

FLAVIO BRIATORE PRESS ROOM

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FLAVIO BRIATORE - THE YEARS OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY PAY OFF IN 2005



Flavio Briatore arrived in Formula One in 1989 and freely admitted he knew nothing about the sport. Unlike recent entrants such as Colin Kolles, he had no pretensions at all. But he did know how to run a business, build effective teams and make money. At the time, he half-suspected that was more important. And so it turned out. Three world championship seasons later, Briatore has shown a lot of his doubters how little they knew.

In fact, Briatore has become one of the sport's legendary team principals. After his success with Benetton and Michael Schumacher in 1994 and 1995, he repeated the trick in 2005 with Fernando Alonso. It was even stranger as he was an Italian running a French team and all the other championships this century had been won by a Frenchman running an Italian team.

Briatore is the only person who doesn't seem surprised. He says it is all a matter of simple organisation and strength-in-depth: "I believe that a Formula One team is a company and like any other company you need to make sure that you have a structure and make sure that you have a group. And one man doesn't make the company do well or do badly. It is a group of people, which I created."

Renault appointed Briatore as managing director in March 2000, when it bought the Benetton team. He found a team that was a shadow of the one he had left behind only three years earlier. His first task was to cope with a team that was split between the UK factory at Enstone in Oxfordshire and the engine development centre in Viry, France. Combining the cultures was a key problem for Briatore to solve, as he admits: "I had the English and I had the French. I am Italian, so I was the third party. I believe that it is more important that you take the best from everybody and make sure that there is no one nationality driving the team – being like a judge or a referee all the time. In the beginning it was difficult to amalgamate all the different cultures, especially two cultures that for years were opposites. Renault was the engine supplier for the chassis and it was always like 'the chassis is no good'. You have a factory in Enstone and one in France, but in the end we are working for the same team. What I did was recreate a new team of about 10, 15 people. It was not in my mind to create a group from somebody else, but choose one by one the people working with me."

Briatore's first move was to sign Mike Gascoyne, who was then technical director at Jordan, and secure the future of long-time Benetton man Pat Symonds. Briatore recalls: "Mike at the time had basically no job. He was at Jordan, and Jordan was not happy, and before he signed he was talking with me all the time telling me that the situation there was not good. Pat was really one of the key people that I wanted to keep and from there we started. Mike came on board. There was nobody in the aerodynamic department and we did a good job, everybody together." With the basics sorted in England, Briatore turned to France. In February 2003 he got clearance from the Renault main board that he could sack Jean-Jacques His, the team's engine division managing director. It followed a disastrous 2001 season, in which Renault developed a revolutionary wide-angle V10 engine. It was an unsuccessful experiment and it cost His his job. But His was not shifted easily. He was never minded to take orders or even guidance from Briatore and it is certain that if the board had not backed him, then Briatore would have resigned himself.

For Briatore it was an essential part of restructuring and again part of a straightforward strategy, as he says: "It is quite simple this job. What you need is a decent car and an engine for racing. Racing every weekend I need the engine to finish the race, simple as that. This was the difference of opinion between Jean-Jacques His and myself. I believe the programme of Jean-Jacques and the open angle was going nowhere. Maybe in 2010 everybody decides to do it, but I was nominated to be in charge of the French department and I stopped the programme and I split with Jean-Jacques. It was difficult because he was a really big star at Renault. Mr Schweitzer was at the time the president of the company

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and he gave me full authority with Mr Faure to do whatever I wanted. This was incredible. I think it was a turning point because with that type of engine I was last in 2001 in Australia – a Minardi was in front of us. If I kept that engine I believe Renault would have been out of Formula One because there was no way they could have any kind of result.” As a result of His’s departure, Briatore’s responsibilities increased as he took charge of the engine side of the team. He says it was the only way to be successful: “Everybody expects an incredible performance in the future. You need the right product, the product is the car and the engine together. To have a successful product is to have the quickest car in respect to your competitor, and I made the decision, because sometimes the engineer is the engineer, he is not a business person and he is not the manager. Sometimes it is very difficult for an engineer to manage a department because engineering is emotionally optimistic, emotionally driven. I am not optimistic or emotionally driven. For me a number is a number. Every time you have a programme people tell you next week will be much better and, sure, if you put anybody in front of a computer then every day you will have a better product. In the meantime I need to race the car. I believe that you need to give freedom to the engineers to do the job, simple as that. You see someone who is chairman of IBM, next week he could be at a different company. I do not think the product makes any difference if you are managing the company well.”

