

Foot Hard Down. Scheckter`s L&M campaign

by Wolfgang Klopfer

You cannot win a race on the first lap. You can only lose it, they say.

In 1973 a 23 year old South African proved otherwise. Jody Scheckter stunned the American road racing scene when he captured the L&M Championship for Formula 5000 cars. And he did so in spectacular style.

Scheckter began his racing career in 1969 with touring cars and Formula Fords. Two years later he came to England to cut his teeth in the tough British junior racing classes. After winning both in Formula Ford and Formula 3 the South African was signed by McLaren to race the works Formula 2 car in 1972. He won at Crystal Palace, England, in May and finished 8th overall in the European Championship. In October Scheckter had his first Formula 1 race in a McLaren M19A in the United States Grand Prix at Watkins Glen. He impressed, qualifying 8th out of 31 drivers. In the race he ran in fourth place until a spin in the wet dropped him back to ninth.

McLaren could guarantee Scheckter only selected Grand Prix drives in 1973, so he decided to "make some money" in racing as he wrote in his autobiography "Jody" (Haynes, 1976). The L&M Championship was an ideal playground for a hungry young driver. It offered not only a 535,000 dollars total purse for the nine rounds in 1973 (single race wins paying up to 20.000 dollars) but also the experience of 500 Chevrolet horses under the right foot.

Scheckter joined the team of Irishman Sid Taylor who had run Peter Gethin and Brian Redman successfully in F5000 in previous years. The car was a new Trojan T101 which based on the 1972 McLaren F2, a racer Scheckter knew well. In its preview, "Autoweek" regarded the South African as a 25-1 outsider for the Championship stating that "his new car and the relatively young team won't get going right away". The magazine saw defending Champion Graham McRae (McRae GM1) as 5-1 favourite, followed by David Hobbs (Hogan Lola T330, 8-1), Skip Barber (Mason March 73A, 13-1), Brett Lunger (Hogan Lola T330, 13-1), Brian Redman (Haas/Hall Lola T330, 15-1), Frank Matich (Repcos Matich A51, 20-1) and Peter Gethin (Shierson Chevron B24, 25-1).

When the series opened at Riverside in April, Scheckter broke the lap record in qualifying and put the white Trojan on pole. In the race he fought troublesome brakes and finished second behind Redman`s Lola who would miss the next two races due to Ferrari Sports Car commitments. A week later at Laguna Seca Scheckter comfortably won his heat and was on pole for the final. At the start the South African tried something new. In his book he wrote: "It was in this event that I hit upon my "L&M Special" starting technique. All the races in the series used a rolling start, which meant that the cars were doing maybe 100 miles an hour when the starter dropped the flag. My plan was to put the absolute maximum effort into those opening laps, while everyone else was still getting warmed up." Gordon Kirby reported on the Laguna Seca race for "Autosport". He wrote: "The Trojan came understeering into view on that first lap, with Scheckter whirling on the lock and swinging the car into late apexes, then catching it in a series of little slips as the car would try to oversteer on the straight." For 45 laps Scheckter withstood constant pressure from F5000 masters Peter Gethin and David Hobbs and finally won by two seconds.

The South African made it two in a row at Michigan where he completely dominated proceedings. Nearly a second faster than the rest in qualifying, Scheckter took his heat and sprinted away in the final. "Autosport" noted: "Again he was pressing the Trojan to its limits well before the others seemed to realise that the race was now on, and even before the end of the opening lap he had pulled out a huge three and a half seconds margin." Would the newcomer take all that L&M money? "It will be nice when Donohue gets into the series so he will have someone to beat", someone at Michigan told "Autoweek".

Yes, Mark Donohue would join the regulars at Mid-Ohio in a Lola T330 powered by an AMC engine entered, of course, by Roger Penske. But the American racing legend could only manage a distant third in his brand new car at the Ohio track. Scheckter won again from pole. In the final he had to fend off - both cars actually touched - a determined challenge from Brian Redman. After the Michigan round there were rumours that Scheckter was using a Chevrolet with a special cylinder head. But the white Trojan passed a post-race inspection at Mid-Ohio without trouble. Obviously the South African was an outstanding talent. David Abrahamson wrote in his "Autoweek" column: "He is an extraterrestrial phenomenon. Halley's comet more than a decade too early, a pulsar, a quasar, an extragalactic proton-proton reaction, a distant solar system gone stark raving nova".

