



“SO THE REAL STORY WASN'T
RON DENNIS QUITTING F1.
THE REAL STORY WAS RON DENNIS ANNOUNCING
HE WANTED TO MAKE MCLAREN
A FERRARI RIVAL OFF THE RACETRACK.”

making history

Is McLaren's Ron Dennis the next Enzo Ferrari?



AS BOSS of one of the most successful Formula 1 teams of all time, McLaren's Ron Dennis often seemed to tolerate the media as

an irritating but necessary evil that existed purely to provide the publicity to generate the cash he needed to fund his all-consuming passion—racing. “We make history,” I recall him scolding a media colleague of mine who'd presumed to query the strategy behind some now-forgotten McLaren incident during a press conference at the Australian Grand Prix in the late 1980s. “You just write about it.”

I thought about that line as I sat in a spotless conference room at the futuristic McLaren Technology Centre in Woking, England, last April and listened while Dennis calmly announced he was stepping down as team principal and CEO of McLaren Racing. Now *this* was history in the making. All around me, hacks scribbled furiously in their notebooks and fumbled with their voice recorders: One of the most obsessively competitive individuals, in a sport awash with obsessively competitive individuals, was quitting F1 to concentrate on building roadgoing sports cars. No one could quite believe his ears.

“I watched the Malaysian Grand Prix on television, and I couldn't believe how easy it was,” Dennis told Fleet Street's skeptical F1 reporters. “I expected to have some hang-ups, some emotion, some withdrawal symptoms. I had nothing, and I realized at that point I wanted to change. No doubt Max and Bernie will not be displeased,” he said, in a sly reference to the rancorous row with F1's powerbrokers that had simmered through 2008, “but no one asked me to step down. It was completely my decision.”

Dennis will remain a shareholder of McLaren Group, owning 15 percent of the company. (Longtime partner Mansour Ojjeh holds 15 percent through his TAG Group Holdings operation, while Daimler owns 40 percent and the Kingdom of Bahrain 30 percent.) But his new day job is executive chairman of McLaren Automotive, the division he co-founded in 1989 to build the 240-mph, BMW-powered, Gordon Murray-designed F1 and since 1999 been responsible for the design, engineering, and assembly of the Mercedes-McLaren SLR.

Unlike the others in the room that day, I'd already been given an in-depth sneak-peek at P11, the mid-engine sports car Dennis was about to reveal (see our story, page 52, for all the details on the car, now officially named the MP4-12C). I'd already seen this was no

hurriedly conceived mockup, but a detailed and functioning prototype, the product of two years' work, and which boasted some truly impressive technology.

So the real story wasn't Ron Dennis quitting F1. The real story was Ron Dennis announcing he wanted to make McLaren a Ferrari rival off the racetrack.

Dennis concedes now is not the best time to be launching an expensive new supercar. But he points out the sales targets for the MP4-12C are modest—just 1000 units in the first full year, or about a three-percent share of where the supercar market was in terms of sales back in 2003. That car won't be fully launched until 2011, by which time the global economy should have recovered somewhat. And although the Mercedes-McLaren SLR program has been fractious one at times—Gordon Murray and his engineers at McLaren repeatedly clashed with their counterparts in Stuttgart during the car's development—Dennis says his company has learned a lot about manufacturing road cars from Mercedes.

As I toured through the gleaming, white SLR assembly hall at the McLaren Technology Centre, not more than a few hundred feet from the immaculate workshops where the Silver Arrows Grand Prix racers of Lewis Hamilton and Heikki Kovalainen are meticulously constructed, the handful of roadsters on the line were surrounded by the exactly same system and process paraphernalia you see at Bentley or Rolls-Royce. McLaren built just 100 of the stupendously fast, money-no-object McLaren F1s in five years. By the time the last of the 75 Stirling Moss editions rolls off the line this year, it will have built more than 2000 SLRs over the same period. “We know how to build cars now,” Dennis says.

Enzo Ferrari got into the road-car business to help fund his race team. And how does Ron Dennis justify McLaren's move into the road-car business? “I have consistently said that F1 teams inevitably come and go. We believe [making cars] is the future of the Group. There may be an economic situation in the future where McLaren Automotive supports the Formula 1 team.”

I think Enzo would have approved. ■