Briatore singled out Cosworth’s Rob White as a replacement for His. He remembered the talented young man from when Benetton won the championship with a Ford Cosworth engine in 1994. It proved to be a masterstroke. “I needed somebody who understood the cost and you know Cosworth has very good people. I have known Rob for many years and I wanted to change the mentality, and England has super engineering guys. It is a tradition. If you want to make champagne you go to France, if you want to make Prosciutto you go to Italy and if you want to make technology on the engine side then you go to England. The people in France had been there for too many years and what I wanted to do was have somebody who was English or Italian, with a different approach to the problem.” He continues: “Rob has done an incredible job, because in three months he had started speaking French. And he had to deal with all the old people leaving when Jean-Jacques left. I believe that we can now see the result. This year we have finished with Fernando every race excluding Canada. In Canada we had an accident but apart from that we finished every race. Maybe we do not have the best engine in Formula One but I never want the best engine. But the best package.”

Briatore’s strategy is rooted in his business background. Although he has now spent over 15 years in Formula One he still believes his comparative lack of knowledge of the sport hands him an advantage over the likes of Ron Dennis and Sir Frank Williams. He explains: “I believe that is the advantage I have. I have worked in business before Formula One. It is something different and helps to keep your mind not completely involved in the day-to-day operation in Formula One. I always believe that if you come from the outside you can see things that other people don’t see. Look at Benetton. For me it was a miracle when we won a championship with that budget. In 1994 and 1995 Benetton was something unique and we have basically done the same movie, with the same director and a different actor.” He adds: “Every day we see drivers that try to be managers in Formula One and they do not succeed, from Lauda to Prost. When I came into Formula One I had no clue. It is impossible to understand the business completely because it is impossible to understand any business completely. You need to put the right people in the right area, working together and then give the freedom to these people to do the job, but with very tight control.”

Briatore’s lack of engineering knowledge doesn’t sit well with the other team principals, who are steeped in the sport, but it is not an issue for the man himself. He says: “I am not alone in not understanding. It is not that the engineering in Formula One is completely new. I feel when you develop something new, for me it is about the lap time. If everything is perfect and the car is quick, sometimes they tell me the numbers and I try to follow them but I do not know. For me, that part of the programme is already gone and I start on something else.”

Briatore joined the Benetton team in 1989 initially as commercial director, but his long-time mentor and boss, Luciano Benetton, soon appointed him team principal. In a story with remarkable parallels to what happened in 2005, he set about assembling a team of key personnel including Ross Brawn and Rory Byrne, and hired a promising young driver by the name of Michael Schumacher. The rest is history, with two drivers’ world championships and one constructors’ title following in 1994 and 1995. It was an incredible period for Briatore but he says it has all been very different this season: “These are different days and these are different experiences, it is a little bit different. You learn. I learnt a lot from the experience of 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997. Always in life there is a learning curve and always in life you have to try to understand why something happened. You should make sure that the negative part doesn’t happen and that you only keep the positive part. And I have a team that is very strong now, plus Benetton was a T-shirt maker so there was potentially a big limit on the budget as well. With Renault, it is one of the most successful companies in the world.”

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He says of the comparisons between Benetton in 1995 and Renault 10 years later: "It is completely different, different people. I believe the situation is completely different. If you see in our team there are maybe nine people who can coordinate very well and in this team the relationship between the driver and us is fantastic. Everything is working. These key people know there is not any ego trip for me. I had the ego trip in 1994 and 1995. We are still a small human team, we are looking at how we create a small efficient team, no doubt we know some people want to enjoy the championship. In our position I believe that everybody knows that our people are the best people in Formula One at working together."

Briatore says the departure of key people along the way, such as Mike Gascoyne and aerodynamicist, John Iley, have made no difference, so strong is the core team.

