

COLLECTOR

The story of the Formula 1 drivers' autograph hunter

His name is Rafal Rokicki. He is one of the ten largest collectors of autographs of Formula 1 drivers in the world. He travels for them all over the world, writes them letters, calls their relatives and sometimes pushes them to delete their own accounts made on Facebook. It can be called crazy. But no crazier than the guys who sit down every two weeks in a racing car and rush on the route at speed of 300 kilometers per hour. Rafal Rokicki - just a very passionate person. Here is his story.

My first autograph I got in 1994. I wrote to the team Ligier, asked to send me stickers as a souvenir. In response they sent me three signed cards. Drivers: Eric Bernard, Eric Comas and Mark Blundell. I thought, "Wow. This is much better than just stickers." Then I wrote to Lotus and got autographs of Alex Zanardi and Johnny Herbert. Then everything just started. When I arrived at the Grand Prix first time, I already had a good collection.

The first race to which I went - the Hungarian Grand Prix in 1999. I was young and had to spend enough time to save money for that. That time I took the autograph myself for the first time. The first was David Coulthard. McLaren have had a press conference at a hotel in Budapest. I waited for him to complete, went to him and asked for signature. Now I have about ten signatures of David.

Rafal Rokicki

Born in the Polish city of Czestochowa. He is 34-year-old. He graduated computer science at the local Polytechnic. Since 2006 he has been living in Ireland, working for IBM. Married, one 8-year-old daughter. He's interested in Formula 1 since 1989. He is a fan of McLaren team and "in general supports all but not Schumacher and Vettel."

From 1950 in Formula 1 participated approx. 850 drivers. I have autographs of 503 of them. That is more than a half. About 400 drivers of all had died, but I'm trying to get their autographs, too. Around 100 I have. From well-known: Ronnie Petterson. Michele Alboreto. Ayrton Senna. Most recently, I have finally had the autograph of Graham Hill. But, for example, Alberto Ascari, I do not.

Of those pilots who are still alive, I don't have autographs of 17.

One of the most problematic - John Barber. He lives on a yacht in the Mediterranean Sea and very rarely returns to land. And how to get him?

Of course, you can buy autographs. Give me €2000 and I'll get another 20 autographs of those whom I have not. But I don't buy autographs. I have to feed my family.

The most expensive are those who died early, and were quite famous. Jim Clark. But there are exceptions. Very expensive Ricardo Paletti - the guy who died at the Grand Prix of Canada in 1982. He started just in one race and had no time to give a lot of autographs.

The most expensive? Perhaps Alberto Ascari. It would be around 300 pounds. Juan Manuel Fangio? No, Fangio is very cheap. €40 - max. As couple of beers in a pub... I have Fangio's one.

Yes, I sold autograph once. In 1994 I had a very rare card of Karl Wendlinger with his signature. I got it in April from the team. Then he had an accident in Monaco, did not participate in the race until the end of that season. Then I got an offer from a collector in Switzerland. He was ready to exchange a few autographs of Karl from 1993, give me an autograph of JJ Lehto and \$100. It was very good money, and I agreed. Do I regret? Yes. But then \$100 was not small for me.

I have a website. I opened it in 1998. It was probably one of the first site dedicated to autographs of Formula 1 drivers. I know many other collectors. Some have started collecting autographs back in the 1970s. But I think I was the first who presented collection in the network.

I rather not exchange autographs with those who I don't know. Of course, you cannot be 100% sure whether it is genuine signature. But if it is on the page of programme or on an old magazine, it is likely, it's really original.

I know many other collectors. One lives in Austria. We met together by a chance. Once I wrote a letter to Yuko Katayama ... Where? Using his personal address in Japan, it was easy to find out. And so, I sent him a couple of photos to be signed. But in reply he sent me back another shot. He was shown with another person. After some years, I found the same photo on Facebook. This man was a collector. Yuko just swapped our letters. My card was sent to the Austrian, but his to myself. Then we exchanged these autographs. It can happen.

Schumacher's address? Of course, I have the address of Schumacher. This is not such a big secret. All collectors know it. Vettel? Too. But I don't have Petrov's address...

There is one guy who does not want to sign anything. Braush Niemann. I found his page on Facebook, wrote to him. He did not answer. Then I wrote to his daughter, asking her for a help. Why are you laughing? It is normal for collectors. Sometimes we need to reach driver asking his family. Sometimes it works. But not in this case. A day later he removed his profile.

I have autographs of all the drivers who at least participated in Friday's training, since July 1994. The last missed is Roland Ratzenberger.

I have six large folders. Until 1994, all divided by decade: 1950s, 1960s and so on. Since 1994, every season is separate. I'm trying to get autographs of all the drivers acting in the championships. Even if I already have their last year's signature. This season is almost closed. We will see, maybe somebody else will be participating.

Another drivers - George Eaton, he had about 15 races in the late 1960s - early 1970s. Nobody knows where to find him. In this kind we try to work together in groups. Sometimes it works. He's somewhere in Canada, but cannot find his home address.

I never ask to sign a lot of photos at once, so people understand that I'm not going to sell their autographs later making business from that. But I know that another collector once sent 20 photos to Jack Brabham. And all of them have been signed.

On the Internet in two or three hours you can find almost any address. Especially, when it is in the United States. Privacy in America - is a myth. If you know the name and city, you can find anything you want, up to the mobile number.

