

A Fit of Piquet Proves to Be Far More Than That

In reaction to being fired by the Renault team, Nelson Piquet has admitted to the FIA that he intentionally crashed at Singapore last year, in a successful attempt to move teammate Fernando Alonso from a lowly grid position to victory. Worse, Piquet has charged that he was instructed to crash — and where and when — by the team's Flavio Briatore and Pat Symonds. The FIA has investigated, and its World Motors Sport Council will pass judgment on September 21st. We examine the evidence collected so far and the events.

During the Belgian Grand Prix, Brazil's TV Globo broke the story that Renault driver Nelson Piquet had followed team orders by intentionally crashing early in last year's Singapore race, to benefit teammate Fernando Alonso, who then won the race, the team's first victory of the season.

It seemed only reasonable to conclude that either Piquet or his father was the source of the story. Young Piquet had just been released by Renault, and in reaction had, among other things, charged that Flavio Briatore had, in addition to being his team principal and his manager, become his "executioner."

Unlike his father before him, Piquet had failed to impress, but charged that he'd been given inferior equipment and treatment compared to Alonso, and had been set up to fail.

Given the level of Piquet's outrage, and the fact that his very public comments had probably burned his bridge to F1 for the future, it seemed he had nothing to lose by then charging that he'd been instructed to crash in Singapore, in order to force the introduction of the safety car to Alonso's benefit.

In addition, we found it difficult to believe that a driver would take the chances inherent in any accident, and particularly on a concrete-lined street circuit. We also considered that, self-preservation aside, intentionally crashing would go against instinct and years of conditioning, and the reflexive actions to which they lead.

On balance, the story seemed rather unlikely, and besides, it was just a story. After all these years, we've found that there's plenty of time to get excited after rumor turns to fact, and that it often does not.

And then someone gifted us with the dossier which is the product of an FIA investigation into the matter. Collectively, it constitutes evidence and a prosecutor's argument in a hearing to be conducted on September 21st by the FIA's World Motor Sport Council.

(For clarity, in what follows, all references to 'Piquet' are to Nelson the younger, unless otherwise indicated.)

Piquet's Allegations

While the Renault race-fixing story became public during the Belgian GP at the end of August, it had actually begun to unfold much earlier. On August 3rd, Piquet issued a statement confirming he'd been sacked by Renault, but he'd obviously known earlier. On July 26th, Piquet senior had informed the FIA that his son wanted

to make a statement regarding the Singapore Grand Prix incidents. Thus, five days before Piquet announced he'd been released, he provided the FIA with a signed statement in which he alleged

- he was asked by Briatore and team technical director Pat Symonds "to deliberately crash my car" in Singapore to benefit Alonso
- Symonds, "in the presence of Mr. Briatore, asked me if I would be willing to sacrifice my race for the team by 'causing a safety car' "
- he "agreed to this proposal and caused my car to hit a wall and crash during lap 13/14 of the race;"
- that after meeting with Briatore and Symonds, the latter "took me aside to a quiet corner and, using a map, pointed me to the exact corner of the track where I should crash," because "it did not have any cranes that would allow a damaged car to be swiftly lifted off the track, nor did it have any side entrances to the track" which would allow a damaged car to be rolled off the track. Crashing where Symonds indicated "would thus necessitate the deployment of a safety car."
- Symonds told Piquet that the strategy to be employed for Alonso, who would start 15th, would have him very light on fuel, and that Alonso would thus pit before the Piquet crash while others would not, allowing Alonso to gain track position
- he was in a "very fragile and emotional state of mind" because of "intense stress due to the fact that Mr. Briatore had refused" to tell him whether or not he would be retained in 2009, and "repeatedly put pressure on me" to prolong an option that precluded him talking to other teams
- that he agreed to crash because he thought it would help him keep his drive, though no promises were made
- he repeatedly asked the team to confirm the lap he was on, "which I would not normally do"
- after the race, "Mr. Briatore discreetly said 'thank you' after the end of the race" but the deliberate crash was not discussed with him by anyone after the initial meeting and agreement.

