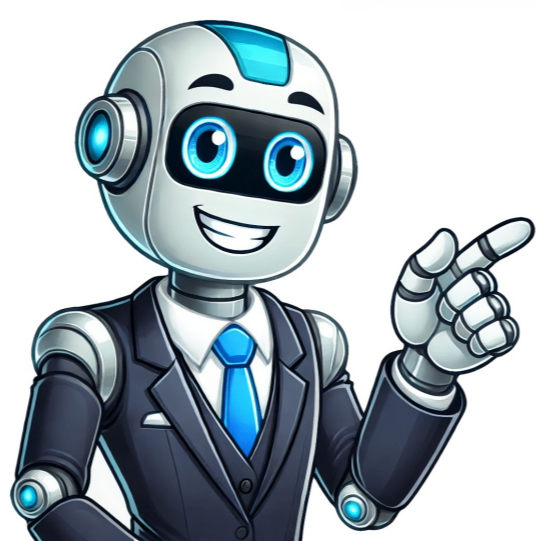


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HALL OF FAME - 1975, 1977, 1984He bought his way into Formula 1 racing and very nearly paid for it with his life. Given up for dead after an appalling accident he recovered by what the medical profession called sheer force of will. His astonishingly quick return to the cockpit was called the most courageous comeback in sporting history. After winning two championships he got bored and left the sport only to return again and win another. During his remarkable career he was called both a hero and a villain. The battle-scarred champion who defied both the odds and convention remains a sporting legend. On February 22, 1949, Nikolaus Andreas Lauda was born in Vienna into a prominent Austrian business and banking dynasty. Paper manufacturing was how Niki's father made his fortune, though none of it would be made available for a contrary son who would surely bring the respected Lauda name into disrepute by playing at being a racing driver. To further educate himself in this field Niki forsook university and enrolled himself in Ferrari's school of hard knocks, paying for it with money borrowed from Austrian banks. Starting in a Mini in 1968, he crashed his way through Formula Vee and Formula 3 and in 1972 he bought his way into the March Formula 2 and Formula 1 teams with another bank loan secured by his life insurance policy. The uncompetitive Marches meant Niki was unable to prove his worth as a driver, let alone state off pending bankruptcy. With no qualifications in any other line of work he had no choice but to keep on racing.Lauda at the wheel of the Ferrari 312B3 at the 1975 Brazilian Grand PrixFor 1973 he talked his way into a complicated rent-a-ride deal with BRM. During that season his ever-improving results paid dividends in the form of a new contract that would forgive his debts in exchange for Niki staying with BRM for a further two years. Instead, he bought his way out of BRM with money from his new employer Enzo Ferrari, for whom he went to work in 1974. Ferrari, who hadn't had a champion since John Surtees in 1964, was impressed by the skinny, buck-toothed Austrian's self-confidence and no-nonsense work ethic, though rather taken aback by his brutal honesty. After his first test in the 1974 Ferrari 312 Niki informed Enzo that the car was "a piece of shit," but promised him he could make it raceworthy. Now in the spotlight as a possible Ferrari saviour, the media noted Lauda's cool, calculating clinical approach and nicknamed him "The Computer." However, The Computer's driving still had some glitches and he made several costly errors in 1974. Niki said that learning from mistakes was the fastest way to improve, corroborating this theory with a first Formula 1 victory in Spain, then another in Holland. In his 1975 Ferrari 312T Niki stormed to victories in Monaco, Belgium, Sweden, France and the USA to become World Champion. All of Italy rejoiced at Ferrari's first driving title in over a decade, though the glory meant little to the unsentimental new hero. Claiming that his mounting collection of "useless" trophies was cluttering up his home in Austria, he gave them to the local garage in exchange for free car washes.Lauda pictured with McLaren team mate Alain Prost at the 1985 British Grand PrixBy mid-summer 1976 he had won five races and seemed a shoo-in to repeat as champion. Then came the German Grand Prix at the desperately dangerous Nürburgring. On the second lap Lauda's Ferrari inexplicably crashed and burst into flames. Four brave drivers and a marshal plunged into the towering inferno and hauled out the smouldering body. In hospital, with first to third degree burns on his head and wrists, several broken bones and lungs scorched from inhaling toxic fumes, Niki Lauda was given up for dead and administered the last rites by a priest. Six weeks later, with blood seeping from the bandages on his head, he finished fourth in the Italian Grand Prix. Astonished doctors said he had recovered by sheer force of will. Jackie Stewart said it was the most courageous comeback in the history of sport. Niki said the loss of half an ear made it easier to use the telephone. In consideration of those who found his facial disfigurement unsightly he thereafter wore a red baseball cap, hiring it out to a sponsor for a hefty fee. The 1976 championship ended in a showdown between Niki and McLaren's James Hunt at Japan's Fuji circuit in torrential rain. Niki decided it was too dangerous to race and pulled out, handing the title to his friend Hunt, who said Niki's withdrawal was an act of bravery. In Italy some called him a coward. Even Enzo Ferrari had doubts and made