

Killer Years, killer schedule

22 March, 2011

John Matthews, producer of BBC4's **Grand Prix: The Killer Years**, relives conducting 20 hours of interviews in three languages across six countries in just 10 days.

Making Bigger Picture's Grand Prix, The Killer Years for BBC4 was a genuine adventure and an intense experience that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. We told the story of the most lethal period in Grand Prix history in one concentrated trip, and it does not get better than travelling around Europe meeting high achieving people and listening to their astonishing stories – except maybe skiing deep snow off piste.

I'm into getting my hands dirty – sitting at a desk, shouting at answerphones and pressing 'send e-mail' will never appeal to me. But telling fantastic stories well most certainly does.

It all comes down to the research. There is so much information out there, where to start? Everywhere. Every bloody book and every expert. Then you realise what you can get access to and what's only a dream. Only after a mass of reading and talking are you ever going to get those amazing conversations on camera.

Rich Heap (co-producer) and I had a very thorough plan of the film, drawn up in HB pencil on huge sheets of thick cartridge paper. We carefully drew up the most important scenes and who would best tell that part of the story, rubbing out the dull bits.

We then made sure we booked everyone on the list. By the time we left the Pennines, every single person was confirmed, bar one lady, Mrs Rindt, who was not sure she wanted to go ahead. She thought it would be a very painful subject to re-visit – and was worried she would look wrinkly, so we took a big diffuser, just in case.

The journey begins

Our first interview was in Norfolk, an important story about the final moments of a racing driver, witnessed by the last person to speak to him. We lit his house in his absence as he flew in from the USA. He was late. We spend two hours listening to a story of him carrying massive guilt around for most of his life, through no fault of his own, then dashed for the ferry to make another interview, in Dutch, the following morning north of Amsterdam.

After a windblown interview on a gigantic sand dune and a gritty picnic by the North Sea, we sped along lethal Belgian autoroutes to a dark museum in Spa, some six hours away, to meet an important old man with a very big story to tell – this time in Flemish.

Having got lost we had driven more than *eight* hours to meet Monsieur Bovy only to hear 'he does not work in the afternoons... he can only be here in two days'. Great. Who planned that bloody interview? It turned out he was on dialysis but was too proud to say so on the phone.

However we had to get going as we had another interview to do in central Brussels the next morning and another in the middle of Paris the day after, with two fascinating and famous Grand Prix drivers.

By then we had already done 2,000 miles and it was only day three.

We then did our slow journey back up that long dreary road to Spa for the second time. Having to do things twice is the worst thing. This was the dullest drive I have

ever done in my life. After much zigging and zagging, we spent two informative hours with the former boss of the dangerous Spa racetrack who had laughed in the face of Jackie Stewart 35 years before.

His story was fascinating, albeit in hard accented Belgio-French. He told us how he had to body-bag two drivers who were killed on his watch and another two almost died. I constantly said ‘doucement, doucement, slowly slowly’ so that my rusty farmhouse French could get up to speed.

I knew immediately that this interview would be one of the most critical scenes in our film. His story was the key turning point in the history of Formula 1.

The final interview

For several months I had been desperately seeking permission to interview Nina, the wife of Jochen Rindt, the World Champion from the early 70s who died in a controversial and terrifying accident at the Monza Grand Prix in Italy

She had been interviewed before but it was badly done, and it was important to hear her devastating story of losing her racing husband in this period.

Men have a certain blinkered, sometimes macho and often skewed take on things – women who have suffered have a habit of telling you as it is. So far we had no women, and these were the people left to deal with the mess created by this callous sport.

After a gruelling eight hour drive and a tortuous two hour interview in a foreign language (with a man who was quite deaf), I got a call.

It was Mrs Rindt: “I can do the interview tomorrow morning at 10am. Come on down.”.

Great – the only problem was we were charging our batteries in an Ardennes forest at five in the evening and she was a twelve hour drive away, in Geneva, Switzerland.

We grudgingly packed for what seemed the hundredth time and headed back down another very long road, Tom Petty’s Mary Jane’s Last Dance on the stereo for the 40th time. We were so numb we passed through the whole of Luxembourg without even noticing.

Mrs Rindt’s interview in Switzerland was delicate, moving and profoundly sad, and told the other side of a very unglamorous and lethal world.

This easy-going and gentle lady told how her life was turned upside down and how she relied on tranquilisers after the sudden and quite unnecessary death of her husband.

At this point we hit the wall. We had not stopped in five days flat. So we took a ride on a meticulously restored Edwardian steamboat across Lac Lemman to unwind.

The mirrored lake was enveloped in mist so sadly we could not see those majestic mountains surrounding it that had inspired Mary Shelly to write Frankenstein over a hundred years before. We then set off on the 1,500 mile return journey back to Blighty to begin our second week of England interviews in the south of England.

All in all we travelled 4,500 miles in just ten days. But in that intense frenzy of activity we had shot the entire film, having in the can (well, three hard drives) more than twenty hours of intimate detail of the most lethal period in Grand Prix history.

And because we did it all back to back – all the stories were focussed on the same themes, fresh in our minds every day making it all the more coherent and together.

A few weeks later, as we began editing, not only could we recount what was said by whom instantly because we had been involved in the whole process but memories of that fantastic trip around Europe came flooding back.

Would I do it any other way? No. We did not stand in an airport security queue once and it was intense, and bloody good fun.

Grand Prix: The Killer Years airs on BBC4, 9pm, 27 March

Tricks of the trade

- Sat Nav is essential for navigating through foreign cities but do not use it to find restaurants in the French countryside as when you get there you tend to find they have been shut for years.
- Take lots of ironed shirts
- Write all your interview questions, themes and scenes down – if its twelve pages long for one interview, you are almost ready. Our preparations for ten interviews filled an entire ring-binder.
- Take all your plans on good old fashioned paper and copy them twice, placed in separate bags. They do not break down and they do not have batteries to re-charge.
- Book an interpreter if your language skills are not up to the job. Call the local university language professor – they will know someone.
- Remember to stop and take in the place– this is real adventure and is to be savoured.
- It makes a big difference taking a couple of hours off and makes the journey fun.
- Make sure you get on extremely well together if your are going to shoot non stop