



F1 Debrief – There’s a definite change in policy here

Christine: This is F1 Debrief, there’s a definite change in policy here. On this show we discuss the FIA’s breaking news, putting your sport before the planet, and just what is a global reflection. Ok, you’ve dragged me away from prepping for my next exam. What can possibly be so important?

Mr C: What can be so important, is that word on the street is that Formula 1 refuelling is returning. Out of the blue, with no warning, with no preparation, the bombshell is dropped upon us on this fair Friday afternoon slash evening such that we have to quite literally stop the presses, hold back all that we were doing and go all in and discuss Formula 1 because some things are so big and so important they just have to be discussed by Sidepodcast. We are not back, don’t get too excited, we had an Aside with Joe last week, we did another podcast this week. This is not the return, but this is big news.

Christine: We have been campaigning for the return of refuelling since it went away, here it is. And yet I’m not feeling quite so sure about it now.

Mr C: Oh my goodness. Just as a quick recap when refuelling was ditched at the end of 2009 and we witnessed some pretty terrible racing at the beginning of 2010, Sidepodcast took a break.

Christine: We had a stop.

Mr C: Not massively dissimilar from the break we are currently on. By the way we are on a break.

Christine: Then we had a stop, now we’re just a tiny little bit busy.

Mr C: What happened was that, what we discovered was that once refuelling was removed from the equation Formula 1 races became somewhat predictable. Thankfully the powers that be recognised that and introduced the Drag Reduction System, which allowed some overtaking to return to Formula 1. The suggestion at the moment appears to be to reintroduce refuelling without changing any of the rules so it will be DRS plus refuelling in 2017, which should be ... well that’s going to be interesting.

Christine: The reaction I’ve seen on Twitter and other social networks has been mostly negative, people don’t want refuelling to return. Maybe that’s just the people that I follow, but I thought I would be more excited than I am and I like refuelling and I would like it to come back, I can’t really see how it fits in the current way Formula 1 is. But more than that, it’s just a bit embarrassing it doesn’t make any sense because they said it wasn’t safe and it wasn’t good for the environment and neither of those two things have changed and yet here it comes.

Mr C: Yes. There doesn’t seem to be an awful lot of reasoning on this decision. The FIA have put out a press release which describes an exchange of views of the current challenges that F1 faces between all stakeholders. That’s Formula One Management, the FIA and the nominated teams who represent, well how are allowed into this group.

Christine: Not Force India.



Mr C: Well not everybody which is apart from anything else inherently unfair. But if we disregard that as a discussion for some other time and some other year. But these people have got together and this is what they've decided. It is out of the blue; it is left of field. But what is important is that at least they recognise Formula 1 does face some challenges. The viewing figures are suffering, the sport has been met with an awful lot of apathy this year from fans and interested parties alike. And they are at least attempting to address some of these issues in these decisions.

Christine: But as always it feels just like panicking.

Mr C: It does a little bit.

Christine: There's something wrong with it, what are we going to do, oh I don't know let's go back five years.

Mr C: It is turning back the clock, isn't it? And you're right none of the causes or not of the problems that existed that brought an end to refuelling have been resolved. I do wonder if those involved in Formula 1 have taken a look at Formula E which is currently going about its business as an all-electric racing series and is arguably the future of cars and motorsport and I wonder if they haven't looked on enviously and thought, well we can't do that so let's just forget the environment, let's forget all the things we were trying to do to make a difference and just go all out on noise and spectacle and explosions ...

Christine: Who cares!

Mr C: ... and just, you know forget anything that is important to the world because we cannot compete on that level now. We've been leapfrogged by Formula E and that's already gone.

Christine: Yeah, because the other things they've said is faster cars, 5-6 seconds drop in lap times, reintroduction of refuelling, higher revving engines and increased noise and more aggressive looks.

Mr C: Which is almost the exact opposite of Formula E and it does feel like it's to hell with the environment, to hell with the world we are a racing series and we are no longer going to be relevant we are no longer going to try and fit into the world and exist despite it.

Christine: They could do it though. I mean all those clever people; they could make Formula 1 even better than Formula E if they put their mind to it.

Mr C: Oh totally. We saw there was a Formula E race this past weekend and the cars didn't have the guts, didn't have the drive, didn't have the energy to get up the hill and do a full lap of the Monaco Grand Prix so they ran a truncated circuit, but that will improve and Formula E is in a better position to build on that than Formula 1 would be. And could you imagine the fuss if Formula 1 went all electric. You witnessed what happened when they went from V8 to V6s. There was an absolute outcry when, you know, people couldn't hear the engines, or you know, the engines were slightly quieter than before. Remember if it was silent and they brought in a DJ. I think Formula E have nailed that sector and that audience and I don't think Formula 1 can compete with that.