plans to replace him, a reaction that angered Niki and made his winning the 1977 driving title a form of revenge. Having clinched the championship with two races remaining, Niki decided to skip them and told Ferrari he was leaving. Enzo called him a traitor for moving to Bernie Ecclestone's Brabham team.In his 1978 season with Brabham Niki won twice and finished fourth in the championship. The next year, in an uncompetitive car, he had scored only four points prior to the penultimate race, in Canada. There, after the first practice session, he walked away from Formula 1 racing, saying he was "tired of driving around in circles" and would now start his own airline. Lauda Air, with its proprietor serving as one of the pilots, grew to the point that further progress would require more capital, in pursuit of which Niki returned to his previous profession. In 1982 he signed with McLaren for a reported US\$5 million, the most lucrative contract in Formula 1 history. In his negotiations Niki told the McLaren money men he was only charging one dollar for his services as a driver - all the rest was for his personality. In 1984 he won his third driving title, albeit by the slimmest of margins from his brilliant young McLaren team mate Alain Prost. Niki won a final Grand Prix in 1985 then retired from the sport for good as a driver, though he never really left the paddock.An overhead shot of Lauda and the McLaren MP4/2 at Interlagos for the 1984 Brazilian Grand PrixHe worked as an advisor for Ferrari, served as a Jaguar team principal and became a television commentator - a role for which he was uniquely qualified to provide insights into the highs and lows of the sport he was lucky to survive and brilliant enough to conquer. Prior to the 2013 season Niki Lauda added yet more titles to his extensive collection when he became Non-Executive Chairman of the Mercedes F1 team, board member of Mercedes AMG Powertrains and special adviser to the Board of Daimler AG. Still wearing his famous red cap he quickly established himself as a highly valued member of the Mercedes F1 effort. Among his contributions was persuading budding superstar Lewis Hamilton to drive for the superbly efficient team that went on to dominate the decade. He had seemed indestructible, but the valiant Austrian's health deteriorated. He underwent transplants: twice for kidneys and in 2018 for a lung damaged in his nearly fatal accident. On 20 May, 2019, 70-year-old Niki Lauda passed away peacefully in hospital. His funeral in Vienna was attended by many drivers and dignitaries who paid solemn tribute to one of the sport's greatest heroes. Text - Gerald Donaldson A Maltese airline providing wet lease and charter services across Europe on a fleet of Airbus A320 aircraft. "My life is worth more than a title" Lauda is reported to have said after he parked his Ferrari 312T2 two laps into the rain-battered 1976 Grand Prix of Japan. Lauda was in a brawl with James Hunt for that year's championship. He quit that last, decisive race, but his courage and determination were never in question. This was, after all, the man carrying the number 1 on his Ferrari and a man who earlier that season had been nearly incinerated during the German Grand Prix at the Nürburgring (the last one to run on the original course), only to will himself back into a race car six weeks later. And with that withdrawal in Japan, he cemented his reputation as one of the most fiercely intelligent and independent men ever to drive a Formula 1 car.Niki Lauda won three Formula 1 world championships, and yet he may well be remembered most for the one from which he retired. His family announced the night of May 20 that Lauda had died after battling with the lingering effects of that 1976 Nürburgring crash for the rest of his life. He was 70 years old. "I am emotional," Lauda told Britain's Top Gear magazine in 2013 when queried about his legendarily stoic personality. "But I also have everything well under control and I can analyze things properly. What drives me crazy is the amount of talking that goes on. I like to make my life simple. I get straight to the point. If it's my mistake, it's my mistake. In motor racing, you learn to achieve the best result in the shortest amount of time. It applies in life too. Be quicker than the others. And don't make mistakes. Even if things fall, have the discipline to find a new way, rather than embarking on a pointless emotional journey."Andreas Nikolaus Lauda was born on February 22, 1949, in Vienna into a prominent and prosperous Austrian family. Less than two weeks after Niki's birth, his grandfather Hans Lauda, then president of the Austrian Industrialists Association, was cited by the New York Times in