

## Introduction

Once you've finished reading this book, you'll no doubt be asking yourself questions such as *How on earth did he get through school?*, *Why isn't he in prison?* and, ultimately, *How the bloody hell is he still alive?*

The answer to all of the above from the horse's mouth is: I really have no idea. None of it was premeditated, save for me trying to make it as a racing driver, and the rest of it just sort of happened. Some has been an upshot of circumstance, no doubt, but the majority is down to the fact that I have always had an issue in distinguishing between how I should behave on a racetrack and how I should behave off it. It tends to be all or nothing all of the time with me.

In spite of everything you are about to read, I have quite a good memory (which is surprising!), so I have many stories at my disposal and I've had to be quite selective. For instance, if I were to try and cover my racing career in full, which so far comprises over 550 starts with eleven different teams, we'd be looking at about a thousand pages. Instead, I've decided to take a few ups, a few downs, and then mix them in with a bit of high jinks and a few shenanigans.

One of the beauties of me being a similar person both on and off the racetrack is that it has left me with two blueprints: how to become a professional racing driver, and how not to become a professional racing driver, hence the

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title. Given the fact there are probably dozens of examples featuring the former currently in print, I thought I'd turn it on its head. After all, as the renowned motor-racing fanatic and dramatist William Shakespeare once said, *Madmen have such seething brains!*

Enjoy.

## LESSON ONE

### The Son of Mod

Right then, you lot. Where do we start?

‘At the beginning’ will no doubt be a popular answer.

Ah, yes, but at the beginning of what? At the beginning of my life or at the beginning of the bit when I started driving very quickly, pissing people off and doing things I perhaps shouldn’t have?

Well, it probably won’t surprise you to learn that I was doing the last three from quite an early age, so we may as well go back to 14 October 1967, which is roughly nine months after my mother and father did something that half the paddock at any British Touring Car Championship race wished they hadn’t.

I was born in Oxford, although when I was very young we moved to the northeast of England and remained there for about seventeen years.

When I say we, I mean me – obviously – and my dad, Tim, and my mum, Linda.

The phrase *a chip off the old block* usually refers to a son taking after his father, and although that’s true in my case, I also take after my mother in many respects, as she too is a feisty so-and-so and doesn’t take any shit from anyone.

Let’s start with my old man, though.

There’s quite a nice hotel in Oxford called the Malmaison, and a few years ago, not long after it opened, my future wife Sophie and I decided to take my mum and dad there for a bite to eat.

Not long after arriving, my mum piped up and said, ‘Do you remember visiting your dad in here?’

‘How do you mean, Mum,’ I replied. ‘It’s only been open a few weeks.’

‘No, no, no,’ she said. ‘When it was a prison!’

‘Eh!? A prison. You’re joking, aren’t you?’

I then remember looking at Sophie. We hadn’t been going out that long, and although she was aware that I’d had a pretty colourful past, I don’t think it stretched to my old man being an old lag.

It turned out that when I was a little boy my mum had taken me to visit Dad when he was a few days into a fourteen-stretch for taking the odd car or two for a joy ride. Fortunately for all concerned, it was fourteen days as opposed to years, so it was over and done with in a flash. I’d love to have known what was going through Sophie’s head when Mum mentioned it in what was now a very lovely luxury hotel. The word ‘Help’ most probably!

When I turned up, my old man was eighteen and my mum was just seventeen and a half, so they were obviously in a hurry to get little things like childbirth and going to prison out of the way. Who can blame them?

Incidentally, when it comes to being in clink, I’ve actually got one up on my old man as I’ve been there twice, although not in this country. Anyway, that’s for a bit later.

When he was young, Dad was Oxford’s chief mod, which probably accounts for some of the bad behaviour, although not all of it. He had a Willys jeep, a minder and at least one police car following him at all times! One night in those early days he came home in an Aston Martin DB5. I was only about three or four years old at the time but I remember

thinking, *Where the bloody hell did that come from?* I never asked him. It's best not to.

