

THE OLYMPIC FAST LANE OLYMPIANS IN FORMULA 1

by Jeroen Heijmans

Although speed is mentioned in the Olympic motto "*Citius, Altius, Fortius*", this does not ensure that the world's fastest sports are also on the Olympic programme. One fast sport, motors port, is excluded from the programme on ground of the *Olympic Charter*, which excludes sports primarily dependent on mechanical propulsion. Also considering the unequal opportunities for the competitors and the high costs involved, it is virtually unthinkable that any branch of motor sport will be contested at the Olympics in the near future – let alone that we can expect to see Formula 1 racing, often considered the pinnacle of motor sport, at the Olympics. In spite of this, six people have managed to compete in both the Formula 1 World Championship¹ and the Olympic Games. In this article I will attempt to describe the versatility of these six Olympians.

The group of "Formula 1 Olympians" consists of five men – Prince BIRA (THA), Roberto MIERES (ARG), Ben PON (NED), Alfonso de PORTAGO (ESP) and Robin WIDDOWS (GBR) – and one woman – Divina GALICA (GBR). It should be noted though, that GALICA never actually qualified for a World Championship Formula 1 race.

Judging from the table below, one could claim that Alfonso de PORTAGO should be

	F1	GPs	Best	Olympics	Best
Bira	1950-1954	19	4th	1956-1972	12th
Galica	1976-1978	0 (3)	DNQ	1964-1972	7th
Mieres	1953-1955	17	4th	1960	17th
Pon	1962	1	DNF	1972	31st
de Portago	1956-1957	5	2nd	1956	4th
Widdows	1968	1	DNF	1964-1968	8th

considered the most successful member of the group, as he achieved the highest classification in both Formula 1 and the Olympics. His sportive career might have seen more highlights, but a racing accident in 1957 ended his life at 28.

Some of the sports in which the Formula 1 Olympians participated in the Olympics were also high speed sports: De PORTAGO and WIDDOWS both competed in bobsleighbing, while Galica took part in alpine skiing. The other three chose lower paced sports: PON competed in shooting, while BIRA and MIERES both participated in yachting – in fact, the two competed in the same event, as they both sailed in the 1960 Star class.

In the remainder of this article I will give short biographies for each of the six members of this small group. The article is concluded by an overview of a few others that came close to joining this group but did not compete in both the Formula 1 World Championship and the Olympics.

1 The Formula 1 World Championship was introduced in 1950. However, many other races with comparable cars have been held before that year, and non-championship Formula 1 races have been held until the early 1980s. Unless otherwise specified, I will use the term Formula 1 in the sense of the Formula 1 World Championship

Prince Bira



Prince Birabongse Bhanudej Bhanubandh of Siam, a grandson of King MONGKUT, was born on 15 July 1914 in Bangkok. In 1927 he was sent to Eton College in Britain under the guidance of his older cousin, Prince

Chula CHAKRABONGSE. While his uncle, King PRAJADHIPOK, lost absolute power after a brief coup in 1932, he stayed in England, attending Cambridge University. The prince had been fascinated by cars since he was a young boy, and he finally persuaded his cousin Chula to allow him to enter a car in a race in 1935. He entered that race using the pseudonym of B. BIRA, which he would keep using throughout his racing career, therefore becoming known as Prince BIRA.

That same year, CHULA and BIRA established a new racing team, White Mouse, with BIRA racing an ERA voiturette. They were quite successful, and BIRA scored his first victory in 1936, winning the voiturette race before the Monaco GP, which was followed by more international wins that year. In the years to follow more victories came, but only in British events as the international (Italian) competition proved too strong. The outbreak of World War II interrupted racing and the career of Bira, who stayed in Britain while his home country was occupied by Japan.

