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TOP ATHLETES AND THEIR LOVE OF FOOTBALL

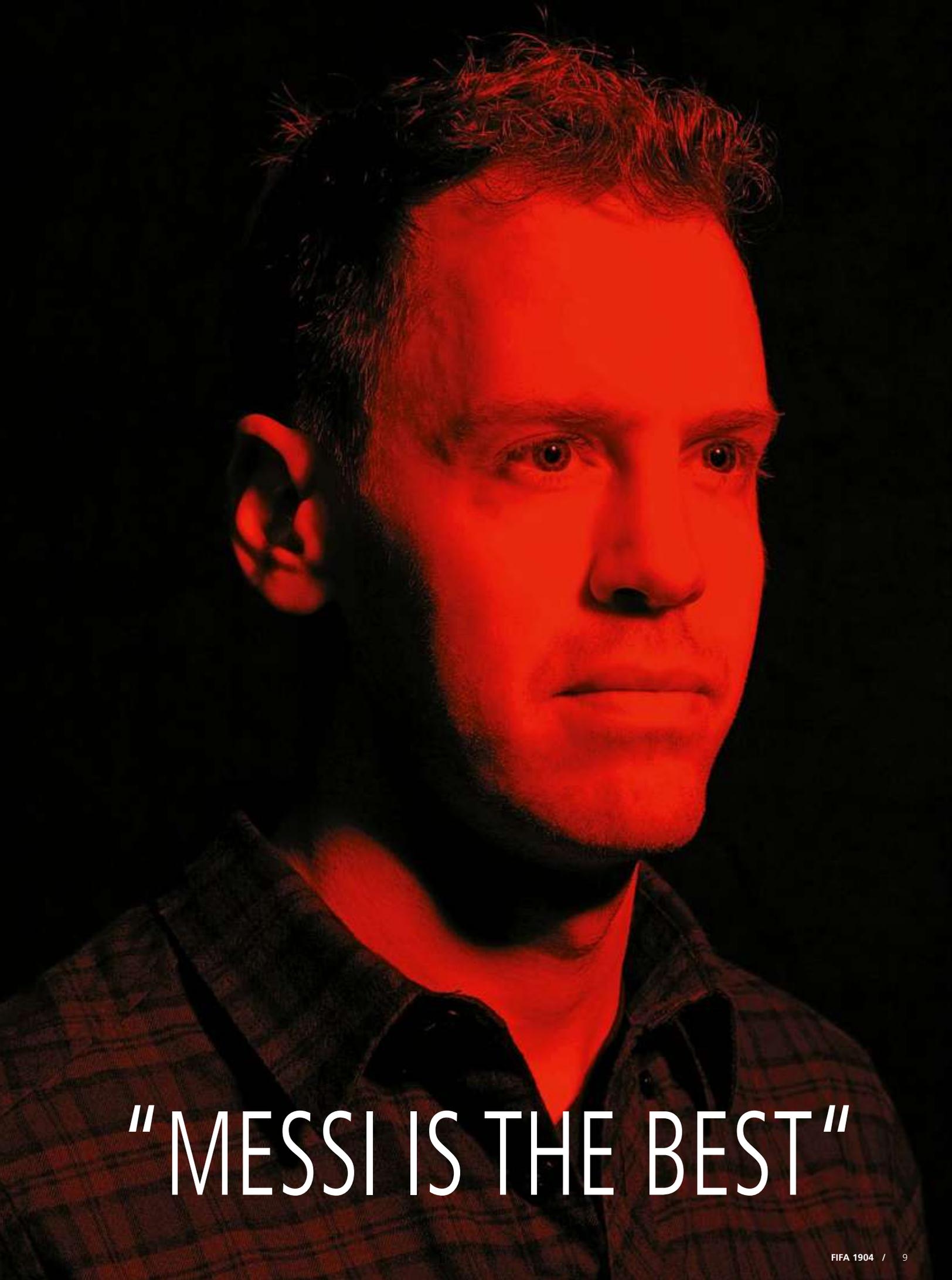
"I TRY TO LEARN
FROM FOOTBALL"

FOUR-TIME FORMULA 1 CHAMPION SEBASTIAN VETTEL



When Sebastian Vettel talks football, his enthusiasm shines through. But what do football and Formula 1 have in common? The Ferrari driver visited us at the Home of FIFA for a conversation about resilience, boring executive boxes and the best footballer in the world.

