Formula One History: From Silverstone to the McLaren F1

Name Date Class

Reading

1 On the last day of March 1998, at a private test track in northern Germany, driver Andy Wallace pushed the throttle to the floor and kept it there. The car **hurtled** down a straight more than eight kilometers long, and the needle passed 240 miles an hour. It was a McLaren F1, a road car with the driver's seat in the middle, and its engineers had raised the rev limiter for the occasion. Its two-way average of 240.1 miles an hour has not, as far as published records show, been beaten by any production car with a naturally aspirated engine, meaning one without a turbocharger or supercharger. To see how a road car came to behave like a racing machine, begin on an airfield.

2 The airfield was Silverstone, a **windswept** former Royal Air Force base, and on 13 May 1950 it hosted the first race of the Formula One World Championship. A formula is a set of technical rules that every car must follow; the novelty was joining national Grand Prix races into one title contest. Only seven races counted that year, and one was the Indianapolis 500 in the United States. Alfa Romeo of Italy dominated. Its driver Giuseppe Farina won that first race and would become the first champion, while his Argentine teammate, Juan Manuel Fangio, would go on to win five titles in all.

3 For its first decade, Formula One cars carried their engines in front of the driver. Then a small British firm, Cooper, tried something **unorthodox** and put the engine behind the seat because, by John Cooper's own account, it was the practical thing to do. The cars were less powerful than some rivals, yet Australia's Jack Brabham won the title in one in 1959 and 1960, and by 1961 every team had copied the layout. One of Brabham's teammates, New Zealander Bruce McLaren, founded a team of his own in 1963. It would win its first Grand Prix in 1968, but its founder was to die while testing a car at Goodwood two years later, aged 32.

4 Meanwhile, racing was becoming **lucrative**. In the 1970s Bernie Ecclestone, who owned the Brabham team, persuaded the teams to bargain as a group instead of one by one with circuit owners, and television helped turn the championship into a billion-dollar business. Money bought engineering. McLaren, run by Ron Dennis from 1980, is widely credited with having **pioneered** the carbon-fiber chassis in Formula One, and in 1988 its Honda-powered cars, driven by Brazil's Ayrton Senna and France's Alain Prost, won 15 of 16 races. The exception came at Monza, weeks after the death of Ferrari's founder, when Senna, leading with two laps to go, collided with a slower car. Ferrari finished first and second at home.

5 Afterward, in a Milan airport lounge, Dennis, technical director Gordon Murray, and two colleagues began to discuss a road car. Murray sketched a three-seater, and the McLaren F1 became his **brainchild**. His brief was **uncompromising**: lightness above all, with the driver seated in the middle like a single-seat racer, which became the car's **hallmark**. It was built around a carbon-fiber shell, reportedly the first on a road car, and the engine bay was lined with gold foil to reflect heat. There was no ABS, traction control, or power steering. BMW supplied a 6.1-liter V12 of roughly 620 horsepower, and the whole car was **pared down** to about 1,140 kilograms. McLaren **unveiled** it in Monaco in 1992.

6 Murray had never meant the F1 to race and **reluctantly** agreed to a racing version only after customers pushed for one. At Le Mans in 1995, the F1 GTR cars were **underdogs** against purpose-built prototypes. Yet the car would go on to take the race at McLaren's first attempt, in heavy rain, with a Frenchman, a Japanese driver, and a Finn sharing the wheel for a Japanese-sponsored team. McLaren cars also finished third, fourth, and fifth. Production ended in 1998 after 106 cars of all types, and McLaren is widely reported to have lost money on each road car it sold.

7 The sport changed too. After Senna and Roland Ratzenberger died at Imola in 1994, it introduced **sweeping** safety reforms, and a titanium "halo" above the cockpit, mandatory since 2018, has been credited with protecting drivers in serious crashes. In 2025 McLaren's Lando Norris won the drivers' title by two points, and 2026 brought a major **overhaul** of the rules, with nearly half of each car's power coming from electricity, a long way from the F1 road car's unassisted simplicity. Collectors, meanwhile, care about **provenance**, the documented history of who built, raced, and owned a car. In August 2026 a 1996 McLaren F1 GTR that began as a factory test car sold for about $34.7 million, the most ever paid for a McLaren at auction.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**hurtled**	_____	**A**	bare and open to strong winds
2	**windswept**	_____	**B**	wide in range and having large effects
3	**unorthodox**	_____	**C**	a complete and thorough change or repair
4	**lucrative**	_____	**D**	reduced to only what is essential
5	**pioneered**	_____	**E**	a typical feature that shows real character
6	**brainchild**	_____	**F**	the recorded history of who made and owned something
7	**uncompromising**	_____	**G**	was the first to develop and use something new
8	**hallmark**	_____	**H**	different from the usual or accepted way
9	**pared down**	_____	**I**	refusing to accept lower standards for any reason
10	**unveiled**	_____	**J**	in a way that shows you do not want to
11	**reluctantly**	_____	**K**	competitors that are not expected to win
12	**underdogs**	_____	**L**	producing a great deal of money
13	**sweeping**	_____	**M**	an original idea or invention of one person
14	**overhaul**	_____	**N**	moved very fast and with great force
15	**provenance**	_____	**O**	showed to the public for the first time

