

2008 – Stirring Up A Tropical Storm



It was little expected that the inaugural Singapore Grand Prix, would start a controversy that would rage a full year after the chequered flag.

On the evening of Sunday 28th September 2008, the world was simply being 'wowed' by the spectacle of Formula One's first night race, set against the backdrop of Singapore's night-time skyline.

While Ferrari driver Felipe Massa set the initial pace ahead of World Championship rival Lewis Hamilton, all eyes were on Fernando Alonso in the Renault. He had been fast in practice, but lost vital track position after a technical problem in qualifying. Come the race, Alonso was the first to make a pit stop with just 12 of the 61 laps gone.

Just a lap later Alonso's team-mate Nelson Piquet triggered the first appearance of the Safety Car when he crashed at Turn 17 – the defining moment of the first night race. Having already made his stop, the time Alonso had lost to the front-runners was wiped out. Alonso's advantage was compounded by a pit lane bungle that saw Felipe Massa depart with part of the refuelling rig still attached, while his Ferrari team-mate Kimi Raikkonen crashed out of the closing stages.

The incidents meant that Alonso took the chequered flag in a race that was almost too good to be true. And so it turned out when in August 2009, Piquet admitted he had crashed deliberately to give his team-mate an advantage. An investigation cleared Alonso of any knowledge of the ruse and his result has been allowed to stand.

These later dramas barely scratched the lustre of the most watched race in Formula One history. It showed Singapore off to 110 million TV viewers around the world as well as to over 103,000 spectators trackside, over 40% of which were overseas visitors.

The race was described by pundits as the "Monaco of the East" and won a string of international accolades, including the Autosport Award for Pioneering & Innovation and the FIA Promoter of the Year Award. It was also perfectly summed up by F1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone who said: "When I originally suggested the notion of Grand Prix racing under lights, people had thought I had gone mad. But the whole Singapore experience raised the standards for everybody."