Scheckter's performance at Watkins Glen was definitely from outer space. At first the Glen weekend looked like a disaster: The Trojan was badly damaged when Scheckter hit the armco in a fast downhill lefthander. Sid Taylor quickly rented Bob Lazier's Lola T330. When Scheckter entered the track with his new mount, F.David Stone was watching for "Motoring News": "Shattering is the only word to describe Scheckter's effect on the opposition. Within minutes he was equalling his performance in the Trojan and lap by lap he continued to lower his times. They were shaking their heads in disbelief when he finally stopped with a lap of 1:41.3 over 3.5 seconds under the Formula 5000 record and beating the F1 race record of 1:41.6 set by Jackie Stewart in last year's United States Grand Prix. Scheckter's performance on its own was remarkable but by comparison with all the rest it was miraculous. He was a full two seconds faster than the nearest opposition".

In the race "Scheckter was doing exactly what he has done in the past three L&M races. and had pulled out nearly four seconds by the end of lap two", Gordon Kirby reported for "Autosport" noting also that "it looked very different from the F5000 Scheckter we have come to know. There were none of those great twitches and squirts across the road, instead we saw a car that appeared to be easily and definitely guided." F.David Stone supposed in his "Motoring News" story how much better a car the Lola must be for "Scheckter's aggressive tail hungout style as seen with the Trojan was not evident with the Lola."

The sixth round at Elkhart Lake looked like another Scheckter runaway affair. The South African planted his rebuilt Trojan firmly on pole from Lunger, Hobbs and Redman. But a slow puncture in the heat meant that Scheckter had to start the final from 8th position. He was soon in second place but could not overtake Redman's Lola and had to fend off rapid Canadian Eppie Wietzes as well. The trio finished within three seconds. Gordon Kirby wrote in "Autosport": It was easily the best and brightest F5000 race that America has ever seen."

In the five weeks since Watkins Glen Jim Hall, of Chaparral fame, had modified Redman's car extensively. "Autoweek" took a close look: "Suspension points were relocated allowing them to use lighter three-coil springs, the radiator housings were ventilated as was the bell housing, a new wing was fabricated which produced the greatest downforce with the least drag."

Meanwhile Scheckter had persuaded his team to buy him a Lola after he had "a nice comfortable ride and easy victory" at the Glen as he told in his autobiography. The new car appeared for the Road Atlanta race, and according to Scheckter "gave us nothing but trouble." It blew its engine in the heat. So Scheckter started the final in his faithful Trojan from the back of the grid and climbed to fourth when the chequered flag fell. Redman won by 28 seconds from Donohue and Gethin. Scheckter 120 points vs Redman 90 points.

There were still two races. Scheckter takes up the story in his book: "By August, the team had hit quite a low point from which we never really recovered. Redman and I were now in a big battle for championship points, so I was quite relieved to clinch the title by finishing third at Pocono. That was one weekend I wouldn't like to live through again. I'd had two crashes in the Lola, one of which knocked me about quite badly and left me with a really sore neck. In the rush to rebuild the car, there wasn't time to insulate the cockpit from the engine bay, so I drove the race in near agony, supporting my head with one hand, steering the car with the other, and all the time getting slowly roasted. I was totally exhausted at the end, and had to be lifted almost bodily out of the car."

Redman won again at Pocono and took the final round at Seattle as well. Scheckter closed the season with a third again knifing through the pack after a heat DNF. The South African had 144 points in the final standings, 14 more than Redman. "Car and Driver" made a point in its L&M review: "The championship deciding factor may have been Scheckter's perfect attendance record - there was just no way that Redman could make up for the two times he was truant."

Scheckter's earnings totalled 115,200 dollars. He had made money out of his racing and he had proved himself in powerful single seaters.

The experience served him well. From 1974 onwards, Scheckter was a fulltime F1 driver for Tyrrell, Wolf and Ferrari. In 112 outings he finished in the Top Three 33 times and captured the World Championship in 1979. In 1980 he retired from the sport.