

Fast and furious

Last week Slavica Ecclestone sparked off what looks set to be London's biggest ever divorce battle from her husband, veteran Formula One boss Bernie. But since much of his fortune is in the volcanic Croat's name, and she seems to be revving up for a fight, is billionaire Bernie heading for a blowout? **Mark Hollingsworth** gets the inside track on the duelling Ecclestons



Petra and Tamara Ecclestone at a premiere in London in July

At every Grand Prix, set apart from the Formula One trucks, a silver trailer with tinted windows and airlock doors is parked at the most prominent part of the paddock. It is from inside this luxury bus that Bernie Ecclestone, the reclusive billionaire who runs Formula One, surveys his kingdom away from prying eyes and ears. From here, like a medieval monarch, Ecclestone conducts his business, receiving an endless stream of visitors. Some want favours. Others redress. Deals are done. Advice is given and sought. Very little is written down. A promise and a handshake are sufficient.

If you catch a rare glimpse of Ecclestone outside this air-conditioned inner sanctum, he is instantly recognisable. Barely 5ft 4in tall, with his trademark green-tinted glasses, he strides around the paddock making brief, curt comments into a mobile phone while carrying an attaché case stuffed with £50 notes and US dollars. Despite his neat, well-cut clothes, he has deep lines embedded on both sides of his face and speaks in a clipped South London accent. He has the air of the archetypal used-car salesman and looks out of place among the glamour and beautiful people of the circuit.

But inside Formula One, Ecclestone is admired, respected and feared. He is admired for building, virtually single-handedly, one of the world's richest and most successful sports. Grand Prix now resemble open-air rock concerts (only the World Cup and the Olympics are more profitable). He is respected for the power and control that he wields, personally promoting 14 of the 17 Grand Prix. And he is feared because of the air of menace and ruthlessness that surrounds him. Formula One officials are often scared of him. 'What, my friend, does "unscrupulous" mean?' he once said. 'I don't understand the word.' Known as 'Little Caesar' and 'The Godfather', he can be a generous and loyal friend, but is not a man to cross: 'If somebody does something bad to me, I will remember.' And yet he is capable of a disarming, if black, humour. 'I am not intending to die and I don't advise anyone to try to kill me unless they come well-equipped.'

Today the workaholic Ecclestone, 78, is sitting on a fortune of £2.4 billion and is Britain's 24th richest man. He is the ultimate deal-maker, but now he faces what could be the →

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