

Senna versus Schumacher



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Keep your enemies closer

His heart was saddened by the necessity of what he was about to do, but at the same time determined to make a difference. He and his fellow Formula One drivers had just held their drivers' meeting and were adamant to make their voices heard. Ayrton Senna opened the door of La Rascasse restaurant, surprised by the sheer number of cameras and microphones he was about to address. A few moments of silence passed before he spoke. "At the drivers' meeting today, we agreed to form the Grand Prix Drivers' Association", he said. "It was agreed that the representatives of the GPDA will be myself, Michael Schumacher, Gerhard Berger, and Christian Fittipaldi. Consultants to the GPDA will be Niki Lauda and Alain Prost. The GPDA requests representation and recognition within the FIA to improve the safety of Formula One, after the accidents of Rubens Barrichello, Roland Ratzenberger, and myself at Imola, and Karl Wendlinger, yesterday. At our meeting, we discussed to take immediate action to look at the next three grand prix circuits, together with the FIA, for possible improvements."

As soon as Senna had made his statement, the dozens of members of the press fired their questions towards him. But his thoughts were already elsewhere — he was a worried man. One by one, he looked his fellow GPDA directors in the eyes. And they looked back at him. "We're doing the right thing, Ayrton", said Michael Schumacher. Senna nodded in agreement, as did the others, while the quartet stepped back into the restaurant, leaving the mob of journalists outside. "We are, Michael", Senna replied. "We needed to act after all that has happened. We cannot have any more accidents. And I trust that the FIA will do the same. Over the next few weeks and months we will have to work together to prevent this from happening again."

Senna's thoughts wandered back to the events of the previous grand prix, a fortnight ago. He was still coming to terms with what happened, and with how he would respond to it. For the tragedies that had unfolded were something that Senna hadn't experienced before. As one of the senior drivers in the field, the only remaining World Drivers' Champion amongst only a handful of race winners, he felt obliged to take action.

It all began prior to the 1994 season. In order to combat the spiralling costs of running a Formula One team, and to counteract criticism that over-reliance on technology was reducing the drivers to a secondary role, sweeping rule changes had been introduced for 1994. Most notable among the changes was a ban on electronic 'driver aids' such as active suspension, anti-lock brakes, traction control and launch control. Senna had been one of the critics of these driver

aids, using his 1992 Christmas card to FIA President Max Mosley to lobby for a ban on them. But he had also warned the authorities that banning them, without simultaneously curtailing the speed of the cars, would lead to “a season with a lot of accidents”. He had voiced his concerns to, of all people, his former rival Alain Prost, calling him multiple times over the winter period, even going as far as asking Prost to be president of the drivers’ association.

Senna was proven right. In testing at Silverstone, J.J. Lehto, in his first test for the Benetton-Ford team, crashed to such an extent that he had to be removed from the car, unconscious, and taken to a hospital where he was shown to have a fractured vertebra in his neck. After the opening grand prix in Brazil, while testing at the Mugello circuit, Jean Alesi hurt his back after crashing his Ferrari.

At the third race, all hell broke loose. From the start of the weekend, there was an unpleasant atmosphere in the San Marino Grand Prix paddock. Despite all electronic driver aids having been banned prior to the season, there were suspicions that the Benetton team were still using them. The FIA were obviously having trouble policing. It was a burden on Senna’s shoulders and it only added to his difficulties of settling into his new team and adapting to the Williams-Renault car. Never mind the uneasy start to the season he had experienced.

In Friday qualifying, Jordan-Hart’s Rubens Barrichello violently crashed at the Variante Bassa chicane, it was launched into the air across the kerbs, clearing the tyre barrier at the opposite side, brutally striking the debris fences. The car rolled, smashing Barrichello’s head onto the steering wheel and cockpit sides, and knocking him unconscious. When the car finally landed, upside down, Barrichello was about to swallow his tongue. Quick intervention by the medical team, under the experienced guidance of Professor Sid Watkins, saved the Brazilian’s life.

When Senna heard about the crash and that it concerned his protégé, he hurried to the medical centre. But as soon as Barrichello regained consciousness, Senna left him to the care of his good friend, professor Watkins. That evening, at his hotel, Senna dined with several friends and colleagues, among which his brother, Leonardo, and his manager, Julian Jakobi, speaking with them for a long time about the meaning and consequence of chance, about good luck and bad luck. And he mentioned launching safety plans prior to the next Grand Prix. Little did Senna know that the worst was yet to come.

Some twenty minutes into Saturday’s second qualifying session, Roland Ratzenberger damaged the front wing of his Simtek-Ford, a lap later lost the wing altogether on the straight towards Curva Villeneuve, and smashed virtually head-on into the concrete wall at Villeneuve

corner almost at full speed. A rescue team hurried to the scene of the accident, but the Austrian was beyond help.

Senna had watched the crash on the closed-circuit TV screens in his Williams pit box, while getting ready for his own qualifying laps. With his gaze fixed onto the screen, he removed his helmet, and after several moments turned away his head, shaking it in disbelief. Senna summoned one of the track officials to drive him to Villeneuve corner, to observe the crash site himself, but of course there was nothing he could do.

Once back in the paddock, Senna broke down in tears on Sid Watkins' shoulder. Watkins was surprised by Senna's state, but soon realised what it was. *He has never faced the reality of his profession before so starkly*, Watkins thought. *No one has been killed during his time in Formula 1. This is the first time it has come so close.*

On the morning of the San Marino Grand Prix, Senna briefly spoke to former driver and Ferrari consultant Niki Lauda about safety issues. During the drivers' briefing, there was a minute's silence for Ratzenberger, and in the back of the room, Senna quietly wept. After the briefing, he discussed safety with fellow drivers Schumacher, Berger and Alboreto. The foursome agreed to meet with all the drivers on the Friday prior to the next race, in Monte Carlo. Lauda would also be invited to contribute. Senna and Schumacher left the drivers' meeting together, further discussing matters amongst themselves.

"How do you feel, Michael?" Senna asked.

"Difficult to say, really. I try to focus on the job at hand. And that is to get into my car in a few hours, and try to win the race."

"Of course, that is what we do. But don't you feel any restraint, any doubts?"

"Well, you know what Gerhard said, yesterday. In times like these, the question any driver asks himself, is whether he wants to race again. And that's what keeps me going: I want to race."

"So do I... but this doesn't take away the responsibilities we have. You and I, together with Gerhard, Damon, and Alboreto."

"Why us five? Why me?"

"I feel obliged because I am the only world champion left. Piquet retired, Mansell, and now Prost, too. With Gerhard and Alboreto, I am the most experienced driver. And, with them, and Damon, you and I are the only ones having won grands prix. It's our job. It's our responsibility."

Senna versus Schumacher

A few moments in quiet followed. Senna had spoken the truth. But he had also come to realise that Schumacher would be his main rival for 1994, and possibly beyond. And with his suspicions about the Benetton's legality in mind, he felt all the more that he needed to keep a close eye on Schumacher.

"I need you with me", Senna admitted.

Schumacher looked him in the eyes. "I understand", he said. "Let's talk in Monaco."

On the starting grid for the San Marino Grand Prix, Senna was visibly worried. He sat in his car, strapped into his safety harness, but without his helmet on, for some fifteen minutes. Something he never did. Every now and then he closed his eyes as if he was in prayer. Senna was clearly a man in turmoil, not sure whether he was doing the right thing. It was as if he — very much the senior driver in the field — felt responsible for the safety of his younger colleagues. And the mêlée wasn't over, yet.

At two o'clock local time, the field of 24 cars left the grid for the warm-up lap. Then the cars lined up for the start, and when the starting lights went from red to green, the race was on. But Lehto, in fifth place, stalled his engine, and while sixteen cars managed to avoid the stranded Benetton, Pedro Lamy, starting from 22nd for Lotus, had his view blocked by the cars in front of him. The Portuguese ran into the left rear side of the Benetton, tearing off his right front wheel, along with countless other parts of both cars, launching it over the safety fence, into the crowd. Both drivers were able to get out of their cars unaided, and both walked back to the pits, but in the grandstands nine spectators suffered minor injuries.

The Safety Car was sent out to enable the marshals to clean up the wreckage on the start-finish straight. Four laps later, at the start of lap six, the Safety Car left the track again, restarting the race. Senna led the pack, with Schumacher just over half a second behind, the heavy cars creating spectacular sparks when the undersides touched the tarmac.

The rivalling duo completed the lap in unchanged order, and Senna prepared to take Tamburello corner like he had done hundreds of times before, but this time, something went wrong. The bottom of the Williams-Renault hit the tarmac again, forcing the car into slight oversteer. Senna corrected the slide by steering right, in the left-hand Tamburello curve, while moving at 310 km/h. The tyres instantly regained grip, negating Senna's blindingly quick reaction to the slide: it had been too much. The Williams slid off the ideal line, onto the dirty side of the track, and onto the grass, crashing into the concrete wall at 218 km/h.

Senna versus Schumacher

Although the crash seemed relatively straightforward, it was obvious that Senna had been injured in some way. As soon as race control understood the severity of the accident, the race was red-flagged to allow medical personnel to do their jobs. There was no movement in the cockpit. Upon impact, the right front suspension had broken, releasing the wheel from the chassis. It ricocheted from Senna's helmet and knocked the driver unconscious. Senna's head leaned motionless onto the right side of the cockpit for over a minute. Watkins and his medical team extricated Senna from the wrecked Williams-Renault, and laid him on the ground. Quickly afterwards, the medical helicopter landed on the now-empty track. And right before Senna was rushed to Maggiore hospital, the triple World Champion opened his eyes.

Over half an hour after Senna's crash, the grand prix was restarted. Schumacher battled with Berger for the lead until the latter had to retire with mechanical problems. Ten laps from the finish, more mayhem: as veteran Michele Alboreto made a stop at his Minardi team's pits, the Italian mechanics hadn't fastened the car's right rear wheel. And when Alboreto accelerated away from the pit box, the wheel came loose, and struck two Ferrari and two Lotus mechanics. They were left needing medical attention.

An undeterred Schumacher took his third victory from as many races. Nicola Larini scored a second place for Ferrari, while the third and last podium spot went to Mika Häkkinen and McLaren. Neither of them sprayed champagne after the national anthems were played, out of respect for their colleague Roland Ratzenberger. Schumacher increased his lead in the Drivers' Championship to a massive 23 points over both Hill and Barrichello.

