

F1 People – Juan Manuel Fangio

This is the last in the second series of F1 People, seven short shows brought to you by Sidepodcast. We've looked at a few important names from the world of Formula 1 this series, and now it's time for our final VIP. Today we'll look at Juan Manuel Fangio.

Juan Manuel Fangio was born on the 24th June 1911 in Argentina, although his parents were Italian. He completed his military service and opened a garage to begin racing in Argentina during his 20s, and he became National Champion in 1940 and 41. The government then funded his career move to Europe, where he joined Formula 1. Fangio entered the sport aged 37, and although this was a time pre-world championships, where the emphasis was less on youth and fitness, Fangio was still sometimes the oldest driver taking part. His first race was in 1948, at the French Grand Prix, in which he retired, and that was his only race that year. The next year he won five out of seven races, and thus went into 1950 as a clear favourite to win the brand new Formula One World Driver's Championship.

The 1950 championship saw a clear split in competitiveness, with the pre-war Alfetta car showing well, and the post-war Alfa Romeo struggling. Fangio was in the latter, but still managed to win three championship races and four non-championship battles. His team mate Farina, however, was even better in the car and took the title that year. In 1951, Fangio came back even more determined, and he finished consistently enough to get his first World Championship Title, only the second one ever handed out.

1952 was a terrible year for Fangio. He began the year without a drive, as a change to the rules in F1 meant Alfa Romeo couldn't compete with the cars they had and withdrew from the competition. Fangio found himself a seat in June, for a couple of non championship races, and then signed up to drive for Maserati immediately after the second one. He missed his connecting flight, however, and drove through the night from Paris to Monza, arriving just half an hour before the start. As you would imagine, he was incredibly tired, and started from the back of the grid. On the second lap, he lost control of the Maserati, crashed into a bank at the side of the track and was thrown from the car. He was taken to hospital with a broken neck, and his survival was by no means a sure thing.

However, survive he did and he spent the rest of the year at home in Argentina, recovering from his injuries. Amazingly, he was back racing the following year, 1953, where he joined Maserati again for the championship battle. His main rival was Alberto Ascari in the Ferrari, but Fangio kept finishing second with only one lucky win, and he ended the year second overall.

When Mercedes entered Formula 1 in the middle of 1954, Fangio immediately defected from Maserati to join the more successful team. He finished eight out of twelve races that year, and took the championship, followed again the next year by another successful championship campaign. However, 1955 was also the year of the terrible Le Mans accident where 80 spectators were killed, and Mercedes pulled out of racing at the end of the year.

In 1956, Fangio replaced his former rival Alberto Ascari at Ferrari, and with them he managed to secure his fourth title. He remained at Ferrari for only one year, however, and in 1957, Fangio returned to Maserati, although they were still using the same car that he had been in before leaving them for Mercedes. 1957 saw Fangio's final win that secured his final championship, but there is nothing like going out in style. At the infamous Nurburgring, a botched pit stop left him 50 seconds behind two leading cars, but Fangio wasn't put off. He put in fastest lap after fastest lap, broke plenty of lap records along the way, and overtook for the lead on the second to last lap. In the end, he secured the win by over three seconds.



Fangio retired in 1958, having won 24 Championship races from 51 starts, the best winning percentage in F1. In the year of his retirement, he was kidnapped by Cuban rebels, but they released him and he remained good friends with his captors afterwards.

During his retirement, Fangio demonstrated Mercedes-Benz cars in order to sell them, and was then appointed President of Mercedes-Benz Argentina in 1974. He died in 1995, aged 84. Fangio is often called the greatest driver of all time, although it is difficult to compare drivers from the different eras. Fangio's five world championships record stood until Schumacher broke it in 2003, but even Schumi acknowledged respect for Fangio's achievements. In Argentina, he is known as one of the greatest sportsmen ever to come out of the country, and there are six statues of him at various points around the world.

That's all for this episode of F1 People, and all for this series, in fact. I hope you've enjoyed listening to this second set of shows, and if you haven't already, make sure to check out the first series for another seven famous names. As ever, your feedback is welcomed, either in the comments, via voicemail – the number is 0121 28 87225 – or email me Christine at sidepodcast.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

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