

# ALUMNI AT LARGE

MONISHA KALTENBORN



Being named the first female team principal in Formula One's near 70-year history might come to be regarded as the defining moment in the career of **Monisha Kaltenborn** (LLM 1996). However, neither she nor her Sauber F1 Team colleagues realised that she was breaking new ground in a male-dominated sport until they announced her appointment in 2012 and questions poured in from the media.

Monisha herself identifies events in July 2009 as providing her greatest professional challenge to date – not least because successfully overcoming them made her later accomplishments possible. “In the middle of that Grand Prix season, BMW – at that time 80 per cent owner of the BMW Sauber F1 Team – announced it was withdrawing

from the sport by the end of the season,” says Monisha. “We faced having no licence to compete in the new season and no major backer but had to plan as normal – while ensuring our team did not break up from within.”

Monisha was well prepared for the challenge. She had served on Sauber's management board for almost

a decade, following her introduction to motor racing in 1999. Trained as a lawyer – she completed her master's in International Law at LSE in 1996 – her introduction to Formula One came while she was providing legal and governance counsel to what was then Red Bull Sauber, a client of Fritz Kaiser Group. In 2000 she joined Sauber

*“I remember emerging from Holborn tube station and being at once overwhelmed and in wonder at the sheer number and diversity of people. I realised then that this was a snapshot of London and LSE as a whole – a vibrant mix of different cultural perspectives.”*

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directly, to head up its legal department, which was when her passion for Formula One began in earnest.

When BMW withdrew from the team, and the sport as a whole, relatively abruptly at the end of 2009, Monisha was tasked with ensuring that Sauber could continue until the end of the current racing season and develop its cars for the next – a complex task in itself, considering Formula One’s regular and costly rule changes – in trying circumstances.

“The financial implications of losing our major partner were huge, with the potential to derail everything that went before it at Sauber. Above all else we had to be a commercially viable and attractive operation. Against that backdrop, I asked myself how I could keep the team together so it didn’t disintegrate,” she recalls. “Pressure from the outside is one thing, but if you break up from the inside you can do nothing. I had to keep the team together just so Sauber had even a chance to fight.”

Monisha drew on her legal training – skills such as how to focus on salient points in the right context – to deliver a compelling argument: “I had to engage in intense communications and make them believe it was going to work so that people gave me their trust and fought with me to deliver something. I had to convince them that my belief and vision was going to match and support their own objectives.”

Her approach worked: Sauber overcame its short-term challenge and retained the majority of its 380-person workforce. Peter Sauber repurchased the team he had founded and, with Monisha appointed chief executive officer, it retained its licence to participate in Formula One and continued to perform well with financial resources that were limited in comparison to some of its rivals. In 2012, Monisha completed her rise to team principal, when Peter Sauber decided to take a back seat.

More than two years later, she is now also a major shareholder in Sauber. Frequently the focus is still on her role as a female leader in the sport. Does it frustrate her? “I can understand that people are

fascinated about my being the first female team principal – but I never held this ambition; it just happened. On the day we announced it, we didn’t realise the implications,” she says. “That said, at my first official FIA F1 press conference in 2010, I was told it was the first time in over 60 years a woman had attended one – whether that is accurate or not, it means people do notice women.”

Monisha stands out in Formula One but also in sport in general. While her fellow LSE alumna Heather Rabbatts (BA History and International Relations 1978, MSc International Relations 1979) became the first female board member of the English Football Association in 2011, they remain exceptions in the professional sporting world.

“Sport is perhaps behind the rest of society,” she says. “If women have the education or expertise in other spheres, they are not questioned. But male-dominated environments remain in sport. We talk about equality in society and of chances being open to women; then you realise there are so many areas in which women haven’t taken a leadership role.

“It is also true that there is so much more women can do to capitalise on the opportunities they are given. They must then do so aware that it creates more pressure: the moment you are seen as the first person to do something, you become a pioneer – whether willingly or reluctantly. If decision-makers

see somebody is there in a role, it encourages them to think more about merit. They will then provide the opportunity to people without being afraid.”

Within motorsport and its assembled media, there has been a shift in how people approach her: she is now asked technical, car-related questions. “While everyone was always courteous towards me, when I became team principal those outside Sauber would only really ask me about commercial or legal issues; their questions were valid and considered, but always confined to broader strategic subjects, not racing,” she says.

“That has changed, but it was interesting to see how people perceived me. I obviously didn’t come from an engineering background, but legal training teaches you to approach diverse subjects in a rational and questioning manner.”

A difficult 2014 season for Sauber and potential restructuring of the sport has not dimmed Monisha’s desire to continue testing herself. “In a competition, you are motivated to reach the top, no matter where you are,” she says. “It’s a continuous challenge in which you always want to better yourself – that’s the nature of sport. You have to be mindful of enterprise and commercial value to support the business, but you need that solid base to compete in any sport in a meaningful way.” ■

Monisha Kaltenborn was talking to Chris Kendrick, constituency communications manager at LSE.

*“At LSE I attended lectures on international law by Sir Daniel Bethlehem and sessions dealing with different jurisdictions such as patents and IP rights – we learned general principles: how to focus on posing useful questions to the relevant points. They still serve me well today.”* MONISHA KALTENBORN

