

My experience in the MINI Celebrity Challenge at the 2002 Melbourne Grand Prix.

By Tom Browell

The telephone call

Arrived home on Sunday (17th February) after the usual hectic weekend's activity to find an unusual message on the answering machine left by "Sherryn from Qantas corporate marketing". I thought it was just someone doing a survey, but my wife Zoë asked if I had entered any contests. I remembered entering something on the Qantas web page, "to win a MINI - I think". I called Sherryn back who said, "Do you remembering entering a competition on the Qantas web site? You are one of five finalists." I had to ask "a finalist in what?" and Sherryn started to explain about the prize: fly to Melbourne, participate in the MINI Celebrity Challenge driver training and maybe get picked for the celebrity race; in any case, stay the week and go to the Melbourne Grand Prix with corporate hospitality – for two people. All the while, I'm giving Zoë the thumbs-up and she thinks I've won a new MINI.

The preparation

A package arrives on Monday evening by courier, which confirms that the whole thing is not some wicked hoax. In it are pages of terms and conditions, prize details and forms to fill in. I fill in the forms, fax them back to Sherryn and follow up with a phone call the next day. Everything was now confirmed. I leave the next Sunday night for Melbourne and will be away for the whole week. Zoë has decided to join me on Friday to watch the race. Meanwhile, we have to work out who will mind the kids (Rosy, 5, and Harry, 3) for the weekend – we have never left them both for this long. Zoë's parents are away so it's up to my side of the family, and as usual my sisters (Melony and Clara) along with my Dad and Jan, all agree to help out. Our friends, Jacqui and Mark and Raf and Monique, also offer help. So an action-packed babysitting time-table was drawn up - Zoë and I felt the kids would be fine. I load up Grand Prix 3 on my computer (after not having played it for ages) and set to work memorising the Albert Park circuit

And he's off

On Sunday (24th February) night I fly down to Melbourne on my own. Zoë and kids leave me at the airport, I buy a new scientist and a copy of the Grand Prix program to read. The flight is on time and I get a business class upgrade. I have a bit of trouble with the table and seat controls, but the wine is nice. I catch a taxi to the hotel and check into a fantastic one bedroom apartment suite. There's an envelope with the next day's schedule and a few other details waiting for me. The letter is from Sascha and Laura who organise the celebrity race. I call Sascha just to say I've arrived; she says all I need to do is be on the bus at 7.15am. After going out to buy Thai takeaway and some basic supplies (weetbix, milo, milk, coffee, tea and cordial), I watch TV and try to get to sleep – it's not easy.

The first day – judgement day

I wake up just before the alarm, my heart already pounding. A shower, bowl of weetbix and a coffee calms me down a bit. I'm ready half an hour early, so I just read and listen to my walkman until 7am before heading down to the lobby. Fergus, Chris and Cathy are already there and we introduce ourselves after we all realise that we're the "finalists" - there are only four of us, as one "finalist" has pulled out at the last minute. In the bus, there's polite conversations on the way, but I can tell each of us is really thinking, "wonder how good these others are".

At Sandown we find our way to the celebrity race lunch room and change rooms. We're fitted out with a loan racing suit. The "celebrities" arrive shortly afterwards and we're all ushered into the classroom.

After the introductions and explanation of procedures, the four of us "finalists" are taken out and put into BMW325s and the fun begins. Derek Walls and Jenni Thompson are our trainers. The first lesson is on steering technique and I'm surprised that the technique I normally use is completely wrong. We exercise our technique by racing around a slalom course of witches hats.

Now to see who's the best!! To my despair, it isn't me. After four runs through the course, the times are all very close, but the order is Fergus, Tom, Chris and Cathy, with times between 21.5 and 23 seconds.

Then it's on to braking. We do several straight line braking exercises and then some braking and steering exercises. Once again it seems Fergus is best, knocking down the fewest witches hats. I feel I've learnt a lot already, and since it seems Fergus is going to win the "major prize", I decide I should make the most out of the rest of the day.

