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Team Retro-Speed's Ed McDonough driving Senna's 1984 Tolman-Hart.



THE BEST QUALIFIER IN F1 HISTORY? : Ales Norsky

Who's the best qualifier in F1 history? Words by Ales Norsky

When someone says Formula 1 qualifying, generally, two thoughts come to mind perhaps before any others; no one comes close to Ayrton Senna on raw qualifying speed, and the Formula 1 field today is much more closely matched than ever before.

Well, I have decided to test these assumptions, but immediately I would run into a problem of how to do that? In the first case, I started with the fact that in 161 GPs, Senna started from pole position 65 times, which comes to a ratio of 40.373 percent. That figure places him 4th overall on this particular list, behind Juan Manuel Fangio (56.863 percent) Jim Clark (45.205 percent) and Alberto Ascari (45.161 percent). So, I made a decision to further analyse qualifying performance of those four drivers, plus the current Formula 1 champion Lewis Hamilton, who comes fifth at 36.842 percent.

The method I selected was to compare the variance between the pole position time set by one of these drivers, and the second fastest driver on that day, marking the pole position time as 100.000 percent. Ascari achieved the largest gap, the second driver behind him recording time of 100.837percent average. Fangio follows with 100.802 percent, then Senna 100.618 percent, Clark 100.532 percent and Hamilton 100.314 percent. Then I reversed this step to see the gap one of these drivers lagged behind the pole position time, when they have qualified in second place. Here, Hamilton shows the smallest deficit, with average time of 100.217 percent behind pole position. Remaining order is Ascari (100.277 percent), Clark (100.341 percent), Senna (100.526 percent) and Fangio (100.664 percent).

What does it all mean? I am not sure but, using these findings, anybody can draw their own conclusions whether any of these drivers was a stronger qualifier than the others.

For the second exercise, I decided to compare the 2020 season to the previous seven decades, by examining the gap between the pole position time and the time set by the driver who qualified in the middle of the starting grid. I discarded the idea of involving the last qualifier, because in some years, these were enormously slower than even the mid-field, and that would needlessly distort the data. Therefore, in 2020 the average mid-field qualifier set time of 102.186 percent compared to the pole position time (100.000 percent).

The previous 70-year average stands at 102.934 percent, which suggests that 2020 was indeed more competitive than the historical norm. The decades breakdown presents the following results: 1950s at 105.718 percent; 1960s at 103.112 percent; 1970s at 102.227 percent; 1980s at 103.841 percent; 1990s at 101.824 percent, 2000s at 101.831 percent; and 2010s at 102.365 percent. Consequently, it seems that the current Formula 1 field is about as close as it was in the 1970s, but is apparently moving in the wrong direction when compared to the competitive levels some 15 to 25 years ago. And, just in case anybody is wondering, using this logic, the tightest F1 starting grid was in Bahrain 2007, with the mid-field qualifier setting time of 100.284 percent of the pole position time, while the least competitive starting grid came in the 1951 French Grand Prix, with the gap reaching a truly substantial 114.345 percent!