The parallels between 1995 and 2005 extend to the comparative budgets of Renault and its major opposition. Briatore says Renault spent around US\$120 million supporting the team and building the engine in 2005, almost half the yearly support expenditure of some of its car-making rivals. He says: "If last year I had 20 million dollars more I could not have made the car go quicker. The investment is always proportional to what you are doing. My motorhome is seven years old. I don't change my motorhome, I make the car go quicker. I prefer to invest every penny that I have in the business and if we are a little bit tight in other areas, I do not think it is a drama."

Briatore is wary of the dangers of complacency. After Schumacher won his second title in 1995, the German left for Ferrari. He took most of the key personnel with him, notably Brawn and Byrne. Ten years on, Briatore admits he took his eye off the ball: "I was doing too much in a very short time. I was really tired." He readily admits he took on too much and was too ambitious.

At the time he owned the Ligier team and the Minardi team, as well as his 30 per cent share in his own team Benetton. He says he bought Ligier to get the Renault engine, after he saw what Cosworth was offering for 1995 and didn't like it. Whatever the truth of it, it worked, and a second championship followed. But then it fell apart. Stretched too thin he was juggling too many balls. He believed he was a better juggler than he actually was and simply had too many balls in the air, and they came crashing down. When the stars left, it was a signal to regroup and recreate with new fresh talent. Instead he hired two veteran drivers who were by then chasing cash rather than victories. He says: "Maybe I made a mistake to put two old drivers in the team instead of creating a young driver like I did with Schumi. But it was the time of Gerhard [Berger] and Jean [Alesi]. The car was competitive because Gerhard was winning in 1997. In 1996 we finished second or third and the team was always finishing. I also wanted to cash out my businesses, as it was the time when everybody was talking about the Formula One stock market. I sold Ligier to Prost, I sold Minardi to Rumi and eventually I sold my 30 per cent in Benetton." All told Briatore banked close to US\$100 million for his shares in all three teams and it is the basis for the US\$200 million fortune he has today.

Briatore sold out and left the sport. Or so he thought, as he recalls: "For me it was the right moment to sell it. Because I could see that there was no way the sponsors would follow the team. I believe that it was very important for me to walk away from Formula One, but you know I did not walk away, because I took over Supertec." He explains why he left: "I was worried about the cost explosion and Luciano had different opinions, and this is normal because we had different involvements. I was very happy that the Benetton group bought my shares." Briatore sold out at the peak value for Formula One teams. Three years later, when Benetton sold it to Renault, it was valued at half as much.

Briatore spent most of the intervening three years running Renault Sport Engines, under the Supertec badge, and supplied Williams, Benetton and BAR with power between 1998 and 2000. He was also developing his driver management company with long-time associate Bruno Michel. It proved a shrewd move, eventually signing an unknown Spaniard called Fernando Alonso in November 2000.

Predictably the Benetton team went backwards in his absence. His successor David Richards was sacked barely a year into the job by Luciano Benetton, who then appointed his son Rocco to be team principal. Rocco Benetton proved to be out of his depth and when Renault decided to buy the team in March 2000, Renault's racing head, Patrick Faure, insisted Briatore was an integral part of the deal. Faure had been very impressed with the way that Briatore had run Renault Sport Engines and wanted him in on any Renault return to Formula One. But buying Benetton was not the only option. Briatore remembers: "The first possibility we discussed was starting a team from zero. We also started negotiations with other teams and one was Jordan and another was Benetton. And I met with Luciano and he was really pleased to sell the team at that point because after 1997 it was a little bit of a disaster and we put a deal

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together quickly in 2000 and we took over in 2001." He continues: "The relationship between Renault and me was always very good. I started working with Renault in 1995 and we were successful. I won the championship in 1995 with Benetton. I did a good job for them with Supertec, because Supertec was the only possibility for Renault to keep all the technology they had developed. People did not understand, people think that at Supertec I was only the commercial guy. Don't forget I kept all the Renault people in work, kept it all going, so when they decided to come back it was all there.