On August 17th, Piquet provided the FIA with a supplemental statement, to summarize the points made in the course of a second interview held in London, during which he reviewed "preliminary telemetry data" which the FIA Technical Department had obtained from the Renault team.

STATEMENT OF NELSON PIQUET JUNIOR TO FIA

I, **Nelson Ângelo Piquet**, born July 25, 1985 in Heidelberg, Germany, currently residing at 6, avenue des Ligures, apt. 9em 32, Monaco, say as follows:

1. Except as otherwise stated, the facts and statements contained in this Statement are based on facts and matters within my knowledge. I believe such facts and statements contained in this Statement to be true and correct. Where any facts or statements are not within my own knowledge, they are true to the best of my knowledge and belief and, where appropriate, I indicate the source of that knowledge and belief.
2. I make this Statement voluntarily to the FIA and for the purposes of allowing the FIA to exercise its supervisory and regulatory functions with regard to the FIA Formula One World Championship.
3. I am aware that there is a duty upon all participants in the FIA Formula One World Championship and all Super Licence holders to ensure the fairness and legitimacy of the Championship and I am aware that serious consequences could follow if I were to provide the FIA with any false or misleading statement.
4. I understand that my complete statement has been recorded on audio tape and that a full transcript of my audio recording will be made available to me and the FIA. The present document constitutes a summary of the main points made during my full oral statement.
5. I wish to bring the following facts to the FIA's attention.
6. During the Formula One Grand Prix of Singapore, held on 28 September 2008 and counting towards the 2008 FIA Formula One World Championship, I was asked by Mr. Flavio Briatore, who is both my manager and the Team Principal of the Renault F1 Team, and by Mr Pat Symonds, the Technical Director of the ING Renault F1 Team, to deliberately crash my car in order to positively influence the performance of the ING Renault F1 team at the event in question. I agreed to this proposal and caused my car to hit a wall and crash during lap thirteen/fourteen of the race.

In the statement, Piquet explained how he had crashed. "After ensuring I was on the designated lap of the race, I deliberately lost control of my car" on the exit to turn 17, the second part of a right-left chicane. "I did this by pressing hard and early on the throttle. As I felt the back end of the car drifting out, I continued to press hard on the throttle, in the knowledge that this would lead to my car making heavy contact with the concrete wall...."

Having reviewed the telemetry, Piquet stated that the data "clearly demonstrates that I pressed significantly harder and earlier on the throttle on the exit to turn 17 on the lap in question than on previous laps. Once the back end of the car had begun to drift out, the only way of recovering control of the car and avoiding contact...would have been to back off on the throttle. However, I did not back off the throttle to any material extent. Rather, I pressed hard on the throttle beyond the moment at which the back end started to drift out and, indeed, right up to and beyond the point of impact with the concrete wall. Again, the fact that I did not back off the throttle is apparent from the (standard data recorder) telemetry readings of the incident."

In both statements, Piquet acknowledged that he had "a duty...to ensure the fairness and legitimacy" of the F1 championship.

The Inquiry in Belgium

From the outset, the FIA had involved the investigative firm Quest, and by the time of Piquet's second statement, at least, had also involved the law firm of Sidley Austin LLP. Both companies had representatives present at Quest's London offices when Piquet was interviewed, and again when the stewards of the Belgian GP (Lars Osterlind, Vassilis Despotopoulos and Yves Bacquelaine) were charged with investigating the Piquet allegations, and interviewing a number of people from the Renault team two weeks later. (Osterlind and Despotopoulos are members of the World Motor Sport Council, which will ultimately determine guilt or innocence.) In addition, Herbie Blash, the FIA observer was present in Belgium.

The inquiry was conducted over August 27th and 28th, and on the 28th, the stewards received a hard disc said to contain the team's entire data file (except car data) from the Singapore Grand Prix. Briatore provided additional information and documents.

The stewards "were reminded" that, in 2008, deployment of the safety car resulted in the pits being closed until the field was aligned properly behind the safety car, and that over the 14 races preceding Singapore, Alonso and Piquet had respectively scored just 18 and 13 driver points, and Renault was tied for fourth place with Toyota in the constructors' championship.

