

CHRIS AMON

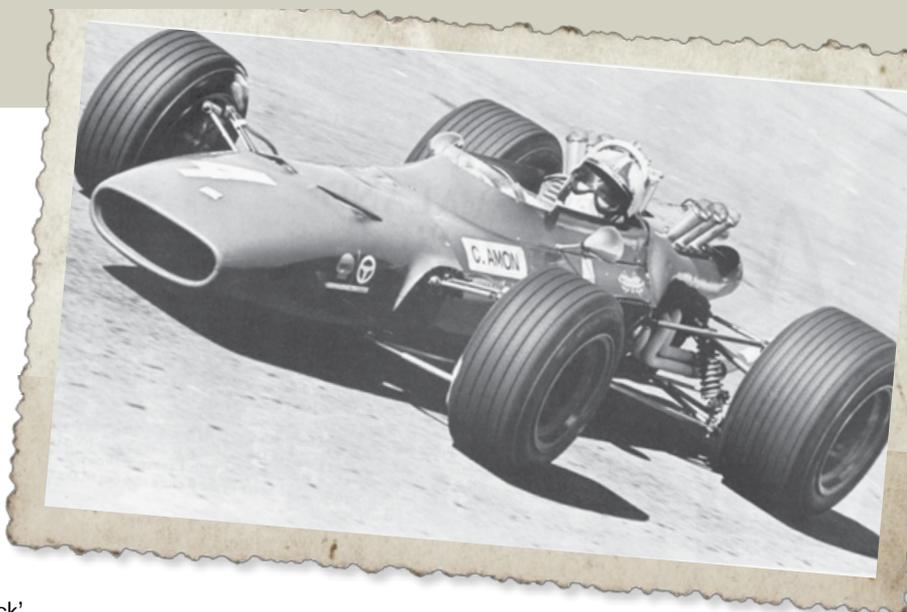
A brief history of a great driver

BY MICHAEL CLARK

The talent was evident when he was barely out of school. Driving a Maserati 250F at the age of 18 in his first New Zealand Grand Prix in pouring rain gave him a taste for oversteer that would never leave him. The chance came to race in Europe a year later, and two days after arriving he saw his first F1 race – and he was in it! Soon after he became one of the few teenagers to start an F1 World Championship Grand Prix. His initial success was away from F1 – endurance sports cars and Can-Am-type big-bangers: he always excelled when horsepower exceeded grip.

In 1966 his relationship with Bruce McLaren meant Ford paired them for Le Mans and their 'all-black' GT40 headed home a Ford 1-2-3, fellow Kiwi Denny Hulme sharing the second-placed car. There was little going for Amon in F1 that year but he and McLaren mounted a strong two-car team in the inaugural Can-Am championship. Ferrari, no less, had noticed, and things got off to a perfect start when Amon won the 1967 Daytona 24-hours. In his first Grand Prix for Ferrari, Amon was third on a day when compatriot Hulme won but team-mate Lorenzo Bandini crashed and later died. The Kiwi was promoted to team leader, a position he held for three years – arguably the happiest and most frustrating of his career. In 1968, if points had been awarded for grid positions, Amon would have been crowned World Champion with a race to spare. As it was, despite the numerous laps led and pole positions, all he had to show was a second place on the day of his 25th birthday in the British Grand Prix.

Chris started 1969 by winning the Tasman Championship in a Ferrari 246T but by mid-year he was watching the Ford Cosworth V8-powered cars of Jackie Stewart and Jochen Rindt – the two drivers he considered his closest rivals – dominate as his V12 Ferrari languished. He left Ferrari, a decision he regretted almost immediately. In 1970 he again led races in the March 701-1 but still his maiden F1 win hadn't come. He spent the next two years with the French Matra team, but it was frustratingly similar to Ferrari – wonderful chassis, fantastic noise, no power. He led the 1972 French Grand Prix by a massive margin – surely this was his day – until a tyre went flat. He was 29 but had virtually given up hope of ever winning an F1 race. He even tried building his own car, the Amon AF1-01, in 1974, and in 1975 astonished the F1 fraternity by agreeing to drive an Ensign ... and he made it talk. He put the car on the second row of grid for the 1976 British Grand Prix – unheard of for the tiny team. There was no doubt the skill was still there, but it turned out to be his penultimate GP and within a month he'd driven his final F1



Left: Chris Amon in his 1968 Ferrari 246T at Pukekohe 1968 – Forza by Eoin Young page 64
Above: Chris Amon driving his 1968 Ferrari 246T Dino V6 – Shell Book 1968

race. It had been a career of 'what might have been'. He became known as the unluckiest F1 driver ever, a tag he is now comfortable with. As Chris himself says: 'I raced in one of the most dangerous eras in motor racing history where many of my friends and rivals were killed – and I'm still here ... I'm the lucky one!'

The farm boy from Bulls, at the age of 34 returned to the farm in 1977, married Tish and started a family. In the quarter of a century in between leaving for boarding school as an eight-year-old he'd achieved the unusual feat of getting his pilot's licence before his driver's licence, driven in F1 as a teenager, got signed by Enzo Ferrari, and came ever-so-close to re-writing F1 history. In his career Chris drove an enormous range of machinery. Michael Clark has produced a book for the Festival and has managed to get Chris to talk about every car he drove in anger – there are 81 in total! Some will be present at Hampton Downs over the Festival weekends, including:

- the actual Ferrari Dino Chris won his first New Zealand Grand Prix with, in 1968
- the 1970 March 701 that hung on a wall at the famous Donington Collection for nearly 40 years
- the unique Amon AF101 – the pale-blue machine built for Chris in 1974
- a V12 BRM P201, also from 1974
- a Talon MR1A F5000
- a 1964 Shelby Cobra
- arguably his all-time favourite – Maserati's seminal 250F
- the actual car that started it all in 1960 – the A40 Special, the first Amon racing car. ●