"I believe that the people knew me, they knew what I had done with Supertec and people knew I had been with Renault all the time. I was pleased to come back with Renault. Coming back with Renault was a really, really good chance to come back into this business, a big challenge. No one believed that Renault would be successful." Back in control, the tried and tested Briatore strategy rolled into action. He says: "I did exactly the same as I did in 1992, 1993, when I built up Benetton. I believe that when you are managing something, you have the personal responsibilities in the results of the company. I had to take the full responsibility for the results of the company if Renault did not succeed. Things like Schumacher and Benetton never happen twice in life, but we picked up the team again in 2001."

After arranging his management team and resolving the mistakes in the engine department, the next important decision that Briatore took was accepting testing restrictions in return for two hours extra practice on Friday mornings in 2003. He was widely criticised at the time for accepting a proposal designed to help cash-strapped teams, but Renault's subsequent performance in 2003 silenced the critics. It proved a great decision, culminating in Fernando Alonso's first win at that year's Hungarian Grand Prix. He remembers it as a crucial decision: "We had a revolution at that time, because for the performance we had, it was better to go with the smaller teams. Sometimes the big teams, McLaren, Ferrari and Williams never try to explore a new situation. I did not care if we stayed with Jordan. It was better for me and better for my company. By the time we had done the Friday testing it was terrific. I did it because the team was not ready and because I didn't have enough engines to do the job like McLaren and Ferrari were doing. I believed that the right strategy for everybody was to do the two hours. It was important for the drivers."

The ingredients that eventually resulted in the 2005 championship were gaining pace, but there was one setback. Mike Gascoyne left the team at the end of 2003, accepting a big offer from Toyota. Renault's cautious financial plan could not afford Gascoyne's new wages. Briatore says he never considered matching it for a moment. With him, nobody is greater than the team, as he says: "Mike did the job and then he got a fantastic offer from somebody else, it was completely stupid to stop him. But you know we restructured the company, a bit as we did at the time of Benetton." He adds: "In this kind of business people are always looking over to you to see if you are doing well, and what you pay, but it is not one guy that makes the difference in one company. You see, when Mike went to Toyota, I honestly did not see the difference in performance that I had before to the performance that I had with Mike. I did not see this difference. I try to create a group, maybe with people from outside of Formula One, instead of looking for an expensive man." He proved his theory by replacing Gascoyne with Bob Bell, a Renault man and Gascoyne's deputy. It was Bell who oversaw the development of the R25 that took the 2005 titles. He and Briatore also took what turned out to be a highly significant decision to halt development on the R24 at the end of 2004, in order to concentrate resources and personnel on the 2005 car. It was a decision made more difficult because the team was battling with BAR for second place in the championship at the time the decision was made, but Briatore says it was not a difficult choice.

He explains: "I don't think we stopped the car too early. Every year Renault has its target. We had our target, but the car was difficult to drive, we had the trouble with Jarno [Trulli], it was difficult for us to change the car completely at this point. So we finished third, but we stopped because we wanted to be competitive this year. I said at the time that only the future would show if I was right or wrong and the future was this year. Second or third place made no difference to us."

In 2005 all Briatore's plans came to fruition, sooner than even he had expected. The Renault R25 was fast and reliable. Briatore says: "You need a good car whichever driver you have. Everyone, from Ferrari to McLaren to us needs the right combination. First you need to have the right car. McLaren had the right car and were competitive. We had the right car and we were competitive. After that the difference is made by the driver, but also by the performance of the car as well. For example, I believe that this year Kimi has done a much better job than Montoya, but all the time someone is unlucky. I believe that this year Fernando has done a super job, a professional job, like Kimi." He adds: "The worst moment was the pressure we had from McLaren. We knew McLaren was quick and we didn't want to put any risk on the engine that we used for the last race, because the focus for me was the drivers' championship. It was difficult, because we had the lead to do the racing. That's why Fernando opened the door to Montoya [in Brazil],

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because we did not have to take any risk. The difference was always 24 or 25 points and in the end we kept it very well. Then we managed to win at the last race for the constructors'

and this was a little bit of a surprise. We had a good season because of the winter tests and Bridgestone helped us and McLaren helped us.

Briatore reserves particular praise for the way Rob White turned around the engine programme using machinery that was archaic in Formula One terms, culminating in the RS25 engine. He says: "In 2004 we were effectively racing with a Supertec, a very heavy engine and difficult to drive for Fernando and Jarno. This year we have a better Supertec, but really the first year that we start like everybody else is next year. Because next year we are like everybody else with a new engine."