At lunch, I decide to sit with some of the celebrities (might be my only chance, I think), and I chat to Michael Caton and Mike Hammond and a few others. In the afternoon, trainers Peter McKay and Derek take us for laps around the Sandown track. The trainers can talk to us on the radio. I don't know how many laps we do - it must be around 30. I can't believe I'm allowed to drive as fast as I can in such a great car, so I give it everything.

Still it seems Fergus is faster, though he's getting very cocky, tailing the trainer's car by a few inches and pretending to overtake. I am concentrating on the formula we are given at the start: SMOOTHNESS + ACCURACY = SPEED. I'm sad when we have to return to the pits - the fun has ended.

All the while, the celebrities are whizzing around the track in the MINIs. The four of us have to wait for the big decision - who will come back tomorrow. I feel sure it's between Fergus and me.

Because it's been stressed all day that the fastest will not necessarily win, I still feel hopeful.

Sherryn from Qantas arrives (she will hand out the runner-up prize). The trainers are gone for 15 minutes before they come back and usher us into the classroom. Four show bags are sitting on the front table. Shawn Ticehurst from MINI first announces that Chris and Cathy will be "drinking wine and enjoying the race from the sidelines". Then Sherryn gets up to announce the runner-up; as she does, I catch her eye. Something in the way she looks at me for that split second tells me I'm not the runner-up. Sherryn announces that the runner-up is Fergus.

He is as dark as I am happy - and believe me, I'm happy, overcome with all sorts of feelings. I jump up and thank everyone and shake everyone's hand. Chris, Cathy and Fergus leave and I'm left behind - now part of the celebrity group.

A CAMS medical is the final hurdle. After making a few excited phone calls and a cup of tea, I try to relax (I don't want to fail the medical due to high blood pressure). I can't believe I've done it - I'm in the celebrity race. Kritsa Vendy, Karina Brown, Jon Stevens and I pack into a car to drive into town for the medical. My heart is still pounding, but I pass the medical. That's it - no more hurdles.

The news of my success has travelled fast; people are ringing me and airline tickets are being booked (by my Dad for him and my sister Melony to come and watch). I call home to talk to the

kids, Harry is the only one not impressed “when I’m a dad, I’m going to drive a *Ferrari* in the celebrity race”. Back at the hotel, I’m completely and utterly stuffed. After dinner in my room and more phone calls, I finally get to sleep.

Day two – and now for the MINI

The next morning I breakfast with the celebs – they are all very friendly and excited for me. Once at Sandown, I get the rest of my gear (helmet, gloves and shoes as well as MINI t-shirts, a hat or two and a jacket) and get measured for the proper race suit. The celebs do media for about 45 minutes each morning, so I just drink coffee, eat the food and chat.

Now that I’m *in* the race, I think, it doesn’t matter how well I do. That lasts until about lunch, then I’m hooked. The first lesson is on steering technique with another four runs through the slalom course. My left-hand drive MINI doesn’t have my name on it yet, just number 28. After four runs, I’m in the middle of the group in terms of time, and I don’t hit a single witches hat. The MINI is great to drive, very responsive and precise. The next challenge is an oversteer exercise. We make the car (a BMW M5) skid sideways and have correct it and maintain the desired cornering. It’s very difficult, but soooo much fun! The first time I do it the car spins 1½ turns! I master it after about the tenth attempt.

After lunch we do a great braking exercise to learn more about understeer and braking whilst committed to a corner. We approach the corner at full speed (about 110km/h); when we get to the middle of it, the trainer says “brake” on the radio. We have to brake hard to avoid a line of witches hats on the normal exit to the corner and come across to the other side of the track.

I get the hang of it after a few goes.

The next lesson is on racing lines. Once again I’m surprised how wrong my knowledge is. The line that I think is right (a nice even curve from the outside, to the middle of the inside and back to the outside) is nothing like the correct line. The correct line is to make a much steeper turn from the outside, right at the end of the braking area, as this is when the car is going slowest. Then to accelerate through the corner, straightening out all the way, so that the apex is actually ¾ of the way around and the exit is almost totally straight.

By the end of the afternoon I’m still not 100% happy with my driving - I realise I still have a lot to learn. Back at the hotel, dinner in my room again, more phone calls and another very restless night.

