

## Ferrari Fandom, Supercharged by AI

### *Smart Talks with IBM Season 6, Episode 3*

**Malcolm:** I never went to a Formula 1 race, as a kid, because we lived in southern Ontario, and there was just one F1 race in Canada. That race was in Montreal, a good 7-hour drive away. I never watched a F1 race on television, either, because we didn't have a television.

**Malcolm:** But what I did have was a subscription to the car magazine Road and Track, and Road and Track took F1 very seriously. Every month my new issue would arrive. I would turn immediately to the long, detailed account of that month's race. And I fell in love.

**Malcolm:** It's been 50 years. But I can still rattle off the names of all the top drivers of that era from memory. James Hunt. Mario Andretti. Carlos Pace. Jacques Laffite. And, of course, the greatest of them all. My adolescent idol. Niki Lauda. Who won two world championships in the mid-1970's with . . . Scuderia Ferrari.

[BBC Documentary](#) [4:00-4:22; 22 sec] *He was world championship material from the moment he joined the Ferrari team. 'It was no question that in '75-'76, I was dominating the whole thing without any mistakes. I did nothing wrong. This was perfect driving.'*

**Malcolm:** If you had met skinny, pre-adolescent Malcolm, in the mid-70's in rural Ontario, there's a good chance you would have seen me in my prized Ferrari T-shirt. I was a fan. One of what the Italians call *tifosi*. A Ferrari devotee. And that's what it meant to be a fan 50 years ago. T-shirts. Magazine stories and a big Niki Lauda poster on your wall.

But what does it mean to be a fan today? Today we have the internet and streaming and big data and AI and all the other accoutrement of the digital age. Is there a chance to re-invent the meaning of fandom?

**Malcolm:** My name is Malcolm Gladwell. You're listening to the latest episode of Smart Talks with IBM, where we offer our listeners a glimpse behind the curtain of the world of technology. In our first episode, we talked about how an AI assistant created with IBM watsonx helps future teachers practice responsive teaching. Our second episode was how a custom AI model could help L'Oréal's researchers shape the future of what we put on our faces every morning. In this episode...how IBM, one of the world's preeminent technology companies, is joining up with one of the world's preeminent racing brands to fundamentally change how fans interact with their favorite team.

**Malcolm:** The size of the Scuderia Ferrari HP fanbase is staggering. 396 million people around the world identify as Ferrari fans. *396 million*. The only other fanbases that big belong to the iconic premier league football teams like Manchester United or Chelsea FC. I don't believe there is any other Formula 1 team that inspires that kind of devotion.

**Malcolm:** Ferrari's job then isn't necessarily to grow its fanbase. 396 million is more than enough fans. Their job is to deepen the connection people feel with the Scuderia Ferrari team.

**Malcolm:** But if I'm Ferrari, how do I find out more about who my fans are? What they care about? What they want? How do I use my archives and data to create experiences that matter to them? How do I say to the guy – who spent his childhood eagerly reading Road and Track every month “Here are other ways you can get involved with your favorite FI team *today*”

**Malcolm:** The task of deepening an emotional connection, in the digital age, begins as an information problem. Which is where IBM comes in.

**Malcolm:** How would you describe what you do?

**Fred:** I'd describe it as the, probably the best job at IBM. Um,

**Malcolm:** yeah, I was gonna say, I was gonna ask you, do you have the best job at IBM?

**Fred:** I think so.

**Malcolm:** I'm talking to Fred Baker, who leads Sports and Entertainment for IBM Consulting in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. You can probably guess from the accent. He's from New Zealand.

**Fred:** We've had a, a really interesting range of experience over the past, um, sort of five, six years. We've, we've worked with Premier League clubs, like, uh, Liverpool Football, we've worked with England Rugby, uh, St. Andrew's links. We also globally, uh, we've got a global team. So, um, we work with the Masters, the US Open, ESPN, Fantasy Football, the Grammys.