I remember when I phoned Peter de Klerk in South Africa. But he has bad hearing - it was hard for him to communicate, because he could not realize what I wanted from him. He said: "I'll give you my wife." With her, we quickly agreed everything. She confirmed that I have found the correct address, and told me to send photos.

With one of the driver we had a longer correspondence. I asked for an autograph, and he sent me a long letter describing his whole career, sent a few pictures and asked to tell something about myself. I replied that I live in Ireland - he wrote that he had raced there at the beginning of his career. The track was located just a few kilometers from my workplace.

Current drivers are sold poorly. The most expensive price that I can remember was Maria de Villota, who does not even come out at the start. Immediately after her accident, her Marussia card was purchased on Ebay for around £50.

The most pleasant guys in communication - the drivers at the beginning of F1 career. Giedo van der Garde and Dani Clos - very friendly. With stars it is heavier. For the first time an autograph from Fernando Alonso I took in 2003. He was in Poland immediately after his victory in Hungary. I gave him a photograph in

which he was still in the Minardi. He said: "Oh, my first car" - and happily signed. Now getting autograph from him is much more difficult.

Michael, like Fangio, - very cheap. He was racing for so many years and he managed to sign, perhaps, a million of pictures. For example much more is worth last year signed cards of Marussia Virgin. Or a card of Chinese HRT test driver. It is quite valuable. And it will be more expensive than Michael.

Do the drivers recognize me? No, I do not think so. However, Schumacher has excellent memory for faces. If you take an autograph from him, and then try to get another one the next day, he might not sign it ... Saying: "Can I have your autograph?" he replies: "I already gave you one yesterday".

Last year there was a funny story. I was waiting for drivers near the track in Barcelona. Mark Webber drove. I had with me a photograph of him driving Red Bull at Jerez in 2010. I asked him to sign. He took the picture, put on the steering wheel and was closely looking at it. Long enough to become nervous. I even thought that was wrong - maybe gave him a picture of Vettel etc. But after a few seconds, he just said: "Jerez, the last turn". At the picture it was just a car and a barrier - nothing more.

Would you like a scary story? That was Clemar Bucci. Yes, you do not know him. He raced in the 1950s. It took me a long time to get his address. Finally I got this. We agreed everything and he asked me to send photos to be autographed. That was in 2010, around Christmas. I prepared three photos sent to him. He did not respond for a long time. Then, in January, I found in the internet sad news that he died a few days before. I thought that I was too late and won't get his autograph. But even a few days later received a letter. Signed photographs! The envelope was stamped six days before his death.

Now my friends say not to send them any letters by mail.

I got most of the autographs for about 10 years ago. That time, I used to send 20 letters a month, spent every day for several hours on the internet, searching for addresses. Now I'm a master. People write to me asking, "Rafal, whose autograph is it?" I look at it and respond, for example: "This is Ricardo Rosset."

I do not know how much money my collection is worth. I can only guess. Perhaps someone might agree to buy it for 5 to 7 thousand euro. I probably could buy a car. Not new, but quite good. I do not know, I have never considered this option.

Pictures:

Heikki Kovalainen, a driver-collector:

My own a book with collection of autographs. There were basically rally drivers. I often went with my parents at the races in Finland. The first time we went in 1992 in Jyväskylä. The first autograph I got from Sebastian Lindholm, a cousin of Marcus Gronholm. There I got also Colin McRae. It was his first race in Finland, after which he became very popular in our country. He was at the Subaru Legacy and several times got into an accident which were very strong. He turned over a total of probably seventy times, but he kept going. I have many photos from there - his car was crashed from all sides. Then we became friends with Colin. I met him in 1999 at the Race of Champions in the Canary Islands. After the race we had a party for the participants. We had very good fun with him and his brother Alistair. I am still in touch with his family. From the Finns, I have almost all the autographs of famous racers, who were at that time: Hannu Mikkola, Timo Salonen, Tommi Mäkinen, Harri Rovanperä, Juha Kankunen. Juha actually did not want to give me an autograph. I went to his service car, knocked on the door, but he did not want to open. But there were adults who seemed to see me. They said: "Juha, what are you ... He's very small." Only after that he opened the door and quickly signed it. Now we are with him, too familiar. He recently invited me to his winery in France. I'll have to call him.

From Formula 1 racing, I have only two: Keke Rosberg and JJ Lehto. Keke is also performed in the rally. At home I even have a picture, which I'm standing next to him. Next time I have to ask for an autograph.

Jenson Button: "My first autograph I took at the 1993 European Grand Prix in Donington Park. I went to McLaren and saw boxes of Michael Andretti. I was 13 years old, I was very embarrassed, ashamed. Actually, I was looking for Ayrton Senna. But there was just Michael. So I had to ask him to sign. "

Lewis Hamilton: "My first - Mark Blundell. I asked for his autograph in 1995. Then I raced in karting, it was my first year. He was also on the track. I won the race and went to him. We took pictures together, he gave me an autograph. It was the first Formula 1 driver, whom I met in person."

Felipe Massa: "I do not collect autographs, but once I saw Ayrton Senna on the beach. He was with the girls, I tried to come up, but he refused to sign. Since then, I was rooting for Nelson Piquet. Now, when I'm asked for autographs, I never refuse, because I remember that feeling."

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