

Feb 15, 2022

Formula One Racing: “Understood, Give Me A Second...”

By Jessie Lewis

Some new information came to light last week surrounding the controversial Formula One (“F1”) Abu Dhabi Grand Prix that took place on December 12, 2021. Radio conversations between Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile's F1 race director Michael Masi and Red Bull Racing's Sporting Director Jonathan Wheatley were leaked to the public, revealing pressure from the Red Bull Racing team to allow for a nail biting end to the final race of the 2021 F1 racing season where Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen was named World Champion.

If you are not a follower of F1, Sir Lewis Hamilton of Mercedes was looking to win his eighth F1 championship and break Michael Schumacher's record of seven F1 championship titles, while Max Verstappen of Red Bull Racing was looking to get his first F1 championship title and break Hamilton's reign as F1 champion.

The 2021 F1 title came down to the season ending race in Abu Dhabi, as Hamilton and Verstappen entered the race with the same number of points after competing in twenty-one races over the course of the season - winner takes all.

As the drivers were entering their final laps, Hamilton was so far ahead of Verstappen's second place position that even Christian Horner, Team Principal of Red Bull Racing, admitted that “the pace of the Mercedes is just too strong today...we are going to need a miracle.” And a miracle they received! On lap 52 out of 58 there was a big crash, resulting in the safety car being deployed in front of Hamilton, slowing down the drivers to allow for a safe cleanup of the crash.

When the safety car is deployed, no overtaking is permitted, but drivers are allowed to pit and change their tires to give them a fresh start when they return to full speed. Despite the slower pace of each lap, these laps count as full laps completed by the drivers. So when the safety car is deployed, any gaps that a driver was able to create during the race is removed. While the safety car was deployed, Verstappen pitted to get fresh tires, though Hamilton was unable to pit as he would lose his number one spot (remember no one can pass, but if Hamilton pitted, whoever was behind him would automatically gain his position and Hamilton would not be able to pass to try and regain his position until the safety car passed). After Red Bull's Verstappen got his fresh tires, he was near the back of the pack and they were approaching the final lap.

This is where the “miracle” happened and where the controversy is centred. The cars separating Hamilton and Verstappen were all on a different lap than the front runners, as they had been lapped prior to the safety car being deployed. To the surprise of everyone, after initially stating that the lapped cars were not allowed to overtake, Masi changed his mind and broke with convention to allow all five lapped cars to overtake the safety car. This meant that suddenly Verstappen was directly behind Hamilton! When the safety car ended on the last lap of the race, Verstappen had the upper hand with fresh tires and was able to overtake Hamilton to become a first-time F1 champion.

It was only this week that we found out why Masi made that contentious decision to allow lapped cars to overtake the safety car. It was because Red Bull Racing's Jonathan Wheatley was in his ear stating “you need to let them go... and then we have a motor race on our hands,” to which Masi can be heard saying “understood, give me a second...” If Masi had not broken convention, Hamilton would have had the benefit of the lapped cars, as Verstappen would have had to overtake all of the lapped cars before reaching Hamilton. With it coming down to the last lap, the likelihood that Verstappen would have been able to do this was slim to none.

Following the end of the race, the Mercedes team challenged Verstappen's win, but was not successful. It will be interesting to see if any further appeals are launched following the leak of this radio conversation.

If you are new to F1 Racing, the Netflix documentary series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* will have you hooked on the sport in minutes. The behind-the-scenes footage of the drivers, races and relationship dynamics will draw you into the drama from day one. Let's just say that Season 4 is gearing up to be the most anticipated season yet!

Author



Jessie Lewis
Associate
T 647.426.2318
jlewis@airdberlis.com

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