

History of F1 – 1950s

Welcome to Sidepodcast's History of F1. On the last episode, we looked at the years leading up to the beginning of the Formula 1 World Championship, including French road races, and participation in the Indy 500. Now we can move on to the 1950s, when the official Championship began and records started to be kept, and broken.

After the Second World War, the FIA initiated the World Championship. The new sport was called Formula A, but would change to Formula 1 pretty soon afterwards. The minimum race distance was changed, having been 500km originally, but reduced to 300km. This meant that more tracks were eligible to host GP events and in 1950, the first championship race took place at Silverstone. The first race of the new F1 World Championship was the British Grand Prix and was won by Giuseppe Farina. He went on to add Belgian, Italian and Swiss races to his list and beat Juan Manuel Fangio to take the World Championship title.

The driving style of most championship contenders was to be hunched up behind the wheel, ultimately uncomfortable, and struggling to keep control of the car. The new Champion Farina brought about a new style, with outstretched arms, so that he looked very cool and relaxed as he took his crown. This driving position took off and soon everyone had relaxed their driving style to match Farina's.

Although Juan Manuel Fangio lost out on his first attempt at the World Championship, he didn't give up and soon became the most successful driver of the 50s. He won five titles with five different manufacturers, which is a mighty achievement. One of his moves came after a horrific accident at Le Mans. The 24 hour race, that continues to be popular to this day, took place in 1955 as it always did. But it ended with an awful crash that left upwards of 80 people dead. Fangio was lucky to escape, and his team thought it best to call it a day. That team was Mercedes, and they obviously changed their minds at some point through the years.

One of Fangio's biggest rival was Sir Stirling Moss, a driver who always seemed to finish behind his nemesis. In fact, Moss is renowned as the best driver who never managed to win a championship. He is also loved for being a British driver in a British car, especially when he won the British Grand Prix in 1955. Accidents plagued his career though, and the early 60s saw him break both his legs. Moss retired after a few more years of struggling, and no championship title.

Moss was held off the title in 1958 by another British driver Mike Hawthorn. Driving a Ferrari, Hawthorn managed to beat his fellow countryman who was struggling in his Vanwall. The politics within Formula 1 and within Ferrari itself made Hawthorn very uncomfortable though, and he was upset enough to retire at the end of the year. Tragically, only a few months after his departure from the racetrack, Hawthorn was killed in a road accident.

Britain really was seen as the home of motorsport, despite the early origins in mid Europe. More and more British drivers entered the races, with more and more British engineers helping them along the way. By the 1960s, British Racing Green, was soon "adopted" as the Official colour of Formula 1, due to the number of teams racing under the dark green colour.

That's all for the second episode of Sidepodcast's History of F1. On the next show we'll zip forward to the 1960s, where drivers competitiveness really began to take hold.