a report about progress of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding the country after World War II. According to the elder Lauda, Austrian industries were prepared to employ 20,000 former government officials during 1949. That's important if you were a former government official. And the Laudas were the sort of family that expects its younger members to follow a well-trodden path into finance and industry. A Lauda wasn't supposed to become a racer.Still, it was the wealth of the Lauda clan that allowed young Niki to enter the world of racing, at least obliquely. Getty ImagesNiki Lauda (center) with James Hunt (right) and Jody Scheckter (left)Lauda got a tantalizing taste of success the first time he raced, driving a Mini Cooper to a second-place finish in a 1968 hill-climb. He skipped college to chase his racing dream. But his family wasn't about to write checks to further his pursuit. So he took out loans to finance his apprenticeship through the Formula Vee and Formula 3 ranks. Then in 1971 he took out an even bigger loan against his life insurance policy to join the March team in Formula 2. With the 1972 season approaching, Lauda applied for another loan to move up to Formula 1 with March. He was even approved for that increased debt."One of the bank directors gave me the all-clear to do an F1 deal," Lauda recalled to Britain's Motor Sport magazine in 2009. "so I signed a contract with Max and Robin. Then I came back to Vienna and the same director told me 'a sum of money like this needs me to get the approval of the supervisory board.' He came back after he'd done that and said, 'They say no.' ""They," it turns out, was really one person. His grandfather."I telephoned my grandfather and asked him who I had been brought up. The way I saw it, I couldn't let March down."Lauda approached another bank in Vienna and was on the verge of securing a new loan that substituted sponsorship on his car and helmet for interest. "Then the manager asked what would happen if I killed myself," said Lauda. "I thought 'shit, I hadn't thought of that.' We clinched the deal by securing the money against an insurance policy on my life. But assuming I survived, there was still the loan to pay back."Lauda made it to Formula 1 with March in 1972, but the car was uncompetitive. So in 1973, with even more debt in hand, he moved to BRM, where the car was similarly lousy. But at BRM his teammate was Clay Regazzoni. And when Regazzoni—who'd been impressed by both Lauda's driving skill and his ability to practically reassemble a car to extract better performance—recommended that Lauda come with him, Getty ImagesFerrari would pay Lauda enough to pay off his accumulated debt on his contract with BRM. Somehow, ironically, Hans Lauda passed away in January 1974, just as his grandson was joining Ferrari and about to experience his greatest racing success.Lauda came to Scuderia Ferrari at the moment when the team was being reorganized under Enzo Ferrari's former assistant, the brilliant 26-year-old Luca di Montezemolo. And it was just as the new, blindingly quick, flat-12-powered 312 was pulling the team out of a decade-long slump.The combination of Lauda's methodical, precise driving with the performance of the Ferrari 312B3-74 was an instant sensation. Of the 16 Grand Prix races in 1974, Lauda qualified on the pole for eight and won two. His first career victory came in the fourth race, the Spanish Grand Prix at Jarama in April. His second win was two months later in the Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort. A frustrating series of early retirements meant Lauda finished fourth in the driver's championship behind Emerson Fittipaldi, his teammate Regazzoni, and Jody Scheckter.Ferrari started the 1975 Formula 1 season running the 312B3-74 for the first two races but put Mauro Forghieri's brilliant 312T on the track for the third race, the South African Grand Prix at Kyalami. Lauda qualified fourth and finished fifth, a relatively modest start for the new car with its innovative transverse gearbox.Getty Images"I didn't fully appreciate the advantages it would offer because it seemed such a big change from a chassis about which we knew everything," Lauda told Motor Sport in 2005. "But the 312T really did possess totally neutral handling and a wide torque curve. It was a true gem, a lasting monument to Forghieri's abilities."At the Monaco Grand Prix, Lauda and the 312T ran away from the field and won easily. He won the next two races as well—Belgium and Sweden. Add victories in the French and United States Grands Prix, and Lauda took the Drivers' World Championship by a wide margin over Fittipaldi. And Ferrari easily secured the manufacturers' crown ahead of