

The Best Race Ever

Contributed by Mark Talbot
Wednesday, 16 May 2007

The haze of the track was rising. Shimmering cars heading towards me, one out of the pit lane, one down the main straight. I could see the different colours, but I couldn't tell whether one was ahead of the other or not.

As the mirages became more solid, I could see the gap developing. The push had been enough. Takuma's red and white car came into view at full speed and the Renault was slightly slower. As they passed my seat, Taku was ahead.

With just five laps to go, Takuma had moved into the points for the new team.

On grandstand F (or Tribune F as they say in Spain) dozens of people were startled by the leaping and shouting of Zesare and me. Jumping, waving, screaming encouragement at Taku as he zoomed past.

It felt as though we had just won the World Championship, tears of joy began to wait their turn … could he really keep Fisi behind him for five laps?

Two Days Earlier … Practice:

Taku and Anthony had both shown great form in the free practice sessions, and during Friday's sessions had both given lots of valuable and accurate information back to the engineers about how the car was handling describing the balance between protecting the front tyres and getting the most from the rear tyres … so setting the cars up for the qualifying session meant the whole team were very excited about what they might achieve.

I have worked in Engineering management for many years and I thought I knew what teamwork looked like. Not so. Seeing this team of people preparing those cars was like seeing a well-rehearsed ballet. Everyone knew exactly what to do next and where to put things. They hardly spoke. Instead of moving out of the way of someone, they helped them instead. This is real teamwork

I will mention one man in particular – Barney. This man is one of the most productive people I have ever seen. He is always busy and always helping. Everyone relies in some small way on Barney. He helped Taku in the same way as Taku's engineers.

Saturday … Qualifying:

Session 1 was relatively easy and both drivers flew through to the 2nd session. Sadly, in the second session Taku had a fuel pick-up problem and Ant was blown off course after losing downforce to a damaged underside. So they had made mid-field and felt a little sad.

How far SAF1 have come to be “a little sad” with being mid-field? Last year we were only just challenging Midlands… now we are so close to a few more of the big-money teams … and amongst the works team Honda>Aguri>Honda>Aguri

Zesare's friends were a little surprised by how Super Aguri were doing. We were proud, but a little worried too … what was Taku's problem? Did he have to swap engines? Thankfully it was a fully-repairable fuel pick up problem. Phew.

Sunday …The Race:

After a false start the cars came off the line again for a second parade lap – that got people quite excited, and confused …

One, two, three, four, five red lights and then GO! GO! GO!

In the first corner Alonso and Massa had a kiss, Alonso losing out. Sadly, Taku also lost out as the two Hondas passed the ill-fated Renault.

12th turned to 13th, but then the luck reversed and slowly but surely, Taku clawed up the table as he kept pace with some serious teams' cars. His lap times were similar to teams at the top – for ages he was the last of the

cars to be lapped, and even when he was lapped, Hamilton made no real impression on closing him down. Pure speed put him ahead of the two Hondas. They helped even more by crashing with each other.

So Jenson was in the pits for a new nose and out again in last position. Then Rubens pitted and Taku was ahead. Could Taku pass Rubens when it was his time to pit? The answer was yes – Taku pitted but kept his on-track advantage over Rubens. It was now Fisi in 8th and Taku in 9th. The gap between Taku and Rubens grew as Taku chased the Renault.

And then it happened.

Around 20 laps to go, I heard the Renault team tell Fisi that he had to pit again! All around me, the grandstand were startled as I leapt to my feet shouting “Fisi has to pit!!” Instantly, Zesare and I knew that Taku had a clear chance of a point!

Without Kangaroo TV our enjoyment of the race would have been much less, because we would not have known about Fisi having to pit again. We would not have seen Taku’s sector time. Thank you Kangaroo.

We watched in hope and in terror … the interval between Fisi and Taku was growing slowly. Eighteen seconds. Twenty seconds. Could Taku keep close enough?

Laps went by and I began to think that maybe Fisi wouldn’t pit … and then my prayers were answered. Fisi in and Taku at full blast.

Pit stops are always fast, but twenty-something seconds seems like a lifetime when you are waiting for your team to come down the straight.

Finally, Massa came into view – I knew Taku was the next car. But I could see Fisi leaving the pit lane. Could Taku possibly do it? It was going to be ever so close.

Fisi was ahead of Taku – but Taku was at full throttle, maximum speed, and sailed past him into the first corner a cars length ahead of the Renault.

Five laps to go. How can a Super Aguri keep reigning champions at bay? Will Fisi just take it straight back? Taku drove like a Banshee. He showed why we all love his racing. Was he inch-perfect? I doubt it, but smooth is for others, Taku drives with a passion. Passion that was being shared in grandstand F. Zesare could not even watch the last four laps. I couldn’t take my eyes off the horizon of the main straight. Hoping, wishing, praying, that through the haze I could see red and white before yellow and blue.

Lap after lap the tension built, I was giggling out loud knowing it would happen, but not wanting to jinx Taku by finally believing. The lap count went to 1 and Taku was still there ahead of Fisi by a ‘healthy’ few tenths of a second.

The Ferrari of Massa passed the chequered flag and I waited … the heat haze still obscuring the finish line, but then I saw the most fantastic sight – a red and white car of Takuma Sato taking the cheers of his pit crew along the pit wall.

Zesare and I rushed to the front, above the Super Aguri flag that was flying so proudly for us, and waited for Taku to come past. As Taku arrived, he slowed, looked straight at us and waved in triumph. Goosebumps appeared, and pride swelled over from us.

For the first time in my life, I had taken champagne to a race, and now was the time to open it. Sweet victory, overwhelming joy and bubbles up my nose. Fantastic!

I christened the flag with champagne too – it has been to a lot of races, flying proudly, and this was the most proud moment for us both.

Of all the races I have watched, I have never been so emotionally charged as this race. I have watched Taku’s driving for a few years now, but this was something else. Never have I felt so proud of a driver, and a team.

Go Taku.