



Days that Shook the F1 World – Traction Control Banned

Welcome to the third episode of Days that Shook the F1 World, a mini series brought to you by Sidepodcast. We've looked at crashes, and fines so far this series, now let's take a look at a technology that was banned.

The regulations for the 1994 F1 season were announced at the Canadian Grand Prix the year before. One of the most significant changes was that electronic aids were to be banned, which meant no traction control. The FIA were worried that electronic aids were making driving a little too easy for the guys out on track, and decided to put the emphasis back on skill rather than technological development.

Traction control is a simple device put in place to limit the possibility of wheel spin and therefore aid acceleration. Coming out of a corner, traction is the most important thing a driver needs to get grip out of the tyres and speed away from his opponents. According to F1 engineers, a tyre works best if it has only slight wheel spin. The computers are there to calculate the exact figures and put a stop to any extra flailing about. A driver could simply put his foot down, and the computer would do all the work for him, and process things a lot quicker than he ever could. But, where's the fun in that?

Banning traction control saw the art of cornering perfectly return to prominence. Other aids were also disallowed, with power brakes and active suspension all taken out of the rulebook. At the time, there was some consternation that the rules were being tailored to restrict Williams, who had invested heavily in active suspension and were about to make a huge step forward. We can, of course, only speculate on that. Nevertheless, the regulations changed and it was up to the FIA to police them.

It wasn't long into the 1994 season that things began to slip away from the regulators. During the Pacific Grand Prix in April, the Italian media found out that Ferrari test driver Nicola Larini had used traction control when he had driven in Jean Alesi's place earlier in the year. Both Ferrari and Larini denied the claims, but by then, suspicions had been roused. After that fateful weekend at Imola, the FIA asked three teams, Ferrari, McLaren and Benetton, to provide them with information regarding the engine systems, to detect whether traction control was in use. Benetton took three long weeks to provide their copy, whilst McLaren handed it over straight away.

Things got progressively worse for Benetton, with eyebrows raised at the French Grand Prix over Schumacher's impressive start (eerily similar to the TC days), a hefty fine for ignoring a penalty at the British GP, and a serious pit stop fire in Germany. However, nothing was done about the traction control ban until 2001. Midway through the season, the FIA decided that they couldn't police the regulations properly, and so revoked the ban. Traction control was allowed back on the cars and continued to be so until 2008.

When the TC ban came back into force in '08, nearly all of the drivers hailed it as a good thing. No one wants to sit back and let the cars do all the work, not even the guys behind the wheel, and some of the action we saw during that first year wouldn't have occurred if the computers were in charge. With a standard ECU, the regulation is much easier to police, and teams would be found out immediately if they were trying to circumvent the ban. But as we have seen, it doesn't look like they even want to.

Thanks for listening. If you've got any thoughts or feedback, please leave a comment on Sidepodcast.com, leave us a voicemail on 0121 28 87225, or email me christine at sidepodcast.com. I'll be back tomorrow with another Day that shook the F1 World.