

Feature

Senna: A Snapshot - May 1st, 1994

by **Alex "Zander" Keep**

This weekend will see the tenth Imola Grand Prix since the deaths of Ayrton Senna and Roland Ratzenberger at the track on the 30th April and 1st May 1994. Below is a snapshot of that weekend, the season to date and the state Formula 1 before and after.

Going into Imola things were looking surprisingly bleak for the Williams team. Two consecutive pole positions had been turned into non finishes for new signing Ayrton Senna. At Interlagos in the first race of the season Senna had been outsmarted by the Benetton Ford of Michael Schumacher who had capitalized on the new refueling regulations. Senna had had to stop twice for fuel while the leaner Ford V8 in the back of Schumacher's car had meant that the young German had only had to stop once resulting in Senna spinning in his efforts to catch Schumacher and the German going on to celebrate the win, his third. The race was perhaps best remembered for a monumental pile up that occurred when Eddie Irvine appeared to lose control of his Jordan while attempting to pass rookie Jos Verstappen's Benetton and the resultant collision took out Martin Brundle's McLaren Peugeot. Luckily no one was hurt but Irvine was in trouble for the second time in only his third Formula 1 race!

The new allowance to refuel cars during the race had been pushed through by Ferrari before the season began (whose 412 T1's still had thirsty V12 engines) and, although Gerhard Berger and Jean Alesi had looked unlikely for a first title for the Scuderia in 15 years, some good performances and a couple of race wins had looked good. Unfortunately Alesi had broken his neck in preseason testing and test driver Nicola Larini was filling the Frenchman's shoes. Many were not happy with this regulation and the mix of the specially concocted race fuel used for Formula 1 cars combined with cars doing up to 150 mph as they rocketed past on their way out of the pits (there were no pitlane speed limits) seemed sure to result in dire consequences.

At Aida in the inaugural Pacific Grand Prix things went little better for Williams. Senna was bundled off at the first corner by Larini's Ferrari and Hakkinen's McLaren and Schumacher again went on to win from Damon Hill's Williams.

Heading back to Brazil before the circus returned to Europe Senna reflected that, although he was 20 points down, he was going into the faster European season. Imola was one of the fastest circuits on the calendar and the FW16 had potential even though it was far more tricky to drive than the FW15B which had taken Alain Prost to his fourth title the year before prior to announcing his retirement. Williams designer Adrian Newey had made the FW16 tighter in the cockpit and it was clear to see how Senna was hunching his shoulders as he drove due to the low cockpit sides that were normal back then. Senna also found that his knees were knocking against the steering column and a thinner tube had been welded in to allow him more comfort at the next race.

Going into first practice Senna was immediately quick. The power of his Renault V10 allowed him to power through Villeneuve and Tamburello far easier than Schumacher's Benetton and, although the Ferraris were close, the extra time they took to refuel was sure to play to his advantage. Senna was concerned by the amount of speed Schumacher was getting out of the lower corners and expressed his feeling to Patrick Head and FIA technical director Charlie Whiting that he felt the Benettons may be using some sort of traction control system (which had been banned the previous year). Later that season traction control software was found hidden in both the Benetton and McLaren engine software but the FIA could not prove that they had used it so both teams escaped punishment.

During second free practice on Friday Rubens Barrichello's Jordan-Hart seemed to run wide on the right hand side of the track. The car was immediately launched into a series of rolls and came to rest the right way up 150 meters further down the track. Barrichello was taken to hospital and Senna checked that he was OK and then went to visit him immediately the session had finished, staying with his compatriot until the Brazilian recovered consciousness.