He resumed racing in 1946, and won several races with his own Maseratis, including the inaugural Dutch GP. In 1949 he left his cousin's team, and joined the team of Enrico PLATÉ, which also used Maseratis. He scored many podium places in important races, and won the Swedish GP. The next year, with the introduction of the Formula 1 World Championship, he still drove for the team, but his car was no match for the Alfa Romeo's. He still managed to score five points, placing 8th in the championship. 1951 proved to be a bad year, as BIRA suffered from a skiing accident, while his private OSCA-powered Maserati did not perform very well either. The next two seasons were little better, and his drives with Simca GORDINI (1952) and CONNAUGHT (1953) didn't earn him any championship points.

After driving a Maserati for the factory team in the first GP of 1954, he continued the season with his own Maserati team. He started that season's French GP as 6th and managed to finish in 4th place, after driving in third for

much of the race, thereby scoring his first championship points since 1950 – it were also to be his last. At the end of the season, he ended his racing career in style by winning the New Zealand GP in January 1955.

Back in Thailand, BIRA had now time to turn to his other hobbies, which included yachting, flying and sculpturing. In 1956, he was sent to Melbourne to represent his country at the Olympics in yachting. Together with Luang Pradiyat NAVAYUDH he entered the Star class, but they did poorly and finished 12th and last, far behind the other boats. BIRA did better at his second Olympic appearance. Now assisted by Boonpuen CHOMVITH, he again sailed in the Star class, this time finishing 19th out of 26 boats. In Tokyo 1964 he entered the Dragon event, his crew consisting of his wife Princess Bhanuband BIRABONGSE (the British-born Cheryl HEYCOCK) and Prateep AREEOB. With their boat "Linglom", they only kept the Jamaican yacht behind them, and finished 22nd. The 1972 Olympic yachting tournament in Kiel, which saw other royal entries from the Spanish and Norwegian crown princes, ended with another classification in the back of the field. In their Tempest, BIRA and Paitane CHULGATUPPA finished 21st and last.

Although Kiel was BIRA'S last Olympic appearance, he would remain active in the sport, and he managed to get the 1978 World Championships in the Fireball class to Thailand. Living both in Thailand and France, where he owned a large schooner, BIRA died after a heart attack on Christmas Eve 1985 in the London Underground. His achievements in auto racing and sailing are honoured by the Bira International Circuit outside Pattaya in Thailand and the *Prince Bira Memorial Regatta*, which was instituted in 1990.

Divina Galica



On 13 August 1946, Divina Mary GALICA, MBE, was born in Bushey Heath, Hertfordshire, a town near Watford, northwest of London. She made her Olympic debut in Innsbruck in 1964, where a 23rd position in the giant slalom was her best performance. Four years later, she had higher hopes for the Olympics, having placed 3rd at a World Cup downhill before the Games, behind Olga PALL, who would also win the Olympic downhill title. Galica's eventual 32nd place was

a disappointment, but she managed to take 8th in the giant slalom. She qualified for her third Olympics in 1972, and achieved her best result, ending up in 7th place in the giant slalom. The only British alpine skiers to have done better in the Olympics are GALICA'S 1968 team mates Gina HATHORN (4th) and Felicity FIELD (6th).

In 1974 GALICA was invited to join a celebrity race, and this set off her career in auto racing. Two years later, she was driving in the Shell sport Group 8 championships, in which old cars from several Formula classes were used. Having scored two fourth places, GALICA decided to enter the 1976 British GP at Brands Hatch, thereby entering the select group of women that have taken part in the Formula 1 World Championship. At the time, that group consisted of Italian ladies Maria Teresa de FILIPPIS and Lella LOMBARDI – who had scored half a point in the 1975 Spanish GP. Later, Desire WILSON (RSA) and Giovanna AMATI (ITA) also joined them. The only time two women entered for a Grand Prix race was at that 1976 British GP, although neither GALICA nor LOMBARDI managed to actually qualify for the race.

However, being a woman was not the only remarkable thing about GALICA'S appearance that race. She drove the same car she used during the Shell sport series, an old Surtees TS16, and used the same number on the car: 13. This number had not been included in motor sport events since the death of Giulio MASETTI (1926) while driving with that number, although drivers were allowed to request it. In Formula 1 only Moises SOLANA (MEX) had used it before, in 1963. All this did not help her to qualify for the race, as her qualifying time was 2.5 seconds too slow.

