

[Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / 'Williams were in survival mode' | James Vowles breaks down his move from Mercedes

Hello, welcome to this week's episode. No race, of course, this weekend, but we do have an interview with James Vowles, the Williams team principal. James took over the role from Joss Capito and joined at the beginning of this season. This is a fascinating chat with a man who's had over 20 years in the sport, working his way up to Mercedes, where he was part of a team that won eight Constructors titles and seven Drivers titles. He finds himself with a very different challenge now, though, looking after a Williams team, looking to push themselves up the grid. I love this chat with James, hope you do too.

James, hello, welcome to the podcast. Hello. How are you doing? Very, very good. Thank you. How are you? Yeah, very good. Thanks. Thank you for having us in this incredible room with all of the cars from Williams history. It's incredible to be here. And I guess a reminder, if ever there was a need that Williams has got this amazing past in Formula One. Yeah, you summed it up well. You are surrounded really by championships, race, wins, podiums, cars that have huge legacy behind them. And in fact, behind you, some of my favourite here, one of my favourite places to come, definitely. Yeah. Do you ever just come down here and just sort of by yourself, look around and kind of go, yeah, this is it. Very much so. Very frequently, you'll find me, just only a five minute break, this is the place I'll be coming just to walk around. The first place I want to start is kind of how it's going. And obviously, you've been in the role for sort of four or five months now. And is Williams starting to feel like home for you? Definitely feeling like home, because I've been welcomed into this organisation. I think it wouldn't be if the team didn't want me here in the way that we want to progress. As you say, it feels like four or five months.

I thought it was only a month or two. It was only when someone said the other day, it's about four that you realise just how quickly that's all passed by. But definitely feels like you've obviously got the role as team principal at Williams. I'm fascinated to know how does one become a team principal at a team? And I just want to get into the kind of the recruitment process. Who approached who? How does that work? I mean, the journey here is, I think, first of all, team principals, you have a wide range of skills and expertise within the sport today. Toronto has a different set of expertise than I have, for example, a different set to Andrea McLean. So we're not all unique in terms of our backgrounds. My particular one is if we went way back, I mean, sort of mathematics, computer science, and then engineering with the degrees that I sort of grounded myself in before joining Formula One, and then spent around about 20, 23 years in Formula One building up my expertise. And I was fortunate, 20 years ago, you could do a multitude. In fact, you had to do a multitude of jobs. It wasn't uncommon. It was sort of around 250 people within the team. So you'd end up doing vehicle dynamics, in my case, race engineering as well at the same time, bit of R&D, a little bit of software. So just fairly broad ranging skill sets and built up very much within both the strategy and the race engineering domain up to a certain point. And then strategy really took over and that's what I became known for. 20 years ago, tools didn't exist like they do today. Data didn't exist like I did today. And my background is very much data driven, putting in place systems and methods to have as much data as possible to make decisions such that it's not heuristic, it's based on evidence, not anything else. Wind on from there. And obviously as team grows, I was fortunate enough

to have a huge organization behind me on the strategy side to the extent where my job became just arbitrating it, making sure we had team orders sorted out, and just making some final

decisions. But the hard work being done really by many other people. And the reason for doing that was purposeful. When Toto joined, he and I had a very open discussion about things. And the pathway in the direction of travel for me was very much one of leading towards something like this role. Now you're, you can't really ever hope or otherwise, you never guaranteed this, this isn't yours for the taking, this is yours to earn on the journey. And what I did is made sure that along that journey, I put myself in a position to always have the ability to learn and develop. So strategy then became not just the focus of what we do during the race weekend, but what we do across the year. How do we actually plan power units or upgrades? Or how do we actually

across the whole year end up performing well and just on one race weekend? And then expanded to multiple years. How do we across multiple years keep performing and including regulations? How do we want the regulations to move forward that helps us and helps the sport at the same time? Then it went even further than that. How do we as a group in motorsport want to be perceived, what we want to do, Formula E, GT3? And you can start to see the build up of it. Drivers started to fall underneath me, simulated drivers, young drivers and race drivers. And I started to do the building blocks really of the journey through to team principal. But that covers the engineer and a little bit of driver side. The other element of things is on my journey, I had the opportunity to work with my own companies. And along that journey ended up understanding the finance HR and business cases. And that really, I think fully formed me into someone that has an understanding of the whole organization, which is what has presented the opportunity anyway to come here.

