



## Days that Shook the F1 World – Niki Lauda’s Crash

Hello and welcome to the latest miniseries from Sidepodcast – Days that Shook the F1 World, Series 2. Yesterday we were right up to date with McLaren’s fine from 2007. Now we’re going back in history for today’s important date – August 1<sup>st</sup> 1976.

For a long time now, the Nurburgring has been a shadow of its former self. The original Nordschliefe circuit runs for over 22 kilometres with an arguable number of corners, but well over 70. Its twists and turns challenged drivers until eventually, the safety concerns became too great, and the Formula 1 race took to a shorter version of the massive track. The reason for this change can be traced back to one important event, a crash involving Niki Lauda.

It was the German Grand Prix of 1976. Lauda qualified second behind James Hunt, and the race started in wet conditions. Both Hunt and Lauda had a bad start, allowing Clay Regazzoni through to take the lead, leaving Niki out of the top ten and desperate to make up for lost time. On only the second lap, the Ferrari lost control and hit the Armco immediately bursting into flames. Looking back at footage today, Lauda admits that he can't understand what happened. The car touches the kerbs and twitches, and as Lauda tries to course correct, the car lurches to the right. At 250 km/h, the Ferrari bounced off the barriers, and spilling debris everywhere, came to rest back on the track. The race was stopped, and the Rescue Car took 40 seconds to arrive. In that time though, nearby drivers, some who had collided with the accident themselves, had already leapt from their cars to help Niki out of the flames. The Ferrari driver wasn't moving, his helmet had come off, and it was down to his fellow drivers to get him out. Brett Lunger, Arturo Merzario, Guy Edwards and Harald Ertl were heralded for thinking clearly, keeping calm, and more importantly, saving Lauda’s life. They got him out of the car, and laid him on the nearby grass to be collected by the ambulance. He was taken to a nearby hospital, badly burned, and later transferred to a specialist unit.

Lauda suffered severe burns, and it was touch and go for a couple of nights. However, his condition began to improve and it was just five short weeks later that he got back behind the wheel. At his first test in the Ferrari at Fiorano, his head was still bandaged, and his helmet had been specially designed to be put on as painlessly as possible. Another five days passed, and Lauda returned to racing. His determination saw him finish fourth, despite his confession that he has never been as scared as he was before the race began. With these nerves of steel, Lauda continued to lead the championship, but there was one more hurdle put in his path. At the final race of the 1976 season, Fuji saw torrential rain, and Lauda withdrew. James Hunt finished third and took the title by a single point. At the time, Lauda said there was more to life than the championship, and that staying alive was more important. No one could criticise him for such a decision, after such brave performances throughout the year. And it didn't stop him from coming back, trying even harder, and securing two more championships to his name.

With the horror of the crash still reverberating around the paddock, the Nordschleife disappeared off the calendar for eight years. Some drivers, including Harald Ertl, say that the incident with Lauda was just that, a racing incident, and shouldn't have been considered with the ongoing controversy of the track. He believed the safety systems worked well, and Lauda's survival is a tribute to that. Others would argue that the length of the track meant it took too long for emergency vehicles to reach some of the further parts of the circuit. The Hockenheimring became the circuit of choice for racing in Germany, whilst the Nurburgring underwent serious modifications. It returned in 1984, and continues to host the Grand Prix to this day.

That's it for this second episode of Days that Shook the F1 World. Please join me tomorrow when we'll look at another important day in Formula 1's history.