

[](http://www.flickr.com/photos/9850426@N06/1845408702/ "imola GP on Flickr by lorkatj") When you are an athlete at the top of your game, your skill and talent tend to polarize fans and fellow athletes. They either love you - because you are such a phenomenal talent - or they hate you - because they are so fed up with you being at the top of your game all the time. This love/hate relationship tends to, in hindsight, remind us of how great an impact the athlete had on the game they dominated. Athletes in this category tend to inspire the passions of fans -one way or another.
 <p> In Formula One, we've seen this phenomenon a number of times. Michael Schumacher♦ is a great example. Perhaps one of the greatest, if not THE greatest, driver that Formula One has ever seen. I was always able to appreciate his raw talent and skill - but it would always drive me crazy the way he dominated the sport. He had a very passionate following, and when he retired, everyone knew (fan or otherwise) that the sport was losing something special. We'd been witness to something special - and we could all look back and be thankful for it. </p> <p> It could be Micheal Schumacher or Michael Johnson♦ or Michael Jordan♦ - there is something very special about watching an athlete compete at the highest level as they set new standards for their sport. </p> <p> Prior to the Schumacher era, we'd seen another driver of comparable ability - and his name was Ayrton Senna . </p> <p> May 1, 1994 stands out as a tragic day in Formula One, a sad personal memory for me, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention it on this day. </p> <p> It was the weekend of the San Marino Grand Prix, and it had already proven to be a sad and tragic weekend. Roland Ratzenberger♦ was a little-known driver in his first season of F1. He was in the 3rd race of a 5-race contract with newly-established race team Simtek . He was a young Austrian driver that was living his dream - of racing in Formula One. On April 30, Ratzenberger was killed in qualifying - the first death at an F1 race weekend since 1982. A death in any racing series is incomprehensible, and in F1 even more so. Though it's the highest level of racing, it's also made great strides in driver and spectator safety. But occasionally, bad things happens. This tragic event was a reminder to the powers-that-be that they can never stop thinking about safety advances in the sport. </p> <p> Ratzenberger's death made it a somber weekend. Senna was troubled by this turn of events and had pledged, as the most senior driver in the field, to re-create the Grand Prix Driver's Association (a group committed to driver safety). Senna qualified on pole position for the May 1 event. </p> <p> In North America, Formula One is broadcast live. If the race is in Europe, then it will almost certainly be a 7:00 am start time here in Texas. I remember crawling out of bed early that Sunday morning and turning on the pre-race coverage. Remember, this was in an era before digital video recorders - though yes, I could have taped it on VHS. But there is something about the live start to an F1 race that words cannot describe. It's the sound, the excitement, the action, all of it. So I was up early that fateful Sunday morning to enjoy watching another live F1 race. </p> <p> I remember the start ... and then I distinctly remember that on lap 7, we had an in-car camera view from Michael Schumacher's Benetton as he followed Senna. As they went through

Tamburello, we witnessed a twitch from Senna's Williams - and then he went off the road at 190 mph. There was a change in camera views showing Senna hit the barrier on the outside of the course. There was an overhead helicopter view after the fact. But at the time, it all looked very benign. I've seen hundreds of race with their share of accidents and it all looked somewhat non-descript. It was one of those accidents that drivers typically walk away from unscathed. Or so it looked at the time.

But there is a moment in time, a gut feeling you get, when you realize that something just isn't right. I remember sitting in the living room, as the sun was rising, wondering about why there was so little information about his status. Minutes passed, and there was very little commentary. The race was stopped just over a minute after Senna's crash, but it seemed like an eternity. You just knew something wasn't right. And it wasn't.

The [accident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Ayrton_Senna "Accident at Imola") took the life of Ayrton Senna - three-time world champion, and without a doubt one of those special athletes that I mentioned earlier. Senna was certainly a "higher profile" driver than Ratzenberger. Senna was a national hero in Brazil, and had donated millions of dollars to children's charities during his career. Ratzenberger was a young driver in only his 3rd F1 race weekend. It was later revealed that a furled Austrian flag was found in the cockpit of Senna's car, and he had apparently intended to dedicate a race win to the memory of Ratzenberger. Nonetheless, the loss of two drivers in the span of two days was tragic at best.

I don't bring this up with morbid fascination. For me, it's a sad memory of a May 1 long past - a vivid recollection of one of those sad moments in life. It's definitely a reminder of the fragility of life, of lives taken in their prime. But it's also a reminder of greatness, of rising to a level that few will ever witness. It's the thought of having been fortunate enough to witness an athlete at his peak, and the beauty of a person striving for excellence in something they do so well.

Ayrton, we remember you, your legacy, and your greatness - today, tomorrow, and many years from now. And we thank you.

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