

Races to Remember – Belgium 1998

Welcome to the second episode of Races to Remember, a miniseries from Sidepodcast that chronicles those races that shouldn't be forgotten. Yesterday we were looking at the recent history of 2003, but today we travel just a few years back to the Belgian Grand Prix in 1998.

The Belgian Grand Prix in '98 was held in August and the weekend was unseasonably wet, although Spa is notable for its downpours. We barely got through qualifying safely, with both Jacques Villeneuve and Mika Salo crashing their Williams and Arrows respectively. Meanwhile, having better luck, Hakkinen and Coulthard locked out the front of the grid with McLarens, over a second faster than best of the rest Damon Hill.

The rain didn't let up at all on Sunday, but the race got underway as scheduled, no safety car intervening. However, things didn't go to plan. Hakkinen got away cleanly at the front, with Villeneuve, Schumacher and Fisichella all getting through safely as well. Coulthard, though, emerged from the spray sideways, and hit the wall. Debris and wheels flew everywhere, and that plus the lack of visibility, meant that pretty much everyone else trying to get off the grid became caught up in the accident. In just a few seconds, Irvine, Wurz, Barrichello, Herbert, Panis, Trulli, Salo, Diniz, Takagi, Rosset and Nakano were all tangled up with each other. Both Jordan drivers got through safely, whilst Verstappen made it back to the pits, albeit heavily damaged.

Clearly, the race couldn't continue, and a red flag was shown to allow the debris to be cleared. The teams hurriedly worked to get themselves back in order. Barrichello couldn't continue due to minor injuries, and three teams had both their cars written off. With just one spare T car for each, that meant three drivers sitting out the race.

It took almost an hour for the carnage to be sorted, and the race was restarted. Damon Hill took the lead almost instantly, whilst Hakkinen had to take evasive action to avoid Michael Schumacher around the first corner and spun into a Sauber. Moments later, Coulthard and Wurz made contact, with only DC able to continue, at the back of the field. At the front, Schumacher overtook Hill for the lead, and scampered into the distance. As the afternoon drew on, he came up to lap Coulthard.

Schumi was frustrated when David didn't move over straight away, and when the McLaren did slow to let the Ferrari past, it was on the racing line. Michael crashed straight into the back of DC. Both cars returned to the pitlane but neither could return to the action. Schumacher was so incensed, he marched straight into the McLaren garage to shout at DC, so much so that he had to be held back by racing officials. Once Michael was done with McLaren, he went for a word with the stewards. They found it to be a racing incident, and let the accident pass.

Afterwards, and I'm talking five years later, Coulthard admitted that he probably hadn't acted correctly, and if he could do it all again, he would never brake so heavily on the racing line in such conditions. It was a pretty dangerous racing incident.

However, let's rewind five years again, and the race was continuing. Coulthard did eventually rejoin the racing, although he had lost an awful lot of time. Damon Hill was in the lead once more, and after just one more incident and safety car period, there were only six cars left. Finally, the chequered flag was waved, and Damon Hill took the top step of the podium to team mate Ralf Schumacher, making it a Jordan 1-2. Jean Alesi was in third. It was later revealed that Ralf had been constrained by team orders and felt that he could have easily won the race himself.



That's it for this episode of Races to Remember. Don't forget to leave your feedback on sidepodcast.com, about this Grand Prix in particular, or if you have a suggestion for a future episode. I will return to tomorrow with another race to remember.

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