

Jürg Dubler - Swiss star of «Les Années Fabuleuses de la Formule 3» By Dennis Thalmann

«I won against Niki Lauda most of the time when we raced in F3. I think the only time he beat me was with his Porsche 911 against my Volvo on the road!» And one of these victories was at the very fast and challenging circuit at Brno - an ultimate driving test.



Jürg Dubler related this reminiscence with a subtle smile and a sparkle in his eye while recalling his racing experiences during probably the greatest period of Formula 3 and some of the most competitive racing in the history of the sport.

The period was 1964-1970. This was the time of the Cosworth 1000cc engined Formula 3 cars, known as the «screamer» engines for the incredible sound they made at high revs, which they seemed to be onto at all times! It was a period of large grids and extremely close racing that was every bit as exciting as the Formula One of its day.

It was also the key developing and launching ground at that time for all drivers aiming for Formula One.

Jürg Dubler, a tall, easy-going Swiss driver from the Zurich area, was one of the most prolific and successful drivers of that time, against such talent as Jo Siffert, Ronnie Peterson, Clay Regazzoni, Emerson Fittipaldi, James Hunt, Graham Hill, Piers Courage, Howden Ganley, Peter Gethin, Tim Schenken, Willy Mairesse, Peter Revson, Manfred Mohr, to name a few.

He won a total of 36 races and finished second 18 times of the more than 100 races competed in all over Europe, including the Nordic countries and the U.K., and in the Temporada series in Argentina, during this 6 year period.

Born in Zurich in April, 1941, his natural racing talent manifests itself early when he entered his first race, a slalom on the old airport at Dübendorf. Driving his mother's Fiat 600, he would have won had he not been penalized for taking a gate the wrong way when he was distracted by the sight of his mother by the track with a horrified look on her face.

Not long after that, in 1960, at the age of 19, he took a trip to Stockholm with a school mate in a new VW Beetle that his father had bought for him. On the way back, they stopped at the Nurburgring to do a few laps on a public day. The first lap he did with his friend on board, and they suffered some minor damage when he went off the circuit. For the next lap, his friend wisely stayed out of the car, and Jürg went out again and turned a time of 13 minutes 30 seconds. No one could believe it, but all the times were recorded in those days so it was documented.

Clearly, a natural talent and passion was emerging.

Dubler's first job out of school was with Volvo Switzerland. The owner's son had a Volvo 544 that he raced, so Jürg soon had his own 544 that he stripped out completely, and this became his first race car. He competed in many hill climbs and slaloms in Switzerland and France, further developing his car handling skills. He then took the car to England to be with his future wife, Marianne, who was in school there. He entered races at Silverstone, Aintree, and Brands Hatch.

Jürg Dubler's real racing began with the purchase of a used Cooper Formula Junior with a BMC 1100cc engine. With this engine the car was not legal for circuit racing, but he competed successfully in many hill climbs, building his winning reputation. In 1964 he bought a brand new Brabham Formula 3 car which launched him into the formula where he would establish an international reputation as a top racing driver. He would have a new Brabham every year until 1967, when he continued with a works Chevron F3 car.



In those days, there was not an overall F3 championship, only country F3 championships. «We were not interested in championships, we just wanted to race, so we raced in all of the country championships across Europe, the more the better»

During this period, Jürg and Marianne Dubler, with their mechanic Fredy Kessler, travelled to races most

weekends during the season, all over Europe, including Eastern Europe, towing the race car behind the Volvo. Remember, there were very few auto routes in those days so a trip from Zurich to Magny-Cours could take a full two days, especially as the entourage was limited to 60 km/hour.

Jürg Dubler had a natural talent for speed and car control. In the overhead close-up photo you can see that his hands on the steering wheel are not gripping so much as gently holding the wheel to get the maximum feeling for what the car is doing and giving smooth inputs to the steering. A naturally relaxed and smooth racing style, and in racing, smooth is fast, as his performances so clearly showed.

His favorite circuits were always the road circuits, like Brno, Montjuic Park, and Monaco. Apart from their unique characteristics, they were a great equalizer. With closed circuits one could always gain an advantage over other drivers by extensive testing there, whereas with road circuits the public streets were only closed and available for the same amount of time for everyone. The great drivers always excelled on these types of circuits, and Jürg Dubler was no exception.