Late that the afternoon, at Maggiore hospital, Dr. Maria Teresa Fiandri announced that Ayrton Senna had suffered from a Grade III concussion. "Mr. Senna was unconscious for several minutes after the crash, but regained consciousness just as the medical helicopter left the circuit." Immediately after arriving at the hospital, Dr. Fiandri and her colleagues subjected Senna to an MRI scan, which assured the doctors that the driver had not suffered brain damage. "We plan to keep Senna under observation for another 48 hours," Dr. Fiandri added, "And, if no complications occur, we should be able to discharge him after that."

On Wednesday morning prior to the Monaco Grand Prix, Senna gave his first interview after the accident. "I am very happy to be here again," said the Brazilian to a gathering of newspaper journalists, magazine writers, and television reporters, "especially after my crash in Imola. It was a heavy impact, which knocked me unconscious, but professor Watkins and his team worked hard to help me. On the Wednesday after the race, I was released from the hospital by doctor

Fiandri — whom I would like to thank for everything that she and her team have done — and I travelled by car back to my apartment, here in Monaco. There I recovered and worked on my physical condition, trained my neck muscles for the next race and so on.”

Senna also talked about his discussions with old rival Alain Prost over the San Marino Grand Prix weekend: “Since Alain retired, we often spoke on the telephone, usually about safety. We had a conversation on the Friday, and I saw him again on the Sunday morning. I would like Alain to keep involved with safety in Formula One. We were going to speak again the following week, but since I was in hospital, that has not happened yet. But we will meet again here in Monte Carlo.”

Lastly, Senna extended his condolences to the Ratzenberger family: “It was a very sad weekend in Imola, because we lost Roland. My thoughts are with those he left behind, and I pray to God that we, in Formula One, learn from this, and that Roland will not have died for nothing.”

The next day, late in the first practice session for the Monaco Grand Prix, Karl Wendlinger had a major accident at the Nouvelle Chicane. He hit with the wall's impact-absorbing plastic façade at close to 280 km/h. The enormous forces caused the Austrian to lose consciousness. Marshals and doctors were quickly at the scene, and removed Wendlinger from his stricken car. Professor Watkins team first examined the driver, and sent him off to Princesse Grace hospital in Monaco, from where he was soon moved to Saint Roch Hospital in Nice. There he underwent examinations by medical specialists, who concluded he had not broken any bones, nor sustained back injuries, but did diagnose him with cerebral contusion. His condition was stable, but critical.

On Sunday morning, in memory of Roland Ratzenberger, all the Formula One drivers, along with many team members, FIA officials and members of the press, gathered on the starting grid, next to pole position, which was left empty for the perished Simtek driver. A minute's silence was observed, while Gerhard Berger, with several Austrians working for various teams, held their country's flag, carrying a sign saying 'Auf wiedersehen Roland'.

As the lights went from red to green, Senna had a clean getaway in the Williams. On his tail was Michael Schumacher in his Benetton. Racing towards the narrow Ste. Devote right-hander, the F1 field squeezed itself along the barriers. Hill made a stunning start, passing Berger into fourth spot, but then hit Häkkinen's car from behind. This sent the McLaren driver spinning onto the run-off, and into retirement. Hill did make the first corner, but had hit the armco, breaking his left front suspension. The Englishman retired only a few hundred meters on.

Senna versus Schumacher

The mêlée left Senna and Schumacher a gap of some four seconds to Berger and Alesi. Senna, though, quickly picked up his pace to increase his lead over Schumacher to some 15 seconds in the first ten laps. The German himself went over twelve seconds faster than Berger. By the time the first pit stops came in sight, Senna led Schumacher by 28 seconds. The Brazilian pitted on lap 23, allowing his Benetton adversary in the lead, but only briefly, because a lap later Schumacher pitted, too. After their stops, Senna again drove a stunningly fast stint, with the lap record shattered again and again, to the point where the three-time World Champion lapped the Monte Carlo streets almost three seconds quicker than his old rival Alain Prost had done the previous year.

On lap 40 Senna held a massive lead of some 50 seconds on Schumacher, while the latter led third-placed Berger by 28 seconds. But then Blundell experienced engine trouble in his Tyrrell-Yamaha, the Englishman's car spitting oil onto the track at Ste. Devote corner. While Senna had already lapped Blundell, Schumacher briefly lost control of his Benetton in the slippery first turn, nearly hitting the armco on the outside. Berger was less lucky, however, seeing the oil flags too late, spinning off the track and onto the short run-off. On lap 50, Schumacher visited the pits for a second time, easily retaining second over Berger. A lap later, Senna also pitted for the last time, and he too kept his position.

Later that afternoon, Senna took the chequered flag for Williams. It was his first victory for the team, his first of the season, and an unprecedented seventh in the Monaco Grand Prix. Michael Schumacher needed a full minute more to finish the race in second, the German being the only driver Senna hadn't lapped. On the celebratory lap, Senna took an Austrian flag that he had hidden in the cockpit and waved it to the crowds to honour Ratzenberger.

While Senna stood on the podium, next to prince Rainier, his thoughts drifted off. Even though he just won the race, he wasn't truly happy. Wendlinger's accident had to do with that, of course, but there was something else as well. An announcement, on Saturday, jeopardised Senna's long-term plans: rivals Benetton had taken over the Ligier team. *This will obviously lead to Benetton taking over Ligier's Renault engine contract, Senna thought, agitated. And if Schumacher can be competitive with the Ford engines this season, he will no doubt dominate next year when he has the same engine as my car... never mind the fact that his car doesn't comply with the rules.* Senna realised that he would have to go over his options again. His contract with Williams was for two seasons. After that he would be a free agent. *If I want to be as close to perfection as possible, it is important to have a competitive car like I have now,* he thought. *I'll have Julian arrange another meeting with Luca.*

Three days after the Monaco Grand Prix, the Sauber team announced that doctors would start bringing Karl Wendlinger out of his induced coma. "Wendlinger is being woken up slowly over several days by reducing his medications", a spokesman said. "Further prognoses are not possible in the present stages." Two days later, however, doctors stated that the attempts had been halted due to brain swelling. They remained hopeful, though: "The neurological signs have slightly bettered but the patient is still in a critical condition."

On the Thursday prior to the Spanish Grand Prix, GPDA representatives Senna, Schumacher, Berger and Fittipaldi examined the fast right-hander behind the pits. Several drivers had threatened to pull out of the race, because they deemed that there was insufficient run-off at the corner. Subsequently, a tyre chicane was put up in order to slow the cars down, which Berger tested by running his Ferrari through it a number of times. Also, more plastic, water and tyre barriers were placed along the walls surrounding the circuit.

"I'm still worried about all of this, Michael", said Senna, when the group walked back to the paddock. "Lehto, Alesi, Rubens, Roland, myself, Karl — the list goes on and on. And now Lamy, last week."

"I know. It's unbelievable."

"Our test driver drove the car last week, and I understand that, with the all changes the FIA has mandated, it was a bit of a culture shock."

"We really haven't been able to properly test our car", Schumacher replied. "And admitting as much could now lead to our exclusion from the race."

"They're taking a hard stance, indeed."

"We're fundamentally changing the cars. They're too much of an unknown quantity to us, now. That doesn't feel to me as particularly safe."

"I fully agree with what the FIA have announced for Canada, but what's been done for this race, is plain dangerous."

"I'm glad I decided to join the GPDA, so we can do something about just that. What do you propose we do?"

"Working on the wings and diffusers is fine, but that just makes the cars more difficult to control. We should do something about the power, and I'm afraid that removing the airboxes isn't enough."

Senna versus Schumacher

In Saturday morning's practice, another serious accident happened. In the final corner of the circuit, leading onto the main straight, Andrea Montermini, replacing Ratzenberger, ran wide, and crashed head-on at some 160 km/h into the concrete wall lining the gravel bed. Medical personnel quickly arrived at the scene, and cut the unconscious Italian from his car. He was then airlifted to a hospital, where a broken toe and cracked heel were diagnosed.

On Sunday, Senna took his second win of the season, ahead of team-mate Hill. Schumacher had suffered from gearbox problems, but finished a strong third, scoring valuable points to retain his championship lead.

Karl Wendlinger regained consciousness in the Nice hospital a few days later. He would soon return to Innsbruck, Austria, for further treatment and doctors expected Wendlinger to fully recover.

The British Grand Prix witnessed controversy. During the formation lap, Schumacher, starting from second, overtook pole-sitter Hill. Almost half an hour into the race, received a 5-second stop-go penalty, which he failed to serve in time. Subsequently, Schumacher was shown the black flag by race control, meaning he should immediately stop at his pit or face disqualification. Again, the Benetton driver did not comply. However, Benetton team boss Flavio Briatore and technical director Tom Walkinshaw argued with race control that there had been a misunderstanding over the first penalty. And, surprisingly, officials went along with their argument and withdrew the black flag, after which Schumacher served the stop-go penalty. It allowed Hill to win the race, with Schumacher in second, Häkkinen third, Alesi fourth, and Senna, who had had a miserable afternoon, only in fifth place.

Benetton received a hefty fine and Schumacher a reprimand by the stewards of the meeting. However, two weeks after the race, the FIA's World Motor Sport Council decided to exclude the Benetton team from the British Grand Prix results for their offences, as well as increase its fine to half a million dollars. Schumacher was also disqualified from this second place and he received a ban for the two grands prix following the Court of Appeal's hearing.

Senna felt angry as well as envious of Benetton's actions. *What do they think they're doing*, he thought. *Sure, at Lotus and McLaren we also tried to find any loopholes in the regulations, and tried to bend any rules that allowed for flexibility. But it appears that Benetton are going about their racing not only bending the rules, but breaking them.* And with that thought, Senna shivered. *If Schumacher and Benetton are doing this regarding something as relatively minor as overtaking during the formation lap, how do they handle banned driver aids? How do they deal with safety?*

Senna versus Schumacher

Only too soon, Senna's question would be answered. At the German Grand Prix there was an announcement by the FIA, confirming it had found irregularities in the Benetton team's engine software. Worse still, during the race, when Jos Verstappen pitted, a massive fire erupted when the Benetton team's refuelling nozzle wouldn't properly connect to the car, spilling fuel all over the car. Verstappen as well as several mechanics suffered minor injuries.

Before the race was over, there were rumours that Benetton had made alterations to the fuel rigs to increase fuel flow, allowing for faster pit stops. So, after the race, Senna went to find Schumacher in the paddock. He took him aside, and asked: "What's going on, Michael?"