the Brabham and McLaren teams.Lauda's battle with James Hunt during the 1976 season was so dramatic that it literally became a movie—Ron Howard's *Rush*, released in 2013. With the buttoned-down Lauda in the 312T2 and the flamboyant Hunt most often in McLaren's M23, the racing was going to be epic even without Lauda's fiery disaster at the Nürburgring during the German Grand Prix. But it was that crash that would radically alter Lauda's appearance and define much of the rest of his life and career.Getty ImagesThe fire burned off most of his face and ears and horribly scarred his lungs. "My then wife fainted when she first saw me," Lauda recalled to Britain's Telegraph newspaper in 2013. "So I knew it could not have been good."Getty ImagesIn what amounts to nearly a medical miracle, and an excruciating ordeal, Lauda returned to racing after missing only three races. He had built a formidable lead in the Drivers' Championship after winning five races before that fateful German Grand Prix. Going into the last race in Japan he was still leading Hunt—who also had five victories, after several politically charged rulings—in the championship points race. By parking his Ferrari in Japan, Lauda practically gifted the championship to Hunt, who won it by a single point by finishing third in the decisive race.Lauda never hid his scars. "I only had to do surgery to improve my eyesight," he explained to the Telegraph. "Cosmetic surgery, it's boring and expensive and the only thing it could do is give me another face. I had the eye surgery so that my eyes could function, and as long as everything functions I don't care about it." Lauda returned to Ferrari for the 1977 season, but his relationship with Enzo was fraying. Lauda won three races anyhow and took his second driving championship, but Formula 1 was changing. The radical Lotus 78 brought the ground-effects era to the series, and the 312-series Ferrari wasn't likely to be competitive going forward. Lauda took up Bernie Ecclestone's invitation and joined Brabham-Alfa for 1978. He had his moments with Brabham—including a victory in the notorious BT46 with its fan that sucked the car down to the road—but mostly he was frustrated. So Lauda retired after the 1979 season.Getty ImagesThat retirement lasted about three years. He came back during the 1982 season driving for McLaren. And in 1984 he took a third Drivers' World Championship driving the MP4/2C powered by Porsche's awesome radically turbocharged 1.5-liter V-6 engine. He beat teammate Alain Prost by a scant half-point at a time when many already thought of him as washed up.Lauda ultimately retired after the 1985 season, in which he dropped out of 11 of the 14 races he entered with various mechanical issues. And that retirement allowed Lauda to indulge the mercantile instinct that seems to run through his family, and aloof as he could be, he was also somehow vulnerable and fully human. "Don't talk too much," he told European Business in 2015. "Be focused on the goal and achieve it. Gray zones do not interest me at all. Whenever there is discussion, I make it clear that I do not want any gray zones, just black and white. When you have something in black and white, you can deal with it quicker. You must always be faster and better than the others. The less you talk, the more time you have for the essential things."Getty ImagesJohn Pearsley HuffmanSenior Editor/John Pearsley Huffman has been writing about cars since 1990 and is getting okay at it. Besides Road & Track, his work has appeared in Car and Driver, the New York Times, and more than 100 automotive publications and websites. A graduate of UC Santa Barbara, he still lives near that campus with his wife and two children. He owns a pair of Toyota Tundras and two dogs. He used to have a Nova and a Camaro. Niki Lauda is one of the most influential figures in Formula 1 history. The Austrian won three world titles and enjoyed great success on the Mercedes F1 board after his retirement. Andreas Nikolas (Niki) Lauda was born on February 22, 1949 in Vienna, Austria to a wealthy paper-manufacturing family that didn't approve of his interest in racing. Nevertheless the youngster became a racing driver despite his family's protestations, taking part in Formula Vee before driving Porsche and Chevron sports cars in private. However after his career stalled, Lauda took out a £30,000 bank loan that was secured by a life insurance policy in order to buy his way into the March team as a Formula 2 driver in 1971. It didn't take long for Lauda to be promoted to the F1 team, driving for March in F1 and F3 in 1972. However the team's 1972 F1 campaign proved disastrous, with the low point coming at the Canadian GP when both cars