

CHAPTER 4

Teammate trouble: Senna and Prost

In his first season at McLaren, Senna finally had the car of his dreams. It had the best engine and the best body in Formula One. Senna's hands hurt terribly when he was driving the Lotus. In his new car, driving was easy. The McLaren team also had good people working for them.

The engineers at McLaren loved working with Senna. He worked as hard as they did and he always thanked them at the end of a long day. And, unlike other drivers, he always said when a problem was his own fault, not the car's.

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Senna and his new teammate Alain Prost

At first, Prost and Senna worked quite well as teammates. But they were very different. Prost thought carefully about a race. He did exactly as much as he needed to. If he could win a championship with a third place in the race, he came third.

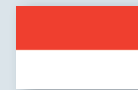
Senna could never do that. 'Something inside me, something very strong, pushes me on,' he once explained. 'I try to beat myself.'

He also tried to beat Prost. As they now drove in the same cars, the races were a fair test of their driving. Senna drove the fastest qualifying lap in thirteen of the season's sixteen races. But qualifying laps didn't win races. Senna drove his car so hard that there were sometimes problems.

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Monaco was the third Grand Prix of the season. While he was qualifying, Senna drove better than ever before. He was excited about the main race on Sunday. Monaco was one of his favourite tracks.

THE MONACO GRAND PRIX 1988



The race started, and soon Senna was far ahead of Prost and the other drivers. The McLaren boss, Ron Dennis, told him to slow down now. Senna was going to win anyway, he said. But going slower wasn't easy for Senna. Eleven laps before the end of the race, he crashed into the side of the track. Prost drove past and won the Grand Prix.

Senna jumped angrily out of his car and went to his flat. He didn't speak to anyone. Hours later, he was still crying. 'I made a mistake,' he said later. 'I became much stronger after that.'



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By the time of the Portuguese Grand Prix, Senna had seven wins and Prost had four. During the race, Prost tried to overtake Senna near the pits. Senna drove to Prost's side of the track. Prost had almost no track to drive on. His car touched the pit wall. An accident here could kill not only the drivers but also the engineers on the other side of the wall ... but luckily the accident didn't happen. Prost won the race in the end, but he wasn't happy. 'It was dangerous,' he said. 'If Senna wants the world championship as much as that, he can have it.'

Prost and Senna could not be friends after this. Prost won again in Spain. He now had five wins against Senna's seven, with only two more races in the season. Prost had to win in Japan and Australia. Senna only had to win one of those races. Then he could finally be world champion.

THE JAPANESE GRAND PRIX 1988



At the start of the race, Senna made a stupid mistake. His engine stopped just as the race was starting. Luckily for Senna, the track went downhill and he could start his engine again. But he was now in fourteenth place and Prost was in front. By the end of the fourth lap, Senna was fourth. Then it started to rain. Prost drove slower, and Senna overtook him. The race ended with Senna in first place and Prost in second place. Senna was world champion!



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Later he told the newspapers about the end of the race. 'I saw God,' he said. Some people laughed at him. Prost said to the newspapers, 'Ayrton has a small problem. He thinks he can't kill himself because he believes in God. I think that's very dangerous for the other drivers.'

Senna was angry. 'Yes, I believe in God. But that doesn't mean that I can't die.' After de Angelis's death, he knew the dangers of motor racing as well as anyone.

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Soon the season was over and Senna went home to Brazil as world champion. There were parties with lots of important people, but his friends were still the old friends, from school and from go-kart racing. He was very close to his family, too. But the most important person in his life at this time was Xuxa.

Senna bought his own home in Brazil: a beach house at Angra. He and Xuxa planned to spend as much time as possible there. Of course, with their busy lives it wasn't easy. But Senna loved her deeply. He hoped to have children with her in the future.

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When Senna went back to Europe for the 1989 season, the problems with Prost started again.

Like last year, the two McLaren cars were the fastest in Formula One. Senna qualified first in thirteen of the sixteen races that season. Prost wasn't happy. He told the newspapers that his and Senna's cars had different engines. But it wasn't true. The two engines were exactly the same.

Senna was faster, but he had more problems with his car. Sometimes he drove it too hard because he hated being in second place. When Senna didn't finish a race, Prost usually won. And Prost got points in a lot of races for finishing second. By the time of the Japanese Grand Prix, Prost had more points. Senna had to win both of the last races of the season to become champion.



Senna was very popular all around the world

THE JAPANESE GRAND PRIX 1989



In Japan, the two McLaren teammates drove brilliantly. For a long time, they were close together, with Prost just ahead. On the forty-seventh lap, Senna tried to overtake. Prost turned into the next corner early, with Senna next to him. The two cars touched and lost control. They drove slowly off the track together.

Both men thought for a moment. If they didn't finish the race, Prost was world champion. Prost got out of the car. But Senna turned his car round and drove to the pits. The engineers did some quick work on the car, and then he returned to the track. He drove an amazing race and crossed the finish line first. He could still win the world championship!

But there was a problem. While Senna was racing, Prost was talking to the head of FISA*, Frenchman Jean-Marie Balestre. They spoke the same language, and were good friends. Now, after the race, Balestre decided to disqualify Senna. Senna didn't drive the whole course, he said. He left the track during the crash and joined it again at a different place. Senna got no points for the race, and Prost was world champion.



* FISA is short for the *Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile*. It controlled Formula One and other racing championships.



Prost talking to Balestre

Senna was very angry. Other people sometimes left the track in a race and joined it in a different place. Balestre didn't disqualify them.

Disqualifying Senna seemed completely unfair. Senna and Ron Dennis asked FISA to think again. But Balestre didn't want to listen. Prost was still the world champion.