**Malcolm:** You do, the tennis stuff, is that all under your remit.

**Fred:** Yeah, so we do Wimbledon as well. Yep. That's under my remit.

**Malcolm:** If you've ever watched Wimbledon on television, I'm sure you've seen at various moments a little IBM logo on the bottom of the screen. That's because IBM has been Wimbledon's official information technology partner since 1990.

**Malcolm:** When the idea of a collaboration between Ferrari and IBM was first broached, Baker actually took people from Ferrari on a tour of IBM's Wimbledon operation. Just so they could see what a tech company like IBM could do for a sports franchise.

**Malcolm:** Which Wimbledon did you take them to?

**Fred:** Last year's champs.

**Malcolm:** Tell me what you showed them.

**Fred:** We take them what into what we call the bunker. So we, it's literally underground, at the Champs, um, and showed them how we bring everything to life from the data capture off the courts, how we real time categorize, serve all those points to broadcasters and serve them into the app, the website for millions of fans around the world. // They were really impressed by that.

**Malcolm:** I'm also impressed by that. IBM trained its AI on the language of tennis. And not only the language of tennis, but specifically the language of tennis at Wimbledon.

**Fred:** So it can then decipher what an unforced error or a winner or a, a lob or, you know, idiosyncrasies in the language.

It can decipher all of that. And then it can also tell what does a broadcaster like to talk about that is interesting to a fan, you know, we've trained it, so it can not only analyze everything going on in the match, it can analyze past performances and rationalize results based on conditions or form, and then make predictions that fans can learn from.

But it can also pull out on the spot really interesting milestones, moments, data points that then come out of the mouth of a broadcaster

**Malcolm:** IBM is running an AI model that has been trained on huge amounts of tennis data, in order to give human broadcasters ideas on what they can talk about. And it all takes place underground right near the courts.

**Fred:** It's literally like, it's the underground floor of the broadcast center at um, at Wimbledon. It's literally almost under the courts.

**Malcolm:** Do you guys have – is IBM got the entire bunker?

**Fred:** Yeah.

**Malcolm:** How big is the room?

**Fred:** Oh, I, I'm sure our, our team would like it to be bigger, but, um, it's, it's big enough. There's probably, there's probably 30, 40 IBMers down there, um, manning the fort. // seeing it live is just really impressive when you see how much work and intelligence goes on to then make an end experience for a fan that is really, beautiful and representative of their brand and tradition.

**Malcolm:** IBM's goal in taking Ferrari to the Wimbledon bunker was to show them what it looks like to harness the power of data. And how this could help

shape Scuderia Ferrari's fan and digital experiences. Could AI learn the language of Scuderia Ferrari?

**Malcolm:** what was the original app like before IBM got involved?

**Malcolm:** I'm speaking with Stefano Pallard, who runs fan development for Ferrari's F1 team.

**Stefano:** It was quite a good app...a very good digital product but just an editorial product. So we were providing fans news and videos, articles, uh, and it was mainly about that. The strategy and the idea was trying to, um, use the app, uh, to, to have a deeper connection and, and interaction with our fans, make it more interactive. // So, turning it from an editorial product with, which was a very good editorial product, uh, into a more interactive product, digital product.

**Malcolm:** With such a massive undertaking, I asked Stefano how it all started once IBM got involved.

**Stefano:** we started really with a very long, uh, couple of [00:16:00] months of discovery phase. So, looking at the current app, looking at fans, uh, looking at what fans wanted for a, from a, from a fan app.

**Malcolm:** Tell me a little bit more about that phrase, something the fan wanted. What is it that the Super fan wasn't getting before that was something that would tie them even closer to Ferrari.

**Stefano:** Having run some focus group, having, having read about market research, having spoken to fans and being a fan // the strongest insight is Ferrari fans and superfan want to be part of something, want to belong to something. So they want to be part of a community, and ultimately they want to be part of a winning team. So they, they want to feel closer and get access.