After another season in the Shell sport series, GALICA had another go at Formula 1. Driving for Hesketh, she attempted to qualify for the two South American Grand Prix in Argentina and Brazil, but the car was much too slow, and her qualifying times were seconds slower than the other drivers'. After those two races, Galica was replaced by Eddie CHEEVER (USA). The Hesketh team had to quit the championship four races later.

After her failed attempts in Formula 1, GALICA left single-seater racing, but she remained active in several other racing classes until the late 1990s. She also made a return to her first love, partaking in the speed skiing demonstration at the 1992 Olympics (placing

19th out of 20). The following year she achieved a speed of 200.669 km/h in that sport, joining the small group (25) of women that have broken the 200 km/h barrier on skis.

Roberto Mieres



Roberto C. MIERES, colloquially known as "Bitito", was born in Mar de Plata on 3 December 1924. He belonged to a wealthy family, and was active in many sports, including tennis, rugby, rowing and yachting. In 1948 he drove his first racing car, a Mercedes.

In 1950, after having won the Argentine sports car championship, he was invited to join his fellow countrymen Juan Manuel FANGIO and Froilán GONZÁLEZ for some races in Europe. Driving a Ferrari, he placed 4th in the Geneva GP, a non-championship race. After that, MIERES was absent from the European circuits for several years, until GORDINI offered him a ride for the 1953 season. MIERES drove three races, placing 6th in the Italian GP. For the next season he entered the first five races as a privateer, racing his own Maserati. Following the death of the Argentine Maserati driver Onofre MARIMÓN at the German GP, Mieres was invited to join the Maserati factory team. This move immediately proved successful, with Mieres scoring fourth places in both Switzerland and Spain, and eventually sharing 8th place in the championship.

He stayed with the Maserati team for 1955. During the season opener in front of his home crowd in Buenos Aires, MIERES briefly led the race but finished in 5th place eventually. Maserati was no match for the strong Mercedes-Benz cars that season, and MIERES again placed 8th in the championship. The Dutch GP at Zandvoort was his best race, scoring a fourth place and setting the fastest lap of the race as well. After the season, MIERES went back to Argentina, not to appear in the European racing scene again, although he would make appearances in the Buenos Aires 1000 km sports car race in 1957 and 1958.

MIERES switched his focus from racing to sailing, and this resulted in qualification for the Olympic Games of Rome, 1960. Together with Victor Hugo FRAGOLA, he entered the Star class. His final classification was 17th, two positions ahead of Prince BIRA, who had also raced a Maserati in the 1954 season.

At present, Roberto MIERES lives in the Uruguayan city of Punta del Este, still taking part in historical car races.

Ben Pon



Bernardus Marinus "Ben" PON was born on 9 December 1936 in Leiden, but he grew up in Amersfoort. His father Ben PON Sr. was a car dealer and in 1947 he became the first importer of Volkswagens, after already

showing interest in the VW Beetle before the war. The Beetles became a success in the Netherlands, and PON Sr. also started importing them into the United States, where they eventually became popular as well. But PON Sr. is probably even more famous as the inventor of the Volkswagen Transporter, better known as the Volkswagen Van. His company still exists, and still imports Volkswagens.

By 1961, his son had begun racing sports cars, entering in several World Championship events. His car – not very surprising considering his father's job – was a Porsche 356B Carrera, which he drove together with his friend, Graaf Carel Godin de BEAUFORT (NED). They achieved several top three classifications in their class, and PON also won the GT1.6 class at the 1961 24 Hours of Le Mans, driving with Herbert LINGE (GER) at that occasion.

