



F1 Advent Calendar 2009 – Day Seventeen

Hello and welcome to the latest episode of an extended mini series from Sidepodcast. This is our F1 Advent Calendar 2009 - 25 short shows recapping the season just gone. It's time to open yet another door in our advent calendar, so let's get started with Day Seventeen - Spin Me Round.

Whilst Renault were waiting for their appeal hearing regarding the one-race ban dished out after Hungary, they found themselves in another bit of bother. Their driver of 18 months Nelson Piquet Jr, published a note on his website saying he had been let go from the team. It was a bitter letter, and although the news wasn't exactly unexpected for anyone who had seen him drive, it's delivery was slightly unusual. Piquet criticised his former team, particularly Flavio Briatore, suggesting that his boss had been demanding, uncompromising, even threatening.

Just a few days later, the rumblings of a huge scandal began. Rumour had it that Piquet Jr had been asked by his team to crash at the Singapore Grand Prix in 2008, to bring out the Safety Car that aided Alonso to win the race. It's something that had been mentioned in jest many times, but no one thought it could be true.

The FIA duly investigated, and on the 4th September, a statement was issued saying Renault would have to answer to the charges. A World Motorsport Council meeting was scheduled for later in the month, in fact just before the Singapore Grand Prix for this season.

Above anything else, I think this case will be known as the one where everything was leaked. We had letters to and from the FIA, statements from Piquet Jr and his father, documents regarding Briatore, and much more. Anything that was written down seemed to make it out into the wider world, and gave us and the media a lot to talk about. Piquet claimed that Flavio Briatore and Pat Symonds had asked him to crash the car, and he had felt pressured into doing so. Both he and Alonso were given immunity from any penalties regarding the case.

Initially, the team denied the charges. They even said they would begin legal proceedings against the Piquets, suggesting that it constituted blackmail, and the allegations were false.

About a week before the trial, Pat Symonds was offered immunity by the FIA if he would answer their questions, but he did not take it. At this point the story suggested conversations about the crash had taken place prior to the race, but that it was all Piquet's idea. The truth is yet to be known.

On 16 September, both Flavio Briatore and Pat Symonds left the team, and Renault F1 confirmed they would not contest the charges against them - essentially pleading guilty. The World Motorsport Council still met, and a mysterious Witness X - reportedly from the Renault team - gave evidence. With no defence to be heard, though, it was simply a matter of doling out the punishment. The result? A two year ban, suspended, for the team, plus bans of varying lengths for Symonds and Briatore.

Whether this was an acceptable punishment is really a matter of opinion. However, the team lost two key members of staff, several sponsors withdrew after the hearing, and worse than all of that - they had to watch Piquet's replacement, Romain Grosjean, spin at exactly the same corner during the Singapore Grand Prix weekend, just a few days later. Sometimes, you just have to laugh.

That's all for now. Thank you for listening to this F1 Advent Calendar 2009, and I hope you will join me again tomorrow, when we will see what's behind the door for Day Eighteen.