**Malcolm:** The way Stefano saw it, the opportunity wasn't with race days. When the cars are on the track, the *tifosi* are already locked in. But there *was* an opportunity to engage Ferrari fans on the other days of the week. Or during the off season.

**Fred:** Formula One is so much more than just the race.

**Malcolm:** This is Fred Baker again.

**Fred:** What we can do is relive the race and bring it to life after the fact. Um, we can help them prepare, we can help them relive the past, and we can also bring the experience around Race Weekend to Life as well.

**Malcolm:** That of course, made me wonder: How *do* you engage fans when there's not a race happening? Baker says it all comes back to data and information.

**Malcolm:** Talk, talk a little bit about data collection. 'cause you're talking about a brand with tentacles everywhere, and you're trying to bring a lot of that stuff together in the app.

**Fred:** This is an organization that has for decades used data for racing, for performance, but it's, it's not historically used that data for everyone in the world to see. // what we are trying to do is expose as much of it as we can to fans. So part of collecting the data, the challenge was around how you go across all the disparate, different groups, that collect data for different purposes.

The team that collects data on tires, the team that has data on drivers, on weather, on competitors and so on. So you're trying to bring all that together and source it and make sense of it and train our AI to understand what it means, what things on team radio mean, what nicknames mean, what, uh, abbreviations and slang and idiosyncrasies on car specifics and track specifics and so on mean.

And you're also trying to design for something that is gonna be fan engaging but also appropriate to all the sensitivities of the privacy that's necessary. So you want it to be able to do all of that, collect all the data, produce something for fans in an automated way

**Malcolm:** But in order to design something to expertly engage the *tifosi*, it's necessary to understand more about the passion, and the type of national identity behind the fan base. You need to get inside the mind of the superfan.

**[BREAK]**

**Malcolm:** If you wanted to meet some modern day tifosi in the United States, you could head to a bar in midtown Manhattan called Féile (FAY-luh). Every race day, Formula One fans gather at Féile to cheer on their favorite drivers, their favorite teams. And I mean, really cheer.

**Malcolm:** I sent our producer Jake Harper to Féile on the day of the Canadian Grand Prix, so he could see the fandom up close. The bar gets loud and so crowded it's hard to move. Today, the room is packed with Scuderia Ferrari HP fans.

**Jake:** Even your glasses are Ferrari. I just noticed that.

**Malcolm:** Jake talked to a Ferrari fan named Gino, who was dressed head to toe in Ferrari's signature red and black.

**Gino:** Even my shoes are Ferrari.

**Jake:** Yeah. Fully decked out.

**Gino:** They were making fun of me last time I was here. They were like, is your underwear Ferrari? And I texted my girlfriend like, babe, I need Ferrari underwear.

**Jake:** Did you get, did you get it?

**Gino:** Not yet. Not yet. I'll work on it.

**Malcolm:** Gino's fandom started with Ferrari as a brand.

**Gino:** I love the cars. I think the 458 Scuderia is like the pinnacle of automotive engineering. That's my dream car. The 430 with the glass house for the engine, I mean, they're all gorgeous.

It's always been an aspiration of mine to own one. Um, so that, that naturally made me gravitate towards Ferrari. Even when the company I worked for sponsored AMG Patronis, I was secretly like hiding my Tifosi at the races.

**Jake:** Like Clark, Kent and Superman, just hiding the uniform underneath.

**Gino:** I love that. I love that. Yeah. I was wearing a Ferrari shirt underneath my suit.

**Malcolm:** In one sense, Gino is typical of what Ferrari has learned about its followers. A lot of FI fans, especially newer fans, are fans of drivers. But the tifosi love *Ferrari*. It's the oldest brand in Formula One, the only team that has stuck around since the series was founded in 1950.

**Malcolm:** But in another sense, Gino is not typical. He lives in New York. He can go to Féile to celebrate FI with other tifosi.