With another championship won, Briatore's next job is to avoid the mistakes that brought Benetton to its knees in the years that followed Schumacher's titles. This time there is one important difference. If Alonso is lured away, Briatore has a host of young drivers from his management company to choose from. He says it is a scenario that could happen: "I believe that sometimes a driver wants to change teams not only for the money but to demonstrate to the world that they can win with another team. If somebody wants Fernando in 2007, this is the reason we have Heikki Kovalainen. We have young drivers and in the end you recover yourself."

He insists that breaking the bank to keep hold of Alonso is not his first priority. He explains: "I will find the money for the team to make sure the people work well and afterwards the driver, if it is possible. It is a fantastic situation in the team; it is like a family for him. If the car is competitive, I believe that we will find the driver to get the result. It is very difficult to imagine 2007 though, because we need to start to think about what will happen in 2006." Renault's comparatively small budget does not faze him. Indeed he believes it could prove advantageous, as he says: "If you have a budget you need to be efficient and I believe it is working very well. You lose the focus sometimes. It's like when you go into one restaurant and the whole menu is fantastic. If the budget is unlimited you can end up with nothing; you have a little bit of that, a little bit of this. Instead the way we work is like when you go shopping. You have the menu of the dinner you want for the evening. You go and buy the ingredients, and the result is always what you want. I believe if the company is efficient it will get the job done."

As well as running the team Briatore also plays a big role in the sport's politics.

Politically, he is in a potentially difficult and possibly contradictory position. As an employee of Renault he is charged with supporting the manufacturer's plans for a breakaway series, but he also enjoys an exceptionally close relationship with Bernie Ecclestone. But he refutes suggestions that there is any conflict of interest, as he says: "I manage a company and for me friendship is not a business. Business is business and Bernie is the same. I firmly believe we should have one championship and we are doing everything possible to have one championship in Formula One. That is the key. Bernie has created a big sports television event but it's very easy to destroy it. I believe we should not destroy what we have between manufacturers, team principals and Bernie. We need to work together and maybe change Formula One a bit. With Bernie there is always this open discussion and it makes no difference to the business decision and to what Renault do. Renault pays me. First is Renault."

He adds: "Bernie and I have worked together for 15 years we have done a lot of stuff together. I have a lot to learn from Bernie because Bernie is the kind of guy who is very, very quick. In my life I have worked with two major business people; one is Luciano Benetton and the other is Bernie Ecclestone. I have a good friendship with both, this is important when you are sitting next to somebody and doing business. I believe that I understand exactly what Bernie wants and I understand what Luciano wants."

Briatore has always been a major component part of Formula One as a show and believes his colourful lifestyle is part of his team's appeal to sponsors. In 2005 the team filled its sponsorship quota easily and the same is expected in 2006. He says: "When you decide to work with me I give something different, and maybe that is why some of the sponsors have followed me from the beginning.

"We need to understand our business is a little bit of showbusiness. It is not only technology, because we have women watching the race and kids watching the race. Nobody comes to me after the championship and says 'your gearbox was terrific or your suspension'."

Briatore continues: "I am part of the lifestyle. I know what the people want. I know what the marketing people want.

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It is about the lifestyle because every car is the same, so how do you choose one car or another one. Who is driving this car? What represents this car? Everyone has an engine in the car and tyres at the front and back. What is important for other sponsors is the market, because in the end we represent not only the team technologically, we are technology. If you win the championship it is because you have the technology. It is the show and the lifestyle. The television must be about your team and not somebody else. Interview us and our driver and nobody else."

It is an area of the sport that only Briatore had fully grasped before Dietrich Mateschitz's Red Bull came onto the scene in 2005. Other team principals have neither the same appeal nor methods. Briatore says: "I think that they have a different background. For me Benetton was already lifestyle and for me a product was also part of the lifestyle. We are something different. When you go to the race it is about colour. Renault's colour was yellow, so we changed the corporate colour to blue because it is more modern. When you see the race you see red and then you see blue, because the people are dreaming with us. It is good for me, good for the team and good for Formula One." Briatore sees results as the be-all and end-all and his business background makes it difficult for him to accept team principals who he believes are not doing their jobs. He says: "Like any company, it is about good or bad results and you never see a good manager have a bad result. You never see a bad manager have a good result. In normal life, someone with a bad result is out. Sometimes in Formula One you see a bad result and you see that people are still there, this is the difference. I think there are a lot of jobs more difficult than to be a Formula One team principal."