Christine: The thing is there was outrage but all you have to say now is just wait a couple of years and they'll bring that back again. It can be the argument for any outrage ever – just wait, it will be fine.

Mr C: Yeah, well turn back the clock we've got sparks back in Formula 1, turbos are back and now we're bringing back refuelling. I think though, our reasons for despairing at the loss of refuelling was ultimately that you need as many variables as you possibly can to make a motor race interesting and it doesn't really matter if those variables are natural in terms of the environment, the weather, whatever. Or if they are forced and put in place with manipulation of rules or whatever to create those kind of variables.

Christine: It matters to some people.

Mr C: Well ok. But ultimately what you want is the start of the race to have enough variables that you couldn't necessarily predict the outcome. And reintroducing refuelling brings back another variable and that is important because you can then have split strategy you can have cars starting light, pitting early, pitting multiple times if they need to and then running a different race from your competitor who goes long and runs a completely different strategy and then they meet up at the very end. It can cause or it can lead to some confusion and you need decent commentators to explain it to the armchair fan but what you gain from that is unpredictability and that really is what Formula 1 is missing. That is one of the current challenges that this group of people have to address. There is an inherent lack of unpredictability in a motor race when all the cars are largely the same, all of the competitors are largely as talented as each other and there's not enough input or enough variety of inputs to mix it up on a regular basis.

Christine: It was the end of refuelling and then it was all about the tyres but now it's not so much about the tyres because when the tyres were softer and they exploded obviously that wasn't safe so they made them harder and now they don't have very much impact at all and so we're left with very processional races again so I can see why they have to do something. But actually talking about the tyres there is another thing they want to do, next year for 2016, because all the refuelling stuff is for 2017. But next year they propose free choice of the two dry tyre components out of four that each team can use during the race weekend. So I'm not 100% sure what that means but I assume it means that each team can pick any of, two of the four that they like. So we could see all four during a weekend.

Mr C: Well that right there is the potential for another variable, if you've got four tyres available to choose from instead of two then that's more potential for split strategies.

Christine: The tyre supplier Pirelli, they weren't so keen though. There's a quote from Andrew Benson on the BBC he said, 'Pirelli said at the weekend that it had reservations about the idea. But bosses have ignored this and voted it through.'

Mr C: [Laughter] Because...

Christine: What do Pirelli know?

Mr C: Well there is that. The thing with bringing in more tyres is it brings in a lot more expense. At the moment Pirelli have to produce enough tyres to supply every driver for the period of the weekend and if instead of having to bring two they have to bring a potential four for each event in advance that's going to increase their costs.



Christine: I guess it depends when the teams have to select by. But at the moment Pirelli choose 3 races... 3 or 4 races at a time so they know well in advance. Yeah that also doesn't work with the whole environmentally friendly thing as well.

Mr C: It doesn't. It's to hell with the environment, that is what I'm hearing from Formula 1. Stuff it. We'll just make as much rubber as we need. We will create as much waste as we need and as much noise as we want and we'll just burn fuel and to the hell with everybody. That is definitely the take away. But in return you will get a Formula 1 that is worth watching. And that is ultimately important, very important because at the moment it is questionable whether it really is worth tuning in for. There have been some professional races this year. The viewing figures are on a downward trend.

Christine: According to the F1 Broadcasting website the Spanish Grand Prix in the UK had its lowest ratings since 2008.

Mr C: That is terrible. And that is a problem and that obviously needs addressing. Refuelling is a peculiar way to address that problem but who am I to say that it is wrong? Especially as I desperately didn't want them to get rid of it in the first place. In the end I think I came to the conclusion that it was ultimately the right decision despite the fact it took away from our enjoyment of Formula 1.

Christine: Yeah. I think the safety of it really, you know, hits home when you see some of the incidents that have happened and how...

Mr C: Pit lane fires and things.

Christine: Yeah. It does make sense not to have it so I don't know how they think they are going to have rectified those situations...

Mr C: They're not.

Christine: ... that it's suddenly going to be safe.

Mr C: No, they want more fire! I'm pretty sure that what the organisers are looking for is a lot of explosions and a lot of danger, a lot of risk!

Christine: Yeah, the sparks, that is more fire, isn't it?

Mr C: Brilliant. Yeah, bring back sparks into Formula 1 and then once you have these dangerous sparks also bring back refuelling because that's going to work out really well for you.

[Sweeper]

Christine: At the end of the FIA press release there were a couple of other things that says 'A few other measures have also been discussed that require further investigation before they can be implemented.' Which makes it sound like everything else they have decided, they know exactly how that's all going to work.



