

SPORT

Extreme sport for the ears – or: Why Formula 1 driver Jenson Button finds it cool to protect his hearing

Someone who enters “golf and triathlon” under hobbies in questionnaires either has too much spare time or a very demanding job. The latter can be said of Jenson Alexander Lyons Button (Member of the British Empire). The man whom not just Formula 1 officials praise for his “smooth driving style” is among the world’s most successful active racing drivers. Most recently he stood next to current world champion Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) and his own McLaren-Mercedes teammate Lewis Hamilton on the winner’s podium at the Spanish Grand Prix. Like his two colleagues, Button has also been world champion. This was two years ago. When this magazine went to press, he was in a very respectable fourth place in the driver standings, and even in tough times he has repeatedly shown that he is still in the running. Like triathlon, motor racing is also an extreme sport. Not only is it fast and dangerous, it is also extremely loud. Nevertheless, or precisely for this reason, “I rely strongly on my hearing”, says Button. As the 50th ambassador for the *Hear the World* initiative, he wants to be a role model for hearing protection for as many people as possible.

Jenson started kart racing at just nine years of age, supported by his father, who was himself a successful driver in the British Rallycross series. At 18 Button became British Formula Ford champion and advanced to second place in the European driver standings. One year later he took third place in Formula 3, before competing in his first Formula 1 season at 20, achieving a respectable 12 World Cup points. Ever since his debut in the top class of motor racing, Button has been seen as a joker who, although possessing all the necessary ambition, rarely loses his sense of humor. His winning smile and boyish charm have made the Brit a role model and one of the most popular drivers in Formula 1 racing. Yet the 31-year-old has his racing skill and strategic ingenuity alone to thank for the fact that for more than ten years, he has repeatedly made it to the top of the most challenging automobile racing class in a number of different teams. Naturally, there are highs and lows that must be weathered. For instance in Monaco, where in 2009 he earned himself “a place in Formula One’s history books” (*The Express*) with a triumphant start-to-finish victory and the following year was written off shortly after the start as going “from hero to zero” (*The Sun*). Although the failure of his car shortly after the race started was “only” due to a mechanic’s error. What we don’t know is whether the mechanic in question is still working for Button’s team.

Of course, above all the sound of his McLaren Mercedes MP 4-26 is music to his ears, and these are also an essential part of the vehicle tool kit that Button needs for the “fine-tuning of the car before the race”: The crankshaft of the eight-cylinder, high-performance engine with 32 valves, which weighs no more than 100 kilograms, rotates at up to 18,000 revolutions per minute, and all this takes place just roughly an arm’s length from the back of the driver’s head. It is inconceivable for a driver or mechanic to expose himself to such a noise level without ear protection.

As a welcome change to the humming of car engines, privately Button listens to a music mix that we can justifiably call “eclectic”. Alongside the Pigeon Detectives, a young indie rock band from Leeds and a favorite of BBC1 DJ Steve Lamacq, Jenson likes above all ambitious R&B sounds such as the music of Grammy Award winner Maxwell, who set new standards in “neo soul” in the mid and late 1990s with his *Urban Hang Suite*.

“Despite the extreme sounds associated with motorsports, I still heavily depend on my hearing to ensure I perform at my best,” says Jenson Button. “Whether it’s fine tuning the car before the race or communicating with the team on the track. Hearing protection is essential to maintaining a good sense of hearing.” This is why he is particularly keen to be involved in the *Hear the World* mission: “The ability to hear well and connect with the world around us can have a huge impact on our quality of life, yet many people don’t understand the risks they expose their ears to every day. It’s essential that people understand the importance of protecting their hearing today to prevent hearing loss in later life, something I am very aware of in my line of work.”

Christian Arndt

Photo: Bryan Adams