Apart from being a cross between the Modfather and Norman Stanley Fletcher, and a pretty special guy, it has to be said, the most interesting and relevant fact I can tell you about my old man is that he holds the world record for being the first person ever to write off an Austin Allegro (also known as an Austin *All-aggro*).

After a quick butchers on the internet, it seems that the Allegro, which was a bloody appalling car, was launched in October 1975, so that's when it would have happened. We were up in the northeast by this time, and my old man was working in the car trade. The day it was launched he decided to take one home for a laugh and ended up writing it off at the end of the road. How the hell do you write off an Allegro for God's sake, unless you mean to? They only do about 40 mph!

So tickled was my old man at the prospect of being the first man to write off one of the worst road cars of the twentieth century that he actually did some research to try and find out if any others had gone on launch day and as far as he could make out, they hadn't. Well done, Dad! I think the world owes you a favour for that one, ridding us of at least one of those godforsaken vehicles.

Later on, after we'd moved down south, he worked in the City of London insurance market for a while, and one evening my mum received a telephone call from the British Transport Police asking her to come and get him.

'He's stuck in luggage rack on a train and he won't come down, Mrs Plato,' said the officer.

'Stuck my foot,' replied Mum. 'He's pissed, isn't he?'

'Well, he might be. We can't really tell from here.'

‘I’ll be there in half an hour . . .’

I wouldn’t have liked to have been my old man that night. I bet my mum had a few choice words for him when they got home.

People often ask me if I’m related to the philosopher Plato, and my stock-in-trade answer is always: *How the flaming hell should I know?* He was born in Greece about 400 BC for heaven’s sake! I very much doubt it, though. After all, Plato was often described by historians as being a modest man who was quiet and studious and that is pretty much the opposite of me. Then again, he was also supposed to have died in his bed while a beautiful young woman played the flute for him, so it could go either way really, he said cheekily.

If only they’d had cars in ancient Greece. Had he written something off early doors then it could well have been game on with regards to us being related. You don’t hear of many Platos, so you never know.

Because I’m an only child with two daughters, you’d be forgiven for assuming that one day our branch of the Plato family will die out.

Think again!

We’re a resourceful bunch, we Platos, and despite coming close to extinction previously we’ve always managed to cling on.

Many years ago, my great-great-grandmother Edna Plato had a fling with (so the rumours go) an Australian soldier and in 1914 gave birth to two boys, Raymond (my grandfather) and Ernest (who sadly died in his infancy). My great-grandfather was never to be seen again, presumably killed in action in WW1. No father was registered on the birth certificates, which meant the maternal name was passed down: Plato. So in tribute to my great-great-grandmother’s efforts,

the deal is that I will only pay for my daughter's weddings if they retain the Plato name – which is a cracking surname, let's face it. They obviously don't know that yet, but the contract's there ready for them to sign. And I don't want any of that double-barrelled nonsense either!

Until recently my old man thought we were descended from Italians as opposed Greeks. An old relative once told him that back in the day Italian families used to change their surnames in order to give themselves a leg up the social ladder and according to this relative that was why, and where, our branch of the Plato family had originated.

I don't really subscribe to that, but it's a pretty cool tale.

Then, a few years ago, a journalist friend of mine, Marcus Simmons (who actually started his journalist career at exactly the same time I started my car racing career!) did a bit of a family tree for me to accompany an article he was writing about me and he found out some absolute gems. For a start, he told me that my great-great-grandfather on my dad's side had died in the First World War and that his name is included on the war memorial in Abingdon in Oxfordshire. I have driven past that war memorial so many times over the years and I had no idea.

Perhaps more interestingly, though, I always thought that my gifts – i.e. a certain amount of madness and some creativity – must have come from my dad's side of the family, but apparently not. The madness certainly does, or at least most of it, but when it comes to the other aptitudes it appears my mum's side might well be more to blame. Her maiden name is Scott, and she's related to the singer Marc Almond from the 1980s pop group Soft Cell and the comedian Jimmy James, who was massive in the 1940s and 50s. It turns out she was also related to one of the major controllers at the BBC,

so I wish I'd known about that earlier. I could have touched him up for a job!