"What do you mean?" Schumacher replied.

"You know what I mean!" Senna was agitated. "We're dealing with the safety of drivers and mechanics, here. What do you know about the fuel issues?"

"Nothing!"

"We cannot cooperate on safety in the races, Michael, if teams are screwing around with dangerous equipment."

"I understand that, Ayrton, but I don't know anything about any changes to the fuel systems. I asked my team what happened, and they told me that they simply made a mistake."

"A dangerous mistake to make."

"Absolutely. But it's only human to make them."

"Let's keep working together on these matters."

"We will."

Further controversy two races on, in Belgium, and again it involved Schumacher and Benetton. Although they won on the track, after the race, scrutineers found the wooden plank underneath the car, mandatory since the German Grand Prix to decrease aerodynamic efficiency of the cars, to show more wear than the millimetre allowed under regulations. Despite driver and team arguing that the wear had been caused by a late-race spin across the kerbs, the stewards had no choice but to disqualify Schumacher. It gave Senna victory, with Hill in second, and Häkkinen in third.

In the week that followed, Benetton were cleared of accusations of tampering with the refuelling equipment at the German Grand Prix. However, at the same meeting, they lost their appeal against the exclusion from the British Grand Prix and the subsequent two-race ban, as well as their appeal against Schumacher's disqualification from the Belgian race. The decisions meant that Schumacher led the championship standings at 70 points, with Senna second on 49

and Hill third on 43 points. But Schumacher's absence from the Italian and Portuguese races meant that both Senna and Hill had the opportunity to reel in Schumacher. And that's exactly what happened: the Williams team took dominant victories at both events, and Senna closed the gap to Schumacher to a single point, while Hill was only 15 points adrift.

Schumacher had a relative easy time upon his return to the cockpit for the European Grand Prix. He qualified on pole, lost the lead to Senna for the first part of the race, but overtook him come the first pit stops. Senna, however, hadn't received enough fuel to last him through the next series of stops, so he was forced to pit early. It allowed Schumacher a decent lead, which Senna couldn't catch up with anymore. It earned Schumacher his seventh grand prix victory of the season — another two wins on the track were taken away from him due to irregularities — and a championship lead of 5 points over Senna with two races still to go. Hill's third place was not enough to keep him in contention for the title.

The final two, title-deciding races of the 1994 season would take place only eight days apart, in Japan and Australia. Tension mounted in the Williams and Benetton camps, as well as between their drivers Senna and Schumacher. But duties as leading members of the GPDA meant that the two couldn't avoid each other. Right after the race day driver's briefing, where race director Roland Bruynseraede had addressed the issue of the championship and how drivers who were no longer in the hunt, should behave, should they encounter one or both of the protagonists. Afterwards, Schumacher was quick to leave the room, but Senna caught up with him.

"Good to have Roland instruct the other drivers regarding the championship", Senna said.

"Indeed", Schumacher replied.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little bit."

"That's only normal. I was nervous when I was fighting for my first title."

Senna stopped, as did Schumacher, the Brazilian's eyes piercing through his rival's façade. "Let's race cleanly", he said. "We've seen too many drama and injury this season. It should be a fair battle, no matter who wins."

Schumacher German got away from the line slithering into Senna's path, blocking any attempts to pass him into the first corner. Sauber's Heinz-Harald Frentzen, in third, tried to

overtake Senna on lap two, but went off in the ever-increasing rain. Race control decided to bring out the safety car to moderate the drivers in these hardest of circumstances.

After seven laps, the race was on again, with Senna all over Schumacher's car, in a fierce battle for the lead, and, possibly, the championship. A lap later, Gianni Morbidelli crashed his Footwork, quickly followed by Brundle's McLaren, who hit a marshal, breaking the poor man's leg — another casualty of this disastrous season. The race was subsequently red-flagged, with the remaining 15 drivers stopping on the start-finish straight.

Once all the rubble was cleared and the rain had eased to acceptable levels, the race was restarted, although behind the safety car; lap times of this second part of the race would be added to the first part's. Immediately after the safety car left the track, Schumacher pitted for fuel, hoping that he would be able last the distance, the team gambling on a time-limited race. It gave Senna the lead, which he kept even after his own pit stop on lap 25. Schumacher closed in on Senna, and on lap 36 he went ahead — on aggregate time, not on the tarmac. But with the rain now all but gone, it became clear to the Benetton team that they wouldn't make the full race distance. Schumacher stopped for a second time, again allowing his rival ahead in the timing systems.

While Schumacher tried everything he could, it wasn't enough. He had led the first part of the race by 6.8 seconds before the red flags, but Senna had 10.1-second lead on the track in the second, meaning that Senna won the race by 3.3 seconds. The Adelaide street circuit would decide the 1994 title, with a single point separating Schumacher and Senna.

Senna made his intentions for the Australian Grand Prix very clear. He was fastest in all practice and qualifying sessions and took his seventieth pole position, although Schumacher came tantalisingly close, with only eighteen thousandths of a second between them. At the start of the race, Schumacher took a commanding lead into the first turn. This angered Senna. Since the FIA had announced in July that it could not prove that Benetton had used launch control, accusations had died down. But with such a fast getaway, Senna was suspicious once again. All he could do now, though, was slot in behind Schumacher and put on the pressure. Which Senna duly did for the next eighteen laps.

When both rivals took to the pits for fuel and fresh tyres, the fast Benetton crew got Schumacher back into the race four tenths quicker than Williams did Senna. But the Brazilian was undeterred. He reeled Schumacher back in, the gap never increasing to more than two seconds.

Senna versus Schumacher

Then, on lap 36, the pressure got to Schumacher: he cracked, made an error, and went off at East Terrace corner. His right hand wheels hit the concrete wall, but only so gently that the Benetton could get back onto the track.

Schumacher steered left, across Senna's nose.

This is my chance, Senna thought. I've got you now!

Senna immediately went for the gap into Hutt Street corner.

Schumacher, getting back up to speed, steered right to take the corner himself.

The Benetton's right rear wheel touched the Williams' left front.

"Nooo!" Senna screamed.

Schumacher shot into the air, broke his suspension upon landing, slid off the circuit again and came to a halt against the tyre barrier. Race over.

Senna continued. He pitted to have his car looked over by the mechanics, to make sure everything was all right. To make some quick repairs if needed. To try and make it to the finish and pick up enough points. *I cannot have this title taken away from me. Not now, not like this.* Senna was fuming, determined to beat this new kid, Schumacher, determined to beat Benetton. *The arrogant prick! The cheats!*

The Williams mechanics inspected the left front suspension of Senna's car. The wishbone was bent; ever so slightly, but bent nonetheless. Two men pulled the wishbone several times. Technical director Patrick Head came out of the garage to see for himself, but Senna started waving: "It's taking too long. Let me go. Let me go!" The mechanics quickly stepped aside, and sent their man on his way. He had lost almost two minutes in the pits and had dropped to thirteenth place, one lap down from the leader, Berger. But there were still 45 laps to go. If anyone could do it, surely it was Senna.

Senna versus Schumacher

On lap 39, Senna overtook Minardi driver Pierluigi Martini. Twelfth place.

A lap later, the throttle on Alessandro Zanardi's Lotus stuck, forcing him to retire, and Alboreto took his pit stop. Tenth place.

On lap 50, Senna overtook Fittipaldi. Ninth place.

Four laps on, Senna made his third and final visit to the pits, dropped back to tenth, but not for long: on lap 58 he again passed Fittipaldi for ninth.

On lap 59, Alesi pitted. Eighth place.

Seven laps later, Mark Blundell crashed his Tyrrell. Seventh.

On lap 70, Senna found himself right behind Frentzen, but he also had Alesi on his tail. At the end of the Brabham straight, Senna went for it. Frentzen didn't fight back. Sixth place.

Eleven laps to go. Sixth would earn Senna a single point, taking him level with Schumacher in the championship standings. But the German's seven wins over Senna's six would grant him the title. And with Olivier Panis almost a minute up the road, it looked like the end for Senna.

But then, five laps from the finish, Häkkinen suffered a puncture at the fastest part of the track and spun off. As Senna passed the scene of the accident, he saw the stricken McLaren in the run-off area. He was in fifth place. It handed Senna the extra point that he needed.

After 81 laps, the race finished with an unlikely podium trio: Berger ahead of Brundle and Barrichello. Panis was fourth. Taking the chequered flag, a lap down, was Senna, calming down, and getting to grips with the situation and with the result: fifth place. *Hardly the position to take the world championship again*, he thought. *And not the way to do it, either. What a violent end to such a tragic season. I can't believe that, despite us working together, talking to each other so often about safety, Michael would do such a thing.*

After the season ended, there were rumours about a deal between Benetton and the FIA that let the team off the hook in the German Grand Prix pitlane fire incident. Benetton admitted that they had used an illegal fuel filter, and assured the governing body that they would make major

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changes in their management, which included offloading its engineering director Walkinshaw to sister team Ligier. When Senna heard of the deal, he was furious. After all, he had felt manipulated by the FIA during the 1989 and 1990 seasons, and he now felt cheated again, by the FIA and by Benetton and their driver Schumacher. Senna had a lot to think about over the winter months.

Playing hardball

For the start of the 1995 season, an array of changes was made to the cars. The new aerodynamic regulations enforced by the FIA had dramatically reduced downforce. This caused the cars to be a handful to drive. Pre-season testing had shown Williams to be the team to beat — its cars looked the most stable of all. This much to the delight of the local crowd for the first grand prix, in Brazil, who were all cheering for the new world champion, Senna.

Benetton drivers Schumacher and Herbert had less to cheer about. Despite now being powered by the all-conquering Renault engines that had taken both championships each season since 1992, the cars did not display the fluid movements of their Williams counterparts. Worse, Schumacher experienced a heavy crash after a steering failure on the first day of practice and qualifying. His team went as far as stopping Herbert from qualifying until they had traced the problem.

Disregarding their animosities at the end of the previous season, Senna came to the Benetton pits to check on Schumacher's wellbeing.

"Michael, how are you?" Senna asked.

"I'm all right", Schumacher answered.

"That was quite a crash you had."

"It was. I just hope the team find the cause, and that they can fix the car for tomorrow."

"I'm glad you're okay. I was afraid that all of last year's problems would come back. And to be honest, I still worry that not everything is fixed."

"I'm sure it's not too much of a problem."

"I hope so to. But let's keep an eye on how things go. With your team as well as all the others."

"Let's do that."

