



The Great Debates – Series 1 Omnibus

Hello and welcome to a new mini series from Sidepodcast, The Great Debates. Formula One is surrounded by endless discussion, speculation, rumour and opinions, but there are some subjects that are more deep rooted than others, some that go right to the heart of what makes F1 the spectacle that it is today – for good, or for bad. This series, we aim to investigate some of those debates and whilst not definitively answering the questions, at least making sure they are asked. These shows were originally broadcast individually across seven consecutive days, but are gathered here in one omnibus edition for easy listening. This first episode starts with a fundamental principle of Formula One, its very purpose of being.

Is F1 entertainment or sport?

The question “Is F1 entertainment or sport?” at first seems obvious. It’s a sport. In fact, it’s a motorsport, the clue is in the title. The drivers have to be at peak physical fitness, they put in hours of training at the gym and in the simulator, and it all comes together when teams and individuals are pitted in head to head competition over a season of events. It couldn’t sound more like a sport if it tried.

And yet, the closer you look at it, the more you start to see the elements that point towards entertainment rather than sporting endeavour. You’ll have heard the arguments, I’m sure, whenever something like DRS is debated. The artificial device used on cars to promote overtaking where it previously would not have been possible only exists because otherwise the racing would be considered boring. To appease fans, DRS was introduced, with welcoming arms on one side, and, of course, an outcry on the other. The concern rests on whether these race-altering aspects are diluting the purity of the sport, because they are done purely for entertainment and not for sporting reasons.

Fans are giving up at least two hours of their Sundays, for an increasing number of weekends a year, and deserve to get something back in return, but at what cost? Whenever the Sporting Group or similar collections of high-powered people get together to discuss Formula One, its current state and its future, they inevitably turn to the subject of “improving the show”. Is it a show, then, first and foremost? Is it the entertainment provided by two hours of racing on a Sunday afternoon that should be prioritised over the purity of sport?

And what is that purity anyway? Where does it come from? Where is the rule book that defines what is and isn’t acceptable, where the line is before sport becomes entertainment? Whenever the four yearly Olympic Games rolls around, there’s always a conversation to be had about why F1 is excluded. Is it because it’s not a sport in the purest sense? More likely, what makes it into the games is a somewhat arbitrary decision. Regulations regarding excluding sports that require mechanical assistance at the games were removed several years ago, but there doesn’t seem to be a rhyme or reason about what gets selected. So, perhaps best not to use the Olympics as a benchmark here and go right back to basics instead.

Collins online dictionary defines sport as: “an individual or group activity pursued for exercise or pleasure, often involving the testing of physical capabilities and taking the form of a competitive game.” Formula One definitely fits that category. The dictionary defines entertainment as: “an act, production, etc, that



entertains; diversion; amusement.” And actually, Formula One fits in that category too. So whilst the aim of this mini series is not to provide answers, merely to shine a light on the questions, perhaps we have actually solved our first mystery. The answer is that Formula One is both, a sport and an entertainment, and as such it has to constantly tread that fine line between keeping the purists happy and the fickle entertained. And if that is the answer, then this debate is one that will continue to rage for the foreseeable future.

That’s all for the first episode of The Great Debates. What do you think about sport versus entertainment? What other great debates do you feel dominate the sport, or entertainment, of Formula One? Keep listening and they might be addressed here. Let’s move on to our second debate, where we will delve into a more specific part of the race weekend.

Which F1 qualifying format is best?

The age old saying in Formula One is that there are no points for qualifying on a Saturday. And yet, the way the grid is decided still provides plenty of attraction and entertainment for fans at home and at the track, and sometimes, just occasionally, has the potential to mix things up on Sunday – the day when the points are handed out. Over the years, F1 has tried out several different qualifying formats, and each time there’s a change, it’s only natural to compare and contrast with what has gone before. So which format is the best?

For the 2016 season, the FIA tried to introduce a last minute change to qualifying that turned a three session knockout style format to a more brutal elimination style instead. It only took one attempt to realise they’d made a distinct error with this format, that no one appeared to enjoy it – teams, drivers, paddock watchers and ardent fans alike – and it was quickly ditched. That format will likely not live on in infamy, or at least not for the right reasons.

