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Formula One Driver Ayrton Senna

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

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The biggest story in the world of sport this past week was not the abrupt and quick end of the Orlando Magic season, although clearly in Central Florida it was and continues to be the biggest topic of conversation among sports fans. It is a story clearly worth some comment and I will return to it at a later date.

But in fact the biggest story of the week was the death of Ayrton Senna, the Brazilian Formula One driver, who was considered the best driver in the world. He was also one of the best known and most loved sports figures in the world rivaling in popularity the likes of Michael Jordan and Pele. 150,000 Brazilians turned out to welcome Senna's remains home on Wednesday, and millions more watched on television.

For someone like myself this is a bit difficult to grasp, never having been much of a race car fan, never a Formula One fan, and in fact, never certain that race car driving is a sport at all.

At age 34 Ayrton Senna de Silva died when his car missed a turn at nearly 200 mph during the San Marino Gran Prix and hit a brick wall. The car looked like it had exploded, and a few hours later Senna was pronounced dead of multiple head injuries at a nearby Italian hospital.

This was the second death in as many days with Roland Ratzenberger, a 31 year old Austrian, having been killed during a qualifying run on Saturday. It was in fact an accident plagued weekend with other injuries resulting on Friday and Sunday to drivers, pit crews, and spectators.

Senna has been at the top of the Gran Prix circuit since 1984, and won the circuit's world championship in 1988, '89, and '91. He started from the pole position a record 65 times in his career, and had won 41 Gran Prix races, second only to the 51 by his longtime rival Alain Prost. Over the past several years he was among the highest paid athletes in the world, with an annual salary in the \$10M range. He started by racing go-karts, and became a multi-millionaire celebrity who was once the target of a kidnapping plot in Brazil, and who found it necessary to move into isolation from the glare of press and public.

Ironically a few months ago Senna warned that changes in regulations would make Formula One racing much more dangerous, and he predicted that serious accidents would increase on the

circuit as result of the changes. Senna was considered a fierce competitor on the track, a perfectionist about his cars and his own skills, and an extremely important figure in racing. Currently Italian authorities are looking into the possibility that this was not an accidental death but rather a homicide.

Automobile racing has always seemed to me to be an inherently dangerous sport, whose basic appeal came from the smell of death accompanying the thrill of the crash. I know of course it is much more than that, but still this remains a major factor. If you watch race reporting the video always focuses in on the crashes, and quite frankly there is something mesmerizing about watching all that metal twisting, bending, and ripping apart during a high speed crash.

Even watching the crash involving Senna there was a certain degree of fascination with the way in which the car disintegrated into thousands of pieces, each flying off in a different direction after the car hit the wall at 200 mph. Could it be that the appeal of this sport is similar to bull fighting, with the driver comparable to the matador, exhibiting tremendous skills and nerves of steel flirting with death in a piece of technology that some psychologists speak freely of as an extension of the human ego?

It also makes you wonder whether or not auto racing is a sport and if the driver is an athlete. What exactly is the driver's contribution to winning or losing in this sport? Isn't it true that a driver with a technically inferior car can not possibly win, no matter his skill at driving? Is it not equally true that most any minimally trained driver with a superior car will invariably win?

The answers to these questions are probably yes and no, pointing to the fact that the drivers are highly trained athletes needing lightning quick reflexes, exceptional hand-eye-foot coordination, great vision, and keen judgement. These of course are the same skills needed by most athletes for most sports. And in this as other sports some are great, some are good, and others mediocre. And some are truly exceptional. Such was the case with Ayrton Senna a hero to many in the world, a major figure to his countrymen, and a leader to his fellow drivers.

Millions across the world mourn his passing, and Formula One racing will miss him greatly. At 34 he had full life.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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