Since 1957 PON's friend Godin de BEAUFORT had been racing in a few Formula 1 races per season, driving Porsches for his own team, Ecurie MAARSBERGEN. In 1961, he had begun to race the entire season, and for the first race of the 1962 season, the Dutch GP at Zandvoort, he offered PON to drive a second Porsche for his team. The Porsche was out powered by the rest of the field, and PON qualified as 18th (out of 20). Nevertheless, he took off quickly for his first – and last – Formula 1 GP. In the third lap, PON had a heavy crash, his Porsche flipping over and throwing PON out. He was lucky to get away without any injuries, but he swore never to race a single-seater again. Instead, he continued racing sports car races for Porsche with some success, and he finished 8th overall and second in his class at Le Mans in 1964 with Henk van ZALINGE (NED). That same year, Godin de BEAUFORT died of injuries sustained during the practice for the German GP. In 1965, Pon was one of the

founders the Dutch Racing Team, although he did not race that much himself anymore. Still, he won the S2.0 Class (7th overall) at Le Mans in 1967, together with Vic ELFORD (GBR) – his last big result before quitting racing the next year.

At the 1972 Munich Olympics, Ben PON formed the Dutch skeet team together with Eric SWINKELS (silver medallist in 1976). However, the Dutch team performed disappointingly, with PON finishing in 31st, and SWINKELS in 35th.

Later, PON, who had also worked for his father's enterprise, started a wine distribution company. At present, PON is making his own Bernardus wine in the Carmel Valley in California.

Alfonso de Portago



Alfonso Antonio Vicente Blas Ángel Francisco Borija Cabeza de Vaca y Leighton, Carvajal y Are, Marqués de PORTAGO, Marqués de Moratalla, Conde de La Mejorada, Conde de PERNIA, Duque de Alagón,

Grande de España – Fon for friends – was born in London, on 11 October 1928, to a wealthy aristocratic father, and an Irish nurse. While his father engaged in the Spanish Civil War, Alfonso grew up in the French city of Biarritz.

Playboy Alfonso de PORTAGO excelled in many sports. Besides being a good swimmer, polo player and fencer, he was a very good steeplechaser (on horse), winning the French title and participating in the Grand National at Aintree. He achieved his biggest successes in auto racing, however.

He got interested in the sport through his American friend Edmond NELSON, whom he had met as an elevator operator in the New York Plaza Hotel. His first race was the Carrera Panamericana of 1953, which he entered together with Luigi CHINETTI (ITA) in a Ferrari 375. They did not complete the race, but it was the start of De PORTAGO'S racing career. The following year he took part in several sports car races, including the 12 hours of Sebring and the 24 hours of Le Mans. His successes in sports car races, driving Ferraris, earned him the attention of the Ferrari team and he was signed for the team for the 1956 Formula 1 season.

Before his first race in 1956 (the 12 hours of Sebring), De Portago engaged in a different sport, although it also involved steering.

Together with three of his friends – Vicente Sartorius y Cabeza de VACA, Marqués de Mariño, Gonzalo Taboada and Luis Muñoz – he formed the very first Spanish Olympic bobsleigh team to take part in the Winter Olympics held in Cortina d'Ampezzo. With Marquis de MARIÑO as his brakeman, De PORTAGO steered the two-man bob to a fourth place, just 0.16 seconds from the bronze, and clocked the second-best time in the third run. The four-man bobsleigh ended up in 9th position.

De PORTAGO drove his first Formula 1 World Championship race at the French GP, and scored his first points the next race at Silverstone, although it was Peter COLLINS (GBR) who took over De PORTAGO'S car halfway the race and drove it to a second place-finish². He didn't finish any other Grand Prix that season, but scored a few victories in minor races.

He again scored points in the first race of the 1957 season, although he had to share them again, this time with Froilán GONZÁLEZ (ARG). A week before the Monaco GP, Alfonso de Portago entered the Mille Miglia, with his friend Nelson in a Ferrari 335S. At a straightway near the town of Giudizzolo, one of their tyres gave up, and their car swerved into the audience, killing 10 spectators and injuring 20 more; De PORTAGO and NELSON were also killed in the accident. This accident also meant the end of the Mille Miglia race.