There are three formats that get the most attention in any qualifying debate: the “here’s your allotted time, have at it” format, the single lap qualifying and what we have now, the knockout style amalgamation of everything. In the first type, that surely has a more catchy name than what I have come up with, drivers have a certain amount of time to complete their laps, they can go out when they want, and their fastest time dictates their position in the order. A fair and easy to follow format, but like practice sessions, likely to leave a lot of empty track time and see drivers caught up in traffic if they all opt to go out at the same time.

The single lap qualifying had more of a time trial element to it. Each driver went out by themselves in turn, for their one flying lap, and that was it, their only opportunity to put in a good performance. This has the added bonus of really sorting those that can handle the pressure from those that can’t, and helps you see where drivers are doing well and where they’re not, plus slots one driver at a time into the grid to help confused fans keep up. However, it also means drivers can be unfairly affected by weather conditions that move in or clear out, and those who go near the end of the order have a better surface to run on. It can also be considered boring for fans who don’t want to see one car at a time and prefer the hustle and bustle of a busy session.

And that leaves us with the current format – three sessions of reducing length, wherein the slowest six or seven cars are knocked out whilst the rest continue to the next session, culminating in a top ten shoot out for pole position. On the surface, this is a good compromise, allowing drivers to get several laps in each



session rather than all the pressure being on one single lap, giving drivers the space to go out when they want but inevitably having the bustle of a last minute showdown. It can be confusing when driver after driver crosses the line and the order reshuffles, but when the dust settles, it usually seems like a good grid with the potential for a surprise here and there. But is compromise the right thing for F1 to do?

Fans tend to like the qualifying they know best, so perhaps it depends on when you started watching. With the governing body keen to keep evolving the sport and enhancing the show, qualifying is often under discussion for a regulation overhaul, but does it need it, and if so, should it go back to a previous iteration or try something totally new?

As always, do let me know if you're enjoying the show by visiting sidepodcast.com/contact, and let me know your thoughts on the topics covered so far, and still to come. Next up is the third episode of the series, moving on to another debate that gets the fans talking. We've covered already the specifics of qualifying, and a more fundamental area of the sport, and this is another of the latter category.

Is F1 a team or individual sport?

Formula One has a championship that features trophies for the team at the end of the year with the most points, and also for the driver that tops the standings come the end of the season. So, ideally, you'd say that F1 is both a team sport and an individual sport, but it's almost impossible for the series to be both as we have seen many times in the past. And that's the thing that fans end up debating – which should take preference, the best interests of the team, or getting a driver to the top step of the podium?

The way this manifests itself most often is, of course, in the form of team orders. A team has two drivers, and the pair are both hoping to get the best out of any given race weekend. But the chances are, one of them is higher in the championship standings than the other, or has a better possibility of getting a good result, so the team may choose to give that one the more favourable strategy or chassis parts, or engine, or worst of all, give the other driver an instruction to move aside, to help the favoured driver get ahead. We've seen it happen, often with mild consequences, but occasionally having a major impact on race results and championship challenges.

Teams will argue that it is their right to choose the strategy, to favour one driver over the other, to do anything possible to get their team the best result, the maximum amount of points and eventually the best position in the championship standings. That is where the money is, after all, in getting a high championship position, which brings in the prize money, which pays the bills to make the team and therefore the driver even more successful.

However, let's not forget that the drivers are actually in the car, doing the job and bringing home those results. The driver's championship is the most notable result, with many fans and team members alike remembering which driver won the series in any given year, but unable to name the winning team, particularly if it's not the team the eventual champion drives for. So it's all very well for a team to take the upper hand and claim that everyone needs to get the best result for the squad, but it's not too hard to see the argument claiming driver success is the thing that keeps the sport ticking along.

And to further support the individual sport argument is the other side of the team orders debate – that if you are pitting your two drivers against each other, or favouring one over the other, it's because they are



individually better than the other, despite wearing the same sponsored clothing and answering to the same boss.

The team are required to provide the car, and the pit stop services, but the pressure is all on the driver's shoulders to deliver the goods when it counts. The mind games, the battle against teammates, the concentration required to produce lap after lap of speed, focus and precision, all of that is on the driver as an individual, and without that, there would be no racing.

And yet, overall, it has to be considered a team sport. You need the driver, otherwise the cars would sit stationary on the grid. You need the team to provide the cars, otherwise the drivers would be engaging in a running race. Admittedly that would be entertaining but it isn't what F1 is all about. This episode seems to be easily answered with yes, it's a team sport, but there's still just that niggling doubt that the individual drivers are providing the essence of Formula One itself, and that is where the debate will continue for years to come.