were disqualified within three laps of each other. Lauda then took out another bank loan in order to buy his way into the BRM team in 1973. Although the team were in decline the Austrian was quick, running as high as third at the Monaco GP, which caught the eye of Enzo Ferrari. When BRM teammate Clay Regazzoni rejoined Ferrari in 1974, Enzo promptly asked him about the Austrian. Regazzoni spoke highly of Lauda, prompting Ferrari to sign him and clear his debts. After some down years to start the 1970s, Ferrari were once again on the rise in 1974 under the leadership of Luca di Montezemolo. With Regazzoni and Lauda now in the mix, the team started the season well with the Austrian finishing second at his debut race in Argentina. It didn't take long for Lauda to take his first victory for the team three races later in Spain, Ferrari's first since 1972. The Austrian continued to impress from there, registering six consecutive pole positions at one point, however inexperience and unreliability meant he only won one more race that year, the Dutch GP. As a result Lauda finished the season fourth in the Drivers' Championship. The start of the 1975 season was a tricky one for Lauda as his best result after the first four races was a fifth-place finish. However from there the Austrian far of the next five races, with his third place finish at the Italian GP helping him clinch his first World Championship. Teammate Clay Regazzoni won the race, helping Ferrari take their first Constructors' Championship in 11 years. Daniele Audetto replaced Montezemolo as Ferrari team manager in 1976, and despite tension between he and Lauda, the Austrian started the year with four wins from the opening six races while finishing second in the other two. A fifth win of the season at the British GP meant that Lauda had double the points of closest challengers Jody Scheckter and James Hunt, making a second consecutive title all but a formality. Ahead of the 1976 German GP at the Nürburgring, Lauda urged his fellow drivers to boycott the event citing the race organisers' lack of safety measures around the 23 kilometre circuit - including a lack of fire marshals, fire and safety equipment and safety vehicles. Although F1 was quite dangerous at the time, drivers voted against the boycott and the race went ahead. The race took place on August 1, 1976 however things quickly took a turn for the worst. Lauda's Ferrari overveed off track on Lap 2, hitting an embankment and burst into flames while making contact with Brett Lunger's Surtees-Ford car. While Lunger was able to get out, Lauda was trapped with the likes of Arturo Merzario, Langer, Guy Edwards and Harald Erdl all stopping. Merzario was able to pull Lauda from his car, though the Italian suffered severe burns to his head and inhaled hot toxic gas while doing so. The Austrian was conscious and able to stand immediately after the accident, though he later fell into a coma and was given his last rites while in hospital. Lauda survived but suffered scarring from burns to his head. He also lost most of his right ear as well as the hair, eyebrows and eyelids on the right side of his head. Nevertheless Lauda opted for minimal reconstructive surgery, having his eyelids replaced and choosing to wear a cap to cover the scars on his head. Carlos Reutemann was brought in as his replacement however Lauda only missed two races, even appearing at the Monza press conferences just six weeks after the accident with fresh burns. He managed to finish the race in fourth, however in his absence Hunt had mounted a charge to close the gap in the standings. The Briton took wins in the Canadian and US GP, reducing Lauda's lead to just three points ahead of the season-ending Japanese GP. While the Austrian managed to qualify third, one spot behind Hunt, torrential rain hit the Fuji Speedway on raceday. This prompted Lauda to retire after two laps, stating he felt it was unsafe to race in those conditions, especially as his eyes were watering excessively due to the injuries suffered from his fiery crash. Hunt led most of the race, and while blistered tyres forced him to stop and dropped him down the order, he eventually finished third to take the F1 World Championship by one point. Lauda's decision to retire from the Japanese GP hurt his previously good relationship with Ferrari, though he managed to take the 1977 title through consistency rather than outright pace as Mario Andretti won four races compared to the Austrian's three. Nevertheless Lauda decided to leave Ferrari at the end of the season, having raced alongside Reutemann all year despite the two having a poor relationship. The Austrian even left the team before the end of the season, missing the