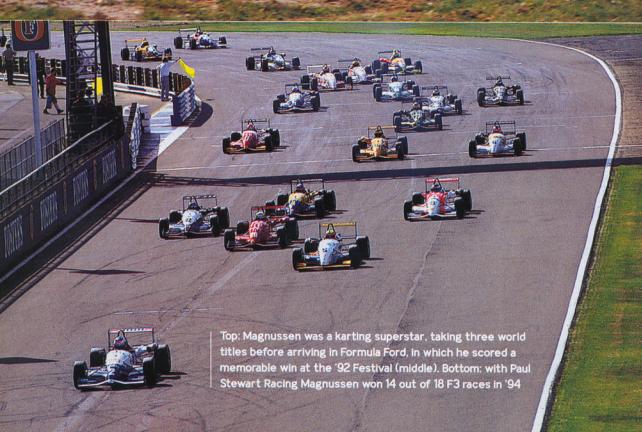




Top: Magnussen was a karting superstar, taking three world titles before arriving in Formula Ford, in which he scored a memorable win at the 92 Festival (middle). Bottom: with Paul Stewart Racing Magnussen won 14 out of 18 F3 races in '94



meant opportunities came to him.

His F3 performances won him a test contract with McLaren, but he got very few F1 miles while spending two up-and-down years in the DTM with Mercedes in 1995 and '96. By now Magnussen's unconventional approach was beginning to cause him problems – people said he was unfit, that he did not work hard enough out of the car.

"The thing I remember about Jan," says McLaren principal Ron Dennis, "was that he never seemed to know why he wasn't quick, and he was the most disorganised grand prix driver I've ever known."

"I remember once we were at an airport. Jan had packed his passport into his suitcase and when he opened the suitcase to find it, it looked like it had been packed by a four-year-old. It looked like he'd gone round the room and just thrown everything into it – including the dirty washing. And none of his toiletries were in a bag."

"People like that are chaotic in their thinking. I thought, 'There's no way he's going to make it.'"

Even so, Magnussen made a highly accomplished F1 debut at the 1995 Pacific Grand Prix at Aida in Japan. Before the race he had never done more than four consecutive laps in a McLaren. But, filling in at the last minute for a sick Mika Häkkinen, he finished 10th, right behind team-mate Mark Blundell.

"I caught him with a few laps to go," Magnussen recalls. "I should have had a go at him. Ron commented on it after the race, but I would have had to take a chance and it was important for me to show I could be sensible. In any other situation I would have found a way, but we weren't near the points, he was my team-mate and I didn't want to take him off, and it was my first race and it was very important for me to finish. Everyone was on at me about not being fit. And I just wanted to show everyone that I was fit."

Jackie and Paul Stewart always intended to employ Magnussen when they founded their grand prix team in 1997, but neither they nor he realised that his performance in Aida disguised the fact that he was seriously ill-equipped for a full-time drive with a novice F1 team.

Magnussen, by his own admission, was "young and naive" and not prepared mentally for F1. He had not yet realised that talent alone is not enough, nor that he lacked the experience to cope with the technical complexities of a grand prix car. Having signed a four-year contract, he neither realised how vulnerable

his position could be, nor how important it was to demand the changes he wanted.

Operationally, Stewart was a long way from being a top F1 team, and pre-season testing was a disaster. Barrichello, Magnussen's teammate, had five years of F1 experience to fall back on. Magnussen did not.

"If it wasn't the car," remembers chief engineer Andy Le Fleming, "the engine was blowing up every five minutes. For someone who needed to learn as much as possible, it wasn't a reliable enough package."

Eventually Stewart set up a two-day test at Estoril before the start of the season for Jan to pound round and learn the car inside out.

He managed five laps before the front suspension broke, sending him into the wall at Turn 2 at more than 160mph. A suspension arm pierced the chassis and tore into Magnussen's overalls, mercifully only grazing his leg.

Magnussen believes now it was a mistake to accept the Stewart drive. "Looking back," he says, "I'm sure another season or two under Ron's guidance as test driver for McLaren would have been better. I'm not afraid to admit that I was very, very young – not only in years but also mentally. But then who is going to turn down an F1 race seat?"