After three shows of this new series, I don't know about you, but I'm getting a taste for this debating lark. If you feel the same, listen on, we've got another weighty topic coming up. This time it's all about the ongoing debate surrounding safety.

How safe is too safe?

Formula One's impressive improvements in safety are on display almost every race weekend, as drivers walk away from crashes that would have been disastrous in previous generations. It used to be that driver deaths were routine, Sir Stirling Moss and Sir Jackie Stewart have talked at length about their experiences knowing they would not finish a season with the full line-up of drivers they started the year with, that friends and colleagues would tragically lose their lives in motor racing accidents.

Thankfully, the sport has moved on a lot since then and drivers have survived barrier impacts that are frankly staggering. But there's still work to be done, and recent events have brought the debate to the fore once again. The death of Jules Bianchi highlighted a growing trend in motor sport – drivers are so well protected in their bodies, that it is now head injuries that are prevalent. The governing body, the FIA, have seen this and reacted, commissioning the safety groups to come up with a solution and we have seen the results of that being tested at various race weekends and during testing.

The solution to this dilemma is an example that goes to the very heart of this safety debate – if you want to protect driver's heads, then cover the cars with a cockpit. Ah, but that is changing the nature of the sport. Sportscars have covered cockpits, not Formula One cars. Okay, then we are dealing with the fact that F1 drivers have exposed heads, there's not an awful lot you can do about it. How dangerous should the sport be, and if you sanitise it, are you taking away from the essence of F1?

The current proposed solution is a halfway house hoping to sit in the middle of all these debates. The halo cockpit device essentially provides raised carbon fibre to protect the drivers heads, but doesn't cover the cockpit completely in an effort to keep the single seater series an open cockpit event. Some drivers are in favour of the idea, others have been very vocal about the disappointing look and feel of the cars once the device is installed.



Changing the look of the cars is an area that is very precious to some of the more dedicated fan base, which is another reason the closed cockpit solution doesn't appease them. The halo device, for the most part, doesn't look good bolted onto the top of a modern F1 cockpit. These cars have already been struggling in the looks department, although progress was made in 2017. Is it worth making such ugly cars that fans don't want to look at them, in a half-hearted effort to protect a driver's head?

The other part of this debate centres on what the drivers think, and ultimately whether they should be consulted at all. Naturally, if a driver is aiming to progress to F1, he has reasons for that which probably amount to the speed, the heritage, the status and yes, a little bit the danger. Feelings are mixed in the paddock, but some drivers say the threat of danger is part of the thrill of the race, part of the reason they race and we watch. Others say they race to win and that risking their lives is an uncomfortable by-product of that, minimising that risk is always the ideal.

You would think that being right at the heart of the debate, the ones in the hot seat, they should be able to make up their own minds about how much danger they want to face. But let's not forget that you have to have a certain mindset to race these cars anyway, that need for speed, that craving to eke out the extra tenth of a second. When it comes to such minimal measurements and high adrenaline activities, it's easy for a driver to push to the back of his mind the risk and focus only on the reward, so perhaps they aren't the best person to ask after all.

In the end, F1 has settled for a committee, the Safety Working Group, who are plotting and planning ways to improve the safety of the sport in the future. All we can do is watch and see how it develops, and debate each step along the way, naturally.

We're more than halfway through the series now, thanks for sticking with me so far. There are three short shows remaining to raise or answer questions in your mind. Have you been having an inner debate with yourself whilst listening? Share your thoughts at sidepodcast.com/contact. Remember, these shows aren't looking for answers, but instead highlighting the topics that keep F1 fans talking. We've covered races, drivers and teams and now it's time to look at another aspect of the F1 circus.

Should classic F1 circuits be so highly rated?

The powers that govern Formula One and decide what direction its future is going to go in are always trying to expand the brand and keep the sport a global phenomenon. The calendar has changed significantly throughout the years, and there is a growing trend for European races to drop off the calendar and be replaced by new, shiny tracks in exotic locations.

But is this a good thing for the sport? Should F1 be broadening its horizons to new and untested locations, or would it do better to prioritise the familiar and beloved European circuits. I've unravelled five points to this debate, so let's take a quick look at them individually.