Jürg Dubler's first international victory came at the 1966 Grand Prix of Portugal, held on a street circuit at Cascais. His most satisfying victories came at places like Brno and Montjuic Park

When asked which drivers impressed him the most from that impressive list he raced against - and beat, Jürg's first answer was surprising. John Fenning, an Englishman, who Dubler rated as one of the best. «He was very brave, always flat out. He was my most challenging opponent at the Portugal races.» What ever happened to him? «No idea».

Another better known name whom he rated highly and was a close friend was the Brazilian Carlos Pace, who went on to a promising career in F1, and whom we lost tragically in an airplane crash. Dubler just lost to him in a great race in England where they swapped the lead many times until Dubler's front tires were shot from his Chevron's characteristic understeering.

The German driver Manfred Mohr also impressed him. «At the rapid, oval-shaped Enna circuit in Sicily, he was the only one who would drive the whole circuit on full acceleration - flat out - no lift. He was braver than anyone else. I could never quite do that. He was a good friend as well».



With all of this success came some tragedies as well. The most profound was when Beat Fehr, his young Swiss protégé and friend, almost like a little brother, was killed in his first international race in Italy. Fehr had been involved in an accident but was out of his car running toward an approaching group of cars, including Dubler, to warn them of the crashed cars in the road. Another chain crash ensued in which Dubler flew over another car and hit a power pole about 5 meters off the ground, but he survived this crash and was relieved to see that Beat had survived his. He was then told that Beat Fehr had been killed. Apparently, he had been hit in the stomach by a flying wheel from the multiple crash and had died later in the hospital. A sad time and great loss of a promising Swiss driver.

When F3 changed to 1600ccs, Jürg lost interest as the cars, and particularly the engines, did not excite him like the 1000cc cars had.

After such promise in F3, why not move to F2 and then F1 like all the others did?

Dubler did one season of Formula 2 in 1970, driving a year-old Brabham owned by the Swiss enthusiast Albert Obrist. He had a promising first race in Bogota, Columbia, where he qualified in pole position ahead of Jo Siffert. They had a very close race until mechanical problems slowed Dubler. After that the season was a struggle as there was little money for maintenance and none for development. The only other bright spot was a race that year at Crystal Palace in England where he again beat Niki Lauda.



And why not Formula 1?

Jürg Dubler did a season of F1 in 1971, but as a team manager for the two-car FINAUTO team from Italy. It was very low budget and the results were limited.

He also had no desire to drive the F1 cars of the period as he knew how poorly built from a safety point of view they were, and by that time he had lost many friends to racing.

And, probably most importantly, Jürg Dubler is actually a very shy and humble person and had great trouble selling himself and therefore finding sponsorship money. He preferred to let the results speak for themselves, but in the business-oriented world of Formula 1, that is not enough.

So Dubler stopped racing after this brief spell in F1 but still did some F1 reporting for Swiss television. He then established Jürg Dubler Automobiles, importing performance and specialty vehicles from the USA. He is now enjoying retired life with Marianne in Dielsdorf, near Zurich.



Asked if he had any regrets about not going further given his skills and passion, Dubler responded: «Not at all. We did a tremendous amount of racing all over Europe and South America, were treated royally, and had great racing and good fun doing it. And I am here today to talk about it, unlike many of my old friends».

This reflects the unique personality of Jürg Dubler, who was passionate for the sport and thrill of driving a truly challenging car in a highly competitive series. With his natural talent he probably could have been as successful in F1 as those he raced and won against, but he was a purist in his enthusiasm, and the so-called «glamour» and politics of F1 did not interest him at all. A man of great integrity as well as enormous talent.

THE FULL STORY

Jürg Dubler had a long and fascinating history that he has documented in two excellent books, titled «Les Années Fabuleuses de la Formule 3, 1964-1970». They are highly entertaining and well written, and convey beautifully the pure passion and camaraderie of this wonderful period.

THE ZARP

In 1966, to help finance his racing, Dubler decided to build a Formula Vee car to sell for this popular European racing series. The result was the ZARP, named for Zurich Automobile Racing Partnership. He built a total of 11 examples: 5 complete cars, 5 in kits, and one for his close friend Beat Fehr. It was a unique design and a successful race car, winning the top five places in a FV race at Monza. We hope to have a full story on the ZARP in a future issue.

