



Days that Shook the F1 World (Part 2) – Death of Ayrton Senna

Welcome to the second episode of Sidepodcast's latest series – Days That Shook The F1 World. Yesterday we looked at the US Grand Prix in 2005, and today we'll focus on another earth-shattering day in F1 History. This time it's May 1st 1994.

Formula 1 is synonymous with the warning: "Motorsport is dangerous."

And it is, although it used to be a lot worse.

Sir Jackie Stewart's autobiography talks about a period in his racing career where he lost over 50 friends and colleagues in ten years. In the 50s and 60s, a serious crash in racing meant terrible injuries or death. And the trend continued until 1994 when the death of Ayrton Senna put F1 safety on the front page.

Senna was a legend, a hero, a proper champion. He didn't always do things by the book, but he was one of life's good guys. He took the usual route to F1, through karting and Formula 3, then dominated Formula 1 for the ten years he participated. With many wins and three championships already under his belt, Senna started the 1994 season badly. He'd recently made the switch to Williams but the Renault powered car was a bit of a handful and he retired for the first couple of races of the season. Arriving for the third race at Imola, Senna was hoping for some good luck.

On Friday, Rubens Barrichello was seriously injured and hospitalised, preventing him from completing the race weekend. Ayrton Senna was his mentor, and visiting his friend in hospital shook his confidence in the safety standards at the track quite considerably.

On Saturday, Austrian driver Roland Ratzenberger was killed during a practice session. Senna began to question his involvement in the sport, but spent Sunday morning organising the recreation of the Driver's Safety group and offering to take the lead role within the group.

Despite his misgivings, Senna's racing blood took over and he started the race from pole position. A safety car slowed the cars down for 6 laps, after a start line accident, and then on the 7th lap, Senna went off track at almost 200 mph, and crashed into a concrete barrier. Although it was a high speed crash, it didn't look like the devastating crashes the sport had previously seen. However, Senna was motionless in the cockpit, until medical attention arrived. He was airlifted to hospital but pronounced dead.

Several questions were raised about the incident itself, including why it took the medical staff so long to reach the car. Marshalls were on the scene instantly, but could only wave their yellow and red flags to stop the passing cars, they were not allowed to go near the car itself. It looked terrible, with many people standing around whilst Senna remained in the car.

There are also questions about why Senna wasn't pronounced dead at the scene of the crash, rather than being airlifted away during resuscitation procedures. Italian rules declared a death at the track would result in an investigation and the sporting event to be cancelled.



Whilst questions remained, Senna was given a state funeral and the world mourned. Books have been written about him, songs reference him, and charity events take place in his name. His most important legacy though, is the improvement of safety in the sport.

There had been several attempts to tighten up safety procedures over the years, but with such an awful weekend as that fateful one in Imola, Max Mosley decided enough was enough and things had to change. New introductions included the HANS device, higher cockpit sides, sturdier chassis', and that was just on the cars. Better tyre walls and gravel traps were also put in place. It's no coincidence that there hasn't been a death in Formula 1 racing since 1994. Thank you for listening to Days That Shook the F1 World. Visit Sidepodcast.com to leave your comments, and don't forget to join me tomorrow for our third important date.

That's our first topic covered, a day that really did unsettle F1 to its very foundations. Join me again tomorrow for part two, featuring another day that shook the F1 World.

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