It's such a varied role, isn't it, as a team principal? I think that's, we only see often on telly the kind of race part of it, but you are the focus and the driving force behind the culture of the organization, I guess, aren't you, at the very top?

I think certainly, so if we go back a bit, you have to lead the organization, which means you have to understand the organization. Clearly, everyone else would be more of an expert than you are. The designers are more expert in designing the UI. The finance team will be far more expert in understanding the finances you are, but you have to have an understanding of how it all fits together. More importantly, the wider range of understanding you have, the more you can bring the whole team together pushing in the right direction. And you brought up culture, absolutely, that's one element of things. But culture is what you enact, but it's more importantly that you have the ability, the faith, the trust, and the respect within the organization that people want to follow that direction. I want to get into some questions from people at home, because we've had lots in for you. One of them from Athena on Twitter would like to know, what surprised you most about being a team principal? I think just how varied every hour of every day is. It's within most roles within Formula One, I would actually say nowadays that it's becoming more and more specialist. So even designers aren't necessarily doing a broad range of designs that are focusing on one element, one very small element of the car. And that's how Formula One has developed over the last 20 odd years since I've been in the sport. And even my previous role was quite varied, because it wasn't really strategy as perhaps I'm known for, but quite a wide range of subjects, including drivers. And you tackle four or five things a day. Here, we're tackling about 20 different things a day. And it's a lot more varied. But as a result of that, I would also argue a lot more exciting. There's a lot going on all the time. You had a hugely successful career at Mercedes, eight constructors titles, seven drivers titles. What's been the big differences

[Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / 'Williams were in survival mode' | James Vowles breaks down his move from Mercedes

coming from Mercedes to Williams? I think the first and foremost, the way I describe Williams is incredible organization, but through various mechanisms, didn't have the money behind it for many, many years and really a lack of investment for near 20 years. And as a result of that, I would describe that the organization that I joined was one that was in survival mode, not one that was in one that you're thinking about what's happening three years in front of you. And that's where you need to be informed on one today. You need to be thinking that far ahead to be on the leading edge of how do you develop? Clearly Mercedes had tremendous amounts of funding

behind it. We had, when I was there, a significant amount of tools, systems and infrastructure that aren't really even on the surface here that that's not available. And what it meant was that it was a very well oiled machine with everyone within the organization in the same direction of travel and completely aligned. It wasn't always that way, but it became that way through investment and various other mechanisms. Coming here, the some elements of this organization are absolutely world championship level, but the some elements that are 20 years out of date. And I think just perhaps the extent of those wasn't quite where expected to be when I joined. Can you give some examples of something like that? I think just in terms, for example, dot invest in heavily and in a good way in the machine shop. I would say the machine shop is in a great, great area really to come work now. It's not being used as efficiently as we can do, but the base machines are in a good place. But ones I've already spoken about publicly, there was no what's called ERP system. There's no digital system that links from when design is released to production to the car, nothing. So it falls into this mechanism where there's individuals that work tirelessly day and night to understand where all the parts are and what you need to make up a car. And bear in mind that the car nowadays isn't 400 components, it's 17,000 or so components. And so to now get each and every one of them understand where they are. Are they in stores? Are they here? Are they finished? What process are they in without some mechanism is incredibly difficult and really just a nod to how well this team has organized itself previously, but also what tremendous growth we can have going forward.

