



Days that Shook the F1 World (Part 3) – Team Orders, Austria 2002

Welcome to the Sidepodcast series: Days that Shook the F1 World. So far we have covered the US Grand Prix in 2005 and the death of Ayrton Senna in 1994, now it's time to look at another relatively recent date: May 12th 2002.

Team orders have always been a controversial subject. The argument is debated extensively these days, and mostly focuses on where to draw the line. Should a team favour one driver over the other in order to maximise championship points? Is it wrong to give one driver the advantage because he is ahead in the championship?

In 2002, the issue hit the news in a big way. The Austrian Grand Prix took place in May of that year, and featured possibly the most controversial, and certainly the most blatant use of team orders that the sport had ever witnessed. At the time, team orders weren't illegal, but good sportsmanship was still encouraged and manipulation frowned upon.

Rubens Barrichello had been consistently fast throughout the weekend. He was ahead of teammate Michael Schumacher in the practice sessions, and he took pole position. He led the majority of the race, but at the very end, was told to let Schumacher past. Schumacher was already leading the championship by plenty, whilst his team mate had yet to break into double figures. This win took Schumacher's total to 27 points clear of his next rival, Montoya, but Ferrari clearly thought he needed all the points he could get. With just a few metres to go before the finish line, Barrichello, who actually could have used the extra points, allowed the sister car past, much to the viewing public's disgust.

When the time came for the top three drivers to take to the podium, the drivers received only boos and jeers, and so Schumacher stepped onto the second place position, and encouraged Barrichello to take his place on the top step. He still took all the points though, saying: "I thank Barrichello for the points, but I am not happy." The BBC reported the incident at the time with the headline: "Schumacher Steals Austrian Win."

Although everyone knew that team orders went on, there had never previously been such an obvious and unnecessary manipulation of race results. The public, rival teams and other drivers, were not happy and the FIA were inundated with complaints. They hastily arranged a meeting to try and come up with a solution to the problem. They did not have an easy job ahead of them.

The rules had been adjusted a couple of times, due to a less severe incident a couple of years previous, and were left a little, shall we say, ambiguous. The basic gist of the legislation meant it was acceptable for a team to favour one driver and demand the other to play a support role, but it was not acceptable for a team to interfere with a race unnecessarily." Not exactly explicit.

The team argued that if Schumacher lost the championship by only a couple of points, then they would end up looking stupid that Barrichello was the one who prevented him from being victorious.

After much deliberation, the FIA came to the conclusion that they could not punish the team for what had happened on track, as technically it was not illegal. They said Ferrari had handled it clumsily, but no penalty could be imposed. What they did was issue a \$1 million fine for the antics on the podium. The FIA are very particular about their podium ceremony and no one is allowed to mess with it, especially people who are only just escaping sanction



anyway. Half was suspended for a year, and the \$500,000 immediately payable was to be shared between Ferrari, Schumacher and Barrichello. Compared to the budgets of the three, a \$500,000 split was not particularly taxing.

To ease the public outrage, Max Mosley set up a Working Group to discuss the team orders problem, and even went so far as to ask the public opinion on the subject. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that team orders should be banned.

Such a rule is incredibly difficult to implement and control, however. These days, all it takes is for a driver to be told via the pit-to-car radio that his teammate is quicker. No explicit orders are given, but everyone involved knows what that means and what needs to be done.

Even if a driver is not playing the team game, a mechanic could quite conceivably make a small mistake during the pit stop that costs a few seconds, and allows the favoured driver to get ahead.

Meanwhile, the public quite rightly continue to debate, complain, and generally badger the FIA for a more concise, understandable and measurable ruling on the matter.

That wraps up another episode of Days that Shook the F1 World. Don't forget to join me tomorrow for the fourth important day in our series.

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