What can I tell you about my mum – that won't get me into trouble?

Well, when I said before that she was a feisty soul, I meant it. As an only child I was always her pride and joy (I still am, bless her), and although she had no problem with me competing in sports like rugby it was on the proviso that nobody laid a finger on me under any circumstances. The first time I became aware of this was the first time she came to watch me play. It was at school, and a ruck was occurring. I was somewhere underneath when all of a sudden I heard a rather familiar, but at the same time rather unexpected, voice.

'Get off him. Get off my boy now!' screamed Mum.

The thing is, she wasn't just chastising the other players, she was physically pulling them off me and then pushing them away.

The next voice I heard was more familiar in the current location but less so overall. It was the games master.

'Mrs Plato,' he bellowed. 'Will you please put those pupils down NOW and kindly leave the playing field!'

Unfortunately for all concerned Mum wasn't having any of it, and while I was lying face down on the rugby field shouting, 'Oh Jesus Christ, make her go away!' while silently praying for Jesus' father to make the ground swallow me up, Mum continued manhandling, not just my opponents, but anyone who dared to be in the vicinity of her little munchkin.

'Get off him. Get away from him. LEAVE HIM ALONE!'

Come to think of it, she should have taken my place on the field. There'd only have been one winner.

Many people assume that because my dad's such a big



personality he's the driving force behind the family and the one who wears the trousers, but if anything it's the inverse of that. Mum's definitely the quieter of the two but she's very, very strong. She was a hairstylist in her younger days, so very creative and offered the opportunity to chat lots, and after that she became a nurse. The two professions suit her down to the ground really, as she's sociable and very caring. She's just a good egg.

There you go, then. On my mum's side you have creativity, talent and a modicum of violence, on my dad's side, out-and-out naughtiness. I am, without any doubt whatsoever, a chip off both blocks.

OK, now I've set the scene family-wise and provided you with some explanations about my future behaviour, let's get behind a wheel or two and kick up a bit of dust.

It all started for me motorsport-wise forty years ago in 1979, so I'd have been twelve years old at the time. Quite late, really. My old man was running a BMW dealership in the northeast called Priory Cars and one day he accepted a racing kart as payment for a bad debt. The debt was nothing – a couple of hundred quid at most – so it was a really good deal.

Dad used to have a mate called Brian Chivers who was into karting, so when he found out about it he was cock-a-hoop. 'Oh, mate,' he said. 'You'll love this. Karting's great!' He and Dad used to tinker around with cars all the time, and although Dad had never raced before (legally), he loved a bit of speed and was obviously into his cars. In that respect the kart was meant for him really, not for me.

The kart had a BM chassis, a Bultaco engine (there's a blast from the past) and was verging on being an antique. That said, it was fast, and the first time I remember driving

it was in and out of the petrol pumps at the garage on a Sunday afternoon. Bearing in mind my lack of experience in driving anything with four wheels at speed, and the fact that I was just metres away from tens of thousands of gallons of highly flammable liquid, this would possibly be frowned upon slightly by today's health and safety executive, but back in the 70s we didn't give a damn! It was just fun.

Not far from the garage there was a company called Tyne Car Auctions, and their car park must have measured at least three acres. Being in the trade, my dad knew the owner quite well (he knew everybody quite well!), and so, after having a few words, we were given permission to drive the kart there in the evening when everyone had gone home.

This is where it started to come to life for me, as I was no longer restricted by space. The police were always having a moan, as we made a bit of noise, but it never became serious enough for us to stop. We just said sorry, waited half an hour and then started again. Dad would have the majority of the time in the kart, and I'd get ten minutes at the end. It was lush.

A few months after we got the kart the whole thing almost came to an end. My two cousins, Nicola and Amanda, came up for the weekend, and Nicola, who was about my age, asked her dad to persuade my dad to let her have a go in the kart. She'd watched me darting around for a while and obviously thought it looked fun.