The championship victories in 2005 have temporarily stopped speculation about Renault's future in Formula One. The man who writes the cheques is Carlos Ghosn, who replaced Louis Schweitzer as Renault chairman at the start of 2005. Ghosn earned the title of 'Le Costcutter' for slashing production in his previous role, in charge of Nissan. According to Briatore, Ghosn is motivated by results and believes the current ones are too good to ignore: "He is a businessman and he knows the numbers and what he wants is results. Just at the moment Formula One is a good investment for Renault. The moment there are not good results, it is not a good investment. Nobody wants to be involved in a bad investment. The future of Renault in Formula One depends a little bit on the future of Formula One as well. For sure Carlos, with these kind of results, is a big support, because Carlos is quite determined and he is quite simple to understand – he wants the result."

Briatore's own future is considerably more uncertain. He had previously said that he would leave at the end of 2005, but he now seems intent on continuing what the team achieved this year. He admits: "I do not know how long I will stay in Formula One, but just at the moment I stay in Formula One. I make sure that I stay in Formula One and I make sure that I have a good result. This business is very competitive and has competitive people and sometimes people lose the focus, but I enjoy working with this group of people. It is part of my life now, an important part of my life. I respect everyone. For instance, I want to beat Ron and if Ron is beaten by me he will be more upset than if Frank beats him. I'm still the new guy, after 15 years, and for me it is fine. I have respect for everybody involved." But he adds: "For me winning the championship in two different teams is fantastic, because it has never been done before. I have done something that nobody else has done. This is part of the motivation."

Chronology

November 1988: Flavio Briatore, the head of the Benetton clothing brand in the USA, is invited to the Australian Grand Prix at Adelaide as a guest of Luciano Benetton. It is his first Formula One race.

January 1989: Briatore is appointed to the role of commercial director at Benetton Formula. He immediately clashes with team manager, Peter Collins.

October 1989: Briatore is instrumental in hiring John Barnard as technical director.

October 1989: Alessandro Nannini scores Briatore's first win in Japan, after Ayrton Senna's disqualification. It is only the second win in Benetton's history.

July 1991: Briatore fires technical director John Barnard and replaces him with Tom Walkinshaw who buys a third share in the team. Briatore also buys 30 per cent, with the Benetton family owning the remaining 40 per cent.

August 1991: Luciano Benetton sacks Peter Collins and promotes Briatore to team principal. His appointment is widely criticised as a man who has no interest in the sport, freely describing himself as a "T-shirt salesman".

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September 1991: Briatore and Walkinshaw sign Michael Schumacher as number two driver from under the nose of Eddie Jordan. Incumbent Roberto Moreno is sacked.

November 1991: Briatore and Walkinshaw hire Ross Brawn as technical director to replace incumbent, American Gordon Kimball.

August 1992: Schumacher wins his first race at the Belgian Grand Prix, exactly a year after his debut. He finishes third in the championship that year.

March 1994: Schumacher wins the opening two races of the 1994 season, in Brazil and Japan, to take an early lead in the world championship.

May 1994: Schumacher wins his third consecutive race of the season at the San Marino Grand Prix in a dreadful weekend where his only title challenger Ayrton Senna is killed.

August 1994: Briatore confirms his purchase of Ligier, in an attempt to secure Renault engines for Benetton. It works and Benetton ends up with the same Renault engines as major rivals Williams for 1995.

November 1994: Schumacher wins his and Briatore's first world championship in highly controversial circumstances, colliding with Damon Hill at the final race.

August 1995: Briatore moves Walkinshaw to run Ligier. Schumacher announces he is leaving Benetton to join Ferrari.

September 1995: Briatore signs Ferrari drivers Gerhard Berger and Jean Alesi for 1996.

