

F1: Schumacher's return: will the bad boy of F1 behave himself this time around?

Silverstone, 1994. The British Grand Prix. Aiming for his first World Championship, Michael Schumacher in his Benetton, lines up behind Damon Hill and the cars set off on the warm-up lap. Schumacher started cheating - and continued for much of the rest of his career. Is there any reason to suspect that this time around it will be any different?

As the cars ran around on the warm-up lap, Schumacher overtook Hill not once but twice - a cardinal sin in F1. The stewards handed him a ten second stop-go penalty but Schumacher did not pit; Flavio Briatore and Tom Walkinshaw both argued the toss with the stewards who, frustrated at Schumacher's failure to come in black flagged him. The team continued to argue and Schumacher continued to circulate. Several laps after the black flag was shown, he came in - not to park but to race to the end of the pit lane and perform the stop-go penalty that had been superseded by the black flag. He shot out again and finished second on the track, behind Hill. The team then argued that as he had performed the stop-go penalty, the black flag should be rescinded. The stewards stood their ground : a black-flag cannot be unwaved, they said. Excluded from the results after the podium celebration, a jubilant Schumacher turned sour, made worse still by being awarded a two race ban.

The 1994 season is infamous: Roland Ratzenberger and Ayrton Senna were killed at Imola, a spectacular fuel fire in the pits engulfed Jos Verstappen, there were persistent allegations that Benetton's lightning starts were the result of some dubious software amounting to launch control - and Schumacher was disqualified from the results of the Belgian GP when his car was found to have excess wear to "the plank" which is fitted to the underside of cars to ensure that they meet minimum ride-height requirements.

But all of that paled into insignificance against the brutal driving at Adelaide: one point ahead of Hill going into the last race of the season, Schumacher led Hill but ran wide and into a wall; returning to the track, Schumacher left a gap on the inside of the next right-hander. Hill drove into it, Schumacher turned right as Hill's front wheels came alongside the Benetton's side pods. Schumacher's car lifted several feet into the air, ironically giving TV viewers a perfect view of the plank, and came to earth with minor but terminal damage. But the damage to Hill's car was structural and although he made it back to the pits, there was no chance of repairing the damage in time for Hill to finish 6th and collect the one point he needed for the Championship. From multiple angles, the right-turn into Hill's car looks positive and deliberate.

Schumacher's cheating events are legion, from parking his car in the middle of the last-gasp qualifying runs of quicker rivals to delaying a stop-go penalty until after he had crossed the finishing line.

Strangely, one thing drew criticisms of cheating and led to both outcry and a change in the Regulations - but Schumacher and his team had done absolutely nothing wrong; indeed, they were squarely within the rules when they applied team orders to swap Barrichello and Schumacher in the 2002 Austrian GP: then Schumacher was criticised and held to have brought the sport into disrepute by putting Rubino on the top step of the podium. OK, so it was naff but the criticism was unwarranted - an irony given the number of occasions when Schumacher's behaviour on track was so obviously wrong yet nothing was done.

And many of them were in dominant machinery. So how is he going to handle being in a machine that has genuine competitors?

Mercedes will be quick - no one is doubting that. But McLaren and Ferrari - and possibly Red Bull - will be swarming around them. The dominance of Brawn is not going to happen in 2010.

Mercedes might find themselves in a difficult position: will McLaren really get an engine that will help them beat Schumacher in a car with Mercedes on the front?

There are rumours that Schumacher was economical with the truth about his pay: originally said to be in the region of 3 million euros, some German commentators are now saying that the package is really worth more than 25 million euros, but to be fair no evidence has been produced to back this up.

Schumacher has not come back to Formula One to take it easy: he intends to win. He wants to repay both Mercedes for their early support of him (and honour a long-breached commitment to drive for Mercedes if they ever entered F1) and Ross Brawn who, at Ferrari, masterminded much of the race strategy that helped support Schumacher's superb driving skills.

And it's those skills that make his cheating so annoying. Schumacher wins races not because he's an oaf but because he has an affinity with racing cars that surpasses that of almost every other driver of his day and because he has the ability to out-drive the car when it's not working but to save it when it is.

The big question is whether, this time around, he has that personality defect under control and, if not, will the recent change in attitude from stewards - who have been anti-aggressive driving - bring him to heel with more force and alacrity than previously.