Break on Twitter would like to know, what are your motivations for joining Williams? What do you hope

to achieve in your time here? I mean, I treat that question as two different things. My motivation for joining here was, I think we achieved everything we could whilst I was at Mercedes, that was a strong game. I mean, they won't win again, of course they will, but that streak, that success, that dominance will be hard to replicate by Mercedes or Red Bull or anyone for that matter. You have the ability here with an organization that now has the investment behind it and very much has the ability and the legacy behind it as well at the same time. But from ground up, we can redevelop things to be the way that is going to be successful within modern day Formula One. And you can be a part of that journey. And that opportunity comes once in a lifetime. So a team principal position within another organization that perhaps is mid-grid and doing very well would be very different to the proposition of coming here and really having a vision of what it should look like and deploying that vision. And that opportunity was unique to me. So that's my motivation behind it. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity and one that I feel I can undertake as well at the same time. In terms of the direction of travel for Williams, it's quite clear. The reason why I came away from the comfort of winning races or certainly

being on the podium is because I want to be in an organization that from ground up we rebuild, but then go on to win multiple F1 World Championships. That's my motivation. This isn't a timeline clearly of several years, but many, many years. But irrespective, that's why I'm here. Yeah, Williams fans will be very, very pleased to hear that, I'm sure.

Now, we've got a few questions in. I don't know if you have seen them on Twitter. I don't know if you're on Twitter. Maybe you try and stay clear of all that kind of stuff. But we've got quite a few questions in about the floor of the Williams Cup. So in Monaco, we obviously saw the bottom of the Mercedes and we saw the bottom of the Red Bull. And there were a couple of viral photos going around showing sort of a Williams floor that looked as a layman, I'm going to say, quite kind of smooth and quite simplified. And then you obviously saw the Mercedes and the Red Bull with a lot more advanced aerodynamics. That was what I saw. From your perspective, can you just speak to those fans who are curious to know about the differences between the two cars and why there are such big differences? I mean, first and foremost, even before the floors were perhaps lifted in the air, you will know just by the stopwatch that we're clearly underdeveloped relative to some levels. And furthermore, Red Bull will be more developed than Mercedes. So before you even had the vision underneath the floor, I hope that perception came across because aerodynamics are obviously quite a dominant factor in why a car is quick and why it's not. In terms of the photos themselves, I have seen all of them. The Red Bull one is very interesting, as are the Mercedes ones. In the case of the Williams one, it's a little bit deceptive. And what I mean by that is, is our floor less developed than Red Bull, absolutely. No way I'm going to say anything different to that. But what I would say as well is it focused a lot on what I'd call the diffuser ramp, which is an area that's very difficult to develop the regulations in. And it's not much more developed on the other cars. But the mid and the front floor, which is where there's a lot of room and scope within these regulations, is less visible on the Williams. So clearly to be within 1.3 seconds of a Red Bull, it's not such a bad entity, especially when you look at cars previously. But is it underdeveloped? Absolutely. Here's the interesting thing. It's not as straightforward as just simply copying their floor. It doesn't work that way. You could perhaps copy bits of it and get a small little boost up. But what you really need to understand is what their thought process was behind it. What are the flow dynamics? What are they trying to do with the air? Where they're trying to put it? How does it work? What ride height ranges are they running in? Again, what you also

saw on the Red Bull and on the Mercedes is now going to be six to 10 weeks out of date. Just because it's on the car now, that's not where it was in the winter tunnel. So even if you copy that today, you'll always be 10 weeks behind the leading edge of some of the best rivals. And you may not understand why they did what they did. So by all means, we can take learning and we will from that. But what's more important to me is proper experimentation and understanding of flow dynamics, using their concepts and systems, but making our own along the journey such that we can not just understand what they've done, but build upon it. Do you have people in your team, will people in your team have been looking at those photos and studying them and kind of going, oh, what's that little bit there? Or how do we think that works? And then taking that into your own design? Completely that. You summed it up well. There was a number of elements of our organization that are developed around understanding our competitors, including this. Obviously,

[Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / 'Williams were in survival mode' | James Vowles breaks down his move from Mercedes

that's more wide ranging, but there would have been people pouring all over it trying to recreate that flow in a 3D world. And then understanding why is it built that way? And then taking those concepts and moving them to our own car. 100%. Not just within here, I suspect within most organizations. Take us into the into the sort of the cycle of a Formula One team across the year and the development. For example, now are you are you looking at 2024? And how much of your