On Saturday, Senna gave his home crowd exactly what they had come for: pole position. But on race day, he wouldn't enjoy his advantage for long. Schumacher jumped him at the start and led into the first corner. Senna trailed him during the first stint, and when both men had taken on fuel and fresh tyres, Senna took the lead. This very much gave the advantage to the Williams driver, since he expected to do on only one more stop, while Benetton had planned Schumacher to come into the pits twice more. And if that wasn't enough, Schumacher struggled to keep the pace that Senna could manage, allowing the Brazilian to take a popular home win with quite a big margin.

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However, a few hours after the race had finished, word came out that both Senna and Schumacher had been disqualified. Their race fuel did not comply with the chemical fingerprint that their supplier Elf had lodged with the FIA prior to the season. The stewards of the meeting thus found it to be illegal. The decision meant that Ferrari's Berger had won the race, with Häkkinen second for McLaren, Alesi third, and Brundle fourth. Both Williams and Benetton decided to appeal their exclusion and they would be heard after the next Grand Prix. Four days after the Argentine race — Hill won, ahead of Alesi and Schumacher — the FIA overturned the exclusion of Senna and Schumacher, reinstating their respective first and second place. It reasoned that, although the fuel had been illegal, it gave no competitive advantage, neither did it break chemical composition regulations. The governing body did not find the drivers to be at fault, but did take away Williams' and Benetton's points for the Constructors' Championship as well as handed both team a hefty fine. With the original Brazilian Grand Prix results now again official, the championship standings gave quite a different view, with Senna, Hill, and Schumacher on 10 points, Alesi on 8, and Berger on only 5 points.

Ahead of the San Marino Grand Prix, Senna and Schumacher discussed their disqualification and the subsequent overturning of the decision.

"How do you feel about it, now that we've gotten our places back?" Senna asked.

"I'm happy that I have the points again, but it's rather strange that the team did not get theirs", Schumacher replied.

"Agreed", Senna said. Then, remembering how Schumacher's Benetton team had broken the rules the previous season, he tried: "You cannot separate car and driver completely. If this is a new rule, you can build an illegal car and let the team pay for victory."

Schumacher didn't reply.

The Williams team continued their new-found form, with Hill taking victory in San Marino, too. Senna had to settle for second, after a 10-second penalty for speeding in the pit lane, while Alesi was third. Schumacher retired from an early lead, however, immediately after pitting for slick tyres, while the track was still damp.

In Spain, Schumacher finally won due to a new race tactic. Instead of opting for one stop more than his Williams rivals, he made one less. Team-mate Herbert lucked into second place, due to

Hill's technical issues on the final lap, making it only the second one-two finish in Benetton's history.

Senna suffered a disastrous race. First, due to the green light not coming on at the start, he and other drivers were left behind. Then the Brazilian wasted precious time behind slower competitors. And to add insult to injury, a gearbox issue forced him out of the race.

Hill now led the championship standings, with three points over Schumacher, while Senna was in third, seven points adrift, with both Ferrari drivers another four points behind him.

For the Monaco Grand Prix, the Sauber team reluctantly replaced their driver Karl Wendlinger. The Austrian had recovered from the injuries sustained in his massive accident at the same race a year earlier, but his performance had disappointed. Wendlinger would return to the wheel for the final two races, but without success, and he would not race in Formula One again.

Late in Saturday's practice, Taki Inoue spun and stalled his car. After the session had ended, the Japanese was towed back to the pit lane by a support vehicle. In the middle of the swimming pool complex, the Footwork was violently struck by the safety car, its driver performing demonstration laps by rally driver Jean Ragnotti for the FIA's press delegate. The impact overturned Inoue's car, severely damaging its engine and gearbox, while the tow rope ripped off the car's roll hoop. Inoue, who was in the car wearing his helmet but not his seatbelts, was struck on the head twice, and saw a chunk taken out of his helmet. He was taken to the hospital for brain scans, but was lucky to suffer only a slight concussion. Nevertheless, he would not take part in qualifying.

When Senna heard about the incident, he was furious. He stomped out of the Williams pits where he had been with his engineers, and straight into the Benetton pitbox, looking to talk to Schumacher to address the issue in their roles as GPDA directors. Schumacher fully concurred with Senna's emotions, and, after a brief discussion, they had their teams gather a crowd of members of the press. They questioned organising body the Automobile Club de Monaco, Ragnotti's behaviour, as well as the FIA's role in the matter.

"Why was Ragnotti out there?" Senna asked. "It's lack of discipline! We understand he had accomplished a couple of laps before at a million miles an hour with handbrake turns at the Loews hairpin. What was the purpose of him doing it? Was it to give officials a thrill? Inoue would have been killed had he not been wearing his helmet. After the tragic events of last season, this is unacceptable. Unacceptable."

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Despite the seriousness of the matter, Senna was pleased that he and Schumacher had cooperated in their statements to the press. *I hope this will bring us a bit closer together*, the world champion thought. *Especially after all that has happened over the past few years*. Senna not only thought back to the events of 1994 and several run-ins in previous seasons. *Hopefully our mutual view on this kind of incidents will help us overcome our adversities, work together in the GPDA, and have a clean fight for the championship*. Little did he know that the worst of their confrontations were yet to come.

When the lights for Sunday's race went green, Senna and Schumacher got away without incident, but the same didn't go for the three drivers following them. Hill was slow off the line and found himself between Berger and Alesi for the first corner. The cars touched, blocked the track, and halted the race.

At the second start — which no less than six drivers jumped, earning them all stop-go penalties — Schumacher got ahead of Senna. Again, the German profited from his race strategy of only a single stop, while Williams had planned two for Senna. It was the first time since Alain Prost's victory in 1988 that Senna failed to win the famous race around the Principality. Schumacher now led the title battle with 30 points, seven more than Hill and eight ahead of Senna.

In Canada, Schumacher started from pole position and he was sure to win the race, but for electric problems, his gearbox stuck in third gear. He did save one point for his sixth place. Senna struggled throughout the weekend and failed to finish due to another hydraulics' issue. Alesi won his first Grand Prix, after 91 attempts, and on his birthday at that, with Jordan's Barrichello and Irvine joining him on the podium.

After the Canadian Grand Prix, Senna and his manager Julian Jakobi had arranged to stay in Montréal for an extra day. They had a secret meeting planned with Ferrari bosses Luca Montezemolo and Jean Todt, to discuss any options for the future.

For their home race at Silverstone Circuit, Williams drivers Senna and Hill took the first row of the starting grid for what would be an eventful British Grand Prix. At the start, Senna maintained his advantage, but fast-starting Alesi pipped Schumacher and Hill for second place. For Senna, this was a very welcome scenario, because he was planning to stop for fuel and tyres twice, while he expected rival Schumacher to at least have considered a single pit stop, again. So, the Brazilian started to create a gap to Alesi, who just ever so slightly held up the drivers behind him.

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Three laps later, Hill opened the first round of pit stops. The Englishman opted for an earlier than planned stop, in an effort to jump Schumacher as well as Alesi, when they would take their own stops later in the race. But his Williams suffered an electronic failure as he left the pits, and Hill dropped back to ninth place.

Over the course of the next seven laps, all drivers that were going for a two-stop race, took to the pits. On lap eighteen, Alesi stopped, releasing Schumacher, who slowly began to eat away Senna's advantage, which had grown to some twenty seconds. Then Benetton's Herbert pitted from third, maintaining position afterwards. Senna came into the pits on lap 22, and rejoined the race behind Schumacher, who was now in the lead.

Around nine seconds behind his rival, Senna realised that he had a lot of work still to do. *It's clear that Schumacher will only stop once. I will need to give it all I've got, once he's in the pits, to create enough of a gap prior to my second pit stop.*

Schumacher on the other hand, was playing the long game. *After both Senna and I have done our remaining pit stops, he will probably be behind me, but on newer tyres. I'll try to keep him at bay, but if that doesn't work, I'll finish in second place, and take six points towards the championship.*

Schumacher took his only stop on lap 31, dropping behind Senna some twenty seconds. Senna pushed like a madman for ten laps, trying to build up his lead, setting the fastest lap of the race on lap 37. Four laps later, the Brazilian stopped at the Williams garage. The gap to Schumacher was almost 27 seconds, so it would be tight. When Senna exited the pit lane, he and Schumacher were neck and neck, but the German was on race speed and took the lead. With both adversaries now on similar fuel loads, the advantage was Senna's, because he was running on newer tyres. He immediately put the pressure on Schumacher.

On lap 46, Senna attempted to overtake at the fast Stowe corner. He failed due to a backmarker being in the way, which frustrated Senna. "Get out of the way!" he screamed into his helmet.

On the very same lap, coming out of Bridge corner Schumacher positioned his car to the right of the track, ahead of the left-hand Priory corner. But he appeared to move a little bit wider than on previous laps.

This is it! Senna thought, and he dived into the gap that had unexpectedly appeared.

Schumacher didn't see him coming, and started to steer into the corner, on the racing line.

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Senna realised that he'd been too late. He braked hard, his left front wheel blocking in a puff of smoke.

Senna's right front wheel touched Schumacher's left sidepod and then his left rear wheel. The cars interlocked and both slid off the tarmac, into the gravel trap at the opposite side of the circuit. The leader and number two of the race retired on the spot.

Herbert, at that time running third, went on to take the first grand prix win of his career. And it was a very welcome victory indeed, because his future at Benetton had been in doubt due to disappointing results. Next to Herbert, Alesi and Hill took to the podium in second and third respectively.

After the race, Senna returned to the Williams motorhome to gather his thoughts. *I hadn't expected such an accident to happen. Not with Schumacher. Not after he crashed into me in Adelaide. And definitely not after our stance on driver safety in Monaco.* Senna firmly believed that if he would no longer go for a gap, he'd no longer be a racing driver. But he also thought: *I'll have to be more careful next time, but I cannot let Schumacher get away with actions like this.* The accident put Senna's feet firmly back onto the ground.

Talking to the press, afterwards, Senna said: "There appeared an opportunity to pass him. He turned into me and we had a racing accident." But Schumacher was extremely firm in his comments: "I think what Ayrton did was both stupid and totally unnecessary. There was no room for two cars there, and it's not an overtaking place. If I hadn't been there, I think he'd have gone straight on into the gravel. He just came from nowhere." And then, out of nowhere, the German added: "It was more or less the same situation at Adelaide last year, where he also tried to dive inside when there was no room", decisively placing the blame for that incident with Senna. The race stewards investigated the crash between Senna and Schumacher, and both drivers received a severe reprimand, as well as a warning that similar actions in the future may result in penalties.