Robin Widdows



Robin Michael WIDDOWS was born on 27 May 1942 in Cowley, Middlesex – west of London. His father, Commodore Charles WIDDOWS, flew for the RAF during the war and was a test pilot afterwards. Like Alfonso de PORTAGO,

WIDDOWS also competed in bobsleighting, although the Spaniard had been the driver, while WIDDOWS formed part of the crew.

WIDDOWS was part of the second British four-man sled in 1964. Steered by William McCOWEN, they ended up in 13th place, just behind the first British sleigh. A week before, two of the crewman of Britain I – Tony NASH

and Robin DIXON – had won the gold medal in the two-man bob. WIDDOWS remained on the British team until 1968, taking part in his second Olympics in Grenoble. This time as a member of the first four-man sleigh, which was taken to 8th place by driver Tony Nash.

In the same year WIDDOWS made his first appearance at the Olympics, he also made his racing debut. He proved successful, and by 1966 he was racing in Formula 3 and winning races as well, while he was also active in sports car racing. In 1967, he entered a Brabham in Formula 2 races, racing for his own team, WITLEY. A win at Hockenheim (Germany) was his best result that year.

More minor successes in Formula 2 the next year – now driving a McLaren - meant he was asked by the Cooper team to drive their second car at the British GP at Brands Hatch. WIDDOWS qualified as 18th of the 20 cars for what would turn out to be his only Formula 1 GP. After 34 laps his ignition failed and he had to abandon the race.

His Formula 1 career was over after that single Grand Prix, but WIDDOWS continued to race in other classes. In 1969 he achieved one of his biggest successes when he placed 7th in the 24 hours of Le Mans with Nanni GALLI (ITA). Halfway through the 1970 season however, while still active in Formula 2, WIDDOWS quit racing.

Honorary mentions

There are a few people that deserve to be mentioned in this article, although they did not take part in both the Formula 1 World Championship and the Olympics. Most of them raced in the era before the Formula 1 World Championship was established. Not all of these drivers actually raced in Formula 1-level international races, but I have included them the sake of completeness.

Marquese Antonio Brivio-Sforza (ITA, 27 December 1905 – 20 January 1995)

The list of victories of the Italian nobleman includes such famous races as the Targa Florio (1935) and the Mille Miglia (1936), and the Alfa Romeo driver posted top results in several other races in the mid-1930s. In that same period he was also active as a bobsleigh pilot. In 1935 he won a bronze medal at the World Championships and he represented Italy

² Until 1958, it was not required for a car to be driven by the same driver the entire race to score points. It was therefore quite common for a team's top driver to take over another car in case his own car had to retire.

at the Winter Olympics the following year, ending up in 12th place in the two-man and 10th in the four-man bob.

Karl Alfred Ebb (FIN, 5 September 1896 – 22 August 1988)

Kalle EBB, an all-round sportsman, took fifth place in the 3000 m steeple chase at the 1924 Olympics, in the shadow of better known compatriots NURMI and RITOLA. In motor sport he was mostly active in races in the Nordic countries, claiming several victories in the Finnish GP.

Frederick Joseph McEvoy (GBR, 12 February 1907 – 7 November 1951)

Australian Frederick McEvoy piloted the British bobs at the 1936 Winter Olympics. He won the bronze medal in the four-man bob and placed fourth in the two-man event. He would be even more successful the following year, winning the world championship in both events, retaining the four-man title in 1938. His motor racing results are less impressive, a sixth place in the 1936 George Vanderbilt Cup probably being his best achievement.

Jackie Stewart (GBR, 11 June 1939)

Scotsman Jackie STEWART just missed qualification for the British team for the 1960

Olympics as a clay pigeon shooter. He fared much better in motor sport, winning the 1969, 1971 and 1973 Formula 1 World Championship.

Asser Wallenius (FIN, 23 July 1902 – 25 February 1971)

A participant in the 1924 Winter Olympics as a speed skater (finishing 5th in the 500 m), WALLENIUS' racing activities were confined to Finland, with several appearances in the Finnish GP, both before and after World War II.

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