We were up at the dealership at the time and, after easing her in and telling her what to do, me and my old man gave her a bump start. Unfortunately, instead of trundling along at 5 miles an hour for a few yards, like she'd been told to, Nicola completely freaked out, but instead of taking her foot off the throttle she put the pedal to the metal, so to speak. It

was scary! She ended up going straight into a brick wall, and after taking her to hospital we found out she'd broken both her ankles. It could have been a lot worse, though. Because had she completely freaked out she would have garrotted herself on the chain across the entrance to the forecourt, and had she driven a few metres to the left she'd have gone straight on to the main road. It was serious stuff. Mum went absolutely bananas when she found out, and wanted to kibosh the whole thing there and then.

'It's too dangerous Tim,' she complained to my father. 'I want you to get rid of it.'

After making a few assurances, such as never allowing frightened little girls to drive the kart ever again and especially near main roads, petrol pumps and chains, Dad managed to hold on to the kart, and, after lying low for a while, we managed to find a karting track in a place called Felton, which is north of Morpeth in Northumberland. Even at this point the kart was still my old man's, and I was just along for the ride.

When we arrived at Felton for the first time I timed Dad and Brian as they drove the kart, and right at the end I managed to persuade Dad to let me have a go. With no licence this was obviously illegal, but Dad must have thought, *What the hell?* It was still the 1970s!

After handing Dad the stopwatch, I asked him to time me.

'Off you go, then,' he said. 'You've got five laps.'

I don't know exactly by how much, but all five of my laps were quicker than any of Dad's or Brian's, and that's really where it all started. Dad and Brian were amazed at the times I'd posted, but I was just having a laugh.

From then on, the kart was mine, and I was the one who

drove it. In true Plato style, the next time we went up to Felton we seized up the engine after getting the oil and petrol mixture wrong! What that meant, though, together with me spanking Dad's and Brian's lap times, was that perhaps it was time to get a new kart, and in a very short space of time Dad had done a deal with a contact of Brian's, and we had in our possession a new one.

We used to keep the kart on a stand in our dining room, and as time went on the dining room gradually morphed from being a nice place to have a meal into a perfect place to tinker around with a kart. It became a workshop, basically, and after not very many weeks the entire house stank of oil and petrol. None of us cared, though, least of all my mum, as she was just as keen on karting as me and my Dad; it was an activity that we all loved as a family, and my mum liked the fact that it was a way for us all to spend time together. There was actually an archway leading from the dining room to the kitchen, so again, with all the flammable liquids knocking around and the odd flame here and there, it's a wonder we didn't go up!

We used to have this massive sideboard in the dining room that these days might have done well on *Antiques Roadshow*. We didn't care, though. From the moment the kart arrived it was covered in tools, parts and a selection of fine lubricants.

The next investment Dad made was in a black van, which he got through a contact. That was to be our home, our workshop and our transport to and from the races for the next year or so. Once he'd bought it, Dad and I set about converting it, and within a few weeks we were all set to go. We had a new kart, a mini-motorhome/workshop/garage, a mechanic, engineer, financier and mentor (Dad), a team catering manager

and team nurse (Mum), a team mascot (our dog, Castrol) and a driver, moi. Team Plato was born!

Within a matter of weeks, karting had completely taken over our lives. It was our joint hobby, if you like. We didn't do things like go on summer holidays or go skiing either. We didn't need to. I also used to give school trips the bum's rush; I can't remember going on a single one. I'd bring a letter home from school with some information about a trip, and after looking at the price Dad would say, 'That's the equivalent to five sets of tyres. Do you want to go, Jason?'

'No Dad.'

'OK, then, bin it.'

Had I not been an only child, the karting thing would never have happened, as Mum and Dad invested everything they had – time and money – into it. Had there been another child to consider, there wouldn't have been enough of either to go around.

