
PODCAST

Sébastien Buemi

ABB Decoded

We hear from Swiss ace Sébastien Buemi about his journey to the pinnacle of electric motorsport, via Formula 1, three Le Mans wins and a record number of victories in ABB Formula E. See acast.com/privacy for privacy and opt-out information.

Anthony: Hello and welcome to ABB Decoded – the podcast that tries to shine a light on the advances in technology that are re-shaping our fast-moving world.

I'm your host, Anthony Rowlinson, and in this episode, we're catching up with Swiss racing driver Sébastien Buemi, who is one of the stars of the all-electric ABB Formula E race series.

Often referred to as 'the professional's professional', Buemi became Formula E champion in its second season and on the eve of Season 7, Buemi powers on as one of the elite drivers – and also as an ambassador for ABB within the sport. Although he's still only 32, Buemi has packed a huge amount of competition into his career since he first began racing go-karts at the age of five. As well as his Formula E title, he is a three-time winner of the Le Mans 24-hour race and a past Formula 1 driver.

So as ABB Formula E charges up for its first season with World Championship status, who better to talk to about electric motor sport and e-mobility, than Sébastien Buemi – as he and his rivals prepare to 'Go Green' at the Diriyah circuit in Saudi Arabia. Over to you, Seb.

Sebastien: So, I'm Sebastien Buemi, I race in Formula E for Nissan e.Dams as you said, I'm the ABB ambassador for Formula E and I've been part of the championship since the very beginning in season one. I won the championship in season two and I have 13 wins, I think, and 14 pole positions something like this. So yeah, I'm happy to be back to prepare the season seven, which would become the first world championship of Formula E.

Anthony: You're actually being slightly modest because you're the most winning driver in Formula E, you have the record. You know you do.

Sebastien: Yeah, it doesn't sound good to say it.

Anthony: OK, but anyway, before we get to that, I wanted to just ask you take yourself back to being a little kid. Yeah, a little Swiss boy. How did you get into motor racing, especially in a country which at the time banned motor racing?

Sebastien: My grandfather used to be a racing driver. He raced in Le Mans in 1960, he did lots of hill climb races, and he did a few times Le Mans and some races in Germany. And basically, my parents, they own a dealership. So somehow, I grew up in a dealership basically.

Anthony: A car dealership?

Sebastien: A car dealership. So, they basically offered me a go-kart for Christmas when I was just five years old. And then, as you can imagine, the following days, I was already driving around the dealership and then we went to a real racetrack. And that's how I basically started, with my parents.

Anthony: And did you get the bug straightaway?

Sebastien: To be honest, I was just five and I don't remember so much back then. I remember receiving the go-kart and they put it under the Christmas tree, you know, so it was huge. Yeah, I knew I loved it. And I basically don't remember my life without go-karting or any kind of racing, so I suppose that I loved it from the beginning. Yeah.

Anthony: And how do you how did you sort of find your way through the sport? Because that's always the challenge for a driver. You know, you've reached an exceptionally high level. How did how did you find your path?

Sebastien: Basically, I did go-kart just like that as a hobby when I was five, six, seven years old. And then, and then my dad, he doesn't like to do things just for the sake of doing them. So, at some point we said, OK, we want to do some races. And then obviously I started to compete in a Swiss championship. Then I won quite a bit. So, we went into the Italian championship of go-kart and then I became European champion in go-kart when I was just 13 years old. And then at some point we thought that it was time to move to a single seater. And I basically got a prize that BMW was awarding to eight drivers, so I had a pretty big financial help to compete into the championship in the following year. So, in 2004 we managed to do it, obviously, just with that help.

And very early on, I met Helmut Marko from Red Bull and basically signed as a Red Bull junior driver back then. And then it was pretty straightforward because I did two seasons in Formula BMW and then I did two seasons in Formula Three, then I did a season in GP2 before being promoted as a race driver for Toro Rosso in Formula 1 in 2009. And then obviously I did three years in F1 before moving to Le Mans and the Endurance championship, as well as Formula E in 2014.

Anthony: We'll come back to Formula E in a minute because that's obviously a big focus for ABB. But just briefly on Formula 1. Firstly, what was that experience like?