last two races after Ferrari ran Gilles Villeneuve in a third car for the Canadian GP. After leaving Ferrari, Lauda joined Brabham-Alfa Romeo in 1978 though results were less than stellar. One of the high points came at the 1978 Swedish GP when the Austrian took the chequered flag in the Brabham BT46B that featured a radical design known as the Fan Car. Lauda also took victory at the Italian GP, however he retired from nine of the 14 races. Those issues continued in 1979. Although the Austrian won the non-championship Dino Ferrari GP in September, his final appearance for the team came at the Canadian GP when he cut a practice session short and informed team principal Bernie Ecclestone that he wished to retire immediately. Lauda, who had founded Lauda Air - a charter airline - returned to Austria to run the company full time. Lauda made his F1 return in 1982, joining McLaren for a reported salary of \$3 million despite scepticism from team sponsor Marlboro. The Austrian wasted no time in proving he still had what it took to compete, winning the Long Beach GP in his third race back. Lauda won the British GP later in the year en route to an impressive fifth place finish in his first season back in the sport. Although Lauda finished the opening two races of the 1983 season on the podium, McLaren struggled through a transition year as they made the switch from Ford-Cosworth engines to TAG-Badger Porsche turbo engines. Although the Austrian came close to winning the final race of the season in South Africa, he ended the campaign without a victory. However Lauda and McLaren rallied back in 1984, with the Austrian taking his third and final F1 World Championship by half a point over teammate Alain Prost. The two were no match for the rest of the grid, winning 12 of the 16 races with the Frenchman winning seven compared to Lauda's five. The success was short-lived however as Lauda retired from 11 of the 14 races the following year. He even failed to start the Belgian GP after crashing and breaking his wrist during practice, an injury that forced him to miss the European GP at Brands Hatch as well. His only win of the season, and the final of his career, came at the Dutch GP as he fended off a late push from Prost. Lauda's final race came at the inaugural Australian GP, though he retired while leading on Lap 57 due to brake failure. © Photo4 With his racing career over, Lauda returned to F1 in 1993 when Di Montezemolo offered him a consulting role at Ferrari. He later became team principal of the Jaguar Formula 1 team midway through the 2001 season, however results failed to improve and he was let go along with 70 other key figures at the end of 2002. Lauda became non-executive chairman of the Mercedes F1 team in September 2012, and his influence proved crucial in signing Lewis Hamilton from McLaren on a three-year contract. © XPBImages Lauda passed away in his sleep on May 20, 2019 at the age of 70 at the University Hospital of Zurich, where he had been undergoing dialysis treatment for kidney problems. Current and former drivers paid tribute to the Austrian in the lead up to the 2019 Monaco GP and a moment of silence was held before the race. Mercedes painted their halo red with a sticker stating "Niki we miss you". Both Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel wore special helmets in honour of the Austrian. Niki Lauda was married twice. His first marriage was in 1976 to Marlene Knaus, a fashion icon, model, and former socialite. The couple had two children, Mathias and Lukas, and remained married until their divorce in 1991. However, during their marriage, Niki had a son named Christoph with another woman. The affair eventually led to the end of their 15-year marriage. In 2008, Niki married again to Birgit Wetzinger, a former flight attendant who is 30 years younger than Lauda. They welcomed twins, a son named Max and a daughter named Mia, a year after their wedding. Published [hour]:[minute] [AMPM] [timezone], [monthFull] [day], [year] BERLIN (AP) — Formula One great Niki Lauda, who won two of his world titles after a horrific crash that left him with serious burns and went on to become a prominent figure in the aviation industry, has died. He was 70.Lauda's family issued a statement saying the three-time world champion "passed away peacefully" on Monday, the Austria Press Agency reported.Walter Klepetko, a doctor who performed a lung transplant on Lauda last year, said Tuesday: "Niki Lauda has died. I have to confirm that." "His unique successes as a sportsman and entrepreneur are and remain unforgettable," the family statement said. "His tireless drive, his straightforwardness and his courage remain an example and standard for us all. Away from