First up, location. Generally speaking, the much loved and classic European races that have dropped off the calendar, or are threatened with that fate, are in the middle of rolling countryside, that is hard to get to and has little to support an annual community rocking up and staying for the weekend. Whilst beautiful, Spa Francorchamps is an incredibly rural destination, and Silverstone is notoriously difficult to get to when the traffic starts to build up. On the flip side, newer locations such as Valencia, Singapore and dare I say it



Sochi, are in city centres – great for visitors, perhaps not so brilliant for locals. Singapore, in particular, have turned the idea of a race weekend on its head, including concerts and entertainment, and offering all the things a city can that a field in the countryside cannot.

The next item on our list is the layout of the track. Almost as a direct repercussion of the location argument, those classic tracks have had the luxury of time and space to build brilliant racing layouts – a mixture of corners, fast and slow sections, with unique areas that make them classic – Eau Rouge springs immediately to mind. Meanwhile, the newer tracks may be a dedicated build or may have to wind around existing street circuits, but no matter which, the track layout never seems to deliver fantastic racing. Singapore, Abu Dhabi, Russia, Azerbaijan, the list of new tracks that have tried and failed is growing constantly. A new track designer could help this situation, but if it is a street circuit, they can only work with what is already there.

Next up, facilities. Part of this relates to the first debate about location, in terms of fans having to stay in rainy British fields in flimsy tents for three days, versus a pricey hotel in the city streets adjacent to the race track, but there's more to it than that. A new build allows for the facilities to be built better – high tech medical centres, nearby research and development complexes, a bustling paddock, and some beautiful, maybe even comfortable, grandstands. The tracks themselves are neat, clean and new, compared to crumbling race tracks with old buildings and a squeeze of a pit lane. But then again, there's something to be said about the familiarity, about the less than pristine nature of a classic track. Where a new event can sterilise the atmosphere and the excitement, a well-known and much loved circuit simply serves to ramp it up, regardless of what facilities are available.

That brings us on to the fourth of our five points, atmosphere. Who can deny the camaraderie on display in Spa, the incredible party going on in Brazil, the intensity of a weekend in Monza? Compare that directly with empty seats in China, or the disinterested crowd of Russia, and it's immediately obvious why classic tracks are so highly rated. They bring in an audience, and not just any audience, knowledgeable and passionate fans.

Which leads us to our last item, history. Monaco is always the example to use when it comes to discussing the history of a particular track. Up until I saw the madness of the Baku track, I would have said that Monaco would never be signed off as up to scratch for an F1 event if it was introduced today. But the long history it has in the sport, and all the weight of expectation and anticipation that comes with it mean it is a staple on the calendar. Races that have history create stories and that's why the classics have gained their status and are held in such high esteem. But, let's not forget that they all had to start somewhere, and just because a race is new doesn't automatically make it bad. Maybe in twenty years' time, we'll all be anticipating the race in Azerbaijan at that classic Baku circuit. Then again maybe not.

We're rocketing our way through these seven short episodes and have just two more to go. The last topic was all about circuits, and the theme continues into this next episode, but looking at a different aspect of the F1 calendar.

What is the ideal length of an F1 season?

The length of an F1 season has changed drastically over the years. The first F1 World Championship included only seven races that counted towards the final scores. Seasons have ebbed and flowed, with



races on New Year's Day or lengthy winter off-seasons, from the races that do and don't count towards the championship to the compulsory twenty event seasons of recent years.

In the 1980s, the season was about 13 or 14 races long. When I started watching F1, it was up to 17 or 18, and now, in 2017 we're talking about 20 and 21 race events, and there are still plenty of locations that would still love to be added to the calendar.

Many F1 fans would say the more races the better, bring it on, a race every weekend if you can. NASCAR seasons contain well over 30 races and other sports, such as tennis, go through a full year with various tournaments on almost constantly. But, of course, there's an argument to be had that the defined season with a clear start, a clear end, and a reasonable length allows for the narrative of a championship to unfold – the long story of how a driver ends up winning the title, whether it be in dominant form, or with a down-to-the-wire finish. If F1 was on all the time, it would dilute the story, and with the racing itself more often disappointing than not, it would do it no favours to be clogging up the TV screens every weekend.