The first time I competed was in the 1980 club championship and I can remember going into the little signing-on hut at the start of the season in order to register. The club secretary was sitting there, and the first question he asked me was what number I wanted. After looking down the list, I said to him as bold as brass, 'I'll have number 1 thanks. That hasn't got a name against it.' 'You will not, young man,' he said, laughing. 'That's reserved for the champion.' That's how little we knew at the time, me and my dad. We'd only been doing this a matter of months and had only been on a karting track a couple of times. We were totally naive.

'Can I have that one then,' I said, pointing to number 6.

'You can indeed.'

In the club championship we cleaned the board in 1980 and in between all that we started competing nationally. The

circuits most local to us were Wombwell, which is near Barnsley; Rowrah, near Cockermouth, which is the other side of Carlisle; and of course Felton. That was our little triangle, if you like, and they became our second homes. There were other tracks in the area but unless they were part of the national championship we didn't bother.

It's difficult to put into words how excited I got on race weekends. I used to run home from school on a Friday, and as long as Dad had arrived home we'd set off bang on 4 p.m. Sometimes we wouldn't get home until 10 p.m. on a Sunday, so if you take into account the time we spent tinkering in the dining room or practising during the week, it really was all-encompassing. And I'm obviously not the only one to have lived this life. Heck no! Hundreds of families the length and breadth of the country used to do exactly the same thing, so there was a real family atmosphere about karting. We were all competitive, sure we were, but it was the social aspect that made it really enjoyable, as that meant everybody was included. There was a real camaraderie at the time, and it kept us all interested. In fact, Mum and Dad still keep in touch with some of the families we met during the karting years. They were great times.

To get the distances we used to cover into perspective, I remember one year racing down at Dunkeswell, which is near Exeter. This was on a Sunday, and straight after that we had to drive to Cockermouth for a Bank Holiday meeting that was taking place the following day. It was about 360 miles from our place to Dunkeswell and roughly the same again from there up to Cockermouth. We loved it, though! The van we had was an LT28 Volkswagen, and in the back there was a partition that me and Dad had built separating the workshop, which included the tyre racks and the tools, from

the living quarters. The bed, which slept all of us, was probably just over half the width of a double bed and was actually nothing more than a piece of foam that we'd had cut and covered. We all slept like logs, though, as most of the time we were knackered. Our garage was nothing more than a little awning that used to strap on to the side of the van. As mad as it all sounds, it actually worked. Seriously, it was perfect.

The only reason we didn't win the British Championship in 1981 was because of a first-corner incident in the last race that knocked me off and dislodged my exhaust pipe. My old man ran straight on to the track (fathers were allowed to help restart the juniors) when it happened, and after making sure I was OK the first thing he did was try and pick up the exhaust, which was obviously red-hot. Ouch! He ended up burning himself really badly and still has the scars to prove it. You see what I mean about naive? It was a baptism of fire – literally – for all of us.

Within just a year of us starting, we had a deal in place with a team, so things had moved on very quickly. New parts would arrive at the house all the time, and I remember me and my old man pulling rear-axle bearings apart and getting all the bits out of the middle just so they'd spin a bit quicker. The bearing hangers are clamped on to the back of the chassis and if they're not perfectly straight they'll clamp the bearings. We used to spend hour after hour just sitting there trying to get these things to move as freely as possible. And I mean hours! It was wonderful though. Quality time.

One of the other great joys of karting – and I think you'll find this is common, especially with my generation – was the pre-race preparation. When I first started, I'd turn up at the circuit the day before a meeting and I'd start painting the kerbs

or hanging up bunting. Whatever needed doing, basically. Everybody wanted to be involved and everybody wanted to make the place look as professional and as presentable as possible. In what other situation would you get children willingly picking up brooms and things? I just wanted to help them put a great event on and I honestly would have walked the 30 miles to the circuit if I'd had to. I used to get a bus, and it was a good two- or three-hour round trip. Having a hobby like that keeps body and mind active and is what an eleven-year-old lad should be doing. In my opinion.

I think a lot of people assume, quite wrongly, that all race circuits look like Silverstone, or mini versions of it, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I'd say the vast majority would be dumps if it wasn't for the volunteers who keep them going.