the public gaze he was a loving and caring husband, father and grandfather. We will miss him very much."Lauda won the F1 drivers' championship in 1975 and 1977 with Ferrari and again in 1984 with McLaren. In 1976, he was badly burned when he crashed during the German Grand Prix, but he made an astonishingly fast return to racing just six weeks later.Lauda remained closely involved with the F1 circuit after retiring as a driver in 1985, and in recent years served as the non-executive chairman of the Mercedes team. Formula One posted a message from its official Twitter account to acknowledge Lauda's contribution to the sport."Rest in peace Niki Lauda. Forever carried in our hearts, forever immortalized in our history." the post said. "The motorsport community today mourns the devastating loss of a true legend." Born on Feb. 22, 1949 into a wealthy Vienna family, Nikolaus Andreas Lauda was expected to follow his father into the paper-manufacturing industry, but instead concentrated his business talents and determination on his dreams of becoming a racing driver.Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said "Niki, we will miss you." "The whole country and the motor sports world are mourning a really great Austrian," Kurz wrote on Twitter.Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen paid tribute to Lauda as "an idol and an ambitious fighter who never gave up."Lauda financed his early career with the help of a string of loans, working his way through the ranks of Formula 3 and Formula 2. He made his Formula 1 debut for the March team at the 1971 Austrian Grand Prix and picked up his first points in 1973 with a fifth-place finish for BRM in Belgium.Lauda joined Ferrari in '74, winning a Grand Prix for the first time that year in Spain. He won his first drivers' title with five victories the following season.Facing tough competition from McLaren's James Hunt — their rivalry featured in the Ron Howard-directed movie *Rush* — Lauda appeared on course to defend his title in 1976 when he crashed at the Nuerburgring during the German Grand Prix. Several drivers stopped to help pull him from the burning car, but the accident would scar him for life. The baseball cap Lauda almost always wore in public became a personal trademark. "The main damage, I think to myself, was lung damage from inhaling all the flames and fumes while I was sitting in the car for about 50 seconds," he recalled nearly a decade later. "It was something like 800 degrees." Lauda fell into a coma for a time. He said that "for three or four days it was touch and go." "Then my lungs recovered and I got my skin grafts done, then basically there was nothing left," he added. "I was really lucky in a way that I didn't do any (other) damage to myself. So the real question was then will I be able to drive again, because certainly it was not easy to come back after a race like that."Lauda made his comeback just six weeks after the crash, finishing fourth at Monza after overcoming his initial fears. He recalled "shaking with fear" as he changed into second gear on the first day of practice and thinking, "I can't drive." The next day, Lauda said he "started very slowly trying to get all the feelings back, especially the confidence that I'm capable of driving these cars again." The result, he said, boosted his confidence and after four or five races "I had basically overcome the problem of having an accident and everything went back to normal." He won his second championship in 1977 before switching to Brabham and then retiring in 1979 to concentrate on setting up his airline, Lauda Air, declaring that he "didn't want to drive around in circles anymore."Lauda came out of retirement in 1982 after a big-money offer from McLaren, reportedly as about \$3 million a year. He finished fifth his first year back and 10th in 1983, but came back to win five races and edge teammate Alain Prost for his third title in 1984. He retired for good the following year, saying he needed more time to devote to his airline business.Initially a charter airline, Lauda Air expanded in the 1980s to offer flights to Asia and Australia. In May 1991, a Lauda Air Boeing 767 crashed in Thailand after one of its engine thrust reversers accidentally deployed during a climb, killing all 213 passengers and 10 crew. In 1997, longtime rival Austrian Airlines took a minority stake and in 2000, with the company making losses, Lauda resigned as board chairman after an external audit criticized a lack of internal financial control over business conducted in foreign currency. Austrian Airlines later took full control.Lauda founded a new airline, Niki, in 2003. Germany's Air Berlin took a minority stake and later full control of