Qualifying for the German Grand Prix was a feast. In the Friday session, no less than seven drivers swapped provisional pole position fourteen times. Senna eventually won the battle, ahead of Schumacher and Hill, and his time stood for Saturday's qualifying practice. At the start of the race, Senna wasn't so lucky, as Schumacher passed him into the first corner. This meant that the Williams team couldn't dictate pit stop strategies, and everyone wondered whether

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Schumacher would stop once or twice. Senna decided to bide his time, staying close to his rival all through the first part of the grand prix. In lap 19, Schumacher went for the pits, handing Senna the lead of the race. When the Brazilian stopped four laps later, Schumacher was again in the lead. It looked like Senna would have his work cut out for him. Still, he waited. Then, with eleven of the 45 laps to go, to the surprise of many, not least Senna, Schumacher stopped for a second time. Senna took the chequered flag, ahead of Schumacher and Berger, who had overcome a stop-go penalty due to an alleged jumped start, but had profited from a number of retirements ahead of him.

During the post-race press conference, Senna spoke to several journalists. Not only did he talk about his second win of the season, and the fact that he now trailed Schumacher by only nine points in championship, having jumped Hill in the standings, he also addressed the rumours about his options for the 1996 season and beyond. "There are four teams involved: Williams, Benetton, Ferrari, and McLaren", Senna said. "I am happy at Williams, and I feel that many things would have to fall into place for me to switch. But the first priority is always competitiveness. I want to win races, because I'm sure other good drivers are going to come into good top teams, and I don't want to be in a situation where I have to struggle to win."

After a difficult spring and early summer, Williams were back on track at the Hungarian Grand Prix. They dominated the race to the extent that they lapped all their competitors. Senna won ahead of Hill and Berger, while Schumacher had to retire after a miserable afternoon. At his first pit stop, his team's usual slick teamwork went wrong when the refuelling rig splashed Schumacher's fuel across the pit box. Benetton were lucky that there was no fire. Of course, the car had not received enough fuel, so Schumacher had to stop twice more. But even the podium would not be his, because, to add insult to injury, with three laps left to go, the Renault engine in the back of Schumacher's car developed an electrical problem. He dropped out of the race, costing him valuable championship points on a day when his rivals scored the maximum amount. It cost the German the lead in the championship, since he now trailed Senna by one point. But with seven races still to go, there was still everything to play for. And play, they did. Hard.

On Monday 14 August, Ferrari announced they had signed a contract with Ayrton Senna for 1996, '97 and '98. They also confirmed that Gerhard Berger would be his team-mate. The next

day, it was announced that Senna would be replaced at Williams by Indianapolis 500 winner and IndyCar championship contender Jacques Villeneuve, son of former Ferrari driver Gilles.

As usual, unpredictable weather played a major part in the Belgian Grand Prix weekend. First, in qualifying, which resulted in Ferrari taking the front row — Berger on pole and Alesi second — with Häkkinen and Herbert on the second row, Hill fifth, Senna eighth and Schumacher in a disastrous sixteenth starting position. But rain also disrupted the race, although not as much as Schumacher's actions against Senna did.

The early part of the race saw Herbert and Alesi battle it out for first place, although the Frenchman experienced his usual luck when he retired just after he took the lead. Herbert had a hard time keeping Hill at bay, and ultimately spun off the track. This left the Williams drivers in the lead, but Hill soon dropped out with yet another example of his team's faulty gearboxes. Senna now led Berger and Schumacher. The German had gained a massive thirteen places in as many laps, but was still some seventeen seconds behind.

On lap fifteen, Senna and Berger both stopped for fuel and tyres, with Schumacher entering the pits three laps later. And then the rain came. Senna pitted again on lap 21, while Berger was forced to retire with electronics' problems, but Schumacher's engineers convinced him to stay out on dry weather tyres, hoping that the rain would quickly go away. It was the only chance, they thought, for Schumacher to beat Senna. And indeed, Senna re-joined the race behind Schumacher, now in the lead, but, on rain tyres, the Brazilian was lapping some five seconds per lap faster.

Before the lap was out, Senna had caught Schumacher.

Through the famous Eau Rouge and Raidillon corners, he was all over the back of him.

Senna moved left to overtake Schumacher onto Kemmel straight.

The German moved left as well, blocking Senna's path.

Senna followed along the straight, and just before the Les Combes combination, Senna pulled alongside, feeling confident that he had his rival covered.

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But Schumacher kept his line, pushing Senna to the right, almost onto the kerbs on the opposite side of the corner.

Senna followed through the 180-degree Rivage corner, and through the fast Pouhon sweep. Into the Fagnes right-hander, Schumacher kept his car in the middle of the track. Senna would need to go around the outside, but Schumacher found the little patch of dry tarmac he needed, and kept Senna behind him, still.

Senna tried through Stavelot, but Schumacher blocked the racing line.

He tried into the first part of Blanchimont, but found Schumacher in his path.

He tried under braking before the Bus Stop chicane, pulling to the left, but Schumacher moved the Benetton left, too, again blocking his rival.

Through Eau Rouge and Raidillon once more, Senna weaving behind Schumacher, but unable to get past.

On Kimmel Straight, Senna again pulled alongside Schumacher, now ready for any blocking move. The Brazilian kept his line, stayed in the middle of the corner, leaving the Benetton driver no alternative than to go straight ahead, across the grass.

Senna was past, into the lead, with Schumacher second, but he had lost valuable time. By now, the rain had stopped, and the track began to dry again. At the end of lap 24, Senna held a three-second lap. But Schumacher's next lap was a massive ten seconds quicker than his previous one. He breezed past Senna, whose wet-weather tyres were now a disadvantage, leaving the Brazilian no option but to stop for slicks, again. It gave Schumacher a massive, thirty-second lead.

The race wasn't over, yet. For the rain returned quickly thereafter. But this time, race control opted to send out the safety car. It allowed both Schumacher and Senna to pit for wets, and suddenly they were neck-and-neck again. However, no sooner than the safety car had released the pack, Senna received a stop-go penalty for speeding in the pit lane. That put an end to the

afternoon's excitement. Schumacher brought his car home, ahead of Senna, who re-took second place on the final lap, leaving Panis in third.

After the race, Senna got out of his car, and, without taking off his gloves or helmet, walked up to Schumacher to express how he felt about his shenanigans.

"What do you think you were doing?" Senna said.

"I was trying to keep you behind me as long as possible", Schumacher replied.

"You drove a stupid race."

"What do you mean?"

"We had some pretty hairy moments, out there. That is all well and good but if it was meant on purpose, I would be very upset. There are some things which are acceptable and some things which are not."

The race stewards agreed with Senna. They called in Schumacher after the podium ceremonies, handing him a suspended one-race ban, for the next four races. So, Schumacher got away relatively lightly with his actions in Belgium. It handed him victory as well as the championship lead. He now had 57 points, three more than Senna and seventeen more than Hill.

Senna received a hero's welcome at the Autodromo Internazionale di Monza, a custom for all Ferrari drivers, present or future. With his signing for 1996 and beyond, the 'tifosi' already considered the four-time world drivers' champion to be one of them. Senna admitted at a pre-race press conference that the feeling was mutual. "To arrive at Monza to such a crowd is heart-warming", Senna said. "Although I'm still fighting for this year's championship, I already feel part of the Ferrari family. I have always admired Ferrari. It is a legend, and every driver wants to race for Ferrari at some point in his career."

Senna proceeded to reiterate his feelings about the season's accidents involving Schumacher and himself. "I feel it is important that driving standards are maintained at the top of the sport. Otherwise, things will degenerate into a free-for-all." He then took a shot at his rival: "It is my view that Schumacher has become entirely predictable when in a position where he knows he has either lost the advantage or thinks he cannot win. Then it would seem he will resort to any tactic in order to prevent anyone else winning. This was proven in Adelaide, last year, which almost cost me the championship, and again at Spa. Next time there might be injuries, or worse. And this

isn't just about Formula One. What example is this for the young guys in karting, in Formula Three? This cannot go on."

To the surprise of many, Hill took pole position for the Italian Grand Prix, ahead of Schumacher and Berger, with Senna in fourth, having suffered from an engine failure in qualifying. It looked like Hill wouldn't profit from the starting position, though, because he spun off the track during the parade lap, when exiting the Variante Ascari. He made it round again, but tumbled into the pit lane when the other drivers lined up for the start. It left Schumacher to take the lead when the lights turned green, but on the first lap, Montermini, Boullion, Papis, Moreno and Diniz all crashed into each other on the gravel that Hill had left on the track. The wrecked cars blocked the circuit, so race control suspended running and opted for a restart. This meant that Hill would be allowed to re-take pole position for a second attempt. This time, Hill duly took the lead, ahead of Berger, who jumped Schumacher, and after a couple of laps getting acquainted with the Williams team's spare car, which had been set-up for Senna, he began to create a gap to Berger. However, on the thirteenth lap, bad luck struck Hill again. A wheel-bearing failed, which sent his car spinning into the gravel at the Variante della Roggia. Although he did make it back to the pits, he was soon out of the race. Berger was now ahead. Though he felt both Schumacher and Senna breathing down his neck in second and third respectively, he managed to keep them at bay for ten laps. And then more misfortune.

Into the Rettifillio chicanes, Berger managed to get ahead of backmarker Inoue.

Schumacher followed suit, around the outside of the Japanese, through the Curva Grande, briefly locking Senna in, behind him.

Inoue kept right to leave enough room for Senna, but, surprisingly, then swerved across Senna's bow to the left in an attempt to allow the Brazilian onto the ideal line for the next corner.

It appeared to work, and Senna indeed got past, but Inoue's moves had caused Senna to misjudge the braking point for the chicane ever so slightly.

Schumacher started to steer left, to take the first part of the left-right Variante della Roggia.

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The Williams' nose tapped the Benetton's gearbox, and both cars spun into the gravel trap.

Both drivers were out of the race. It had happened again.

Schumacher was furious. He was out of his car before the marshals had reached him, and he ran towards Senna, who was still in the cockpit. One of the marshals was wise enough to lead Schumacher to safety behind the barriers, before any fists were drawn.