**Gino:** I'm a big racing fan and coming to this bar, I found a bunch of people that were into F1. Now I'm at this bar every weekend, just about with four or five friends that I made just through racing.

**Malcolm:** But lots and lots of Scuderia Ferrari's 396 million fans, don't live in a big city with a Ferrari bar. And lots of those 396 million fans aren't the kind of hard core fan who dress head to toe in Ferrari's signature red and black. A group that large is diverse. Necessarily. And one of the first tasks that IBM and Ferrari set out to do was to understand the full range of the tifosi phenomenon.

**Malcolm:** People like Gino. Hard core fans. They were easy. They would follow Scuderia Ferrari HP anywhere it wanted to go. But who else was out there?

**Malcolm:** The most interesting addition to the FI fanbase were those who watched the phenomenally successful Netflix documentary, *Drive to Survive*. These tended to be newcomers to the sport. More Americans than Europeans. What was their emotional perspective? What did *they* want?

**Malcolm:** Here's Fred Baker again, the guy with the coolest job at IBM:

**Fred:** if I'm a passionate fan, I wanna read a totally different thing on the app to a casual fan who is of the Netflix, drive to survive generation versus a, um. You know, some really niche personas that we found that are, are super interested but don't find it accessible yet until we start to deliver to quite different needs, um, that, that they have.

**Malcolm:** Working with IBM watsonx, Baker and his team began to develop personas – archetypes of all the possible kinds of Ferrari fans. Because if Ferrari



wanted to get better at talking to their fans, they had to understand who the fans were. And the personas are helping Ferrari and IBM create an app that caters to the *tifosi* in all their iterations.

**Malcolm:** How many personas did you come up with?

**Fred:** Uh, I think we had over 10 in the end. Maybe a dozen? and this is different. Um, yeah. Archetypes of people. Even that process is helped by AI. So we train AI to help us develop out a persona. We can get really detailed as to what each archetype is and their hobbies and backgrounds and so on.

So, so our own watsonx helped us in developing those personas. Like our research um, helped us uncover a segment of middle aged women in China who Ferrari is a real status symbol and they're really interested in the Scuderia Ferrari brand, and now they can engage more with it. But it wasn't yet, uh, you know, accessible or inclusive enough for them to feel comfortable doing so.

So real spectrums of fans across those dozen personas that we had to design for.

**Malcolm:** Give me some more examples of, of the, of personas. // can you gimme a couple more just so I get a flavor?

**Fred:** Yeah, sure. So the other, the other obvious one is, uh, is the “Drive to Survive” fan. Um, and, and that's, uh, you know, they're, they're probably not a diehard all their life Scuderia Ferrari fan, but they've really got into the more social side of, of Formula One that's been born out of the, um, the really popular series “Drive to Survive” on Netflix.

You then have gamer, uh, gamer personas who are into, you know, eSports is growing massively and, and Motorsport, um, and they're probably not necessarily into the real life racing quite so much, but they're certainly into gaming. So how do you appeal to them, then casual fans who are sort of into the luxury of Scuderia Ferrari, but not the sport necessarily.

**Malcolm:** Do the personas have names?

**Fred:** Yeah, I mean, we give them human names. // We had a max, we had a, uh, Alfonso, I think we had a Pedro. Um,

**Malcolm:** The woman in China, is she watching F1 or is she interested more in the brand and what it signifies?

**Fred:** Yeah, more in the brand and being part of a community. \ If I'm that persona in China, then I probably don't feel like I belong to it truly yet, but I'd love to feel like I do. So I could start to become a part of a digital community, learn more about the brand, probably get access to exclusive merchandise or you know, if I can't necessarily, own a Ferrari car, which let's face it, not many people can.

And if we're reliant only on the people who can own a car, then we're probably not gonna get much engagement // So how do we make others feel that they're still a part of that community?

