



F1 Advent Calendar 2009 – Day Eighteen

Welcome to the F1 Advent Calendar 2009 - an extended mini series brought to you by Sidepodcast. We are reviewing the season over the month of December, looking at a key moment each day of advent. Now it's time to open another door to find another story, we're on to Day Eighteen - Out of Practice.

Massa's recovery was going well, and the prognosis was good, but initially, there was no talk of him returning to racing. He missed the Hungarian GP, leaving an empty spot on the grid, but Ferrari had the summer break to find a replacement for the upcoming European GP.

Immediately, the name Michael Schumacher emerged as a potential candidate, and despite the fact his manager denied any such reports - claiming to be 200% sure it would not happen - it was soon confirmed that he would undergo the FIA medical, and start training for a return in Valencia.

Most people, within the paddock at least, were excited for this comeback. Hamilton said: "Michael is one of the sport's greatest competitors and a legend in his own right and it would be great to compete against him." Button added that Schumacher was brave to take up the challenge but was sure he'd be competitive.

Schumacher had a run in an F2007 chassis around the Ferrari track at Mugello, saying that although it was an old car, any experience was good for getting back in shape. Ferrari wrote to the other teams asking if they could waive the testing ban briefly, for Schumi to get some more practice in, but they quite vociferously said no. After a second go in the F2007, and just ten days before the European GP, Schumacher cancelled his comeback. The German had been in an accident whilst testing a superbike in February, and although he had hoped to be fit enough, some quite serious neck problems meant he wouldn't be ready.

Instead, Ferrari drafted in their long-term test driver, Luca Badoer. The Italian had been with the team since 1998, but had not been in the current car since December 2008. From the outset, Badoer said he relished the chance to compete in a race for the red team, but he also approached the weekend very conservatively. At each stage, he labelled the sessions as a test for him, as he learnt the car. Just a test, he kept saying.

During Free Practice at Valencia, he was consistently a couple of seconds off the pace. He qualified last, and finished the race one lap down, although ahead of Nakajima and two retirees. He never seemed to get to grips with the car, or generally being a racing driver. At one point he'd forgotten the pass needed to get into the correct paddock areas. Despite the struggles, Ferrari gave him the benefit of the doubt and allowed the Italian to race at Spa as well.

He was still slow. He qualified last, spinning on his final flying run. He kept out of trouble in the race itself, but finished 14th, which was also last. This time, Ferrari couldn't ignore the results, and replaced him with Force India driver, and fellow Italian Giancarlo Fisichella.

Badoer was quick to cast the finger of blame around - the car was difficult to drive, he was not given enough of a chance, there was not enough testing, the media portrayal of him was too negative. At least half of those were true. He turned up in the paddock at the next race - the Italian Grand Prix - but won't have gained any satisfaction from seeing his replacement qualify 14th and finish the race 9th, just missing out on the points.

The car was difficult to drive and Fisichella was better but not brilliant. He earned himself a test driver role with the team for 2010, alongside Badoer and Gene. Ferrari have also signed up young driver Jules Bianchi following a test this month. If a similar incident were to occur next year, they want to keep their options wide open.



That's all for this episode of our F1 Advent Calendar. Please join me tomorrow, when we will hopefully look at some faster drivers, on Day Nineteen.

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