Sebastien: I would say as a kid, it was my dream to become a Formula 1 driver, and it happened in March 2009 in Melbourne. And I finished seventh for my first race. I scored points and it was great. You know, what really happens quickly is that you want to win in Formula 1, you know, and unfortunately, you have to be in the right car. And it was pretty difficult where I was, but I did three seasons. I considered I did OK. You know, you can always do better. So, I reflect on it as obviously a good experience, a dream. You know, I wanted to reach Formula 1 and there's only 20 drivers out there. So, I kind of consider myself quite lucky, obviously. Also, thanks to Red Bull for giving me the opportunity. But then, unfortunately, I didn't get to drive in maybe one of the best cars. And then it's difficult, obviously, to achieve results.

Anthony: And you were young when you when you came in, weren't you?

Sebastien: Yeah, I had just turned 20 when I raced. I was 20 and just three or four months when I raced my first race. But obviously I think I drove my first test when I was 17, not even 18.

Anthony: That was a big thing with Red Bull, wasn't it? The young driver program, bringing in sort of, you know, really quite inexperienced drivers, but with a lot of talent and pushing them straight in. And you had that experience.

Sebastien: Yeah, exactly. So obviously the whole program has changed and evolved. And now Alpha Tauri is a much bigger team and can compete at a much higher level just because they have the very good infrastructure, a very strong link with Red Bull. So, yeah, obviously times change, and you have to be at the right time at the right place. But still, I'm happy with what I was able to do.

Anthony: Now I must ask you about the one quite notorious moment that you had in Formula 1 – I think it was China in 2010 in practice?

Sebastien: Yes.

Anthony: You're driving down the main straight, the very famous video moment. Both front wheels flew off when you hit the brakes. Maybe you could just tell us what that feels like?

Sebastien: To be honest, I get asked that question quite often, but at the end, I had no time to realize. If you look at me, I continued to steer. Even so, I have no wheels. So, it went so fast. I mean, obviously we try to gain weight on the front suspension, and it was too much.

Anthony: By making it lighter?

Sebastien: Yes. We wanted to make it lighter. And you know, it's always difficult to be at the weight limit in Formula 1. And obviously we did not bench them properly and it broke. So, yeah, it looks scary, but at some point, it was not too bad, you know, inside the car.

Anthony: But this is the sort of thing that only a racing driver could say, because most people, if both the front wheels fly off, you know, it's a big moment.

Sebastien: Yeah, it's a big moment. But I was also lucky enough that it was at the end of that long straight with big run-off. If it would have happened in Monaco at the exit of the tunnel, it would have been a bit more difficult, I think. But, you know, you have to be lucky. We've seen it not long ago.

Anthony: Some drivers, if they leave Formula 1 after maybe not quite as long as they wanted, three years or something, sometimes their careers fade and they disappear. But that hasn't happened to you. You've had huge success in sports car racing. And again, you're probably too modest to mention this, but you've Le Mans three times the world's most famous sports car race, and that's an amazing achievement. But you were also champion of ABB Formula E in season two and you're still one of the leading drivers with Nissan. So, could you tell us a little bit about what electric motor racing is like?

Sebastien: Yeah, I mean, I'm really proud to be part of the ABB Formula E Championship and Nissan in Formula E because, again, you know, at the beginning of the championship, I had no idea how the championship would evolve. And I just joined because I had a very good relationship with Jean-Paul Driot, the owner of the team, Alain Prost as well. So, I joined the team thinking it's a good opportunity. You never know what it will become. So, I want to be there. And back then, it was easy, obviously, to combine it with my WEC duties in World Endurance Championship, and that's how I started. And then very quickly, I realized that it is something nice and big and it was going to grow. And throughout the season, we've seen obviously manufacturers joining the championship, the level getting higher and higher, having obviously big sponsors and partners joining, including ABB.

And you really see today, politically, it's obviously very important to go towards electrification. And, you know, I'm also happy because I've seen the improvement of the cars. Initially, we had two cars, to do the whole race, and now we do the whole race with more power, faster and only with one car. So, it just shows how much the technology has improved, how much the batteries are getting better. The car weight is the same, but obviously the battery is much, much better. And yeah, we drive with much more power. So, I'm happy to be here and I'm already looking forward to season seven, eight and then the Gen 3 that will obviously come into season nine.

