



## Days that Shook the F1 World – 1955 Le Mans Disaster

---

Hello, we have reached the end of our second foray into Formula 1 history, picking out the days that have shaped the sport we know and love today. This last edition picks out a specific date from the 1950s – June 11<sup>th</sup> 1955.

Although not strictly a Formula 1 race, the Le Mans 24 Hours in 1955 had an enormous impact on all categories of motorsport, for the worst possible reason. June 11<sup>th</sup> is known as one of the blackest days in racing history due to the terrible crash that took place.

In those days, most current F1 drivers would be taking part in the endurance event, and the battle at the front was between Hawthorn, Fangio and Pierre LeVagh. LeVagh was driving for Mercedes, along with Stirling Moss and Fangio.

The race started well, but after about two hours, the accident happened. LeVagh's Mercedes came into contact with the Austin-Healey of Lance Macklin, and due to the ramp-shaped rear of the car, was launched into the air. The Mercedes hit the mound of earth designed to protect the spectators, and was somersaulted over the top and directly into the crowd.

The car had a high magnesium content, and as the fuel tank split and ignited, the entire thing burst into intense flames. LeVagh had already been thrown from the car and killed, and many, many spectators suffered the same fate. When rescuers attempted to put the flames out with their water extinguishers, it made things worse as it met the magnesium fuelled flames. By the time the fire was out – two hours later – over 80 people had died. It was a horrific accident.

Organisers decided to let the race continue to prevent a rush of panic in trying to leave the circuit. They wanted the roads as clear as possible for the ambulance traffic. Mercedes had let their other two cars continue in the race, and were now holding a comfortable lead. After word of the death toll reached head office in Stuttgart, however, the order filtered through to the track for the cars to be withdrawn. Mike Hawthorn went on to win the race, but there was no celebrating to be done.

Although it was eventually classed as a racing incident, the effects of the accident were far reaching. France, Switzerland and Germany immediately placed temporary bans on racing, meaning the French Grand Prix was cancelled. Switzerland went on to make the ban permanent, allowing drivers to only participate in time trials, and not side by side combat. This restriction was only recently lifted in 2007.

The Formula 1 season continued just a week after the accident. Although there were many complaints about this decision, the Dutch Grand Prix organisers felt they had to continue as planned. Mercedes won the remaining three rounds of the season, and afterwards announced their intention to withdraw from circuit racing. They didn't return for another three decades.

The only thing the accident doesn't seem to have affected is safety. It clearly highlighted a series of weaknesses for spectators, which were mildly addressed by increasing the gap between the viewing areas and the track. However, driver safety, fire precautions, and better track facilities were all left for the next generation to deal with.

That's all for this episode, and this series, of Days that Shook the F1 World. I hope you've enjoyed visiting the history of Formula 1 with me. If you have any ideas, suggestions, or feedback, please feel free to let me know at Sidepodcast.com. Thanks for listening.