Day Three – my Dad’s visit

The most exciting thing about today is that my MINI has my name on it! Now I really feel one of “them”. Today’s first lesson is overtaking. Once again, my understanding of car racing is shown to be wrong. I thought a good slipstream, then a bold braking move down the inside was the key to overtaking – wrong. As it turns out, the key to overtaking lies in the “smoothness and accuracy” of the corners leading onto straights. By taking a corner well, you can begin to accelerate much earlier, giving you a much higher speed on the straight and a relatively simple overtaking move (as long as the person in front isn’t as neat as you through the corner). Obviously if you catch up to someone, you are faster than them somewhere on the track, so the other key to overtaking is working out where you are faster than the car in front, and then working out a move at that point. I really enjoy this lesson and when we get out on the track I have some fantastic “races” with Mike Hammond, Michael Caton and Antonio Sabato Jr. My dad arrives half way through the morning and is thrilled to see me in the racing environment. It’s great to have him here as I have been “alone” for long enough.

He takes some great pictures and has a great time talking to all the others on the sidelines. We're now doing practice race starts. First two at a time, then seven at a time, then altogether. We do a few short "races" and I perform pretty well. Unofficial timing records the fastest lap at 2.20 (Mike Cooper); I'm on 2.22. There are several heated exchanges about Prue Jackson and her desire to run people off the road if they get past her. Ralf Schumacher comes by to do a press conference and says hello to us, then we have lunch at BMW headquarters. Dad leaves for home at about 3pm.

The final session is free practice, and my gearbox decides it doesn't want me in second gear any more. I use the spare car for the rest of the day, but due to the interruption only get a couple of laps in.

After training we go to Albert Park; I'm in Geoff Brabham's car with Suzie Wilks and Russel Mark. We do several very slow laps (40 km/h) and each have a turn of driving while Geoff explains the lines and braking areas. We hop out near the pits to watch the F1 teams setting up. That night I have dinner at some friends' place. It's good to get out of the scene for a while, although I don't think Kristina and Damian think much of car racing. I finally get a good night's sleep.

Day four – CAMS License

After leaving for Sandown on the bus, I realise I've left my racing shoes at the hotel. I know I'll need them for the CAMS license. I call Sascha (as you do when something goes wrong) who retrieves my shoes brings them to the track - phew. My gearbox is repaired and my proper racing suit is ready; I now feel I have everything I need, and the rest is up to me.

The morning is slow. We are briefed about the CAMS test and do some revision about flags. Because the test might be on a section of the circuit we haven't used yet, we do some laps behind the trainers using that section. My car feels great after the gearbox repair, better than before - braking and down-shifting is much smoother.

The CAMS license test requires us to race around the circuit and apply all the knowledge we've gained during the week, whilst obeying the instructions of the marshals and CAMS officials. Anyone observed to be dangerous or disobedient will be hauled over the coals; the rest of us will pass without any further question. The format of the test is three "mini" races, each about 25 minutes long. It is decided that we will use the part of the circuit that we had used all week, but the "infield" section would be an 80 km/h yellow flag zone (no racing or overtaking).

I'm at the back of the field for the first race (about third-last) and have great time overtaking a few people. We've been told to keep our cool and go at 90%, but I think most of us are going 99%. I make up about eight places when they red flag the race (just to make sure we know this means we have to stop). During a drink break, there much discussion about how fast or how slow people were, who passed who and who ran who off the road.

In the next race I make up more places so I'm sixth on the grid for the final race of the day. In the last race I quickly make it up to third behind Ben Dark and Antonio. We come up behind Suzie Wilks (who had spun off and then recovered) in the infield (yellow flag zone). Ben and Antonio overtake and I pass her shortly after the green flag. I'm able to catch up a bit to the other two, but they are not obeying the 80 km/h speed limit in the infield. I decide to cool it and slow to 80 for each lap, allowing Mike Hammond to catch up. I'm happy to see Ben and Antonio black flagged (out of the race), leaving me in front.

Mike Hammond and I have a great race that day. Ben and Antonio go through a court-room-like saga with CAMS officials and flag marshals called as witnesses. We all get our licenses. As we're leaving Sandown for the last time it's sad to see the MINIs loaded onto a car transport headed for Albert Park. We have all grown confident on that circuit and could always ask the trainers for help - from now on we're on our own.

