

The automobile driver's world championship started in 1950. Before that, huge stars like [Tazio] Nuvolari, [Achille] Varzi, Germany's [Rudolf] Caracciola and newcomer Juan Manuel Fangio were racing and consequently their wins do not count in the records. Fangio won five world titles between 1951 and 1957. He bowed out in mid-season at Reims in 1958, saying he "thought that this wasn't a thing to be done by a grown-up man like me." He had taken Alfa-Romeo, Mercedes, Maserati to glory – and in 1956, even Ferrari, which that year insistently tried to win "without Fangio." He never went off the road whether testing or racing, as too many drivers do today, never spun his car and never, ever criminally pushed another car with his own. Fangio only had two accidents in his career: in 1948, during the 6,000-mile Buenos Aires-Lima-Caracas road race, and in 1952 at Monza. In those days Fangio's competitors were no less than Alberto Ascari, Nino Farina and "kids" like Stirling Moss, Mike Hawthorn and Peter Collins.

Fangio raced in Formula One for eight years (in a world with six to 11 Grands Prix a year vs. 17 today), with a still unequalled percentage of wins, however you play the numbers. By contrast, Schumacher, [Alain] Prost, [Ayrton] Senna and others have been around much longer, collecting seemingly more impressive numbers of pole positions, wins and races run. When asked why he was a tad slower than Fangio, Stirling Moss, at the top of his form and about 20 years his junior, answered, "I never got close enough to find out." Despite his deeply human discretion and modesty (and earning only \$150,000 in his best-paid year), Fangio had more people in awe of him than any astronaut would later. His fame boosted Fidel Castro's visibility to global orbit when Castro kidnapped him at gunpoint, politely, before the Havana race of 1958. Can anyone state about Schumacher – as TIME does on its cover – that "Now his only challenge is history?" Let us give to Schumacher what belongs to Schumacher but let us not give to Schumacher what belongs to Fangio.

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