that airline, which Lauda bought back in early 2018.He partnered with budget carrier Ryanair on Niki's successor, LaudaMotion.Lauda in later years formed a close bond with Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton, who joined the team in 2013. He often backed Hamilton in public and provided advice and counsel to the driver.Lauda also intervened as a Mercedes mediator when Hamilton and his former Mercedes teammate Nico Rosberg feuded, argued and traded barbs as they fought for the title between 2014-16Lauda twice underwent kidney transplants, receiving an organ donated by his brother in 1997 and, when that stopped functioning well, a kidney donated by his girlfriend in 2005.In August 2018, he underwent a lung transplant that the Vienna General Hospital said was made necessary by a "serious lung illness." It didn't give details.Lauda is survived by his second wife, Birgit, and their twin children Max and Mia. He had two adult sons, Lukas and Mathias, from his first marriage. Niki Lauda, born Andreas Nikolaus Lauda on February 22, 1949, in Vienna, Austria, lived a life defined by speed, resilience, and an unyielding passion for racing. From his earliest days, he was captivated by the thrill of cars and the adrenaline of competition. Despite coming from a wealthy family with roots in paper manufacturing, his real dreams lay in the world of motorsport. Niki Lauda's interest in racing was met with disapproval from his family, but this did not deter him. He embarked on his racing journey in 1968, beginning with Minis and advancing to Formula Vee and Formula Three. His love for racing drove him to take out a £30,000 bank loan to secure a seat in European Formula Two with March Engineering in 1971, highlighting his determination. In 1973, he joined the British Racing Motors (BRM) team, where he scored his first points in a thrilling race in Belgium. His talent quickly drew the attention of the legendary Ferrari, and in 1974, he signed with the iconic team. Lauda's first victory came at the 1974 Spanish Grand Prix, setting the stage for what would become a storied career. He clinched his first World Championship in 1975, winning five races. By 1977, he had secured his second championship with Ferrari, further solidifying his legacy. Lauda's dynamic rivalry with James Hunt became one of the legendary stories in Formula 1. The two first met in Formula 3 racing in 1970, where their contrasting styles were evident: Hunt, with his playful charm and flamboyant approach, and Lauda, the meticulous strategist. Despite their differences, they quickly became fierce competitors, earning each other's respect. Niki Lauda famously remarked, "James was among the very few I liked, and I respected." The 1976 season, often dubbed the "Rush" season, brought intense drama, especially during the German Grand Prix at the Nürburgring. On that fateful day, Lauda's Ferrari crashed and burst into flames, resulting in life-threatening burns and toxic fume inhalation. Doctors held little hope for his survival, but Niki Lauda was the embodiment of resilience, making a miraculous comeback just six weeks later. Incredibly, he returned to the track for the Italian Grand Prix at Monza, finishing fourth despite his injuries. The championship rivalry intensified, and the title showdown culminated at the rainy Japanese Grand Prix at Fuji Speedway, where Lauda, still recovering, bravely chose to withdraw due to dangerous conditions. Hunt, seizing the opportunity, finished third, securing the championship by a mere point. The impact of Niki Lauda's rivalry with Hunt was profound, influencing the sport's direction and highlighting the critical importance of safety in racing. Following his harrowing crash, Niki Lauda became a passionate advocate for greater safety measures in Formula One, fighting for improvements in car design and driver protection. His efforts facilitated significant changes, creating a safer environment for future generations of drivers. Beyond his impressive track record, Niki Lauda's legacy includes his analytical approach to racing. Known as "The Computer," he combined speed with a cool, calculating mindset, inspiring countless fans and aspiring racers and leaving an indelible mark on the world of racing. I am sure you found this story interesting. Please subscribe to my blog by filling in your details below: My blog has countless such articles and stories to guide you and quench your thirst for knowledge. You can also follow me on X and Facebook to read more such stories and posts. You can also watch a video on this topic on my YouTube channel: PS: Copilot and ChatGPT have been used to create parts of this post.

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