The Official Welcome is at Government House that night. There are hundreds of people but Suzie and Katrina stick with me so I don't feel left out. There's yummy finger food and very good red

wine – I have quite a lot of both. The Governor does the rounds and I shake his hand; the society photographers are all over the celebs. A police band plays rock music on the patio – they're hilariously dead pan and daggy looking, but they sound pretty good. We only stay for a couple of hours, then back to the hotel. I'm already a bit tipsy, and I haven't socialised with the celebs all week, so I decide to stay with them in the hotel bar. It's a great night, with Jon Stevens singing, accompanied by a friend from Noiseworks on guitar and the rest of us drunkenly singing along. I get totally hammered and crash into bed with all the lights on.

Day five – practice at Albert Park

Fortunately the bus doesn't leave until 9.30am as it takes me that long to recover from the night's intoxication. I double-check everything in my bag before I leave today, as getting in and out of Albert Park is huge ordeal. Once there, we get our first look at our new "home", the MINI Celebrity Challenge Compound. The MINIs are parked in three lines out the front and behind we have a covered area with tables and chairs and the usual assortment of food and drink. Behind that are change rooms and toilets. There's even someone employed to sit outside the toilets and clean them after each use!!! The whole compound is very strictly guarded so only the celebs, their guests and the BMW/MINI people are allowed in. We have a briefing about the day's activities, then the F1 cars start their first practice. With Mike Hammond and Alicia Molick, I go to the BMW stand to watch. Lunch is at the carousel – BMW has a very fancy spread in there, including a huge marque showroom with the latest BMW range as well as an F1 car.

Our practice session is at 3.40pm which means we have to be back for a briefing at 1.30pm and ready to leave the compound at 3pm.

It's quite an ordeal to get from the compound to track. First we have to drive (behind a police escort) to marshalling area through the general admission area, with hundreds of people lining the route to get a glimpse of the celebs. "Who's Tom Browell?" I keep hearing. Next we wait at the marshalling area for about 20 minutes before making our way onto the track near the last corner and driving down to the grid. There we wait again for ages until finally we're allowed to go, two at a time.

We have no idea how fast or what gear to go in around this circuit, but I've been advised by one of trainers to take each corner in a higher gear first, then try a lower gear next time if that was no good. On the first lap, I take most of the corners in third gear, and all but three of them are bad. Next lap I change down to second, and although I have to change up to third again in the middle of some corners, it's much quicker. I'm pleasantly surprised how well I know the layout of the circuit from playing the Grand Prix 3 game on my computer – the graphics in the game are amazingly detailed, right down to the shadows of the trees.

They have told us that our times for today may count toward the grid position in the case of bad weather during qualifying so I try for one really quick lap. I make at least one error on each lap, however, mostly going too fast into a corner and going off or missing the line. On the last lap I slow down a bit, but made it round error free. At the end of the session, we drive to the marshalling area before being escorted back to compound, once again through the crowds. I can still hear: "Tom Browell – who's that? Oh, there's Suzie Wilks!!"

Zoë has arrived at the hotel so I'm glad to head back there. When I arrive, Zoë thinks I look great, but also laughs a lot when I walk into the room in my racing suit. We only have about an hour to get ready for the Grand Prix Ball! We get dressed up and head down to the bar for a drink before we go. Geoff Brabham is there with the official times for the practice session. I have the third fastest time, but there's not much in it. Greg Alexander and Antonio are the two ahead of me. I am really pleased and secretly start praying for rain during qualifying, as this will secure me third on the grid for the race.

After introducing Zoë to everyone and everyone introducing their partners (many had arrived today), we all pile on the bus. We get to the casino via a roped off entry with hundreds of

google-eyed onlookers trying to get the celebs' attention. I didn't realise how big this thing was, over 900 people! After drinks in the anteroom, we enter the ball room – it's enormous. We find our table right down the front right and scan the name tags to see who we're sitting with – Layne Beachley, Frank Farina, Michelle Walsh and her partner and the retail sales manager of BMW, Geoff Briscoe and his wife.