On Saturday rookie Roland Ratzenberger was not to be so lucky. Ratzenberger had been a late stand in for the Nick Worth's Simtek team which, with Pacific were one of two new teams on the grid that year. The Simtek was a neat little chassis and David Brabham was leading the team well, easily guiding his car through the nightmare of pre-qualification and threatening to emulate Eddie Jordan who had stepped his Formula 3000 outfit up to F1 three years earlier with great success. Simtek was just about to sign over DEATH cigarettes as a title sponsor that weekend and the contracts were due to be signed on Sunday. Ratzenberger was an Austrian who had shown himself to have plenty of talent in lower Formulae. He had raced successfully with Eddie Irvine at Le Mans for Mazda and seemed to compliment Brabham, Austrian sponsors helping to pay for his drive. During first qualifying Ratzenberger had run over some curbing hard and radioed it to his pit. He said that the car did not feel any different and elected to continue his qualifying laps rather than come in to get it inspected (in those days you had unlimited laps to get a qualifying time over two sessions on both Fridays and Saturdays). Ratzenberger accelerated away from the Variante Bassa and went flat out over the start/finish straight and through Tamburello. At some point during this time his front wing, damaged on the lap before, worked itself loose and then got trapped under the front wheels. Although he did not know it Ratzenberger was completely out of control. He accelerated towards the fast right hander at Villeneuve and, instead of braking as he should do, piled into the wall by the corner at around 180mph. The trauma from the impact was immense and death was instant.

Senna heard that there had been an accident and commandeered a track car arriving at the scene. Shocked by what he saw he confided in his friend chief FIA Medical Delegate Professor Sid Watkins that he was not sure he wished to continue. Professor Watkins suggested that he take some time off and pull out of the race on Sunday, going fishing with him instead. Senna said he understood what Professor Watkins was saying but he had to race. It was as simple as that.

Sunday dawned clear and Senna made a point of going to see his friend Gerhard Berger at the Ferrari motorhome. Although still shocked by the events of the previous day, Senna seemed more like himself and chatted at length with his former team mate. Senna seemed more conciliatory than he had seemed before. He made a point of saying hello to Alain Prost with whom he had had a bitter feud while Prost had been racing and seemed genuinely supportive of his new team mate Damon Hill.

Senna led the grid away from pole position with Schumacher's Benetton in second, Berger's Ferrari in third and Hill's Williams in fourth. As the lights turned from red to green to signal the start of the race (in those days the red lights were lit and then within ten seconds they would turn to green and the race would start) Senna and Schumacher both made good starts. Further back things were not so lucky. Pedro Lamy's Lotus Mugen had stalled on the grid and Verstappen had not seen him accelerating straight into the back of the stationary car at well over a hundred miles an hour. Debris had flown everywhere including into the spectator stands and the safety car was quickly dispatched as the grid finished their first lap passing over the debris of the shattered cars. The safety car (a Fiat Croma) led the field for a further five laps and several of the drivers radioed that it was going too slowly, the cars weaving violently from side to side in order to get some heat into their tires. Eventually it peeled away into the pits and the race could begin again. Senna immediately put his foot down, behind him Hill was trying to dispatch Berger's Ferrari but had Larini's sister car following him closely. Schumacher was still close to Senna and its driveability out of slower corners meant that Senna could not use the superior power of his Renault V10 to pull away. Senna's Williams also seemed to be bottoming out as it went through Tamburello, sparks from its undertray flying up behind it. Two laps later as Senna went through Tamburello the car seemed to run wide and cross onto the grass and gravel, hitting the wall quite quickly but at a shallow angle. The safety car was again dispatched but as the medical teams arrived they insisted that the race be stopped. A piece of the right hand suspension arm had perforated Senna's helmet through the visor and Senna was dying. A helicopter quickly

ferried him away to the nearby hospital in Bologna where Senna was officially pronounced dead that evening.

Back at the track it was known that Senna had been injured but no one knew exactly how badly. Wild rumors and counter rumors were going around but thankfully none of the drivers had seen the particularly gruesome shots that the Italian TV director had been showing (British television audiences were also spared the sight of Senna's bloody helmet being removed due to the BBC transferring to their own pitlane cameras). The race restarted an hour or so later and without Senna to battle Schumacher won it easily though more injuries occurred as some mechanics were later hurt after they were run over by their own car. Hill's Williams expired as did Berger's Ferrari and Nicola Larini got his best ever grand prix finish for second place while Mika Hakkinen was third for McLaren. The race day was over but the consequences of that weekend are still with us ten years on.