When the dust had settled, Ferrari were leading the race. For the tifosi, it couldn't be any better. But on lap 32, the TV camera on Alesi's rear wing came loose, bouncing into Berger's path and wrecking his front suspension. And then Alesi's infamous luck haunted him again as his Ferrari let him down once more. It left Benetton's number two driver, Herbert, whom the team had ironically just dropped for the following season in favour of Alesi, to take victory. McLaren drivers Häkkinen and Brundle finished second and third respectively. It was the first podium for Mercedes-engined cars since Juan Fangio and Piero Taruffi finished one-two ahead of Alberto Ascari, also at Monza, exactly forty years earlier.

Schumacher blamed Senna for their accident, after the race. "I turned into the corner not expecting anything. Suddenly I felt a big bang and Ayrton went into me."

"It was just ridiculous", stated Senna, in turn blaming the slower Footwork. "Inoue let Schumacher past and then blocked me and then moved out of the way again. Obviously Michael was very upset, but I am upset too."

Benetton protested Senna, and, although many in the paddock felt that it had been an accident, since Senna had had nothing to gain by punting his rival off the track, the stewards decided to hand the world champion a suspended one-race ban.

Schumacher put one hand on the world championship cup in the Pacific Grand Prix. Despite being on the receiving end of some offensive driving, courtesy of Senna, at the start of the race, three super-quick pit stops by his Benetton team and his impressive in- and out-laps put him ahead of Senna after his second and final stop. Schumacher won his sixth race of the season, despite his car slowly giving up the ghost, first with a downshift issue, and, on the final lap, all lights on the Benetton's dashboard going off. No matter: with only two grands prix to go, he led the championship at 83 points, with Senna on 70, and Hill, now out of contention, on 52. Senna

would need to win both remaining races, with Schumacher taking no more than six points. Not impossible, but not very likely either.

The second grand prix in the land of the rising sun in eight days would witness an anticlimactic end to the 1995 Formula One World Championship. Schumacher dominated the race, which started in damp conditions. The only threat was Alesi, who pitted for slick tyres earlier than all other drivers, only one lap after he took a ten-second stop-go penalty for jumping the start, and managed to get within two seconds of Schumacher before his transmission broke on lap 23. Thereafter Schumacher was virtually unchallenged.

Senna saw his championship hopes fall to pieces when he was caught out by more rain in the middle of the fast left-hander Spoon. He went off the circuit, barged through the gravel trap, damaged his front wing, got back onto the tarmac, but had to pit for a new nose cone. He re-joined the race down in fifth position.

Then, with only fifteen laps to go, it all went bananas for Williams. First Hill dropped out of the race. He had gone off at Spoon as well, got back onto the track, but slid off again on the gravel that came out of his own sidepods while braking for 130R. Almost simultaneously Senna got a stop-go penalty for speeding in the pit lane. But before he could take it, the Brazilian dropped the ball once more, again at Spoon, and finished his race in the gravel trap.

Schumacher won the race and was now world champion. He had beaten the best.

The final race of the season was also the final time that the Australian Grand Prix would be in Adelaide. Senna bid farewell to the Williams team by utterly dominating his final race for them, lapping the entire field not once, but twice. But the race weekend had been overshadowed by another major accident. On Friday afternoon, Mika Häkkinen's McLaren suffered a left-rear puncture on one of the quickest parts of the circuit. The car spun 360 degrees before ramming head-on into a tyre barrier. Häkkinen suffered a skull fracture and internal bleeding, and was only saved from suffocation by an emergency tracheotomy at the site of the crash by Professor Sid Watkins. The Finn was then rushed to nearby Royal Adelaide Hospital, where he quickly recovered. He would be fit to race before the next season.

Having returned home from an exhausting year — for the first time since 1977 there had been seventeen grands prix — Senna contemplated on all that had happened over the course of the season. That he had lost the championship was not the greatest of issues, but he did feel very

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bad about how he had lost it. After the previous season, Senna had felt cheated by Schumacher and Benetton, though eventually he had prevailed. But now he thought that, whenever he and Schumacher were near each other on the track, it was an accident waiting to happen. Although, in the end, his rival probably wasn't to blame for all incidents, Senna did come to realise that he hadn't had any similar situations with other drivers. It wasn't illogical to think that Senna would have won at least two of the grands prix in which he and Schumacher had eliminated each other, and that might have given him just enough points to retain his title. Senna believed that Schumacher's way of responding to adversity on the track, had earned him the championship, very much at the Brazilian's expense.

Musical chairs

When Ayrton Senna was in Formula 3, he employed Keith Sutton, a starting motorsports photographer who looked after Senna's press contacts. The Brazilian was very successful in F3 and he and Sutton made sure that all Formula One teams received their press releases. "But", Sutton recalled years later, "Ayrton really only wanted to know that I was sending them to Ferrari." For the 1996 season, Senna's dream to drive for the Scuderia, finally came true. He had always claimed it was important for his CV to win races and championships for different teams.

There were a number of familiar faces at Ferrari, too. First of all, there was Senna's former Lotus race mechanic, Nigel Stepney, who was now chief mechanic at Ferrari. And team boss Todt had lured away Rory Byrne from Benetton, who had been the team's chief designer since their days under the Toleman guise, when Senna drove for them in 1984. "This is the guy", Byrne had said, after Senna had first tested for Toleman, "He's brilliant, we've just got to have him." Now he would.

Senna had claimed that he hadn't signed for Ferrari for the money. "For me, the attraction of Ferrari is as much the challenge as it is the traditions and history of the team. I will simply be trying to win some races for Ferrari in my first season and try to get everything sorted out to be ready for the second season and to win the championship."

It was clear that Ferrari would need time to be competitive again. After seven seasons with V12 power, the Scuderia had a new three-litre V10 engine in the back of their new car. But Senna had vowed to work on building a new team, hopefuller win the odd race, and regularly challenge for race victories and the championship by 1998, when his Ferrari contract ran out.

But before the season was near its halfway point, Senna took a commanding victory in the rain-soaked Spanish Grand Prix, beating Schumacher and his new Benetton team-mate Alesi by a quarter of a minute. And it wasn't before long when Senna also won in Belgium, and, very much to the enjoyment of the tifosi, in Italy, where team-mate Gerhard Berger made it the first one-two finish for the Scuderia since the 1990 Spanish Grand Prix. With three race wins and another five podium places, Senna ended up fourth in the world Drivers' Championship.

Schumacher and Hill fought for the title, and they were very evenly matched first half of the season. Hill won three races, came second twice, third one time, and failed to finish on two occasions. Schumacher won two grands prix, was second two times, as well as third twice, while

also suffering two DNFs. It left Hill in the lead of the championship after 8 races by a mere 5 points.

The second half of the 1996 seasons started with a dominant display by Schumacher, who took three wins on the trot. They would prove to be the foundation for a second championship, because, despite not winning again, the German claimed the title by two points, coming third in the final race in Japan, behind both Hill and Senna.

Villeneuve was the surprise of the season. Not only did he finish second on his Formula One debut — he would have won, if not for an oil leak — he also won three grands prix on his way to third in the championship.

Remarkably, 1996 was the second year that Senna didn't win the Monaco Grand Prix, but neither did Schumacher. After an incident-filled race, Martin Brundle ended up on the podium next to Prince Rainier, taking the first win for McLaren since Senna's 1993 victory in Australia. It would be the only grand prix win of the Englishman's career.

Late in the summer of 1996, Schumacher announced he would be leaving Benetton. Williams had already signed Frentzen to race alongside Villeneuve, which meant that Hill was also on the market. The championship protagonists were both vying to take start number 1 to McLaren-Mercedes. The team went for Schumacher to partner the team's long-time driver Häkkinen, Hill opted for Jordan-Peugeot, while Benetton took on former Williams test driver and Sauber and Ligier racer David Coulthard to partner Alesi.

To the surprise of many, Schumacher won the first grand prix of the new season for his new team. And at the detriment of Senna, too. But over the next eight races, it were Villeneuve and Senna who exchanged wins. And after nine races, only 9 points separated both drivers, ironically as many points as Schumacher had scored after his opening-race victory. Berger took a popular win in Germany, his first since the same race in 1994. After that, Villeneuve took three more race wins, with Senna only winning a single grand prix, and, finally, another win for Schumacher, so the Canadian converted a nineteen point deficit in the title standings to a five-point lead with two races still to go.

Then controversy rose in the penultimate race. Villeneuve had taken pole position for the Japanese Grand Prix, but, before the race, the stewards announced that he would be placed at the back of the grid, as a penalty for ignoring yellow flags on two consecutive laps during practice. The Williams team had no option but to appeal, which allowed their driver to start from

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the first row. He drove a very conservative race, however, and only finished fifth. Villeneuve was subsequently disqualified from that position, which shifted the title advantage back Senna, who had won the race.

In the final race of 1997, the European Grand Prix at Spain's Jerez circuit, Villeneuve did all he could to try and take the championship by winning the race, but Senna finished right behind him in second place. It left Senna a single point ahead of his rival in the final standings, with Schumacher in third place. Thus, Senna claimed his fifth World Drivers' Championship, eclipsing his hero Fangio as well as his old rival Prost.

A taste of your own medicine

Ahead of his final Formula One season, Ayrton Senna was considered favourite for another championship. His 1997 title rival Villeneuve would have to do without factory-supported Renault engines, while Senna's Ferrari team were on a high, having won their first world championship in almost fifteen years. However, both Williams drivers were fastest in the first test session for the new season, and Benetton were adamant that they had what it took to compete with Ferrari and Williams for the championship.

Senna, though, had his own ideas about the new season. "McLaren are first on my list," he said to the press at a Fiorano test. "They were very strong last season and with the new people they have, they should be our most dangerous opponents." He was referring to Adrian Newey joining McLaren from Williams, and the Brazilian had experienced what the British design chief could add to a car's performance. Also, McLaren signed a tyre supply contract with Bridgestone, while Ferrari remained with Goodyear, which was in its last season, having announced its withdrawal from the sport at the end of 1998.

There was an additional reason that made Senna expect McLaren to be his Ferrari team's foremost competitor. It had to do with the Brazilians greatest fear, which was for having to compete with a rival that had an unfair advantage. Senna's reasoning was that after the previous season's Luxembourg Grand Prix, a renowned photographer had taken pictures of the inside of the McLaren's cockpit, and the photos revealed a third pedal. It was rumoured to be another brake pedal, which applied stopping power only on the rear wheels.

All of this made Senna nervous about the new season. He knew how good his former team could be. He knew how Newey could work his magic. And he had also come to know how Schumacher could exploit a competitive advantage. Especially an unfair one.