There's a show consisting of acts alternating on two stages, one at each end of the room. The theme is "the world according to Formula One", and each act comes from a country where a Grand Prix is held. After dinner, there are some very boring speeches and awards before the Little River Band start playing, reunited for the dancing. Layne has been pretty loud and taking the whole thing as a big joke, so I'm a bit worried when Zoë suggests that I dance with her. We have fun doing slam dancing and bumping into people (including Steve Bracks).

All the other celebs have left the ballroom and we find them in a casino bar. We have some drinks and talk to few people. Zoë and I are lucky enough to corner Kieren Perkins for a while - it was great to meet him and chat. We talk about kids, car racing (he was in the celebrity race the year before) and other stuff. At 12.15am, the bus leaves for the hotel. I'm surprised that the gang come back on the bus as they usually stay out much later. Matt Tilley grabs the microphone and does impersonations of Geoff Brabham and the other trainers, as well as a perfect Ben Dark. It's one of those moments I will never forget – so funny. It's nice to get to bed (especially as Zoë is there) after what seems like one of the longest days of my life.

Day six – qualifying

The bus doesn't leave until 10.30am today as our qualifying isn't until very late in the day, and Sascha thinks we might need a sleep in after the ball. We sleep in a bit, I try and see a weather report on TV, then we head down for breakfast. The mini bus ride from the hotel to the track takes about 45 minutes and is very tedious. There are three check points and then a very long, slow road with huge speed humps that winds its way through Albert Park, under the track via a tunnel and finally to the MINI compound. Once there I show Zoë where everything is and call Melony (my sister) who has flown in for the day. She has left her wallet on the plane so her day had not started well (she gets it back a few days later with all the money still in it!). She will be at the track later with my aunty Nel and cousin Amanda.

We watch the F1 cars do their qualifying sessions and have lunch with the celebs at the BMW facility. We get a great pit walk, seeing all the F1 cars up close, as well as the absolute extravagance of the teams – the Ferrari mechanics are even wearing Ferrari shoes!! The corporate cart race just happens to be on at this moment - Fergus is in it as the runner-up got to drive a Qantas go-cart. He is doing well on the first lap – 5th place – but he gets involved in a bit of a barney on the second (and last) lap and finishes down the field. The weather is not good all day and the F1 cars have a tough time in their sessions. I am pretty happy, as my third place is fine, but the thought of trying to go fast in the wet is making us all very nervous. Geoff Brabham informs us in the briefing that we're going onto the track no matter what the conditions.

We leave the compound at 4.20pm, once again through the crowd. It turns out to be dry, after all the bad weather, which means that this session is for real. I'm wondering what tactic to take to get a free track. Antonio and Greg Alexander will be let off first, then 10 seconds later Mike Hammond and I will go. I don't want to get into a duel with him, as this will slow me down, so I decide to try and get away from him as quickly as possible. Because the track is still damp and Greg and Antonio will be jostling, I think they might be a bit slow on the first lap, and if I can pass them I will have the place to myself.

A camera crew interviews Greg, then Antonio, then look at me in third and give the same sort of gesture I've gotten used to all week – who's that guy? They skip me and go on to Mike. I must say this riles me up quite a lot – just when I need it. Greg and Antonio speed off together, and when

they're about 200 metres away, Mike and I are waved off. I don't make a great start, but Mike lets me have the first corner and I take off from there. Greg and Antonio are slow and I pass them both after two laps. It feels fantastic to pull off those overtaking moves – both completed without any incident and both very definite. It's like a fairytale unfolding in my little MINI – each lap I feel more and more confident and fast. I have no idea how fast I am compared to the rest as I can only see Antonio in my mirror some way behind. I notice a few cars stopped on the side around the circuit – Suzie Wilks is one of them. After five laps the chequered flag comes out so I slow right down to try and see where Zoë, Nel, Melony and Amanda are sitting to give them a wave. Unbeknown to me, I've got pole position; it's been announced on the track-side commentary so they (and all the people around them) are going absolutely nuts. I hear them yelling as I amble past – it's great to have them there.