energy is going into this season? And how much is going into next season's car? So for the reasons I sort of, I guess, brought back to, if we focus just solo in this year's car, we're not going to move forward relative to the field. Perhaps we'll scratch around at the back of the grid for another championship position, but that won't move us forward to the level that we need to be moving forward. We have to be focusing on 24, 25 and 26. And it sounds far, far ahead. In fact, the regulations in 26 aren't even decided. But you absolutely have to have your vision based on the future in order to get it right in those time periods available to you. That said, I'll still turn up at every race weekend and won every millisecond out of the car and every point that we can possibly score. And this car won't be static. There will be further developments being added to it. But it's very much that our eyes on the future because it has to be. And even more so in our circumstance, because we have far more to gain than others. Tweet here from Calvin. How is being at the top of F1 with Mercedes shaped how you approach a team at the back of the grid? I think first and foremost, it gives you a vision as to what excellence looks like, what the standard is now within modern day Formula One to be at the front of the grid. And even Mercedes now is being

beaten by Red Bulls. There's another level above that again. But it gives you a vision and understanding

across an entire organization, which remember is it's a large, large organization that the track you see perhaps 60 people. There's about 800 behind the scenes working away. But it gives you a vision

of how those 800 people should work together. What the flow of information should look like, what communication looks like, what development rates look like. What Mercedes did was bring me through that. Because obviously it was a journey. Mercedes wasn't always very good, 2010, 11, 12 were not the best examples. But that transformation took place there, which is also why I know it's possible to do here.

Yeah, you were of course a part of that. So you've seen that firsthand. I want to talk about the drivers. What are the big differences between Logan and Alex when you work with them?

First and foremost experience. I mean, Alex is an underrated driver, incredible ability and a leader of the team in many regards, because he's been there for for an enough for a period of time that he understands the direction of travel we need to go in. He's not questioning himself anymore. He's questioning how do we move things forward within the organization and team.

Alex is also very communicative. He's very good. If you ask him direct questions on where to improve,

he'll give you a very clear, concise set of answers from it, established from years of experience in doing so. And he's brought this car into Q3 a few times, just an accolade to really what he's able to do with this package in the right conditions. Logan is different. He has a fire in his belly from wanting to get the absolute most out of the car. And often as a result of that,

we'll push things to the absolute limit, sometimes over, but to the absolute limit.

It will take time to find yourself. The world of Formula One is tough now. He's gone from an environment where he was literally driving an F2 car to driving a Formula One car just a few months afterwards with nothing in between. And in the old days, I mean, it's hard to define how far back the old days are, but you would be doing 10, 20,000 kilometers of testing before you have that opportunity. He's had to forego that. And so now he's learning is taking place on the track. And his development rates will only get better at tracks that he already knows. If we look at the beginning of the year, many of those tracks, in fact, he'd never seen before or visited.

It's a tough start to the year, wasn't it, for a rookie?

Yeah. In hindsight, I've underestimated how much that really was. But we're into a, with the exception of Canada coming up, we're into a series of races that will actually be easier and certainly for Logan to get his head around. But where he is at the moment is you can see there's just laps that he pulls out that are faster than Alex. He's got ability within him. Now it's about creating a structure around him where he's able to deliver consistently week on week.

Yeah. Yeah. You've worked with a lot of great drivers in your time at Mercedes. Could you pick a favorite? Or if that's perhaps a little challenging as a question, which is the drive you've learned the most from? Even that one, they're so individual, as all of us are as well. I'm different to you and different to everyone around us, but I learned a tremendous amount. It doesn't mean you don't learn

any less from that individual. They've all come with their own characteristics. If I wind back, I mean, I've worked with Jacques. Actually, he's transitioned from Williams to himself. I've worked with Jacques back then. Very different style to other people, but just performance driven like and no other. I've worked with Michael and Michael was this incredible individual. He sort of had an aura and a presence with him as well. Completely different to what you see externally. What he is within a team is this person that is here to help us, help the team move forward and brought the team

really very close together. In you, everyone's birthdays. He sent flowers to prospective partners as required and really looked after individuals in a great way. What it meant is the team were really pushing for him to be successful. That wasn't through any other mechanism than him being himself. What he was also good at is he knew that his performance perhaps was not quite at the same

level, but he made up for it in terms of the amount of work and dedication he put in. From that, Nico learned a lot. Conversely, Lewis learned a lot from Nico. We have drivers there. They're both one world championships, but very different talent pools available to them. You have Lewis who has just such an amount of natural talent, but his work, again, every year he steps it up. What you did last year is not good enough for the following year. That's really the definition of Formula One as you are today. It's exactly the same thing. Finally, George, who was a talent that I've known for many, many years and really grew up into who he is today. He has such potential in front of him, but he's, again, very different to Lewis. It's not so much one preference or otherwise. They all bring something different to the table, but successful as a result of it. It's more learning from each of them as individuals as to what makes them tick, what makes them grow. What I can tell you is what they all have in common is that they are other world champions or future world champions.

