He lets the rear slip out and it thuds satisfyingly over the rumble strip. "This is 10 times better than the game. I'm so happy that I kind of remember the track from the videogame, because if I hadn't learnt it, it would be a little, er, complicated right now!"

Soon enough, we're on the back straight again.

"You sure that kink isn't flat?" he asks again.

"Well," I venture, "you could try..."

"You crazy?" he laughs. "Crashing at 290km/h [180mph] wouldn't be very intelligent right now."

He steadies the car under braking and gives it one last burst of gas through the final chicane before we roll to a halt in the paddock. He unclips his belts, twists the key out of the ignition and walks away, a huge smile plastered on his face.

"After 10 years of coming here, I finally got to go round this place at last. It's so much better than you could ever possibly imagine. I've never seen such a track.

"And you know what else?" he grins "For the first time ever, I'm actually happy that there's been some PR to do!" ■

RAB PASTE
YOU BALLS!
ESTER
TERSHIRE
2006
ENG
DOM & CLAIRE
RICHIE
2006
sideways
SLIM!
2006
LAURENEHE
ATTACK!