

Britain's Lewis Hamilton making history as F1 rookie

by Bill Center

Forget for the moment the obvious, that Lewis Hamilton is black.

Think about this:

At the age of 22, Hamilton is the youngest driver ever to lead Formula One's World Championship points race. He is the only driver ever to finish his first six Grands Prix with six top-three finishes.

And Sunday, Hamilton won the Canadian Grand Prix.

Which brings us back to the fact that Hamilton also became the first driver of African descent to win a major car race - anywhere in the world.

You have to go all the way back to 1963 to find anything even remotely close to Hamilton's historic victory in Montreal. That was when the late Wendell Scott won a NASCAR Grand National race on a dirt oval in Jacksonville, Fla.

Of course, NASCAR wasn't then the ticket that it is today. And neither were NASCAR officials, who first declared Buck Baker to have been the winner.

Over the ensuing 44 years, no black driver won a major race.

The most notable African-American drivers over that span were Willy T. Ribbs and drag racer J.R. Todd.

Ribbs scored a number of wins in the second-echelon Trans-Am and IMSA sports car series and was the first black driver to qualify for the Indy 500 in 1991 (as well as test in a Formula One car in 1990). Ribbs also raced in NASCAR's Winston Cup series, but never triumphed in five seasons on the IndyCar circuit or in NASCAR.

Todd last year became the first black driver to win in the premier Top Fuel class of the National Hot Rod

Association series. Todd scored three wins.

However, black drivers in America have been few and far between.

The most recent African-Americans in major oval or road racing series being George Mack (17th in the 2002 Indy 500) and Bill Lester, who is a regular on NASCAR's Craftsman Truck support series and has made attempts on the Nextel Cup tour.

Although NASCAR has its "Drive for Diversity" program in hopes of developing female, black and Latin drivers and crew members, stock car racing views reigning Supercross champion James Stewart as its top candidate to be the sport's first African-American winner since Scott.

Which makes Hamilton all the more notable as he heads for Indianapolis and Sunday's United States Grand Prix at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Hamilton is the first driver of African descent ever to race in Formula One.

Hamilton's known history begins on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean, from where his paternal grandparents migrated to England almost 40 years ago. Lewis started racing around the village of Tewin, Hertfordshire, after being given a go-kart by his father at age 8.

Hamilton was first introduced to Ron Dennis of McLaren at 11, and three years later signed a development contract with the team. The past two seasons, Hamilton served as a test driver for McLaren-Mercedes before moving into the cockpit last winter as part of a team shakeup.

McLaren signed two-time world champion Fernando Alonso away from Renault as its No. 1 driver. With Alonso in the lead, Dennis believed it was the perfect situation for Hamilton to be eased in as the No. 2 driver.

After finishing third in his Formula One debut in Australia in March, Hamilton posted four straight runner-up finishes - the last of which raised protests from Formula One officials and fans.

Running second to and gaining on teammate Alonso on the streets of Monte Carlo last month, Hamilton was

flashed "slow down" orders to finish second.

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