Sebastian Vettel spoke to Annette Braun and Alan Schweingruber; with photos by Gian Paul Lozza



“MESSI IS THE BEST”



t's pouring down. Yet the rain and the cool temperatures in Zurich don't stop the masses from visiting the zoo. Mums, dads and kids are queuing to get in. From here, you can see FIFA HQ, and you realise where the man in the baseball cap and the dark plaid shirt is heading. He stops for a moment before the entrance, pulls out his phone and dials a number. A few minutes later, Sebastien Vettel strides into the lounge on the first floor of the Home of FIFA. He shakes a couple of hands and smiles unassumingly.

Sebastian, when did you first find yourself inside a football stadium?

It must've been in the mid- to late 1990s. Borussia Mönchengladbach were playing in the Champions League and a friend took me to the game. I can't remember who they were playing, though. These days, when I go to a game, I go and see Eintracht Frankfurt. They're my local team.

Do you watch from an executive box?

Oh, no, I watch from the terraces. With the hardcore fans.

So you stand to watch the game?

Absolutely. I've been asked into the executive boxes many times, but the atmosphere there just isn't for me. I want to be in amongst it, where the singing happens, where the real atmosphere is. That's what really makes football fun, don't you think? I go with friends. And at half-time we go and get a beer and a sausage.

Don't you get swamped by fans?

Sometimes. Mostly at half-time. Kids come up to me and ask for an autograph, and I'm quite happy to oblige. If it did get too much, then I'd have to say "Look, I'm here as a private individual just trying to watch the match." During the 90 minutes, most fans are engaged and engrossed in the match. We're all there for the same reason at the end of the day.

You travel a lot. How do you keep up to date with matters football?

On race weekends it's actually quite tricky. Sometimes I keep up to date via the live ticker. Or I watch recordings of what happened in the *Bundesliga* that day back at the hotel. I do get quiet weekends at home, as well. When that happens I listen to the *Bundesliga* round-up on the radio on Saturday afternoon.

What about other European leagues?

Well, I do drive for an Italian racing team [laughs]! Most people in our team are big Juventus fans, so I do automatically keep an eye on *Serie A*. Football is a great topic of conversation, so I try to always be on the ball. Otherwise, I also take an interest in *La Liga* in Spain, as I've been to see Barcelona play quite a few times.

Do you show your emotions as a fan?

I get very emotional for international matches, like when Germany beat Italy at the European Championship last year. When the game was on, we were in

Austria preparing for the Grand Prix weekend. In the evening, we all watched the quarter-final together. You can imagine what that was like! One-all, then the penalty shoot-out that didn't seem to want to end. I celebrated and shouted. It really was very emotional.

How was the mood in the team afterwards?

Oh, it was alright. Obviously, I walked in with my chest puffed out the next day!

You grew up with football. Did you ever dream as a boy of becoming a professional footballer?

I was passionate when I played, but I never really joined a team as such. That was probably because I just wasn't good enough. I used to really love being in possession, but didn't much like giving the ball to anyone else. It was only later that I would understand what it takes to become a professional footballer. While there are lots of clubs all over every country, to really make it, a lot of things have to come together. And even then, the athlete in question has to be extraordinarily talented.

"I WANT TO BE IN AMONGST IT, WHERE THE SINGING HAPPENS, WHERE THE REAL ATMOSPHERE IS."

How would you explain the whole world's captivation with football?

Everyone can identify with football – it's easy to get into. To play the game, you don't need any equipment or a perfect location. You don't even need a grass pitch; any flat surface will do to begin with.



Role model

The four-time world champion is not just an idol for many children, but is also cited as an exemplary athlete by Germany coach Joachim Löw.

TOP ATHLETES AND FOOTBALL

Everyone has tried football at some point in their lives, even if only for a few minutes. And because everyone knows how hard it is to control a football, everyone can also appreciate what the professionals do.

“I USED TO REALLY LOVE BEING IN POSSESSION, BUT DIDN'T MUCH LIKE GIVING THE BALL TO ANYONE ELSE.”

Is that different in Formula 1?

Most people drive a car from the age of 18, but to pursue motor sports seriously, it takes more than that. You need committed parents, who drive their kids to go-carting races week after week. Parents prepared to take on all that effort for such a long time. Luckily, I had that.

And now you're a four-time world champion and role model for lots of kids.