For the first two thirds of that season Magnussen was always slower

than Barrichello, usually by a considerable margin. With virtually no pre-season testing, he did not understand the car, nor could he pinpoint what he needed from it.

Some believe this was because he had never had to struggle before and so had never learned how to make a bad car better. "That's not completely incorrect," Magnussen says, "but I won't take the full blame for it. I was paired up with an engineer who, between us, we didn't make a good team. He wasn't a bad engineer – it just didn't work with me. I needed somebody who would at least try to get into my head and see what I was thinking. It was all about technology and engineering with him. At the time I saw that as less of a problem than it was."

Le Fleming agrees that Jan did not get the level of engineering support he needed. And, although the Stewarts tried to lift their struggling driver, some say they went about it the wrong way. In one infamous



Magnussen switched to sportscars with Panoz. Here he wins in Washington DC in 2002

incident Jackie Stewart decided to take Magnussen for a driving lesson. "I've got loads of respect for Jackie," Magnussen says. "But driving a car now is very different from driving one 30 years ago."

"If you want to try to build up a driver, you don't take him to Oulton Park, force him to drive in a way that is unnatural to him and then advertise the fact that you went faster. I had to drive my own way to be fast. It made me look stupid. I couldn't believe it. I just thought, 'Why is he doing this to me now?'"

Magnussen says it was a shock to find himself struggling so much.

'Jan was the most disorganised grand prix driver I have ever known'

But late in the season, just when it seemed as if he would never get it right, it all came together.

"I got miles in the car – most of them in races – and got into a good rhythm," he recalls. "I got more and more comfortable and I got to a point with my engineer where it started to work. Everything started to come together and then my confidence started to build up."

At Spa he was impressive in wet but drying conditions. The momentum built with a strong performance at Monza, and then came Austria, where Barrichello and Magnussen finished fifth and sixth.

"Rubens had been used to not registering Jan on his radar," Le Fleming says. "All of a sudden Jan was going quicker. Rubens would pull his belts tighter and then Jan would go quicker again. We thought, 'My God, he's got it. We might have something here.'"

For the rest of that year Magnussen looked like the grand

getting lost. You know, 'Where is the problem?'"

The decision to sack Magnussen hit him hard – at 24 his life's dream was over. "I went back to Denmark and was ready to pack it all in," he says. "I was disappointed in myself, but also with people in F1. I thought about quitting. Then David Sears [Magnussen's manager] called me about testing in the US with Panoz."

"It wasn't something I really wanted to do but it was such a weird, wonderful car. I felt a good sense of team spirit; good people around me. I felt that people wanted me there. I wasn't just somebody they could cut later on."

At Panz he rebuilt his career as one of the world's best sportscar drivers. He and team-mate David Brabham beat the all-conquering Audis five times in three years – the only times the German cars ever lost in that period. Last year he won his class at Le Mans in a Chevrolet Corvette. He's driving for Chevy again in '05, alongside a Toyota deal in the Danish Touring Car series, which he won in 2003 for Peugeot.

"I didn't understand until I began working with Panoz that I was so unhappy in F1," Magnussen says. "I realised how much I enjoyed racing, and how little I enjoyed all the bullshit of F1. So I didn't try at all to come back to F1. That's not to say I wouldn't try it again."

"I really wanted to be successful, but I didn't know what I had to do to be successful. I've learnt that since then. But the more I thought about it the more I realised it wasn't only me. It was many things around me."

No one who has worked with Magnussen doubts he had the talent to become an F1 ace. Maybe he would have made it if he had come to it a little older and wiser – done some time in Indycars, say, like Montoya. For Le Fleming, though, it might not even have taken that.

"He's definitely a quick guy, and if you had somebody who was hard enough to beat him up about working at it then I think he could have done well. If somehow Jan had got a Williams drive in '97 or something, I think he'd be a bloody star."

Andrew Benson is motorsport editor of www.bbc.co.uk/sport



Another race with Stewart, another DNF