That same dedication for going after every millisecond, that competitive nature, is inherent in all of them.

It strikes me as similar to your approach at Williams. You're talking four, five, six, seven, eight years in the future. Obviously, when you talk about all those drivers, they're leapfrogging each other in terms of what they've learned. That must be really lovely to see that kind of lineage and that path throughout the team. Exactly that. You summed it up. Well, the driver's pathway is no different to the one we have to go through as a journey here. It's not the journey of months, but many, many years. You don't get there by doing your own thing by yourself. You get there by finding the standard and wanting to beat it and doing so by changing and adapting. Speaking of other drivers, you've got Jamie Chadwick as your Williams Driver Academy driver. Is there any plans to put her in a practice session anytime soon or more broadly, how close do you think we are to getting a female racing driver in Formula One?

Jamie's within Formula W, the most successful driver, no question about it. With discussions with her, she's now doing within IndyCar basically a career pathway there. I think that's sensible to put focus on for the time being. Diverging and putting back into a Formula One pathway doesn't make much sense. She has a pathway there that's one that can lead to great success. She's doing well at it. Within Formula One itself, there's a new F1 Academy coming to the fore, which I think again would be another strong direction. I think the car positioning is good. Susie Wolf really understands what it takes. One of the few women that's driven a Formula One car and has a complete

understanding of what's required to get there. But again, you're years away, really years away, before we have the right success. I think part of that is that the investment wasn't done at the right level, at the right age group. We have to go all the way back to carting days and create an environment where we breed champions in the same way that has been for many of the champions on the

grid today. That will take time. The only difference that I'm seeing now is that there is definite change and it will happen as a result of, I think, the right environment being round that enables that. A few more questions for you. Formula Robin would like to know, you're very open about the issues that Williams have and the mistakes that are made, giving details like explanations. We've heard that in our coverage on Sky. You're obviously on the pit wall and it's been brilliant to get you on there. But what's made you decide to kind of have this open nature? Because it's not always something we see in Formula One. First of all, it's how I'm built. That's what I believe in. I believe in openness, honesty and a culture of communication. And it's one you have to emit and you have to portray, certainly, the culture that you want for others to follow the lead instruction you are. And clearly, we're in competition with nine other teams. There's no doubt about that.

But at the same time, what we need to do is who we are as Williams is we're races. Pure and simple. I'm here to do a better job than absolutely everyone else in the grid at the same time.

And that open and honest pathway to how we're going to become successful is one that I think I'd like to share with the world. Because I want the world to be following us on this journey at the same time. And I want the team to follow us on this journey at the same time as well. I think more so than that, perhaps. I have a passion for this sport. The sport has looked after me very, very well. And I want to share that passion and some insights with not just this team and the drivers, but really the wider world. I want people to understand why this business means so much to

me, why I think you should be following it. And to give you tidbits of, and they are tidbits, that the depth is enormous once you get behind the scenes of some of the great things that happen in our sport, I think will only be better for us and for the sport in the long term.

Something I have to talk to you about is your desire to do a bit of driving behind the wheel as well, because you raced last year in the Asian Le Mans series. Tell us how that was getting behind the wheel.

