

# **PEDAL TO THE MEDAL?**

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When Ayrton Senna received a gold medal for winning the 1991 USA Grand Prix in Phoenix - the last F1 driver honoured so - he scrutinized the tiny disc dangling on his neck and then smirked across the rostrum at his team boss Ron Dennis as if to say 'is that it, where's the trophy?' Earlier this season, it wasn't the silverware that was at stake but the 10 points that the race winner traditionally bags towards the World Championship. With Bernie Ecclestone's comments as late as the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix that he would still like to see his radical idea reach fruition, our analysis looks beyond the stirred emotions and examines in detail the merits of the medal system.

## **WINNER TAKES IT ALL**

The proposal looks simple: scrap the current points system in favour of gold, silver, and bronze medals awarded to the top three finishers in order to spur drivers on to race to win and fight until the chequered flag. The driver who notches up the most wins over the course of a season is crowned World Champion regardless of his results in the remaining races. An Olympics-style classification - whereby one fourth place beats ten fifths etc. - determines the rest of the standings.

## NOT SO MUCH BETTER RACING

Three limiting factors interfere with the driver's natural desire to win, and a closer inspection of Grand Prix held since 2005 reveals that it is these three factors - and not the carrot of points or medals - that dictates whether the fight for victory is going to be all the way to the flag or not.

On a given day, usually just a handful of driver/car combinations are capable of winning on pure pace; the rest of the field is consigned to the also-ran category due to inferior machinery, car setup, or simply an off-day. Often it's a single driver who enjoys clear performance advantage that allows him to control the pace from the front, like Vettel did in Suzuka or Webber in Sao Paolo this year. The pursuers at some stage realize the vanity of their efforts and grudgingly accept finishing second as their best hope. To assume that medals can suddenly expand the competitive landscape into five or six drivers vying for the win is optimistic.

The prevailing technical regulations further exacerbate this problem. In a formula where the drivetrain must last several races and where overtaking is very difficult, the risk-averse strategy of settling for second place, especially if the chances of catching the leader are slim, yields higher returns than an attack that potentially blows the engine or gearbox and thus also ruins the driver's next race due to a grid penalty. It's wiser to save the car, settle for silver, and go for gold in two weeks' time.

The third factor is battles between team-mates. On occasions when one team dominates the proceedings, the medal incentive becomes irrelevant because no team principal will jeopardize a one-two finish by letting his charges fight doggedly to the flag - think Alonso vs. Hamilton in Monaco 2007. The team victory is orchestrated from the

pitwall and the race is typically called off after the final pit stop, if not sooner.

And lest we forget, there are several races a year where the fight does indeed go down to the wire – Spa 2008 comes to mind – and where switching from points to medals would be... well, pointless.

### SIDE-EFFECTS

The medal system's Achilles heel is the increased opportunity for a less complete driver to win the Championship. Taken to the extreme, if an error-free driver in a less competitive machinery collects four wins and ten second places, he still loses the title to a win-or-bust rival in a slightly superior car who wins five times and crashes out of the remaining races. Intuitively, that doesn't feel right.

A worthy champion should tick all the boxes: dominate from the front, slice through the field, extract the maximum on bad days, restrain his instinct and target fifth place if that's what's required, motivate the engineers to build the most reliable car on the grid, and steer clear of collisions and accidents. A flick through the history books confirms that the chief culprit behind deserved but lost championships is not a title rival successfully playing the numbers game, but poor reliability (Moss in 1958, Clark in 1967, Mansell in 1987, Senna in 1989). If we want to mitigate its influence we don't need medals - counting a suitable number of best results serves the purpose equally well (similar to the unloved 11 out of 16 rule abolished in 1991).

Down the pecking order, the medal system with its Olympics-style classification disproportionately rewards luck over merit, a phenomenon which could lure drivers into exploiting some eccentric race strategies: one high attrition or safety car induced podium vaults

the fortunate driver ahead in the standings, even if a rival boasts a string of hard-fought fourths and fifths achieved on days when all frontrunners also finished. The system may work well in the Olympics, but it is ill-suited to sports like F1 where technology and reliability, rather than the individual, are the deciding ingredients in the outcome.

### ...AND POINTS FOR ALL

It's a public secret that the 10-8-6-5-4-3-2-1 points distribution introduced in 2003 makes finishing second a very attractive low risk / high value proposition. But the system itself is not fundamentally flawed and in the various incarnations has stood the test of time since the inception of the Championship in 1950. Rather than take a gamble on the medal approach and suffer the consequences, the powers-that-be should consider tweaking the existing system so that it strikes the desired balance between the conflicting needs of crowning the driver with the most wins and keeping the title battle alive for as long as possible. Awarding points down to tenth place would promote harder racing through the field, and a statistical analysis of past races would easily reveal the optimum points gap required between first and second places. In addition, introduce a \$1m jackpot prize for the winning driver to encourage go-for-gold racing.

In theory, the medal system would boost the racing, but it would do so only in a handful of races per season and, crucially, it would suffer from significant drawbacks. On balance, F1 will be better off if Ayrton Senna remains the last Grand Prix winner to have received a gold medal.