



Days that Shook the F1 World (Part 5) – Monaco Qualifying, 2006

Welcome to Sidepodcast's Days that Shook the F1 World, a series sharing some of the more pivotal moments in F1 History. Today, the 27th May 2006.

Michael Schumacher had already won twice in 2006, but was still struggling for form against defending champion Fernando Alonso. In the back of his mind he might have known this would be his last season and therefore his last race in the principality. Desperation may have been starting to set in.

Qualifying began as it always did, with the first of the three sessions. Notably, Felipe Massa crashed out in the sister Ferrari, causing red flags and plenty of chaos. Whatever help Michael may have expected from Felipe was immediately out of the window, and Ferrari's race strategy was further compromised because Massa would likely start last in Sunday's Grand Prix.

The second session passed without event, and the majority of the third session evolved predictably.

As the session drew to a close, Schumacher began his last attempt at a flying lap, but he lost two tenths somewhere in the middle sector. Aware that he could not make up that kind of deficit in the remainder of the lap and aware that his closest rival was behind him on the track, he got out of shape around the hairpin at Rascasse, pulling to a stop inches from the barrier.

The Ferrari was stuck in a dangerous position, so marshals had to wave their yellow flags, ensuring that a following Fernando Alonso had no choice but to slow down and abort his lap. How convenient.

The big question was: did Schumacher do it deliberately or was it merely a mistake?

Ferrari absolutely denied the former. It was an accident, a pure racing incident with no malice intended.

The entire pit lane rallied against this claim. How could it be an accident? The man was a master at Monaco, he missed the barriers by inches, meaning Alonso's lap was ruined while the Ferrari suffered no damage. Surely an act of evil genius?

The stewards investigated, ruled Schumacher had done wrong, and pushed him to the back of the grid meaning both Ferraris would start from the back row, making it the teams worst ever qualifying position. During the race, Schumacher wowed everyone by fighting his way through the traffic and ended up in the top eight. No one denied the man could drive.

But that didn't matter. The event caused a reaction completely unprecedented in the F1 World. Previous attempts to disrupt the course of a GP weekend by Schumacher and/or his team were now viewed in a new light. How could you believe that his accidents with championship rivals Damon Hill and Jacques Villeneuve in previous years, were simply mistakes? Fans were instantly reminded of his other misdemeanours, and now excuses were much less credible.



If he did do it on purpose, it revealed an enormous amount about Michael Schumacher's character. Being a seven times world champion clearly wasn't enough, and even though he claimed to always want to win everything fair and square, a little underhand technique every now and then wasn't completely out of the question.

Prior to Monaco '06, when an incident occurred where questionable tactics had been used, the pit lane traditionally stayed quiet, had some time to think about it, and then responded via press releases and lawyers. After this event though, no one was backwards in coming forward. The entire pit lane erupted with scorn and derision, crying "cheat" and demanding action. Of course, they got what they wanted, and a new precedent was born. If you have an opinion on any subject, better to share it immediately, loudly, and to anyone who cares to listen.

Most importantly though, this event took place as fans were becoming more vocal too. Bloggers were just waiting for a controversial event to get their teeth into, and Michael Schumacher well and truly delivered. Everyone had an opinion, whether for or against the German, and now everyone could have their say.

Coverage of Formula 1 was changing, and this was the first major event to have everyone call it – cheater, evil genius or genuine mistake?

That's all for our fifth important date. Join me tomorrow for another Day that Shook the F1 World.

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