The first grand prix was a shock to the Formula One world. The new McLaren-Mercedes cars not only occupied the first row of the starting grid, three quarters of a second ahead of Senna's Ferrari and almost a second ahead of Villeneuve, they also pulled away from the competition at some three seconds per lap. While Senna's race only lasted for five laps due to an engine problem, the two McLarens lapped the entire field, Schumacher winning ahead of Häkkinen.

Ahead of the next race, in Brazil, Ferrari formally lodged a complaint against McLaren, Jordan and Williams, accusing the three teams of using illegal braking systems, such a system effectively

operating as a four-wheel steering system. The Scuderia were joined by Arrows, Tyrrell and Minardi, while Sauber only identified Jordan in their complaint. The race stewards told the accused teams to disable the system during Friday's free practice, while they worked on the issue. On Saturday morning the stewards confirmed that the braking systems were indeed illegal. But McLaren wasn't bothered. They went on to qualify a full second ahead of the competition, while Senna was only fourth, and in the race they finished one-two again, a full minute ahead of the competition, Schumacher again beating Häkkinen.

The Argentine Grand Prix was a different story, however. Although Häkkinen started from pole position, Senna was second, ahead of Schumacher. The latter two scrapped for the first two laps, but the Brazilian prevailed. Three laps later, leader Häkkinen made a mistake going into turn 7. Senna saw a small gap open up and went for it. The cars touched, Häkkinen spun and dropped several places, but Senna was through. Senna made the most of his two-stop strategy, and, once in the lead, used his light fuel load to create a gap. By the time the Ferrari driver stopped for fuel and fresh tyres, he held eleven seconds over Schumacher. The German took the lead for a number of laps, but when he also pitted, Senna was back in front. Again, Senna made use of his lighter car, and over the next dozen laps he increased the gap to more than twenty seconds. At his second pit stop, Senna had a large enough lead to stay in front. Even an off due to a late rain shower couldn't keep Senna from winning the race, ahead of Schumacher and his Ferrari teammate Salo.

After three flyaway races, the Formula One circus returned to its European heartland for the San Marino Grand Prix. It was now four years since that dreadful weekend, and after Senna and Schumacher had attended the drivers' briefing, the German addressed the fact.

"Formula One has come a long way since '94, hasn't it?" Schumacher said.

"It has, and I'm happy for it", Senna replied. "Maybe Roland didn't die in vain after all."

"I don't think he did."

Senna was quiet.

"What are you thinking about?" Schumacher queried.

"I was thinking about that weekend. About Rubens, Roland, those spectators and mechanics, as well as my own accident, and what it has come to mean to me."

"What does it mean?"

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"Well, about a year ago I talked to Alain about it. And he explained to me his own experience, which is similar."

"Which is?"

"It was about Pironi's crash at Hockenheim in '82."

"What did that have to do with Prost?"

"It was Prost's car that Pironi crashed into. He was one of the first to arrive at the scene, even before Sid was there. He saw everything. He heard the doctors talk about amputating Pironi's legs. He pleaded against it, which saved them."

"Wow, I didn't know that. And how did Prost take it?"

"The experience changed him. It changed the way he raced."

Schumacher stopped. Senna stopped, too. He turned to his rival, who asked: "Has your experience changed you?"

Senna stared at Schumacher, surprised by the straightforwardness of the question, and by the fact that, of all people, it was Schumacher who had asked it. "I'm not sure", he said.

The conversation was cut short by the Ferrari press officer, who needed Senna to attend a team meeting. When they walked off, Senna looked over his shoulder, to Schumacher. He felt awkward about their talk. About Schumacher's last question. About the fact that he had had no answer. Senna had been preoccupied by his racing, the past few years, but he was sure that he would find out whether that weekend, that season had changed him, and how.

Despite Senna's win in the previous race, everyone expected another walkover for McLaren. Schumacher beat Häkkinen to pole position, and both got away for the race without problems. Schumacher built up a healthy lead over Häkkinen, but after seventeen laps the Finn's gearbox developed an issue that caused him to retire. It left Schumacher with a fifteen-second lead over Senna and Villeneuve. All three drivers pitted on the same lap, while fourth-placed Salo stopped for fuel and tyres a lap later, enabling him to leapfrog Villeneuve for a podium position. The order remained unchanged over the second series of stops.

In Spain, Schumacher was utterly dominant. He was fastest in all practice and qualifying sessions and won the race. Häkkinen followed him throughout the entire weekend, but could never match his team-mate on pace. Häkkinen won the Monaco Grand Prix, his second race of the season, ahead of Fisichella and Salo. Schumacher failed to finish due to a blown engine, while

Senna ended a miserable weekend in tenth place. Häkkinen was now one point ahead of teammate Schumacher in the championship standings.

Senna felt that his victory in Argentina had been a lucky one, with the McLaren drivers winning the other races 45 seconds to a full minute ahead of the competition. Another title could be out of reach at the halfway point of the season, Senna feared. But for the next grand prix, in Canada, Ferrari had developed a controversial engine-mapping arrangement. It enabled the team's engineers to change the power unit's settings according to each driver and every circuit. The FIA had deemed it to be legal. Probably with this in mind, both Senna and Salo had stated ahead of the race that they felt the Canadian Grand Prix would prove crucial in Ferrari's title efforts.

McLaren didn't seem to care: Häkkinen took pole position again, ahead of Schumacher and Senna. The Finn also made the best start. Schumacher was slow off the line, allowing Senna to take second place. However, crashes behind the leaders as well as technical problems for both McLarens meant that the safety car was brought in three times. Senna took advantage, pitting for fuel and tyres, but the Brazilian drove Frenzen off the road coming out of the pit lane. Race control handed him a ten-second stop-go penalty, which dropped Senna back to third, behind Fisichella and Hill. That didn't last long, because the Ferrari proved quicker than the Jordan, while the team also had the better of Benetton come the final pit stops. Senna won the race ahead of Fisichella, with Salo also on the podium.

Although he was realistic about profiting from McLaren's misfortune, Senna was ecstatic with victory. The reigning world champion had taken a healthy bite out of both his opponents' points lead. He was now only four points behind Häkkinen and three behind Schumacher.

Three weeks later, in qualifying for the French Grand Prix, Senna was second, only two-tenths slower than Schumacher, with Häkkinen third and Salo fourth. Come race day, just as the lights were about to go out, Magnussen's replacement Irvine stalled his car on the grid. The race director couldn't respond quickly enough to abort the start, so immediately after the red lights went out, they came on again. The McLarens got away fine, but Senna had made a bad start, and he was lucky that the race was stopped.

The second attempt saw both Ferrari's jump the McLarens for the lead. Senna built up a healthy advantage with Salo keeping Schumacher and Häkkinen at bay. Schumacher spun trying to overtake Salo, costing him any chance of victory, while Häkkinen suffered from refuelling woes. Senna won the race, the first 'proper' victory for Ferrari, as far as he was concerned, and

the first double win for the team since the 1996 Italian Grand Prix. Schumacher was third, while a great drive by Alesi wasn't rewarded, since Häkkinen overtook him on the last lap for the final point.

Because of McLaren's bad results in Canada and France, to everyone's surprise, Senna was now in the lead of the championship, three points ahead of Schumacher and another two ahead of Häkkinen.

Rain on the morning before the British Grand Prix guaranteed a partly wet track at race time. Most drivers started on intermediate tyres. Schumacher took advantage of his pole position to beat Senna, who started second, to the first corner. But Häkkinen didn't take long to take Senna's place behind Schumacher, passing him on lap five.

When the rain returned, several drivers spun their cars, and most of them stopped for wet tyres. Despite conditions further deteriorating, the McLarens kept their positions ahead of both Ferraris. But on lap 38, Häkkinen spun out of the race; his intermediate tyres were no longer up to the job. Schumacher, still in the lead, had accumulated a massive fifty-second lead over Senna, by then. A few laps on, the German, too, spun his car, but despite damaging his front wing, he was able to continue, and hold on to first place. When more cars went off the track, though, finally the safety car was deployed, in order to slow down the cars. Of course it also took away Schumacher's advantage over Senna. Salo was still third, with Alesi in fourth, and Fisichella in fifth being the first driver to have already been lapped by the race leader.

At the restart, Senna passed backmarker Coulthard before crossing the start-finish line in order to be immediately behind Schumacher on the circuit. The Brazilian inherited the lead of the race when Schumacher made a mistake, dropping back to second. However, two laps from the end, Senna got a stop-go penalty from race control for overtaking Coulthard before the safety car situation had formally ended. It would ruin his race, and, with Schumacher right behind in second, it would cost him the lead in the championship, too. But much to the surprise of the crowd, the teams as well as the race stewards, on the final lap, Senna headed into the pit lane, crossed the start-finish line there, winning the race, and subsequently served his ten-second penalty.

How was this possible? Ferrari had made use of several ambiguities that had happened over the last half hour. Firstly, any driver handed a penalty, should serve that penalty within three laps, which Senna had done. Secondly, any penalty must be issued within 25 minutes after the infringement; the stewards had taken six minutes too long to issue Senna's. Thirdly, the hand-

written note from the stewards to the team was not clear about which type of penalty was being issued: a ten-second stop-go or ten seconds being added to Senna's final race time. The latter would only be applicable if the infraction had happened during the final twelve laps of the race, which it hadn't.

Rivals McLaren issued a protest against Senna and Ferrari, alleging them to have cheated for not serving the penalty. It was rejected by the FIA, since the stewards had issued the penalty incorrectly. This meant that Senna had now won his third race on the trot, and the first time on merit, he felt. It gave him a seven-point margin in the world championship standings over Schumacher, while Häkkinen had fallen back a further eight points. The three protagonists had taken all nine grands prix so far. But with seven races still to go, there was everything to play for.

The Austrian Grand Prix saw McLaren-Mercedes return to form with a dominant one-two finish. A week later, in Germany, Schumacher and Häkkinen again controlled the race. Hungary appeared to be more of the same, with McLaren-Mercedes again occupying the front row of the grid, although this time Häkkinen was the one on pole position. However, in the race, second-placed Schumacher found himself under attack from Senna. Although the reigning champion couldn't pass the McLarens in the first half of the race, his team performed a masterstroke by changing to a three-stop strategy. It enabled Senna to first jump Schumacher when he pitted, and then Häkkinen, who stopped two laps later. It demanded a superhuman charge to create enough of a gap to his rivals to remain ahead when Senna did his third and final stop for fuel and tyres. In the end, Ferrari pulled it off, and Senna won the race. They were helped, though, by McLaren failing to let Schumacher pass Häkkinen when the Finn developed a technical issue that slowed him as well as his team-mate.