**Malcolm:** This is what I mean when I say that the task of relating to the Ferrari fan base is a *data and information* problem. It's about collecting, organizing and analyzing the needs and wants of an enormous pool of people — and speaking to each of them, in their own emotional language.

**Malcolm:** Given all the work Fred put into understanding Ferrari's fanbase, I was curious to know how his framework would categorize *me*.

**Malcolm:** I wanna figure out which persona I am. So I'll describe to you my relationship to Ferrari and you tell me. So what I am is a huge car nut, so I like all cars obsessively.

**Fred:** Yeah.

**Malcolm:** collect on a very limited stage vintage cars, read serious car magazines, spend a lot of time on car websites, have a historical relationship to F1 because I grew up with Niki Lauda battling James Hunt in Lauda's Ferrari years. I have a great nostalgic connection. Um, went to Italy with my nephew and went to the Ferrari factory and rented one of those to drive around, you know? And I follow F1, but I wouldn't, I would don't think I would ever go to an, I wouldn't fly to Miami for F1 in Miami.

I wouldn't go that far. And I don't have time to watch F1 on TV on a regular basis. But, um, I'm interested. And, um, I have a red Ferrari T-shirt, which I've been known to wear. Um, and if you, if I ever got really rich, would I buy a Ferrari? Yes, I would. Okay. So where am I? Where am I in your, where, where am I in your, in your, uh, uh, breakdown?

**Fred:** I think you are probably a combination of the, I think it's casual loyalist, is not gonna, not gonna overtly go out of their way to sort of spend money on the racing, but they are loyal to the Ferrari brand and they have, um, nostalgia with it or whatever it might be.

And then the luxury enthusiast as well. // And so, and that, and that type of fan, you're right, we, we, we are probably not gonna engage you by doing a ton more on race weekend, but we can engage you by bringing this hugely rich amount of archive, material, footage, feelings and past drivers of yesteryear we bring by bringing them to life.

**[BREAK]**

**Malcolm:** Is there a, uh, a, an app that you saw someone saw another brand doing that served as a kind of model? I don't mean within F1, I'm talking about from any other field.

**Stefano:** Yeah. on top of being a very sport passionate, I'm a, uh, let's say a marketing passionate, a digital, uh, passionate guy. So I have a lot of apps and, and I, I, I really also, for my job, I, I try to, to look at different markets and different apps.

**Malcolm:** As we were talking, I was thinking about Strava. I'm a huge Strava head. It's my favorite app. If you don't already know, Strava is used by millions of active people around the world. I'm a runner and the app shows me a map of where I went, how fast I ran, what my heart rate was, what the weather was, on and on.

**Malcolm:** So are you, are you are you a cyclist or a runner?

**Stefano:** I'm a runner. I'm a runner. I, I run Marathons. Uh, and uh, ultra marathons. I did last year a hundred kilometers.

**Malcolm:** As it turns out, Stefano is a Strava head too. Right after I spoke to him, I followed him on Strava. He and I run the roughly the same distance every day at the same pace, and if I'm ever in Milan I'm almost certainly going to look him up, to see if he'll take me out on one of his favorite routes through the city.

**Malcolm:** This is what I love about Strava. You can find people to run with. And interact with. Strava is a community of like-minded people, and for those like me, the Strava app becomes a regular part of my daily routine. And that's what Stefano wanted for the Ferrari app.

**Malcolm:** are you interested in allowing, creating sort of robust forums for Ferrari fans to communicate directly to each other?

**Stefano:** I think you have to work in, in, in three directions. So direction number one is, uh, uh, Ferrari to fans. So providing them something which is compelling, which has value, and, and this, I think we're already doing and we're working on it. Second, second way is fans to Ferrari. So, ~~uh~~, help like allowing fans to // better interact with us. So, which was something we were not doing with the previous app.

So we're, for example, we, we have just introduced two features, which are polls. So basic ones, but polls and the possibility like the Submit your Message feature. So really to work on this, uh, way fans to Ferrari.

