

## Sidepodchat – The fastest driver who never raced

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Christine: At the beginning of this year, frequent commentator Steven Roy wrote five brilliant guest posts covering some important F1 history. Now he's turned them from the written word into an audio feast and we're proud to share them with you.

Steven: The fastest driver who never raced. Imagine if Rory Byrne, who designed the Ferraris that Michael Schumacher dominated F1 with, had found himself at Spa in 2003 with the latest Ferrari but without a driver. Now imagine that he decided with no driver available he would test the car himself. Now stretch credibility to breaking point and imagine that he was as fast as Schumacher. Utterly impossible? Of course it is nowadays but once upon a time...

Rudi Uhlenhaut was born in London in 1906 while his father was head of the London branch of Deutsche Bank. After studying in Munich he joined Mercedes Benz in 1931. In 1936 he was put in charge of the newly created Rennabteilung or Racing Department. The Mercedes Benz racing structure had been archaic and there was little communication between the racing team and the experimental department which designed the race cars and was generally led by old drivers with little technical knowledge.

By 1936 there was a real need for action as Mercedes Benz had fallen behind Auto Union who ran uniquely at that time with the engine behind the driver. The Auto Unions were designed by Ferdinand Porsche who had designed rear-engined race cars as early as the 1920s. Both teams were financed by the Nazi party and being the second best team was not a healthy place to be. Auto Union was formed from four companies Audi, DKW, Horch, and Wanderer. The 4 ring logo that Audi use today is actually the Auto Union logo, with one ring representing each of the four constituent companies.

In those days the teams delivered cars to the track and drivers got in and drove them as they were delivered. There was no possibility to modify the cars at race meetings. Imagine an F1 team turning up at a race meeting and having no option, no possibility whatever, to change any aspect of the car.

Uhlenhaut organised a test at the Nürburgring in August 1936 to try different tyres, suspensions, even to test the effect of putting 60kg of lead in the nose to try to generate some front end grip. Two of the team's drivers Rudolf Caracciola (the most successful driver of the era and 3 times European champion in the 1930s) and Manfred von Brauchitsch were on hand to test the cars. After two days they left and with no other option Uhlenhaut, who had tested many road cars at the Nürburgring in his previous job, simply got in the race cars and drove them himself. He soon found some fundamental flaws in the handling and design and was able to identify how to resolve the problems.

The result was that the team pulled out of the rest of the races in the 1936 season after Auto Union thrashed them in the Swiss Grand Prix. All efforts were immediately focused on 1937 and the result was the W125. With this car Caracciola won his second European championship with Von Brauchitsch and Hermann Lang also winning races that season.

For 1938 a new 3 litre formula was introduced and many of the lessons of the W125 were carried over to the W154. In 9 major races that season the W154 took 6 wins, 6 seconds, and 5 thirds. The results were



enough for Caracciola to take his third European championship. A modified, more streamlined version of the W154 was raced in the 1939 season; a season that was never to finish.

After the war Uhlenhaut worked on various Mercedes road cars including the 300SL gullwing sports car. When Mercedes Benz returned to racing Uhlenhaut returned to his previous position in charge of the racing department. He again produced great cars including the W196 which gave Juan Manuel Fangio the F1 world championship in 1954 with 4 wins from 6 races. The Indianapolis 500 was in the championship at that time but none of the regular championship competitors contested it. Fangio had started the season with Maserati and won both the championship races he started with them. The W196 ran as a conventional single-seater and with all enclosing bodywork for better streamlining at some tracks. The 1955 championship consisted of only 7 rounds including Indianapolis. Fangio won 4 of the 6 he contested and took his third world title. At the end of that season, though, Mercedes withdrew from all motor sport as a result of the disaster at Le Mans in which Pierre Levegh's Mercedes left the road, went in the crowd, and killed 80 people.

There is no doubt Rudi Uhlenhaut was an incredibly talented driver and could have raced successfully had he decided to. It is rumoured that he did not because his wife was not in favour or because he was too valuable to Mercedes Benz for them to risk letting him race. During the mid 1950s stories came out that at one test at the Nürburgring Uhlenhaut, who by this time was in his late 40s, went faster than Fangio. Now we all know that conditions can change quickly at the Nürburgring and what had been a competitive lap time a few minutes previously can be beaten comfortably. Regardless of the accuracy of the comments, the fact that a man in his late 40s who had never raced anything can be suggested to be as fast as or faster than the greatest driver of that era is simply astonishing.

In addition to the grand prix cars, Uhlenhaut's department produced sports cars that won many of the great races of the day including the 24 hours of Le Mans, the Carrera Panamericana and the famous 1955 Mille Miglia. Many of these races had equal stature to Grands Prix wins in the eyes of the competitors and the fans.

Following the withdrawal of Mercedes Benz from motor sport, Rudi Uhlenhaut returned to their road car operation producing numerous cars including the Uhlenhaut Coupe. He retired from Mercedes Benz in 1972 having never owned a car in his life. By this time he wore two hearing aids to overcome the deafness resulting from many hours of testing cars with unsilenced engines.

Imagine Rory Byrne taking an F1 Ferrari round Spa faster than Michael Schumacher. Just think how impossible that is and you get some idea how remarkable Rudi Uhlenhaut was.