Once again we drive into the compound and it isn't until I get out of the car that someone tells me about pole position. I don't believe them at first, as the times took much longer to come out the day before – but then the official word comes and it's true. None of the other times have been released, so all attention is on me – ironic after being a “nobody” all week. We have a press conference – more as dry run for the race day, than anything anybody is taking notice of – and I have no idea what to say except that it felt great and I'm so excited etc etc. I call a few friends to tell them the news and am still busting with excitement back at the hotel bar. One of the driver trainers (Alistair Bye) comes up to me and suggests I pull my head in a bit – he reminds me that the real race is tomorrow and my excitement is only fuelling the others' desire to beat me and may mess with my need to concentrate. I'm a bit taken aback by this at first, but I have got where I am by listening and doing what these guys have said all week, so I forget about having pole position from that point on.

We have a few drinks and Geoff arrives with the rest of the times and the final grid positions. Russell Mark has second, Antonio third and Suzie is last. There's a lot of comparing of times from the day before, and as Geoff predicted, most are 3 to 4 seconds faster. Zoë and I go to Kristina and Damian's for dinner – I buy Derek a nice bottle of red on the way as he has told me that it was he who was given the sole job of picking the “winner” on Monday. He told me it was a difficult choice (as always). Dinner is very nice and the perfect preparation for the race day – a quiet and relaxing evening. It takes me ages to go to sleep – my mind keeps playing out race starts and first corner scenarios, and each time I end up in front, my heart rate goes up and I have to try and relax all over again.

Day seven – the big race

After an OK sleep, the morning is pretty much as usual – I try to get a weather forecast again as it looks very gloomy out the window. I'm a bit nervous and I triple-check everything. We go down to breakfast - everyone is calm and ready for the big day. Some of those who haven't made it to the front of the grid are now resigned to just having a good time, but at least eight of us are very keen to get a podium finish, though no one talks about it.

The F1 cars are practicing when we arrive at the circuit and we go into a briefing about the race. It's raining and the track is wet. We have never driven the MINIs in the wet, in fact I have never driven any car at “the limit” in the wet, so there's a lot of nerves. The race is at 11.20, so we have to be ready at 10.30. My aunty Nel has been at the track since 7am to get a good seat and is joined by my uncle David and Amanda on Brocky's Hill.

Zoë will watch the race with most of the other partners in the BMW stand. As we leave the compound for the last time – with me leading the way - I hear a few people yell “Go Tommy!” from the crowd. Geoff Brabham comes with me in the car to the marshalling area and Jenni comes over to see if I'm OK and tells me to “just relax”. I'm very nervous as I drive out onto the track in front of the packed stands. We wait on the grid for about five minutes, and this time the

camera crew interview me. I haven't rehearsed anything to say, and can't remember now what I did say – something about just going as fast as I can. It's great to see it on the big screen. We get the green flag for the warm-up lap – I have to lead the way and set the pace, and all I can think is "what would Michael Schumacher do?" I slow up a lot towards the end of the lap to let the whole field bunch up as we come down to the grid. When we're shown the 10 second board I rev it up to 5000 RPM then all the lights (above the start line) come on, and then go off (GO GO GO as Murray Walker would have said).

I have a very good start and am flying towards the first corner. The track is wet and Russell is pretty close behind and on my right – ready to take the inside line if I'm hesitant. I brake about 20 meters earlier than I did in the dry, Russell gets a bit closer, but then I turn in and am around the first corner in the lead. I know then that all I have to do is stay on the track for five laps and I will win. Turn two is not a problem as it comes straight after turn one and is not steep enough to trouble the MINI, even at full throttle. Turn three however is very slippery as there are trees overhanging the track and the water keeps dripping off them, even after the rain has stopped. I brake about 50 meters earlier than before, thinking that will be more than safe, and it is, but not by much. Turn four is also wet so I stay in second gear until I get round it, where I used third before.

