Death Returns To Formula One Racing Essay, Research Paper

Jesse Oleet !0/5/98

English 10 Short Story

Death Returns to Formula One Racing

My first hint that something was wrong came Sunday afternoon when I logged on to the BBS (bulletin board service, a central computer acting as a host for other users to exchange messages) for auto racing. Someone posted a short but gripping note, “I think I just witnessed the death of Ayrton Senna,” he said. My eyes widened as I exclaimed “what,” in shock and dismay. A few hours later, the facts became clearer. Senna had crashed on the sixth lap of the San Marino Grand Prix while leading the race. It happened at a section called “Tamburello” – a gentle bend taken at top speed, about 186 miles per hour. His car had suddenly veered off the course and crashed into a solid concrete wall. Senna was already considered one of the top drivers in grand prix racing history. He had more pole positions than any other driver did and only Alain Prost who retired last year surpassed his total wins. Incredible intensity and deep concentration characterized his driving. Mistakes from him were rare. It was shocking that he would have a serious crash, even more inconceivable that he would be in mortal danger.

On the BBS, all of us were experiencing a sense of loss and were having a difficult time finding solace among outsiders to the sport of auto racing. Crashes like Senna’s tend to bring out the worst critics who insist that those who want only to see crashes watch-racing events. And so we turned to each other expressing first our anger, then sadness and finally a candid assessment of the sport and how it could be made safer. This was the second death of the weekend as another lesser-known driver was killed during a practice session before the race.

The modern formula one or grand prix car is a masterpiece of engineering and contemporary design. The top teams to develop the cars to their maximum potential spend incredible sums of money. Their shape is wind tunnel tested. Exotic materials like carbon fiber along with chemical additives for optimizing the gasoline are just a few of the important technologies used. Telemetry logged into a computer (like an airplane’s “black box” flight recorder) can tell the mechanics and designers exactly how a car can be optimized for a particular track. In fact computer technology has played an even greater role in the last two years through the development of real-time enhancements. These “driver aids” as they have been called include: active suspension, engine management along with semiautomatic transmission, and traction control. Of course, along with the technological advancements has come a steady increase in speed. More importantly, this steady increase has led to a greater potential for serious harm in an accident.

Details of Senna’s crash serve to illustrate some of the dangers that grand prix racing must overcome if it is to survive. At the section where Senna went off the track, there are some bumps, which (according to other drivers) were disruptive and may have caused a mechanical failure, resulting in the veering of the car. Earlier in the year (during preseason testing) Senna himself had pointed out the danger of these bumps and had requested that the surface be smoothed out. This was supposedly done but the result was even worse! Reports indicate the bumps were perhaps 2 inches high-an incredible hurdle to a modern F1 car. Also there is the wall where the crash occurred. On most tracks there are large runoff areas with sand traps that have proved effective in slowing down out-of-control cars. Stacked tire walls have also helped soften areas of possible impact. However, at Tamburello none of these techniques were employed. There is a small river that runs near the course at this point; hence the placement of a large concrete wall at an acute angle only a few yards from the pavement but in front of the river. A sandpit was contemplated but there was inadequate room. Finally, a patch of concrete was added over the grass to help a car gain some control and perhaps avoid the wall if it went off course. The drivers? head has also become increasingly vulnerable as the speeds have increased. Senna was killed by a piece of his car’s suspension that had broken off during the collision and impacted his forehead. Roland Ratzenberger, the driver who was killed in practice, also suffered a fatal head injury.

But perhaps the greatest problem is beyond the scope of a technical discussion. It is a factor, which lies outside the control of any designer, engineer, mechanic, or driver. To illustrate, at the beginning of the year, FISA (the governing body of grand prix formula one racing) began enforcing a new set of rules which banned the use of most of the driver aiding computer technology. It was thought that driver ability was playing a much lesser role than it ever had, resulting in less competition and increased cost. But in fact, had active suspension been permitted at the San Marino race, Sennas’ car would have been able to negotiate the bumps at Tamburello much more easily and a mechanical breakage would probably not have occurred. It has also been argued that the wall at Tamburello makes the track unsafe and that a grand prix race should not be held there. In fact, many tracks in the US have been denied a race for similar reasons. Yet the promoters of San Marino seem to have a strong influence and their voices have thus far held sway. Meanwhile, the technology of formula one cars continues to improve while the drivers cope with greater speed and frequently greater danger. And so the deeper problem begins to surface: can a governing body, subjected to political forces, safely and effectively guide the progress of formula one technology?

Since that fateful weekend at San Marino, immediate and long-term rules changes are being contemplated by FISA. That they will be effective in improving safety remains to be seen. But even if they are, crashes will not be totally avoidable. And the critics will continue to say that racing fans are blood mongers who want only to see horrendous accidents. That there will be more death is also a possibility. But many people die even as they walk down the street, drive a car, or ride in a plane. Yes, the danger will always be present, separating the great drivers from the reckless and the mere finishers.

After that tragic weekend, Niki Lauda, the retired grand prix champion was quoted as saying; “God lifted his hand from formula one racing momentarily this weekend after having protected it for ten years.” To those of us who admire the drivers and thrill at the delicate beauty of a formula one car as it fleetingly dances along the path of the worlds race tracks, we can only pray that the benevolent hand of protection will return and restore the relative safety of the past ten years.