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

brainchild	**hallmark**	**hurtled**	**lucrative**	**overhaul**	**pared down**	**pioneered**	**provenance**	**reluctantly**
sweeping	**uncompromising**	**underdogs**	**unorthodox**	**unveiled**				

1 The runaway truck _____ down the mountain road with no brakes.

2 Pat's plan to sell the shop was _____, but it turned out to be a brilliant idea.

3 Opening a restaurant near the stadium was a very _____ move for the family.

4 The company _____ a new kind of battery that lasted twice as long.

5 The school library was the _____ of one retired teacher.

6 The chef was _____ about freshness and threw away any vegetable that was not perfect.

7 A bright yellow sail is the _____ of that sailing club.

8 To make the backpack lighter, he _____ his equipment to the bare essentials.

9 The phone company _____ its newest model at a press event in Berlin.

10 She _____ agreed to give a speech, because she hated speaking in public.

11 Nobody believed in the village team, but the _____ beat the champions.

12 The new mayor promised _____ changes to the way the city collects rubbish.

13 The airline announced a total _____ of its ticketing system next year.

14 Experts checked the _____ of the violin to prove who had owned it.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What happened on 31 March 1998, and why does the reading describe it as notable?

2 According to the reading, what was new about the 1950 World Championship, and which two drivers does the writer name from that first season?

3 Why did Cooper put the engine behind the driver, and what happened to the idea over the next few years?

4 How did money and technology change Formula One in the 1970s and 1980s, according to the reading?

5 Describe what happened at Monza in 1988 and explain how it connects to the McLaren F1.

6 The reading lists several design choices behind the McLaren F1. Choose three and explain what they have in common.

7 Why does the reading call the F1 GTR cars underdogs at Le Mans in 1995, and which facts make their victory surprising?

8 In the last paragraph, how does the writer link the 2026 rules, the road car, and the August 2026 auction? What point is being made?

9 The reading opens in 1998, goes back to 1950, and then moves forward again. Why might the writer have chosen this order, and does it work for a reader who knows little about motor racing?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Gordon Murray designed the 1988 McLaren race car that won 15 of 16 races."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that electric power will make Formula One better."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer begin with the 1998 speed run instead of the 1950 race? Is the purpose to impress readers with a number, to link the road car to the sport from the start, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** The 1998 speed of 240.1 miles an hour was a two-way average.

2 **T / F** Silverstone was once a Royal Air Force base.

3 **T / F** Fangio went on to win five championships in all.

4 **T / F** Bruce McLaren died while testing a car at Goodwood.

5 **T / F** Senna collided with a slower car at Monza in 1988.

6 **T / F** The McLaren F1 in the 1998 test had a turbocharged engine.

7 **T / F** In 1950, every race that counted was held in Europe.

8 **T / F** Cooper's rear-engine cars were more powerful than all of their rivals.

9 **T / F** The McLaren F1 had power steering and ABS.

10 **T / F** The three drivers who won Le Mans in 1995 were all British.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. Do you follow motor racing, or another sport that has a long history? What first interested you, or why does it not interest you?
2. Which car, real or from a film, do you remember best? What made it memorable?
3. In the story, a conversation in an airport lounge led to a famous car. Have you ever had a good idea while waiting or traveling? What happened to it?
4. Have you ever watched a match or contest in which the underdogs won? How did the result make you feel?
5. The F1 road car put the driver in the middle of the car. Would you enjoy driving a car like that every day, or would it be impractical?
6. The F1 had no ABS, no traction control, and no power steering. Do you prefer technology that helps you, or tools that leave you in full control? Does it depend on the activity?
7. John Cooper put the engine behind the driver because it was practical. Can you think of an important idea in your own field or life that began as a practical solution?
8. Racing teams in this story came from several countries, and the drivers came from even more. Why do fans still cheer for drivers from their own country?
9. Motor races are held in cities and countries around the world. How might hosting a Grand Prix change a place, for better or for worse?
10. Safety rules in motor racing were tightened after the deaths at Imola in 1994. Should dangerous sports accept some risk, or should rule makers remove as much risk as possible?
11. McLaren is widely reported to have lost money on each road car. Is it worth building something extraordinary even if it loses money? Who should pay for it?
12. One car sold at auction for about $34.7 million, and collectors care about provenance. Why do people value an object's history so highly, and is it reasonable to spend so much on one object?
13. The 2026 rules take nearly half of a car's power from electricity. Should a sport built on noise and speed change for environmental reasons, or should it protect its traditions?
14. Television money helped turn Formula One into a billion-dollar business. Does commercial success improve a sport, damage it, or both?

Language Focus: Future in the Past: would, would go on to, and was to

Writers use would, would go on to, and was to followed by an infinitive to look forward from a moment in the past. They describe events that were still in the future at that moment, although we now know that they happened.

In the reading:

- "…Farina won that first race and **would become** the first champion…"
- "…Fangio, **would go on to win** five titles in all."
- "It **would win** its first Grand Prix in 1968, but its founder **was to die** while testing a car at Goodwood two years later, aged 32."

Practice: Look forward from 1988 and complete this sentence: *"In 1988, McLaren's bosses discussed a road car that…"* Use a future-in-the-past form and the fact that the car was shown in Monaco four years later.

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Notes