That was a very big part of the attraction for me early on (it waned a bit once I got serious as I didn't have as much time) and it was almost as exciting as the racing in that it added to the anticipation and made you feel totally involved. You often hear drivers talking about feeling at one with their cars or their team – me included – but being at one with your sport is just as important, but that takes effort.

It was an important lesson for me, in that you have to give back to whatever sport you practise, and if I didn't have those memories of being involved in the preparation for a race meeting my career in motorsport wouldn't be quite as sweet or fulfilling as it is. It's all very well just turning up, taking what you can and then pissing off again, but in order to get a 360-degree experience you have to get involved at grassroots level – and properly involved. It's the only way.

The first deal we had was with a team called Mistral Racing, which was run by a lovely fruitcake of a man called Neil



Hann. The team was based in a sleepy little village just outside Yeovil called Montacute. It's a great name, isn't it?

One of the reasons my old man had gone with Neil was that he was dead straight and didn't give him any flannel. *This is what's involved, this is what you'll get, and this is what you'll need to do. OK? Bish, bash, bosh.* There was no messing around, and that was exactly how Dad liked to do business. It was music to his ears.

Prior to me, Mistral had had one or two decent drivers on their books, most notably a lad a few years older than me called Martin Smart. Martin had represented Great Britain from 1974 until 1980 and, as well as winning the British Junior Championship once or twice, which is what I'd almost done in my first year, he'd won the European Team Championship and had finished third in the World Championship. His were obviously big shoes to fill, but that kind of challenge was exactly what I needed at the time. I was young and relatively inexperienced, but I had a smidgen of talent and bags of confidence. Although we never became friends (he was a bit older than me, and our paths never really crossed much), a few years ago I decided to touch base with Martin, as his success and reputation had been a big motivation for me and I was interested to see how he was doing. It turns out he's now an architect based in Warwickshire and is doing really well. No surprise there.

When I started driving for Neil in 1981, he had his own chassis called the Mistral MM3, and our engines were made by the gearbox manufacturer Hewland. They'd recently produced their first karting engine, and it was an absolute work of art. Neil was one of the main agents for the Hewland Arrow, which is how it came about, but he used to tune them all himself. At the bottom of his garden he had a shed which

was like a huge Aladdin's cave, and that's where he did the tuning. I used to spend most of my summer holidays down there helping him out, so it was like an extension – and a progression, really – of what I'd been doing with my dad in our dining room. It was invaluable.

Neil had another company at the time called Sportac. They used to produce leather race suits but not just for karters. The Isle of Man TT legend Joey Dunlop was one of his clients, I remember, and he also used to sell suits to a lot of the speedway lads. I used to work there too when we weren't in the shed and would spend hours stitching up suits. Who'd have thought it. Jason Plato. Seamstress to the stars!

I won my first British Junior Championship with Neil in 1982; looking back, he was undoubtedly the link between me competing at a fairly high standard as a privateer and winning multiple championships. My old man and I had all the endeavour in the world, but without the necessary experience and resources we could only go so far. When Neil became involved, that immediately started to shift, and as well as us becoming part of his team, as in Mistral, he became part of ours too. We also started competing in Europe under Neil's tutelage and again we had more success.

In 1983, I started driving for Zip Kart in the European Series and the World Championship, but still under Neil's management. The man behind Zip, the late and much-missed Martin Hines, was synonymous with the sport and was known as 'Mr Karting'. He was the next link in my career chain, I suppose, and in addition to passing on some of his vast and invaluable experience to me and Dad, Martin also sorted out a tyre contract for me with Bridgestone. Having someone like that backing you makes a massive difference to your knowledge and your confidence, which in turn makes any

talent you might have a lot more accessible. In many respects Martin Hines was like an early Frank Williams for me, and it's hard to overestimate the effect he had.

I'll tell you what, let's have a tale from Europe, where, if memory serves me correctly, I probably raced about six times.

My biggest achievement there was winning the Junior Federation Cup in 1983. It took place at a circuit in Kerpen in Germany, which Michael Schumacher ended up buying many years later. He was actually tipped to win the Junior Federation Cup that year and was already being tipped for great things.

