



History of F1 – 1970s

Welcome to Sidepodcast's History of F1. So far we've travelled from the 1900s through to the end of the 1960s, and seen the Formula 1 World Championship begin to take shape, and some of the legendary drivers stamp their mark on it. Now we take a look at the 70s where safety concerns and car development were top of everyone's priority list.

In 1970, the revolution of aerodynamic engineering began to take place. It started with the creation of wings, which meant more downforce for the cars. Essentially this meant they had more grip and could coast round corners much faster than previously. In the early days, the wings were not fastened particularly securely, and it wasn't unheard of for them to fall off at unexpected moments. After a few too many accidents, wings were banned for a short time.

The early 70s saw the rise of a new star for Lotus, Emerson Fittipaldi, a young man from Brazil who won his first race in 1972. The rivalry between he and Jackie Stewart meant that the next four championships were alternated between the two of them, until Stewart retired in 1973. Stewart almost made it to the 100 Grand Prix mark, but gave up one short of the feat. Why would you do that?

In 1975, Ferrari began to make their comeback – despite the fact that the season was littered with protests about driver safety. In the Spanish race, a car came off the track and actually hit the crowd, killing four people, and causing some drivers to refuse to continue to participate.

Ferrari driver Niki Lauda won five races and had nine pole starts to take his first championship. He went on to win two more. The next year, 1976, Lauda was involved in a horrific accident at the Nurburgring, which saw his car burst into flames. Lauda suffered facial burns and inhaled toxic gases, so much that he was not expected to survive. However, Lauda did manage to pull through and was miraculously driving again only six weeks later. The Nurburgring track was taken off the calendar, but returned in a dramatically altered and much shorter state.

Niki Lauda's main competition came in the form of James Hunt, a British driver for McLaren. He won the 1976 championship, but only just. Lauda was leading the championship by 3 points in the last race, but had to retire after torrential rain. That handed the championship to Hunt, who finished the race in the terrible weather, without knowing where he had placed or if he had clinched the title.

Lauda reclaimed the crown the next year in 1977, despite quitting the team with two races to go. The team calculated the position he needed to finish in to claim the title – 4th – at the US Grand Prix, and Lauda delivered and then joined Bernie Ecclestone's Parmalat Brabham team.

In development terms, the cars began to sport air boxes above their heads to increase flows around the engines. Engineers changed their titles to designers, and began to increase their knowledge of aerodynamics. The cars began to take shape, using a streamlined body and undertray developments to the downforce and speed things up. These developments were called "ground effects" and impressed a lot of the drivers.

They were not without their problems though, because the new developments meant the setup of the car was incredibly important. One tiny degree the wrong way would mean the cars were unstable and ultimately not race worthy. F1 became a highly sophisticated balancing act. Eventually, the effects were banned in 1983, to make F1 more about driver skill and less about car setup.

That's all for this episode of Sidepodcast's History of F1, join me for the next instalment where we look at the 1980s.