October 1995: Schumacher wins his second consecutive world championship in dominant fashion at the Pacific Grand Prix, at Aida. Benetton also wins the constructors' championship.

March 1996: Frustrated at interference from Guy Ligier, Walkinshaw leaves the Ligier team to buy Arrows and sells his shares back to Briatore.

October 1996: Briatore buys a controlling share of the Minardi team and attempts to sell it to British American Tobacco.

November 1996: Briatore is rocked when Ross Brawn and Rory Byrne leave to join Schumacher at Ferrari. He appoints Nick Wirth as chief designer and promotes Pat Symonds.

February 1997: Briatore concludes a deal with Alain Prost for Ligier, having pushed the deal forward by buying Guy Ligier's remaining stake in the team.

September 1997: Briatore is sacked by Luciano Benetton and sells his 30 per cent stake in the team to the Benettons for US\$50 million. He is replaced by David Richards, as part of a restructuring of the team's management. Days after his departure, he snatches an opportunity to help Williams and Benetton keep Renault power for 1998. He buys the Renault Sport factory and keeps the operation running under the name Supertec.

November 1997: After failing to sell Minardi to BAT, Briatore sells his share in the team to fellow stakeholders Gabriele Rumi and Gian Carlo Minardi.

December 1997: Briatore forms a driver management company with partner Bruno Michel.

October 1998: Luciano Benetton sacks David Richards and installs his son Rocco as team principal.

November 1999: Technical director Nick Wirth is sacked by Benetton.

March 2000: Renault pays US\$96 million to buy the Benetton team from Luciano Benetton, half the value of it in 1997. Rocco Benetton resigns and Renault immediately installs Briatore as managing director. Briatore sells Renault Sport back to the company.

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July 2000: Briatore announces the signing of Mike Gascoyne as technical director, to replace Wirth. Gascoyne is put on gardening leave by Jordan and starts work at Benetton in 2001.

September 2000: Briatore hires Jenson Button as number two driver for 2001 and 2002.

November 2000: Briatore's flourishing driver management career sees him sign a young unknown Spanish driver. Fernando Alonso is 19 years old when he joins the Briatore stable. Alonso is immediately farmed out to Minardi for 2001.

January 2001: Briatore persuades Formula One's foremost electronics expert Ted Czapski to return from Ferrari.

August 2001: Giancarlo Fisichella's Renault finishes third in the Belgian Grand Prix, an incredible achievement for the team after a disastrous year of engine and chassis problems. Briatore moves Fisichella to Jordan, taking up his option on Jarno Trulli for 2002.

January 2002: The Benetton name disappears from Formula One and is replaced by Renault.

July 2002: Briatore angers the British press at the French Grand Prix by announcing he is replacing Jenson Button with Alonso, the team's test driver, for 2003.

February 2003: Briatore sacks Jean-Jacques His. His remit is effectively doubled as Renault Sport puts him in charge of the Viry engine facility in France as well as the chassis side of the team at Enstone.

May 2003: Renault scraps its unsuccessful wide-angle 111-degree engine and reverts to a traditional 75-degree angle V10 for 2004.

August 2003: Alonso wins his first Grand Prix in Hungary. He is the youngest winner in Formula One history and justifies Briatore's decision to put him in the team.

December 2003: Gascoyne accepts a big money deal and leaves to join Toyota. Briatore promotes deputy technical director Bob Bell to succeed him.

January 2004: Briatore hires Cosworth technical director Rob White to run the engine department at Viry, France.

May 2004: Jarno Trulli wins the Monaco Grand Prix for Renault, but his relationship with Briatore breaks down dramatically and his contract is terminated before the end of the season.

September 2004: Briatore hires Jacques Villeneuve for three races, an unsuccessful move. 2004 car development is halted in preparation for 2005 and the team loses second place in the constructors' championship to BAR Honda.

April 2005: Briatore oversees four successive wins at the start of the season, as Alonso takes a dominant lead in the championship.

September 2005: Alonso clinches the world championship with third place in Brazil, to become Formula One's youngest champion.

October 2005: Renault beats McLaren to the constructors' championship at the final race of the year in China. It is a personal triumph for Briatore, who will stay on in 2006 despite some reports to the contrary.