The stewards also had reference to video from the Singapore event, and to printouts from the Renault telemetry, provided by the FIA technical department. The stewards concluded that the telemetry supported Piquet's version of what he had done to cause the accident. The FIA techies affirmed that his actions were "unusual for the particular situation."

Also made available to the stewards was the telemetry printout from Alonso's car, illustrating when he had also experienced wheelspin at turn 17 during the race. The data traces showed him easing off the throttle, the opposite of what Piquet had done on lap 14.

At the time of the Belgian interviews, the stewards did

not have access to the transcript of the Renault radio transmissions (the FIA had not retained their recording), but the team subsequently provided the recording and the stewards reviewed them before making their report to the FIA.

Alonso was interviewed first, but merely confirmed that his reaction to wheelspin in turn 17 was conventional.

Next up was Symonds, and as the partial transcript in the stewards report showed, he proved notably shy in critical areas:

FIA adviser: (With respect to the Singapore meeting involving Briatore, Symonds and Piquet) In your own words, Mr. Symonds, what do you recall being said to Nelson Piquet Jr. at that meeting? This is shortly before the race.

Symonds: I don't really remember

FIA adviser: You don't remember?

Symonds: No

FIA adviser: Nelson Piquet Jr. says that he was asked by you to cause a deliberate crash. Is that true?

Symonds: Nelson had spoken to me the day before and suggested that. That's all I'd really like to say.

FIA adviser: Mr. Symonds, were you aware that there was going to be a crash at Lap 14?

Symonds: I don't want to answer that question.

Later, there was this exchange.

FIA adviser: There is just one thing that I ought to ask you, and put it to you so you can think about it, at least. Mr. Piquet Jr. says that having had the initial meeting with you and Flavio Briatore, you then met with him individually with the map of the circuit. Do you remember that?

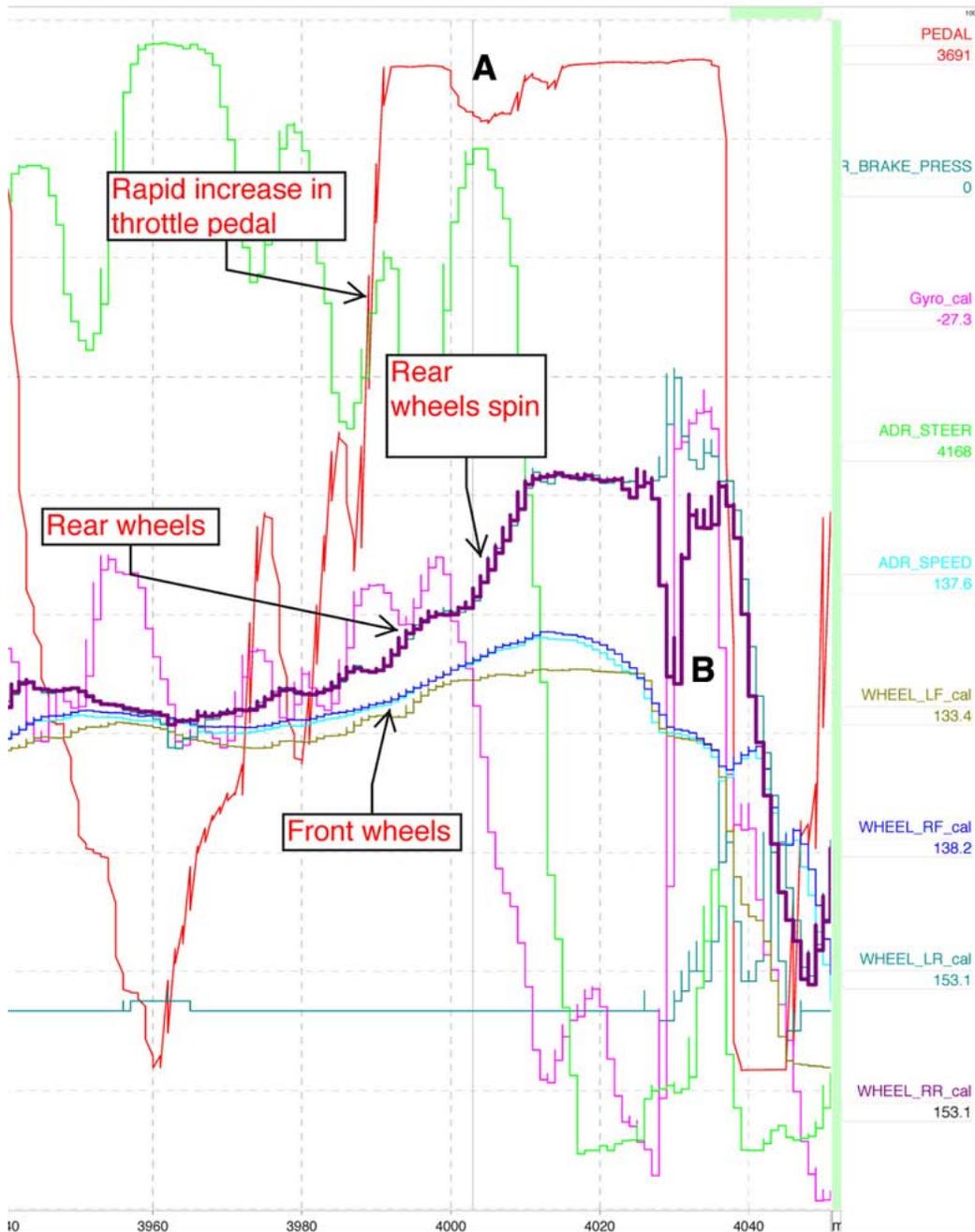
Symonds: I won't answer. Rather not answer that. I don't recall it, but it sounds like Nelson's talked a lot more about it.