Turn five is pretty dry, but the wet grass and a close concrete wall on the exit has me lifting off a touch, where I was flat out in the dry. The rest of the lap has a definite dry line and I drive as fast as before – faster even. I seem to get away from the person behind me (I don't know who it is any more) through the fast left and right combination at turns 11 and 12. Through 11, the MINI is leaning heavily to the right as I keep it very tight over to the left after the corner and just as the weight shifts back I turn in to 12 so that the weight keeps going to the left in one motion – it feels fantastic every lap. I increase my lead substantially down the straight that follows. The next two corners are straight forward 90 degree right handers, the first I take in second, the next in third. Then I have to get right over to the right for the very tight left hand turn 15, made even tighter by the fact I have to stay left on the exit as it leads straight into the all-important right hand turn 16 onto the main straight.

I slow for turn 15 a little more than before – partly because of the dampness and partly because Alister had told me that Michael Schumacher was the slowest man on the track through that corner, and it paid off. I get a fantastic run onto the straight and there is now a huge gap back to second place. Coming down that straight the first time is sensational - now for the first corner, this time at full speed – I hit 175 km/h. I never really nailed it in practice or qualifying. I brake at 120m (where I was braking as late as 70m before) and I realise I have been braking too late all along. I have the brakes almost on full as I start to turn in and as I feel the back wheels going sideways, I lift off the brake and am pointed perfectly at the apex and the exit to the corner. I'm able to accelerate at almost full throttle from there, and feel I've really nailed that corner for the first time. I wave to the BMW stand on turn two and I feel myself loosening up a bit. I see whoever is behind me go straight off and onto the grass at turn three in the rear view mirror. I concentrate hard every inch of the way, braking points, good gear shifts, apexes, look ahead to the exit of the corners and after the third lap I'm miles out in front.

As I come up to turn three they're waving yellow flags and I slow down a lot as I can't see what is causing this. Second place catches up a bit. I see Suzie's car in the pebbles and although we all expected it, I feel sorry for her.

I drive the rest of the race slower as I know where I can get away if I have to, and I really want to finish. Each lap, as I round the last bend, the crowd seems to be cheering louder than the last time. I think the others must be catching me – but they aren't, so I guess they're cheering for me. As I come down the straight for the last time and the chequered flag is waving I just can't believe it. About a million things go through my mind - "Geez, I'm glad I won or what would my mates have thought?", "Did I just win the celebrity race?", "I hope somebody taped it for me", "What should I say at the press conference this time?", "I wonder if I just drive out of here if they would catch me", "Oh, I guess I can wind down the window and wave now!!"

I'm glad to see Russell come up behind me on the warm down lap and even happier to see Mike Cooper zoom up next to me to say congrats – he finishes third. I wave to Nel, Dave and Amanda (and the whole of Brocky's Hill, it seems) who are still shouting and cheering. Back at the grid we stop the cars and I step out and put my hands in the air – what a great moment. Several of the others come over to congratulate me, Russell and Mike Cooper. I'm interviewed again and photographed and then the three of us are taken up to the podium.

The others all had to drive the MINIs around the track, into the marshalling area and back to the compound. Stepping out onto the podium is the best. We all stand there and receive our trophies and it feels fantastic when I lift it up and put my hands in the air - all the people in the grandstand opposite cheered. The thought crosses my mind, "I wonder how much do you have to shake the champagne to make it come out?" Not much. I get some in my eye from Mike Cooper and it stings like hell for a second; he and Russell make sure I get thoroughly soaked. I have a few big gulps of it, after I finish spraying them, one more raising of the trophy and the crowd cheers again – fantastic. We go into a room behind the podium, each sign three posters (I have no idea what for) get a bottle of water and head into the press conference. The others take a while to get there (still driving the MINIs back) so I have time to work out what I will say. "I just want to thank Qantas, MINI and BMW driver training for the best week..." I am drowned out by the celebs laughing and cheering. After that I'm taken to the Qantas corporate suite where Sherryn is waiting – she's absolutely ecstatic. She had the whole suite cheering for me during the race. I am introduced to the patrons and they all give me huge applause. I'm asked a few questions on a microphone and there's more applause and laughter. Sherryn is genuinely pleased for me and it feels great to have given her and Qantas such a great outcome. I do an interview for Channel 9 news and my cheeks are starting to ache.

