

F1: Heidfeld goes into hiding at Mercedes

Nick Heidfeld's Formula One career is all but over: he is confirmed as the test driver for Mercedes GP Petronas, bringing the team up to three German drivers. Billed by commentators as "Quick Nick" he has proved one of F1's "nearly men" - a driver with promise that somehow never quite gets there.

Heidfeld started in F1 in 2000 with Prost-Peugeot. He has raced for Jordan and Williams and spent six seasons with Sauber in its various guises. And although he has clung to the back of the fastest drivers, not quite falling into the mid-ranks, he has never achieved what many expected.

His career has been almost a parallel of Jenson Button's - until last year. Except that, when Button was racing a shed, Heidfeld always had a decent if not excellent car. In his nine years of racing in F1, he has gained one pole position, two fastest laps - and no wins.

Constantly outclassed by Robert Kubica, Heidfeld found himself out of a drive when BMW announced it was pulling out.

But as the season nears, the number of seats available is thinning: there's one alongside Kubica at Renault; there's one alongside Bruno Senna at Campos (where Senna has said he's not being paid). Toro Rosso have at last confirmed Alguersuari as their second driver.

Oh, and until earlier this week there were two seats at USF1 - available to anyone that offers them enough money in a hark-back to the Formula One of old.

Senna said he was told by several teams that he could have a seat if he brought at least USD5 million in sponsorship. Current leader, it is reported, in raising seat money is Vitaly Petrov, the Russian who was second in last year's GP2 series; According to *BILD*, he's apparently got Russian sponsors (a bank and an oil company) prepared to put up as much as Euro 15 million to buy him a seat in F1 this season.

The first USF1 seat to be booked was announced by Argentina's President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on Monday: it's Jose Maria Lopez - and if that name seems familiar, it should. He was one of the stars of the Renault V6 championship in 2003 and spent three years as a Renault test

driver. In 2007, frustrated at not getting a drive, he cut his losses and returned to Argentina where he has dominated several series - winning three championships in three years, 36 poles and 38 wins.

Heidfeld, as he is siphoned off towards factory drives in other series as he tries to remain race-ready in case he gets the call (bearing in mind that testing is so restricted that a test driver, like Alguersuari and others last year, has almost no experience in the car they are expected to step into) will look at Lopez and hope that, one day, things will turn around.

And, of course, hopes that when Schumacher re-retires he, that is Heidfeld, will get the call to step up.