When I see how kids look at me, I think to myself, “You know what, that was me just a few years ago!” It's fantastic to be able to give kids something to take away with them. When I was a junior driver, Michael Schumacher once presented me with a trophy. Meeting him was unforgettable. I grew into the job of being a role model automatically. First came the dream of becoming a racing driver, then my horizons widened, bit by bit. At the same time, you always have to be focused on backing up your performance levels and staying at the top.

What does it take to be the best at any given sport?

A lot of talent. That's the basic prerequisite. After that, it's about how much you're willing to work to improve yourself. Lots of people have got as far as being a profes-

sional and then been happy with that. But that's exactly when you need to pay attention to the details and continue to improve. That's the only way to get to places that no one has ever been before. Sooner or later hard work is always rewarded. Whether it's enough to be the best comes back to how much talent you have.

Who's the best current footballer?

There are good reasons why Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have had the title

of best footballer in the world to themselves for years now. Such consistency at the highest level is extraordinary. Who's better? That's not an easy question. Messi is perhaps the more talented footballer of the two, but that makes Ronaldo the harder worker and better athlete [read about Vettel's top 11 on p. 14 – ed.]. This monopoly at the top of football reminds me a lot of tennis, where the same four players have dominated the tour for years. Clearly, the players ranked five, six and seven are also good, but to get to the top that's not enough. Not for a prolonged period, anyway.

Can you learn anything from other athletes?

Absolutely. The longer you're in the business, the more you feel the connection with athletes from other disciplines. I try to learn from them. What has shaped me and what I have to deal with affects every other professional sports person as well. Some kick a ball around, others hold a steering wheel, but the day-to-day challenges are the same. Training, discipline and mental strength are important for all athletes.

With the difference that in Formula 1 so much depends on the performance of one person – the driver.

The team mindset also applies in Formula 1, even if you maybe don't get that impression from the outside. We don't have 30 players, we have a team of 1,000 looking after two drivers. They're all important. We win and lose together. Even though clearly I'm the one with the ultimate responsibility at the wheel.

Before the World Cup in 2010, Germany's coach Joachim Löw cited you as an exemplary athlete. That was how he motivated his team...

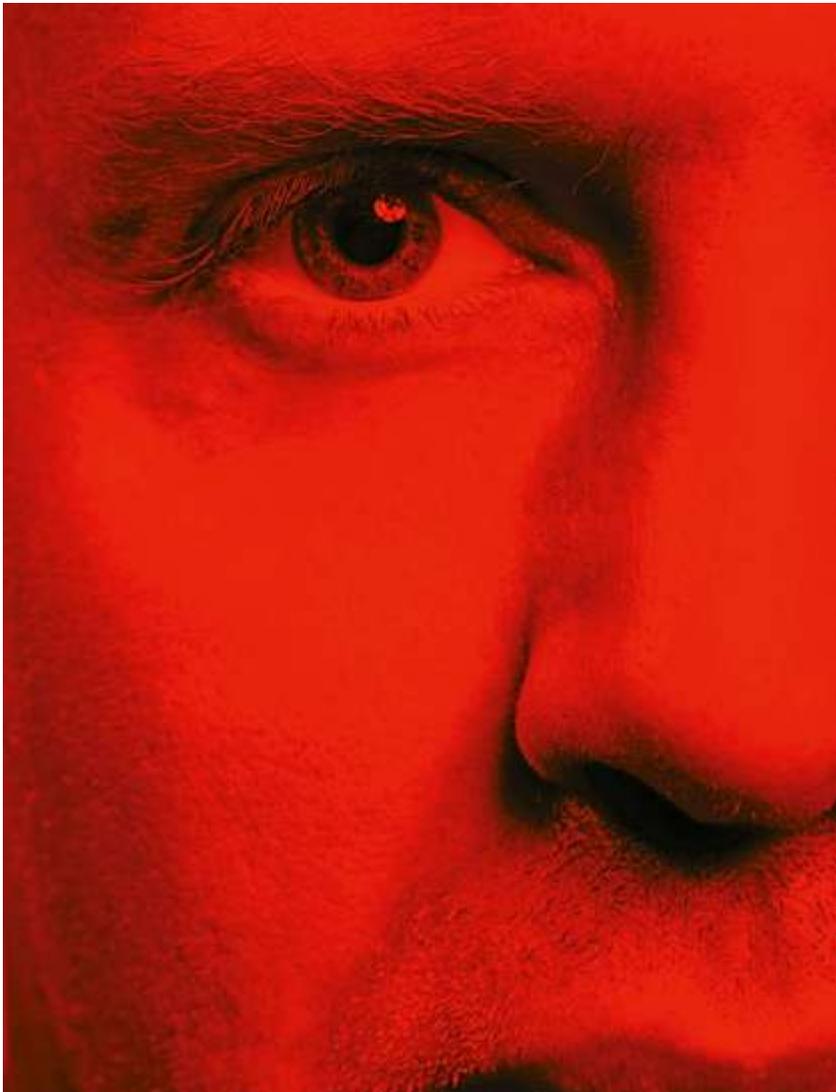
Conversely, this generation of the Germany team has shaped me. To this day, seeing