Anthony: Just to give this some context, we're talking now at the very start, if you like, of season seven, the whole world has had a very strange year in 2020. But Formula E did an amazing thing by managing to conclude its season in Berlin with six races in nine days. Perhaps you could just take a moment to look back at season six, which started as a normal year for everybody but then I remember talking to you at the Marrakesh race saying that the Geneva Motor

Show had been cancelled because of Covid. And it was kind of at that moment that we suddenly realized we were facing a global pandemic.

Sebastien: Yes, exactly. I mean, you know, we came from our first season with Nissan in season five. I finished second in the championship and obviously we had a massive change of regulation. So, we had to change completely our power train, update it for season six. So, when we did start season six, it didn't start very well for me. I had a mechanical failure in the first race in Riyadh. And I got basically pushed out of the of the track in race two. And I had another technical issue in race three. So, I ended up not scoring any points for the first three races, but then somehow, you know, things got better. I got a podium in Mexico, a fourth place in Marrakesh, and then I managed to get three podiums in Berlin. So somehow I think the lockdown helped us a lot because of what happened with the regulation, we lost a lot of time not developing the software in terms of energy management because we had focused massively on this twin motor that we had last year and obviously that got banned. So, the lockdown down kind of helped us because it gave us more time to develop the software. And then when we came to Berlin, we had a pretty competitive end to the season. I think I qualified twice on the front row basically it finished quite well. So, I finished P4 in the championship just for two points from P2, which is a bit difficult because I missed the pole position at the last race for fifty thousands, said that was worth three points. But anyway, this is racing and now we are obviously looking forward to season seven. We've been working on our car as much as we could, so hopefully the upgrades will work, and we will be able to start season seven better than we did in season six.

Anthony: Now when we talk about motor racing everybody thinks about speed. But what about efficiency? It's very important in ABB Formula E. Energy efficiency, human efficiency, stamina, all those aspects. How did they affect you as a racing driver?

Sebastien: One of the particularities of ABB Formula E Championship is that a lot of the performance comes through efficiency and energy management, which is kind of linked. So, the idea is really to use Formula E as a platform to develop new technologies, new software that will one day be into a normal road car. And I think everyone, when they think about electric cars, they think about the range, they think about the fact that you need to recharge the battery. And people are kind of scared, you know, anxiety of the range and clearly, in Formula E we've worked a lot to be efficient. So, to be fast and at the same point not use much energy. And when I said it's a particularity of the championship is that you cannot go flat out from the start to finish otherwise you would not finish the race. And you have again to find the right compromise between saving energy and being fast. And it's pretty impressive how much we've improved throughout the years. You know, the motors are getting better and better, close to 98 percent of efficiency, which is amazing. And the way we use the energy is getting better. So, I think it will continue in that direction. And this is a bit the same now for Formula 1 and WEC is that people want to be clean. You know, we want to be more efficient. We want to waste less. And that's why all those championships are going towards efficiency.

Anthony: And I must ask you, as a racing driver, most racing drivers want to be fast, you want to win. Obviously, that's the very essence of what you do. But this championship has a sense of purpose and mission as well, trying to make the world a better place. Does that affect the way you compete?

Sebastien: The way I compete? No, because I'm a competitor. I really enjoy fighting, whether it's in an electric car or a normal combustion car, like in Le Mans. I like the competition. I like the speed. But I somehow feel that people today accept motorsport better if it has a proper message like Formula E. And we're trying to develop a platform that will convince people that electric mobility is the future and that you should not be scared to buy an electric car or basically go electric. And through the championship, we showcase how much the battery are developing, how much the cars are becoming faster and faster. And I think in general, we change a little bit the vision of the general public on electric mobility.

Anthony: I have another question for you. In the last Swiss E-Prix, which was held in Bern in 2019, you finished third. And there was a very nice moment at the end where your little boy came up to the podium. It made some very nice pictures. But that must have been a great moment for you.