FIA adviser: Mr. Piquet Jr. also says that at that meeting, you pointed out a specific place on the circuit where he was to have the accident and said it was because it was the furthest away from any of the safety or lifting equipment, and gave the most likely chance of a safety car being deployed.

Symonds: I don't...I don't want to answer that question.

Still later, the questioning of Symonds concluded with the FIA adviser asking whether Symonds or Briatore had done most of the talking during the meeting involving them and Piquet.

FIA adviser: Because, just to be absolutely clear here, what Nelson Piquet Jr. has said is that at that meeting it was you that asked him to have the crash deliberately.



The FIA technical department provided the Belgian GP stewards with annotated telemetry traces from Piquet's Singapore accident, and other data. Typical, and damning, is the section shown here. This shows Piquet's use of throttle and wheelspin up to and through the accident. The throttle trace shows early application of full throttle on the exit of turn 17 to induce wheelspin, then a probably instinctive throttle lift in reaction to the induced power oversteer (at 'A'), and finally an immediate return to full throttle to increase the oversteer to, through and beyond the point of impact (at 'B'). Comparison traces from earlier laps show that Piquet indeed applied more throttle, and sooner, on exiting turn 17 to induce the spin.

Symonds: I can't answer you.

FIA adviser: Can I say that if, Mr. Symonds, you'd been put in the position where you were made to ask Mr. Piquet Jr. to crash, it's much better. It would be much better for you in the long term to tell these stewards, to hear that today.

Symonds: I fully understand that.

FIA adviser: Yes.

Symonds: I have no intention of lying to you. I have not lied to you, but I have reserved my position just a little.

FIA adviser: And you're aware that the stewards may draw conclusions from your unwillingness to assist them in relation to what went on in that meeting?

Symonds: I would expect them to. I would absolutely expect that.

FIA adviser: I think I haven't got any further questions.

Symonds was also questioned about the telemetry printout from Alonso's wheelspin incident and from Piquet's car, copies of which was shown to him.

FIA adviser: I think you'll anticipate what I'm going to ask you here.

Symonds: I think I will.

FIA adviser: There's quite.... There's a more significant wheelspin recorded here (in Piquet's traces than Alonso had experienced earlier in the race). You'll see what has been marked by the (FIA) technical department as a rapid increase in throttle pedal (application).

Symonds: Mmm hmm.

