



History of F1 – 1900s to 1940s

Welcome to Sidepodcast's History of F1. This series will take us back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Formula 1 was all about honour, it was a gentleman's sport, and it mostly involved getting to the end of the road without falling in a pothole. We'll travel through time (not literally, of course), to see how Formula 1 became the corporate and money-orientated sport that it is today.

The F1 championship, and all the official records, date back to the 1950s, but the essence of F1 can be traced all the way back to the early 1900s. Back then it involved heavy cars. Drivers would be accompanied by a mechanic because reliability was such a problem, and the track was just a simple road in France. I say simple, but actually, the races were long and tough. The first proper motor race was called the Paris-Bordeaux because... well, it went from Paris to Bordeaux. It was 1200km, and the winner achieved it in 48 hours. Average speeds were a rocketing 29.9 miles per hour. 1901 saw the first race with Grand Prix in the title, the French Grand Prix, taking place at Le Mans. This time they covered the 700 miles at a much speedier 63 miles per hour.

Our first important milestone occurs in 1908. Previously the cars had wheels and spokes that were permanently attached and often breaking. Now, detachable tyre rims were introduced so that mechanics could play around with them and keep their cars in the race. Shallow bunkers were built at the side of the roads, at pre-arranged places, so the drivers could pull over and allow the tyres to be changed. These were called pits. Ah... the first pit stops were now taking place. The ability to change tyres didn't make the cars any easier on the rubber though, as the winning Mercedes of the 1908 French Grand Prix went through ten sets of tyres. Perhaps not impressive by today's standards, but he would have been changing tyres because he *had* to.

During World War 1, racing was stopped in Europe, so a lot of the drivers went to the States to participate in the Indy 500. After the war, Grand Prix began to take place in both Le Mans and Lyons, with France being the main hosts for motorsport. The racing bug spread though, with Monaco and Belgium both hosting their own GPs. Notable winners were Ferrari, Mercedes, and Bugatti, all ahead of their compatriots in engineering terms.

Just before the Second World War, interest in Grand Prix racing fell to an all time low, due to the Depression and the impending war. However, the instigator of the fighting, Adolf Hitler, actually funded quite a lot of the technological development in racing, with both Audi and Mercedes benefiting from government support. Germans began to take the power of racing away from the French and the Italians, and introduced new techniques, including aerodynamic research, and special mixtures of fuel.

A legendary driver, Tazio Nuvolari from Italy, began to shine as he won everything he entered. He won the first race to feature a qualifying format – the Monaco Grand Prix in 1933 - but his greatest achievement was at the German Nurburgring in 1935, where he beat nine up to date cars with a four year old Alfa Romeo. The first Formula 1 racing superstar was born.

That's all for our first episode of Sidepodcast's History of F1. In the next show, we'll have a look at the 1950s, when the official F1 championships began to take place.