



Ancillary F1 – McLaren Support Vehicles

Welcome to the Sidepodcast mini-series Ancillary F1. This series is all about the companies the sport couldn't live without, but who get none of the glory. Today, though, we're looking at a company who do provide a car and sometimes take part in races.

Mercedes Benz have been providing the Official Safety Car to Formula 1 since 1996, along with the Official F1 Medical Car. The Safety Cars services are called upon when weather conditions, or an accident, mean that drivers shouldn't be running at full speed. Since 2000, Bernd Mayländer has been the man behind the wheel of the safety car, with a co-pilot by his side. The pair are in constant contact with race director Charlie Whiting, to determine when the car is needed and when it should pull aside.

Since 1978, and Ronnie Petersen's fatal accident, the medical car has been dispatched behind the grid on the first lap of the race. The first is notoriously the most incident prone lap, so it makes sense for medical attention to be as close as possible. At the end of the first lap, the medical team pull into the pit lane, ready for any further call to action. There are four personnel manning the medical car, Dr Jacques Tropenat, Dr Gary Hartstein, and two assistants.

The two cars make their first appearance of a race weekend on the Thursday, when they test out the track, the cars, the television cameras and live timing system. Mayländer admits that he and Tropenat will often turn it into a bit of a race between themselves, not just for fun, but to make sure they've got what it takes to keep the speeds up. The only exception to the rule is Monaco, where Free Practice is on Thursday, so the safety car test is on Wednesday. With mainstream traffic running through the streets that day, the two can only race as fast as rush hour will let them.

In 2008, the cars were revealed as versions of top of the range Mercedes stock – an SL 63 AMG for the Safety Car and C63 AMG Estate for the Medical Car. I say versions of, because there have to be adjustments made for the cars to be suitable for Formula 1 running.

The AMG development team have Formula 1 specialists who develop, produce and service the vehicles, and make adjustments to the original models. Four cars need to be modified, two as backup. Such changes may include larger cooling ducts, weight reduction, and of course, higher top speed. The Safety Car, in particular, needs to go fast enough to prevent the Formula 1 technology behind from overheating. Both cars have video monitors, radios, and safety lights. The cars can get to 60 in about 4.5 seconds, and reach a top speed of just under 250 kilometres per hour. This compares with an F1 car that can reach over 300 on the long straights. Mayländer says that he is driving at 99% the limit of the car at all times, with that extra 1% there just in case the F1 cars behind push him. Drivers know that he's in a slower car, but they always want to go as fast as they can.

Of course, it's not just a question of speed. At the Japanese Grand Prix in 2007, the safety car ran for 19 laps, and no one knew when or if it would run out of fuel. Of course, with two cars available, it's assumed one could just take the others place, but how would the transition work and how long could they keep that up for?

Given the present F1 rules, the appearance of the safety car always brings about consternation. Current regulations regarding pitting under the safety car are making some strategic decisions redundant and some would go so far as to call it a farce. The regulations are being looked at, examined, and hopefully changed at some point in the future, but there's no doubt that the safety car will be here for years to come.



That's it for this episode of Ancillary F1. Join me tomorrow for another instalment of this mini series, and don't forget to leave your feedback on sidepodcast.com, or on the voicemail 0121 28 87225.

sidepodcast.com
YOUR WEEKLY F1 FIX