Quite some time has passed by the time I get back to the compound, and it's great to finally kiss my biggest fan – Zoë! All the celebs have started signing each other's helmets so I get mine out, but before I can get started there are more photos to take. Finally after all the photos and congratulations and interviews, I get most of the gang to sign my helmet. There is now only just enough time to get lunch before the main race. We hurry over to the BMW facility, have a quick lunch with Mike and Jacqui Hammond and then take our seats for the F1 race, just in time for the warm up lap.

There's a huge smash at the first corner, and Ralf Schumacher goes flying through the air. The whole BMW stand is gasping and hoping he's OK (he is) – but I'm remembering the one piece of advice he gave us when he visited at Sandown – "Just make sure you get round the first corner." The highlight of the F1 race is Mark Webber's fifth place – even if there were only nine cars left in the race. He showed that he is a survivor and a very good driver. We end up at the BMW party after the race, and we also have VIP passes to the Ferrari after party – but our flight home is at 8.45pm and there are no other seats available on later flights – Sherryn checks. The next flight out of Melbourne isn't until 9am the next day and we don't think the kids (or the babysitters) will be very happy if we're that late! So we head back to the MINI compound to catch a minibus to the hotel – but there isn't one there. I call Sherryn again; she is actually just leaving herself, so gives us a lift. We hurriedly pack all our stuff and get a taxi to the airport, making it with plenty of time to spare.

The flight home is on time and uneventful – the flight attendant welcomes me on board the flight over the PA, which is nice. When we get off the plane in Sydney, my dad and Jan, Melony and Jeff, Clara, Leigh and Ann and Alex have set up a banner with champagne and party poppers to greet me - I'm so surprised and glad to see them all – especially Leigh as I haven't had a chance to talk to him much over the week. Jacqui is still awake when we finally get home – and the kids had made huge banners and hung them around the house. I'm too tired to really take much more. It's a really strange feeling going to sleep that night, back in my own house. I'm glad to be home – but I really want more of that "racing car" life.....

P.S. – the players

How the celebrities (and me) finished up:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. Tom Browell | Qantas competition winner |
| 2. Russell Mark,OAM | Olympic Gold and Silver medallist |
| 3. Mike Cooper | Chairman of John Cooper Works |
| 4. Jon Stevens | Singer |
| 5. Greg Alexander | Former Rugby League International, presenter 2UE |
| 6. David Campese,OAM | Former Wallaby and international record holder |
| 7. Matt Tilley | Presenter Fox FM |
| 8. Mike Hammond | Radio and Foxtel presenter |
| 9. Colin Marland | Winner of the 2001 Grand Prix Ball auction |
| 10. Frank Farina | Head coach of the Socceroos |
| 11. James Brayshaw | Presenter Triple M |
| 12. Krista Vendy | Face of Foster's for the Grand Prix |
| 13. Layne Beachley | Four times World surfing champion |
| 14. Prue Jackson | Model |
| 15. Scott Cam | Presenter, Backyard Blitz, Channel 9 |
| 16. Michelle Walsh | Presenter and reporter, Escape with ET, Channel 9 |
| 17. Karina Brown | Host, Body and Soul, Channel 9 |
| 18. Michael Caton | Actor and host, Hot Property, Channel 7 |
| 19. Johnnie Cass | Personal trainer and actor |
| 20. Katrina Warren | Resident Vet, Harry's Practice, Channel 7 |
| 21. John Burns | Presenter 3AW |
| 22. Antonio Sabato Jnr – DNF* | Actor |
| 23. Suzie Wilks – DNF* | Host Changing Rooms, Channel 9 |
| 24. Ben Dark – DNF* | Presenter Getaway, Channel 9 |
| 25. Alicia Molik – DNF* | Australia's No. 1 female professional tennis player |

*Did Not Finish

The BMW Driver Training Instructor Team:

Geoff Brabham
Rauno Aaltonen
Allen Moffat
Derek Walls
Alistair Bye
Tomas Mezera
Peter McKay
Scott Jacob
Gary Brabham
Jenni Thompson
Steve Ellery

The QANTAS finalists:

Fergus Gibson (runner up prize)
Christopher Brown

Cathy Kwa
Joanne Brodie