What I remember most about that event, apart from winning the cup, is the fact that it marked the crescendo of a huge tyre war. Sometime in 1983, the CIK, which is the FIA of karting, had introduced a tyre regulation that said that from now on the tyres used had to be a certain shore. Shore is the hardness of a tyre and is measured by a durometer. This had obviously caused pandemonium within the industry, and it was deemed that the first team or tyre company to come to terms with the rule and get their heads around it would come out on top.

There was a tyre company at the time called Vega, who were an offshoot of Pirelli, and it became clear in the events leading up to the Federation Cup, which was a one-off competition, that they had won the battle, although perhaps not the war. Not by producing a brand-new tyre, by the way, but by circumnavigating the rule. How they got away with it I don't know, but in layman's terms Vega invented a manufacturing process that allowed them to put a very thin layer of hard rubber across the tread of the tyre that would satisfy the durometer, making the CIK believe that the rest of the tyre was the same, and then erode after about four laps.

Underneath that you had all the sexy stuff, so the moment the hard layer had gone, you were off!

Unlike Vega, Bridgestone had played it by the book and consequently they'd been annihilated at every race. Unbeknownst to Vega, however, and the teams using them, Bridgestone had been working their arses off to rectify the problem and by the time the Federation Cup came about they were just about ready.

Although a single event, the Federation Cup was the climax to a long weekend of racing, and we arrived at the track on the previous Monday. On the Wednesday evening the Bridgestone track man, who was called Mr Kakuchi, came around in his van and gave each of his drivers ten new sets of tyres. Each set looked identical except for a tiny bit of paint on the bead. I forget the colours they used, but one was for their standard tyre, another colour for a softer tyre, and two more colours that represented the harder tyres.

Anyway, these things were off the scale, which immediately put 180 of the 200 competitors out of the running. That's the way it was, though. Vega had gone for a quick fix and had painted over the cracks while Bridgestone had played the long game. Well done Bridgestone!

My abiding memory of the Thursday, which is when the shit hit the fan, is watching my dad, Delboy Plato, selling a set of these tyres for £5,000! That's at least ten grand in today's money. The thing is, unless you had a set of these tyres you might as well go home, so if you had the dosh it was definitely worth the investment – said my old man!

The driver he sold them to was called Rohan Dewhurst. He was attached to the British team and was the heir to the Dewhurst butcher empire. He wasn't much of a driver, bless him, but he must have had a few quid, and luckily for him

the first person he approached about acquiring some of these fab new tyres was Timothy Plato, Esq. Dad must have seen him coming and within about two minutes he'd pocketed the wedge and was whistling away with his hands in his pockets, pretending that nothing had gone on. In fairness to Dad, nothing had gone on really. Or at least nothing unto-ward. As long as he sold a used set as opposed to a new set and to a British competitor, everything was OK, and that's exactly what he did. The only thing that surprised me about this was that Dad didn't make more of it. In fact, had he gone around all the other Bridgestone drivers buying up all their used tyres before erecting a stall somewhere within the track, I'd have been far less surprised. I think he was just shocked at having bagged five big ones for a set of ours and thought he'd quit while he was ahead!

We had an absolutely brilliant weekend (financially and professionally!) in Germany and went on to win the inaugural Junior European Federation Cup. The tyres, though, were so grippy it was ridiculous. Even these days the grip you get with a sticky hot tyre in a hot climate in karting is insane. It can break your ribs.

Actually, as well as the aforementioned Michael Schumacher, who is the subject of a great story later on, there were one or two other talented lads racing that weekend, although none of them were daft enough to ask my old man for any tyres. There were David Coulthard, Johnny Herbert, Vincenzo Sospiri, Alex Zanardi, Allan McNish, Mika Häkkinen and a delightful future touring car driver from France called Yvan Muller, who I ended up having a proper ding-dong with. That too is for a bit later on.

In addition to the individual race, in which I triumphed (just in case you'd forgotten), there was also a team race during