Fantastic. I mean, I've done the odd bit of driving in and out. And what I really wanted to do is to commit properly to a series. And Asian Le Mans, it is the Le Mans series that the best of the best really turned up there for a very, very competitive field. And like many things that I do, I'll jump into it and then sort myself out when I'm in there. And this was very much one of them. I've driven GT3s, but cars before then I've been certainly testing and developing my skill sets in a GT3 car, which is the category that I competed in there. But perhaps, and I've done racing before as well, and perhaps to this level, no. So to explain what Asian Le Mans is, you're doing endurance races through the night as well at the same time. So you have to be in daylight and nighttime. You have to do live driver changes and live pit stops. And it's multicast racing. So you have LMP2s, LMP3s and GT3s at the same time. And I'd say probably many of those tick boxes

I hadn't actually ticked prior to turning up for that event. And to explain a driver change, just that, for example, you're traveling down the pit lane, one hand on the steering wheel whilst you're loosening your belts. You have a finger basically just hovering over a stop-stop button. As soon as you come to the box and stop, push the button, engine has to be off before your belts are released, release your belts. That hand then goes for the window. You're opening up a release

fundamentally, open the door. And before you know it, you are crumpled heap on the ground basically just being pulled out. Other driver gets in, you've got to belt them up, and you've got about 10 seconds to do all of that. Sounds like a long period of time, but the first time you practice it, you're about a minute. How are we going to get this down to 10 seconds? That's one example of everything that was on that journey on the way through. I enjoyed every second of it. And probably more so, I think, that part of the reason why I have a strong connection with our drivers and understand that element of things is whilst I'm nowhere near their ability, I have an understanding of what goes through your mindset throughout the different stages of it. And I think that's important. What you have to remember is when you're driving, or you can really see, is a couple of hundred metres in front of you, I mean, at night time, not even that, and then behind you, whatever you can see in your mirrors as a result of things. And you're in your own world. Your engineer is there to support you, but you're in your own world. And a number of first

things come to you. The first is mental health, which I happily talk about, be a whole nother podcast yourself. But you go through these trials and personal trials throughout this process that are challenging. You are competing against some of the best in the world. And you question whether you have the merit or desire or want to be in and amongst them, why are you good enough? And you have to get that in your mind. And it does. But it does when the minute the lights go green, it certainly doesn't up until that point. And that in itself gave me insight into elements that I'd never had prior to that. And I won't use the terms on here, but I was described as good.

[Transcript] Sky Sports F1 Podcast / 'Williams were in survival mode' | James Vowles breaks down his move from Mercedes

There are other terms that describe me, but we had a good answer.

By who? Who described you?

Oh, it was Toto. It's a very good expression. Yeah, he looked to the result. He was following along online as well. I'll describe it. So the way he describes positivity, he would never describe positivity, but he would say, you weren't so he described it. So from him, that is an accolade and a half. But it's something definitely that very much on a radar to get back into and compete in again, these series. But my focus as I am here is in Formula One. The GT3, another racing

will take place in the winter in and around the calendars and making sure we don't conflict with what we have here. But it's such a passion and love that it's not one that I can leave behind me. It's one that I want to form part of my future with as well.

Yeah, definitely. Final question. How do you switch off?

I don't really. It's a problem. It's a problem that comes with me in the role.

But I frequently, and I've been open about this, but I wake up at 4am. I have a notepad by the bed and I'll make notes and all the things that I've been thinking about throughout the night.

And if I do enough of that, I can get myself back to sleep. If not, then that's it.

I'm up and around. If you treat it as your life, your passion, your hobby, and your job, you won't be disappointed. If you treat it as a job, you'll be very disappointed. It doesn't work that way. But to be successful, it's hard to really switch off from it. What I do is with racing myself because any activity where you can't devote anything but 100% to the effort you're putting in, that's part of the reason why I do it. I'm able to switch off doing that.

James, thank you for your time. I really appreciate it.

Thank you very much. Cheers.

Hello. Just a quick note from me at the end of the podcast. I really hope you enjoyed that episode with James. I could certainly listen to him talk all day. And it was a shame, actually, because we were supposed to have a full hour with him, but he was delayed in getting to us, so it meant our time was cut a little bit shorter than we hoped. But such is the life of a Formula 1 team principal that you're being pulled in a million different directions. But a fascinating chat, and I think it's going to be really interesting to see the job he does at Williams, to get them to where he wants to be, winning races, fighting for championships. Only time will tell. As always, really appreciate your questions and crackers in there, so thank you so much for sending those in. And we'll be back next Tuesday after the Canadian Grand Prix, so enjoy the race this weekend and see you next week.