CAREER IN THE FAST LANE

Sebastian Vettel was three-and-a-half years old when he first sat in a go-cart. His father is a motor sports enthusiast and gave him his first few laps. In 2010, aged just 23, Vettel became the youngest Formula 1 world champion of all time. In total, he won the World Championship four times with Red Bull, most recently in 2013.

Vettel has been driving for Ferrari since 2015. In the drivers' standings for the current season, the German is engaged in an exciting two-way tussle for the title with Lewis Hamilton.

F04



Football shirt instead of racing suit

Sebastian Vettel enjoys donning football boots for the odd charity match, but he never considered becoming a professional footballer. "That was probably because I just wasn't good enough."

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VETTEL'S TOP 11

Sebastian Vettel sitting in the manager's hot seat? "I'd send my dream eleven out in a 3-3-2-2 formation," he says.



players like Philipp Lahm or Bastian Schweinsteiger still brings memories of special moments flooding back. They helped launch a new era and were fantastic in the World Cup in Germany in 2006. I was actually at two of the games. My friends had all already passed their driving tests by then, so we were able to drive to the different host cities. I have happy memories of Brazil's 4-1 win over Japan in Dortmund.

What images have stuck with you?

Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, a five-goal World Cup game. But there was one other unforgettable moment from that night: I got together with my current girlfriend! So my trip to the FIFA World Cup stadium in Dortmund was a key moment in my life.

You were 19 at the time. What's the first World Cup you remember?

That would be France '98, with the incredible Zinedine Zidane. That was also the year I first got a Panini sticker album. Unfortunately, Germany only made it to the quarter-finals, where they lost to Croatia. Croatia's number 9, he was great...

Davor Šuker.

Exactly! Šuker.

How do you see things going for Germany in Russia next year?

I'd love to see my countrymen playing for the World Cup title again. For a few years, we've had the luxury of lots of quality players enjoying repeated success. Anyway, from outside, football seems to have changed a lot. It's getting more and more professional.

And what do you think of that change?

I think with innovation and change it's always a matter of time and getting used to things. Video technology means that you can look at a contentious situation from multiple angles a number of times and

“MESSI IS PERHAPS THE MORE TALENTED FOOTBALLER OF THE TWO, BUT THAT MAKES RONALDO THE HARDER WORKER AND BETTER ATHLETE.”

reach a more objective decision. Yet, on the other hand, football is a sport that thrives on its tradition, and that includes the fact that not all refereeing decisions are 100% right. Now we can argue about whether this is unfair or whether it belongs in the game. I'm very happy that it's not something I have to worry about. Instead, I can sit on the couch and say, "This is not how it all used to be!" Generally speaking I'm really more of a traditionalist, including in my own sport.

Yet rule changes are a constant in Formula 1...

Formula 1 is very complex. The stewards have to deal with an enormous rulebook and find the balance in order to guarantee a fair race. On the other hand there are things that just happen. You make mistakes and you have to face the consequences. Situations will also always arise that are new and that you just have to evaluate one by one.

Would a footballer have the mental strength to compete in a Formula 1 race?

I'm sure they would. The expectation and the pressure that you have to cope with in competition are the same. It's about attitude and mental strength, things that professional athletes train for. Obviously physical fitness plays an important role, too. In this regard, you can't compare the two sports one-to-one.

What do you mean by that?

I think Formula 1 drivers have better stamina than footballers. That doesn't mean that we could cruise through a 90-minute match. Footballers focus on interval training. They're masters at picking up the tempo at the flick of a switch, then dropping it again. Racing drivers couldn't keep up with them in that regard. However, if you were to measure who ran more kilometres over a one-hour run, a lot of people would be surprised by the results [laughs]!