FIA adviser: There, is on the throttle. There's a slight releasing of the throttle as the wheels start to spin, but when the (wheel)spin is at its greatest, there appears to be a reapplication of the throttle at almost 100 percent.

Symonds: Yes.

FIA adviser: I put it to you, Mr. Symonds, that that's a very unusual piece of telemetry that would suggest that this may have been a deliberate crash.

Symonds: I would agree it's unusual.

FIA adviser: Would it suggest to you a deliberate crash?

Symonds: I'm not sure I've ever seen a deliberate crash, so I.... It's very unusual data.

FIA adviser: Counter-intuitive for a driver to put his foot full on the throttle when he's in a deep (wheel)spin like that, Mr. Symonds?

Symonds: It is, yes, when he has that much wheelspin, it's counter-intuitive.

Largely on the basis of Symonds' failure to answer key questions, the stewards concluded that the meeting in Briatore's office took place, that a deliberate crash was discussed, and that afterward, Symonds had indicated to Piquet where to have his 'accident' in order to ensure that the safety car would be deployed. The stewards noted in their report that, "had there been no substance to the allegations made by (Piquet) and put to Mr. Symonds, it would have been straightforward for Mr. Symonds to deny them."

When interviewed on the 27th, Symonds said he might have additional information for the stewards subsequently, including responses to the questions he'd declined to answer. Called in again the follow day, however, he again declined to answer the questions. He did add that Alonso had been pitted earlier than planned to avoid him losing time behind Kazuki Nakajima's Williams.

Briatore didn't arrive at Spa until the morning of the 28th, and was immediately summoned by the stewards. He acknowledged the meeting with Symonds and Piquet, but said it was to get Piquet to focus on his racing, rather than his contract. He denied any discussion about a deliberate crash, and denied having said 'thank you' to Piquet afterward, then said he might have said it "as a joke, maybe."

The stewards said one quote summed up Briatore's position: "I never talk with Nelsinho. I never talk about crashing the car. He's never coming to me tell me 'Flavio, Jesus Christ, I crash the car, you won the race, can you renew my contract?' You know, if somebody do you a favor like that, I just.... You renew the contract."

Silence for a Ride

Briatore also supplied the stewards with documentation concerning an exchange with Piquet Senior, and the stewards included a July 28 letter Briatore had sent him in their report.

Briatore told Piquet Senior that he had been "extremely shocked" to learn from a member of his management company (and then had it confirmed by Bernie Ecclestone) that he was charging that his son had been asked to cause the accident in Singapore, and that he was threatening to disclose this to the FIA unless Piquet Junior retained his drive with the Renault team.

Briatore denied the conspiracy, charged blackmail and extortion "by way of threats and outrageous lies on the basis of an alleged hear-say." He concluded by saying that any attempt to "make any declaration in connection thereof" would result in criminal and civil court action against Piquet Senior "on the ground of defamation, false accusation extortion."

Considering that, the stewards noted that, despite the seriousness of the allegations, Briatore "carried out no internal investigation before sending the letter."

The Singapore Race Strategy

Only after the interviews had been conducted on the 27th and 28th did the stewards have access to the Renault radio transmission tapes and the information from the Renault-supplied data disc. And therein lay perhaps the best evidence of a conspiracy.

On the disc was a document titled "Singapore GP 2008 Pre race sheet," which detailed computer-generated one-, two- and three-stop strategies for each driver. The two- and three-stop Alonso strategies both called for him to start very light on fuel and to make his first stop on lap

Pat Symonds	Okay, I think I'm going to stop him the end of 12, that looks like it's all going to work out.
Fernando Alonso	Maybe over steering.
[Engineer]	I'm quite aggressive on rear pressures Pat so...
[Engineer]	Alright don't do anything it's gonna be a different story on the other tyre I would imagine.
Pat Symonds	Yeah exactly.
[Engineer]	Scupper our rear isn't it so.
Pat Symonds	Yeah that wasn't a great centre. Right, we're gonna stop at the end of lap 12 guys, we're going to lap 40.
[Engineer]	63 kilogrammes for Fernando - 6 - 3. Okay?
[Engineer]	Okay, 63 it is.
[Engineer]	Okay so pit stop light is...sorry that was too early.
[Engineer]	Lights on now.
[Engineer]	Okay light is on.
Pat Symonds	Yeah with a good lap we're going to be within a second and a half of him which is right.
[Engineer]	Pat do you still not think that this is a bit early? We only did 6/10ths that lap.
Pat Symonds	No, no it's going to be alright.