And then the third important way to, to build a community and and nurture community is like fans to fans. So if you were able to work on those three dimensions of Ferrari to fans, fans to Ferrari, and fans to fans. Uh, uh, that's how you could really create a strong community and start really monetizing and creating value.

I think we are very strong in the first dimension right now. We're building the second one, so fans to Ferrari, and then definitely, uh, the third one has to be there in order to, to have a complete, community engagement.

**Malcolm:** So let's talk about results. Scuderia Ferrari HP launched the new app at the Miami Grand Prix in 2025, incorporating AI elements and tailoring it to those archetypes Fred was talking about.

Are more people using the app? Are users spending more time on it than they did on the older version of the app? Yes.

**Stefano:** We doubled this month's, the daily active users we were having last season. So compared to the average, the average of 2024 season. Uh, we have more than double, uh, of daily active users. Also we're doubling the, uh, the, a normal month down download. So we, we did, uh, in this month more than two times, the download we are doing in a normal month.

Um, we are increasing by 35% the average time spent on app. // So KPIs are good.

**Malcolm:** If you build the right app, they will come.

**Malcolm:** For generations, fans of all varieties have met in public places—the stands of stadiums, in bars to watch races and matches on television. But there is a chance now for fandom to exist on a higher, broader level. For a community to be created over the internet, even when the fans are vastly different people who live vast distances apart.

**Malcolm:** I can imagine Gino, in his Ferrari Red and Black, using the Scuderia Ferrari app, relating to me as I relive my memories of Niki Lauda from the 1970's. Maybe I could use the app to learn something from the woman in China, the Tifosi newcomer. Or some 17-year old who got sucked in first by *Drive to Survive*.

**Malcolm:** I can imagine myself as part of that vision - taking my lifelong obsession to the next level.

## CREDITS

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### **EXTRA SCENE:**

**Malcolm:** I asked Fred Baker to come up with a hypothetical. Something that could fulfill my childhood dreams. Something that this type of technology could theoretically do that might appeal to a fan like me—someone whose interest in the sport went back 50 years. He said—

what about using AI to bring historical cars to life?

**Fred:** bringing to life cars of the past and allows fans to simulate a 1950 Ferrari race versus 1971 to see who, which car would be faster.

**Malcolm:** wait. You could do, wait, wait. You could do that? Tell me, tell me what that last thing you said? You can run simulations, race simulations out of the app?

**Fred:** you can't outta the app at this point. Um, so,

**Malcolm:** no, I'm talking, I know, Potentially, potentially.

**Fred:** Yeah.

**Fred:** It can, you know, it simulates, based on a whole range of factors that we can feed it and train it on

**Malcolm:** Hmm. Yeah. Wait, so I could... hypothetically you could allow me to compare Niki Lauda, for example, uh, to a contemporary driver, and I could say, if I put Niki Lauda in a contemporary car, . . .

**Malcolm:** what you're saying is that there is a scenario where I could recreate. That era in modern cars and get a sense of how my childhood heroes were performing, uh, would perform in a present day.

**Fred:** Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you can, ~~um, you can~~ analyze and understand how you would rank ~~all~~, all drivers of all time based on their different traits of a driver, right? So you can say who's the best late breaking, who's, who was typically the best on a tight track with limited overtake opportunities?

Who was the best overtaker? Who, who was the best of all these traits? You then apply those traits and rankings to different tracks and different cars where, you know, different, some different cars are better for a late breaker, some different cars are better for a, you know, on straights and so on. So you can simulate, you can allow fan, you could hypothetically allow fans to simulate any scenario. You could say, who's gonna win in Monaco on a 1980 model car.

**Malcolm:** Mm-hmm.

**Fred:** You can, you can put a current driver in a 1980 car equally so you can do all sorts of, uh, fun for simulations.

**Malcolm:** And that's just the beginning...

**END**