At the mighty Spa-Francorchamps circuit, McLaren again dominated qualifying, Häkkinen and Schumacher setting times a full second faster than Senna. But on Sunday morning, the ever-changing Ardennes mountain weather had turned in favour of the delighted Senna, who duly went quickest in the morning's warm-up session.

Despite the bad weather come the start, the race went ahead as planned. Schumacher made a bad start and spun just after rounding La Source. He crashed into the wall and rebounded into the approaching field. The result was mayhem: as many as thirteen cars crashed into each other. The race was red-flagged, leaving no more than eighteen cars to take the second start; four teams were out of the race altogether.

Senna versus Schumacher

The second attempt to get the race going saw even more bad luck for McLaren as both cars started miserably. It allowed Hill to beat Salo into La Source from third. Häkkinen and Senna made contact, which put the Finn out of the race, while it left the Ferrari undamaged, and already on his way to pass Salo for second. Behind them, Schumacher collided with Benetton's Coulthard, and he had to pit for repairs. With Häkkinen's car stranded on the track, though, the safety car came out for a number of laps. Once it was out of the way, Senna immediately took the lead from Hill, and he started to build up a firm lead at a rate of some three seconds per lap.

On lap 25, Senna was almost forty seconds ahead of second-placed Hill. On the Kimmel straight, Senna was nearing Schumacher, who was running eighth and over two minutes behind the leader. Coming out of the Rivage corner, turning left onto the short straight towards the fast left-hander Pouhon, Senna wanted to pass. *He'll move from the racing line to allow me through*, Senna thought. But Schumacher thought: *I'll stay as far right as I can and lift off to let him past*. So when no one expected it, Senna ran his Ferrari into the back of Schumacher's McLaren. The McLaren veered right, without its rear wing, but continued. The Ferrari swerved left, without its front wing and right front wheel, but also continued. Both drivers made it to the pits.

Senna parked his car in the Ferrari pit box nose first.

He threw his steering wheel out, got up, and stormed out of the pit box, pushing his mechanics aside.

Angrily taking off his helmet and balaclava, Senna stormed past the Williams and Benetton teams, and into the McLaren pit box.

A senior team member tried to stop him, but to no avail. Ferrari team boss Jean Todt had quickly gotten off the pit wall and hurried towards his driver. But he, too, couldn't stop the confrontation. Senna, who had almost come to terms with the cheating allegations and the infamous crash of 1994, and their fierce battles and accidents a season later, was determined to obtain redress with Schumacher.

"What the hell was that?" Senna shouted at Schumacher.

"It was an accident", he replied, his helmet still on, hardly able to finish his sentence.

"What were you thinking? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Senna versus Schumacher

“It was an accident, Ayrton!”

“You’re trying to kill me! Just like you did in Adelaide! In Silverstone! Here, in ‘95, and those races in ‘92!”

Before Schumacher could reply, Todt had reached Senna, together with several other team members, deep in the McLaren pit box.

“You’re trying to kill me, because you can’t beat me!” Senna shouted.

His team members pulled Senna back, away from the McLaren team and back towards the Ferrari pit box. Once there, the storm had calmed.

Meanwhile, Damon Hill and Ralf Schumacher found themselves in the lead of the race. And they would remain there until the finish, taking a first grand prix victory for the Jordan team, and a double in at that.

The season was about to enter its end-phase with only three races still to go. Senna was still in the lead of the world championship, only a single point ahead of Schumacher, and Häkkinen now fourteen points adrift.

Senna’s Spa woes were soon forgotten once the Formula One circus arrived at Ferrari’s home grand prix at the Monza circuit in Italy. Most teams struggled with their cars’ set-up due to heavy rain during the practice sessions, but the superb Goodyear tyres helped Senna claim pole position for the Scuderia on home ground. The Bridgestone-shod McLarens were on the second row.

Senna dropped back to fifth at the start of the race, however, while Schumacher took the lead after a blindingly fast getaway, with Häkkinen right behind him. By the third lap, though, Senna was in third position. He was some four seconds behind the McLaren until Schumacher ran into trouble and waved team-mate Häkkinen through for the lead. The German fell back into the reach of Senna, but defended his position. This allowed Häkkinen to build up a ten-second lead, but on lap seventeen the Finn suffered a blown engine. When Schumacher and Senna arrived at the scene in a cloud of Mercedes-Benz smoke, the Ferrari driver profited from the confusion and regained first place from Schumacher.

Through the single series of pit stops, Senna kept in the lead, with Schumacher dropping further back. Later in the race, the McLaren driver managed to fight back, although in the last few laps he made several mistakes and went off the track twice. This allowed first Salo ahead — very much to the enjoyment of the tifosi, for now it looked like it would be a Ferrari one-two — and then Schumacher's brother Ralf.

In this order the drivers finished. Victory gave Senna an eight-points lead in the championship standings. Häkkinen's engine troubles had taken him out of the title hunt. With two grands prix to go, everybody expected a very exciting battle.

On the Thursday prior to the Luxembourg Grand Prix, Senna and Schumacher attended the official press event, together with several other drivers. After the event, the championship contenders bumped into Alain Prost, who was now running his own team, having bought Ligier the year before. The three men hadn't met each other in a while, and they started talking. At first they discussed the season up to that point, and how Senna and Schumacher had proven to be very evenly matched. But then Prost brought up the incident at the Belgian Grand Prix, with which Senna had come to terms, dubbing it an unfortunate accident, indeed.

The discussion moved to the three drivers' shared past, and after a while that fateful weekend in Imola, now four-and-a-half years ago, came up. The three men talked about how they had dealt with it.

"How were you able to cope with that weekend, emotionally, Ayrton?" asked Schumacher.

"First of all", Senna replied, "I got a big wake-up call from that accident. I realised that I could do myself some serious damage. That we all could. But it also dawned to me that, as the senior driver, at the time, I had a special responsibility. And then we recreated the GPDA, of course. I felt that was an important step, to stand up against the other forces, and working with them, while representing the drivers' needs."

"But did the weekend change you? As a man? As a driver? The last time we spoke about this, you didn't really know."

"From Imola onwards I was a different driver, for sure. Not slower or less competitive, just different. I knew where the boundaries and limits were and I knew I had to respect them more."

"Still", Prost queried, "Over the next season, you and Michael had a difficult time dealing with those limits."

"That is true", Senna admitted.

"How would you compare your incidents with Michael with our own?"

“That’s difficult to say, Alain. There were many factors that influenced our rivalry.” Senna referred to the difficulties he had had with then-FIA President Jean-Marie Balestre, and decisions that the sporting commissioners had taken under his guidance. “They very much contributed to the difficulties we had.”

Then, while firmly looking Senna in the eye, Prost put his hand on Schumacher’s shoulder, and said: “Can you imagine what young drivers, back then, thought, when they saw things like that in Formula One? They will have thought they could get away with anything.”

Senna fell silent. *Michael would have been in Formula Three at the time, he thought. He must have felt that, if they can act like that, why can't I?* He remembered how, at the Italian Grand Prix, a few years before, he spoke about setting an example for younger drivers. *I came into Formula One desperate to beat the top driver at the time: Prost. I wanted to prove to myself and to the world that I was the best. I didn't just want to beat Prost — I wanted to destroy him. And I succeeded. And then it dawned upon him. But at what cost? What example did I set myself? What if my actions have instigated what happened between Michael and myself? I have brought it upon myself. And I have put other drivers in danger.*

As a final thought, Prost offered a glimpse of hope to his former nemesis. “The both of you have had many incidents in the past. You will again fight for the championship. And with you, Ayrton, retiring after this season, you have one final opportunity to show what you can do. One final chance to make it a fair fight. Make use of it.”

Once again the Suzuka circuit provided the scenery for a Formula One world championship showdown. Senna held a four-point lead over Schumacher in the championship standings, while McLaren would only need a single point from the Japanese Grand Prix to take the constructors’ title. In qualifying, Senna beat Schumacher to pole position by a tenth of a second. Häkkinen was third, over a second behind, while Salo was in fourth, almost two seconds slower than his teammate.

The first attempt to get the race going failed as Jarno Trulli stalled his Prost-Peugeot. At the second attempt, horror for Ferrari as Senna stalled his engine. Another aborted start, Senna forced to start the race from the back, and the championship battle looked to finish on a

whimper, for now Schumacher was on pole and there were no less than twenty cars between him and Senna.

It was third time lucky and finally the Japanese Grand Prix got underway. Schumacher led Salo through the first lap as Senna stormed through the field to be in twelfth place come lap two. He continued to progress until he stumbled upon his former title rival Villeneuve and his old teammate Hill. He ran behind them for eight laps, and was now almost half a minute behind Schumacher. But, miraculously, during the round of pit stops that followed, through a quick stop by his Ferrari team, and a series of blindingly fast laps on the circuit, Senna gained four positions. This opened up the opportunity for Salo to drop back and allow Senna through for second place. And after Salo's second stop, it looked like this was indeed Ferrari's strategy. It would be too little too late, however, for finishing second behind Schumacher would lose the Brazilian the title on second places' count-back.

Senna feared the twenty laps that he still had to go. They were the final twenty laps not only of this race, of the season, and, indeed, of his career. He would have to spend them waiting for anything to go wrong with Schumacher's car in order to win the title. But on lap 32, the championship finally did go out with a bang. It was Senna's right rear tyre that exploded after the Ferrari driver ran over debris from an earlier crash. He was out of the race. Schumacher stopped one final time for fresh tyres and fuel, and raced to the finish, unchallenged. He took his sixth victory of the year, ahead of Salo and Häkkinen, and was the new world champion.

During the McLaren teams' celebrations, an unexpected guest walked into the pit box. It was Ayrton Senna. He squeezed himself through the crowd, and finally reached Schumacher.

"Congratulations, Michael", Senna said. "It's a well-deserved championship."

"Thank you very much, Ayrton", Schumacher replied. "That means a lot."

The two men embraced. The hatchet was buried.

Senna versus Schumacher is one of five stories about Formula One rivalries that never happened. If you enjoyed this one, you can buy the others at Amazon, Apple Books, and Lulu, both as e-book and as a paperback. Lulu has 15% off on the paperback. Check out <http://senna-versus-schumacher.com> for details.