A sweaty late-spring afternoon in northern Italy. The Jesolo kart circuit, not far from Venice. It's May 1980 and the A-list of karting is assembled for the Champions Cup – the sport's second most important prize after the world championship title. Ayrton Senna is here, aged 20, stringy in black leathers, and in his third season of top-flight pro karting. *He wants to win.* Since blasting into Europe three seasons earlier with the DAP team, as the latest hot-shot Latin from a wealthy family, he has established himself as a staggering talent – speed, ability and future stardom oozing from every pore. But he is not The Man. The Man is team-mate Terry Fullerton. Seven years Senna's senior, the established ace of the sport. Imperious, aggressive, a master stylist, the karters' karter. Cock. Of. The. Walk. Showdown.

"I caught him on the very last lap on the main straight. There's a passing opportunity up the inside, past the start-finish into the first corner, but he blocked to the inside, so I went to the outside and we crossed over past the apex of the next fast corner. I went down the inside into the next hairpin, very late. He went in very late and we touched, he went on two wheels and I went past. I looked back and I had an eight-to-10-yard gap and I knew that all I had to do was be neat and tidy and I'd won the race. It was a very good feeling. I didn't know then who he was going to become, but we knew he was good, and looking back that's a good race to have won. I'm glad I won it."

This is Terry Fullerton, now 58, reclining in a padded-leather office chair in his Norfolk home, thinking back to one of many days in a three-year summer when Senna couldn't – quite – get the better of him. Their rivalry was every bit as intense as that which, less than a decade later, would come to define the careers of Senna and Alain Prost. It drove both men to new heights of excellence. It showed, on Senna's side, uncanny early strains of a 'wronged by the world' mentality that would later prove so explosive when he raced Prost. It would be remembered by Senna, when he spoke about it in a press conference at the 1993 Australian Grand Prix, as the best period of his racing life.

> "It was a very good feeling. I didn't know then who he was going to become, but we knew he was good. I'm glad I won that race"

But right after Jesolo '80, he was just deeply pissed off. A race report from an Italian sports paper later that week quotes him thus: "I think I am the moral winner. Fullerton played dirty. If he hadn't caused an accident I would have won. I preferred to let him go even though the way he overtook me was against the rules."

Fullerton saw it differently, of course, but he already knew all about Senna's anger. The morning after the race, he was standing by his hotel pool, shooting an easy breeze with his mechanic. Life, today, was good. He'd just won a race he now thinks of as "probably his best ever", a result that also denied Senna becoming champion that year. Senna was nearby, in sight, but in the shade. Watching them. Brooding.

"He was sitting on some chairs by the pool," says Fullerton, "and he was obviously waiting, biding his time... And when he had me lined up nicely he just launched out of the chair and threw me into the pool, for whatever reason, just to get his own back. I thought, 'What the fuck did you do that for?' I had my clothes on, yeah, and then he just laughed and walked off, with a kind of 'fuck you' attitude. I laughed as well, but it just showed how beaten up he was inside at what had happened. I'd have been pissed off, but I wouldn't have done that."

If it's nothing new to hear that Senna took losing hard, it's a surprise to learn how young and how strongly he felt the inevitable slights of a fickle sport. Fully aware of his gifts and already able to deploy them to devastating effect, he was not yet mature. And in Fullerton he had encountered a rival every bit as skilled, but with seven years' extra experience to counter this impatient young rival. A contest to savour. In the words of Angelo Parrilla, boss of the DAP team, after Jesolo '80: "Fullerton and Senna da Silva are the two best drivers in the world. All the others are capable of good races, good third places – but nothing more."

It's very easy, now, to view Senna through a sepia-tint lens and become intoxicated on a heady brew of Latin passion and screen-idol charisma, laced with the powerful juice of some of the most ruthless racecraft F1 ever saw. The new *Senna* movie serves only to assist this comfortable reverie: wonderful and heartfelt though it is, it's far from impartial. So it's as refreshing as it is surprising to listen to Fullerton speak of his former sparring partner in starkly unsentimental terms. "He came over with quite a reputation," he says, "but I was very confident of my abilities then, so if ▶



Kart king Fullerton (left) was man Senna *had* to beat

PICS: THOMAS BUTLER