Mr C: Right, ok. But they are still working on some more things. Ok, this is worrying.

Christine: 'A global reflection on race weekend format'.

Mr C: No idea what that could possibly mean.

Christine: That sounds like business speak.

Mr C: Ok.

Christine: Global reflection.

Mr C: They're going to sit back and think about it a lot.

Christine: I guess it means they might want to change up the format but also the races in their different countries have their own unique needs. Monaco on a Thursday...

Mr C: I wouldn't mind if they compressed the weekend. I wouldn't mind if it happened in two days.

Christine: I think Formula E is all in one day isn't it?

Mr C: That might be a little bit too compressed. I like the idea of a weekend Formula 1 but maybe if practice and qualifying were on the same day or qualifying moved to Sunday and practice, all the practice happening on Saturdays. That wouldn't be a terrible change because everybody is, you know we're all pushed for time, us perhaps more than most at the moment but the fans have to make less commitment to Formula 1 then you might find more casual viewers.

Christine: Also "measures to make starts only activated by the driver without any outside assistance."

Mr C: All good. We need more of that. It needs to be less handholding in Formula 1. The radio chatter has changed for the better in the last season, season and a half, with less guidance coming across the radio to the driver and the more the driver can be seen to be doing the better for everybody.

Christine: Yeah, and there have been rumblings from people in the paddock that the drivers, they won't say it, but they're a bit, mmm, not bored I guess but the driving of the current cars is less interesting than it used to be.

Mr C: That is entirely understandable. And the more interest you can provide them the better.

Christine: It also says, 'furthermore in light of the various scenarios presented by the independent consulting company mandated by the F1 Strategy Group...'. That sentence carries on, but does that mean they are outsourcing their strategy. They can't even be bothered to talk about how they are going to make Formula 1 work any more, let's get someone else to do it.



Mr C: I don't know if they can't be bothered or that together they cannot make a single useful decision. But outsourcing strategy? That's a new one.

Christine: They say 'A comprehensive proposal to ensure the sustainability of the sport has emerged'. Which if it includes the things we have discussed so far I'm not sure how that is sustainable.

Mr C: It is not sustainable for the people who live on this planet, no. But it is sustainable for the sport. There is a definite change in policy here, I believe. I think we are witnessing a brand new Formula 1 coming from the statement. Assuming that the proposals go through of course...

Christine: We might witness a brand new Formula 1 if the F1 commission approve it and then it has to go in front of the World Motorsport Council, who are meeting in July.

Mr C: Ok, so it's not a done deal yet. Maybe the plan is to be seen to be doing something and then they'll gauge the reaction of fans and the like.

Christine: Sometimes they take fan thoughts on board and sometimes they don't.

Mr C: Yes.

Christine: Double points being one of those.

Mr C: We'll see how it goes. Well... yes. We'll see how this pans out. I mean, I'm excited. Are you excited on this? I think I'm looking forward to Formula 1 in 2016 and 2017.

Christine: I think I need to know a bit more about how it's going to work, but it has definitely peaked our interest I mean we are doing a show when we said we weren't going to do any shows. So, you know, something is going in the right direction.

Mr C: It strikes me that the worst possible thing that anybody could do right now is nothing. It is clear that change needs to happen. It's not obvious what that change should be, there are lot of factors at play, a lot of things to balance. You still have the man in charge that doesn't really get where the world is going and could really be doing with moving on as soon as possible please. Thanks Bernie. All that kind of stuff, so you've got those problems to contend with, but I like the, I like this out of the blue thinking. I mean F1 seems to have a dropped the ball on this one, I don't believe anybody suggested that it would be coming. It seems to be a bit of a bombshell. F1 picked up the hand grenade and just threw it into the audience on Friday, and that's good. Let's have more of that. Let's you know, be forced into doing shows every Friday because these things must be discussed. There's something to actually talk about.

Christine: Something to podcast about.

M. Yes, yes. And that's what we've got. So we're not back, we are going away again. Thanks for listening – briefly! Do though give us your thoughts, we are very keen to hear feedback. Let us know on Twitter, on Facebook, on voicemail if you have it. I don't know if we could ever necessarily play out those voicemails, I'm not sure if we do another show where we could use them. But we will listen to them all the same. If you feel like just venting, by all means give us a call – 0121 28 87225. We will listen to everything you say.



Leave a message in the contact form, we will definitely read that too. Love to hear your thoughts, even if they are directly us and to no one else.

Christine: Assuming they don't drop another bombshell next Friday and we have to do this all over again, I guess we should meet back here in July and see whether it happens or not.

Mr C: Looking forward to it. See you then!

[Transcript by Robyn]