Sebastien: Yes. You know, the first race we had was in Zurich. I don't remember if I finished fourth or fifth, but I missed out on the podium and it was really important for me to be on the podium for my home race. And by winning,

I mean by finishing third in Bern it was amazing. And obviously my wife and my kids were there and the bigger one came on the podium. It was really, really nice. So, it's a good memory, some cool pictures. I didn't win, but it felt like a win.

Anthony: And do you think the little Buemis may follow dad's footsteps or the family in the family footsteps?

Sebastien: I'd have to be honest. I don't know. I mean, the first one, I started go-karting a bit, but it's still very early stages and it's very hard to say and I don't know how the sport will evolve in the future, but if he wants to do it, I'll try to help as much as I can.

Anthony: What about your style as a racing driver? People say you're quite analytical. You like to look at data and you focus on details. Do you think that's right? Because there's a lot to do in a racing car. It's not just steering and breaks, is it?

Sebastien: Yeah. I think in general today the talent is obviously important. This is clear. You need to have talent, but today you have to work hard because all the guys out there are working hard, and they all have good teams behind them. And to make a difference, you need to work harder. I mean, talent on its own is not enough anymore, I would say. I like to work with my team. I actually enjoy spending time with the teams. You know, some of the guys I've been together with them since seven years. We know each other quite well. We've won and lost together. And I think I'm lucky enough to be one of the only driver that remained in the same team since the very beginning. And I enjoy working with them basically.

Anthony: So, you've seen in that time you've seen Formula E start in really quite a basic way. The car was very simple. It's just about making it work. Now we've got some very sophisticated machines, very fast, and we're looking at Gen 3 in one and a half or two seasons time. Better battery technology, better motors, better charging. I mean, can you see this electric future? You're right at the heart of it. What do you see?

Sebastien: Yeah, I think that the improvement from Gen 1 to Gen 2 was mainly the range. That was although the message Formula E wanted to show that basically the battery technology had improved enough that we could go to one car. So clearly that was something pretty big. But, from Gen 2 to Gen 3, I expect a big step in terms of pure performance. I expect the cars to be quite a lot quicker. And clearly, I'm looking forward to it because I think we started with a pretty slow car and we've improved it quite a lot. And then the Gen 3 will be a big step towards a really fast racing car. And yeah, I can't wait to discover the Gen 3.

Anthony: And do you think we're getting to a time when, you know, ABB Formula E is the racing championship and perhaps the world is shifting towards all-electric motorsport?

Sebastien: I think electrification will be more and more important in the future. You'll have more and more hybrid cars and more and more full EV cars. But it's a bit difficult to say whether, you know, Formula E is going to replace Formula 1 and overtake Formula 1. At the moment, Formula 1, like you said, remains the number-one category in motorsport, but Formula E is basically growing massively, and I really think it deserves its own place in the ladder, in the history of motorsport. And now we again, we see that the cars are getting faster and faster and that at some point we know we need fast cars because Formula 1 is the fastest car. But for how long? I don't know because Formula E is obviously going to improve drastically with the Gen 3.

Anthony: You're a very successful sportsman. You have a lovely home in Switzerland. You have a beautiful family. Do you ever think about danger? Does it play on your mind or do you have to put those thoughts to one side?

Sebastien: I would say you get used to live with the fact that there is still some danger. I mean it for sure. It's a more dangerous sport than some others. But at the end, you know that. I mean, I'm racing since I'm five, I know it can be dangerous, but it's true that from time to time you have those big reminder that it is very dangerous. So, with what we've seen in Formula 1, bad accident can happen, and you have to be aware of it. So, when you fight at the limit, you have to think that things can go bad. And I would not say that I think I respect the risk, but I'm not thinking about it, to be honest. So, I know that it can happen. And I try to do my very best, but I'm not thinking about it really.

Anthony: I guess if you do, you can't really be a racing driver.

Sebastien: Yeah, I think if you think about it too much, at some point it's going to make you slow and then obviously you're not competitive. But I don't feel scared. I don't feel like I'm thinking about it. I just respect the fact that things can go wrong.

Anthony: Sebastien, thank you so much for taking time out of your schedule to speak with us. We can only wish you all the very best in your challenge this year to become the first electric world champion. And that's all for this episode of ABB Decoded. If you have enjoyed it, don't forget to like, subscribe, and share wherever you download your podcasts. See you next time.