Whilst to full on F1 fans, more races means more fun, that isn't the story for everyone. At this point in my F1 fan life, I watch and enjoy when I can but can't prioritise the sport over real life the way I used to. The more race weekends there are, the more chance there is for real life to intervene and for me to miss out on the fun. Equally, getting new fans on board may be easier if there is a limited set of events to watch – the Crashed Ice format of four or five events a season had us hooked immediately – but then again, there's more chance of them stumbling upon the sport or giving it another chance if it is on screens more often.

Meanwhile, there's the teams and drivers to think of. Well, not so much the drivers although there's no argument that they work hard to be good at what they do. The teams of mechanics and engineers though, are hard at it from the moment they arrive at a location to the moment they leave. Unpacking equipment, setting up cars, repairing cars, managing a race, packing, moving on, and that's before we even talk about the endless travel and opportunities for jet lag.

The more races there are, the more tired these crews will be. We've seen the summer break enforced recently to make sure employees take a break, but they are still visibly tired and clearly ready to stop by the final race of the season. If there are more races added to the already busting calendar, then teams are starting to talk about having to double up on race crews, having relief squads to take over when the A team are too tired to continue. This would increase the costs of participating in F1, which in turn could put some teams off joining in the first place.

This debate is a really tricky one as there is no right answer and not even an answer that seems more logical than the others. It's truly a matter of opinion how long a race season should last, depending on how the sport affects your life and what you put in and get out of it. However, it's a debate that we are likely to see take centre stage as the calendar creep we have seen in recent seasons continues, and the strain on the teams starts to become a real issue.

That wraps up the penultimate topic of The Great Debates, with just one more to go. Do let me know your thoughts by getting in touch at sidepodcast.com/contact. Now let's move on to our final topic, the last debate, and it's a big one.



Can you compare F1 eras?

There are two specific things about Formula One that, when combined, make it both wonderful and unique – the jam-packed history of the sport dating back to the 1950 inauguration of the world championship and even before that, alongside the ever-increasing pace of change that keeps the sport moving forward.

However, these two brilliant aspects converge upon each other to create one of the hot topics of Formula One that will never be resolved: Can you compare F1 eras? By that, I mean, does it mean anything to say Lewis Hamilton has equalled Ayrton Senna's record of three world championships? Or that Rubens Barrichello was one of the best drivers ever because he started the most races? Or that Michael Schumacher is a better champion than Juan Manuel Fangio because he has two more titles to his name?

F1 is so bound in data, statistics, facts and figures, that it feels like you can make statements like these and argue your case. But the sport is so different now than when it started, so different now than ten years ago, even.

Senna battled hard for his championships, Hamilton has had a couple of dominant seasons with more time each year to make the difference. Barrichello started young and stayed a long time in F1, but in a series that was expanding its calendar as each year went by allowing for the race starts to rack up. Schumacher was an incredible driver but moulded a team around himself, employed some questionable tactics and may or may not have had some assistance from the governing body along the way. Suddenly they don't seem so comparable at all.

And yet, they are all doing the same job – driving as fast as possible in cars that are designed to go as fast as possible given certain conditions. They're in the same sport, and more than anything, we want to compare them, to discuss the relative merits and disappointments, to decide who really was the fastest driver or the greatest champion, the best qualifier or the worst teammate to have.

Even within the same year, things get tricky. It's a well-known adage that if you want to see how a driver is doing, you can only compare him to his teammate. Same car, same machinery, same situations. That doesn't even bear fruit, though, as there are other things to consider: team orders, favourable strategies, just that cursed bad luck that plagues some drivers more than others. Comparing teammates on a very basic level is hard enough, let alone crossing the boundaries of seasons and even decades.

But it's human nature to look for the story behind the achievements. What would the youngest F1 driver mean if he wasn't breaking a record set by previous drivers? How can we relate to the four consecutive championship wins by Sebastian Vettel if he wasn't standing on the backs of giants? With such a vast history to draw from, despite its differences, it's hard not to want to pit one success story against another, or analyse failures based on what's happened in the past. It may not be accurate but it helps us process the information in front of us. It helps fuel the debates that have taken place and will continue well beyond the end of F1 as we know it.

So in the end, I think the answer is no, you can't compare F1 eras, but oh boy, that isn't going to stop us from trying.



That's all for this mini series, thank you so much for listening. The Great Debates has come to an end, although the debates themselves will rumble on indefinitely, I have no doubt. I hope this has been an entertaining listen and do let me know your feelings on any of the topics covered by visiting sidepodcast.com/contact. Enjoy the conversation, enjoy the sport, and thank you again for listening.