Combined with timing data from the race, Renault radio transcripts from Singapore show that Pat Symonds pitted Fernando Alonso two laps earlier than planned or required by his position in traffic, presumably in furtherance of a secret plan to have Nelson Piquet cause a safety car period, and did so despite logical objections raised another engineer

14. Piquet, starting one position behind (16th) would be carrying a conventional fuel load, and stopping on laps 28 and 44. The document suggests, and the radio traffic confirms, that the plan for Alonso was a three-stop race. Another document shows that Alonso had 8.49 kg of fuel when he actually stopped on lap-12, validating that he had been intended to stop on lap 14, the lap on which Piquet says he had agreed to crash.

During the race, Symonds made the decision to pit Alonso two laps early, and the radio transcript documents how the decision was made, or at least sold to the other engineers, who the stewards concluded had no knowledge of the deliberate crash arrangement.

The imperative for Alonso's strategy was to make up places in the first, short stint, and while he'd gone from 16th to 12 on the first lap, thereafter he was stuck behind Nakajima. For the first eight laps, Alonso stayed within less than a second of the Williams driver, and Symonds is heard on the tape to observe that "While we're behind Nakajima we're fucked. We're not going anywhere." An engineer agrees, saying "It's fucking our three-stop, isn't it, completely."

Symonds replies "I can tell you now we're not three-stopping," but according to the strategy, that would still have left Alonso pitting on lap 14.

At the end of lap five, an engineer notes that Alonso's

fuel consumption means he could potentially go to lap 15 "and maybe we get to 16." Symonds responds, "don't worry about fuel, because I'm going to get him out of this traffic earlier than that."

Another engineer reports that the computer program working strategy variations on an ongoing basis is not working.

Piquet is then heard, on lap 8, asking "What lap are we in." One engineer believes he is asking what lap he's to come in for fuel, but Symonds says "No. Just tell him he is about...he's completing...he is about to complete lap 8."

Given that Piquet's first stop is not planned until lap 28, the question is highly unusual. Told he's on lap 8, Piquet says he cannot see the pit sign board. Piquet then says "It's better to count through the laps because I cannot see (the pit sign board)."

Symonds says "Right. What have we got? Fucking hell; we've got seven seconds (between Alonso and) Nakajima." In fact, the gap is less than a second, and Symonds is actually complaining about a problem with their computers.

On lap eight, Nakajima finally passed the fuel-heavy Jarno Trulli, as Alonso would on the following lap, but lost four seconds behind and getting around Trulli. He then begins to reduce the gap, to 3.692 on lap 10, and 3.122 on lap 11.

An engineer reports that Alonso has run 1.5 seconds quicker than the Japanese, and Symonds responds "One and a half. So we're going to catch him in about three laps, yeah?" and that is confirmed by another engineer.

"Right. I'm going to... I think we're going to stop him just before we catch (Nakajima) and get him out of (the traffic) the reason being we've still got this worry on the...on the fuel pump. It's only a couple of laps short. We're going to be stopping him early and we're going to go to lap 40" for the second stop.

In reality, however, Symonds had been told that the fuel pump problem in the first laps had cleared up, has been reminded that Alonso has plenty of fuel to go to a scheduled stop on lap 14, and told that the gap to the Williams is over three seconds and coming down at the rate of only half a second or so per lap.

Nevertheless, after Alonso reports a lack of grip on the lesser of the two tires compounds, Briatore responds that there is "no way we're overtaking Nakajima with these tires." In fact, Alonso wasn't going to so much as catch up to Nakajima before the planned stop on lap 14.

Symonds again said he would stop Alonso on lap 12, "that looks like it's all going to work out." Symonds then repeats his decision, twice. Inexplicably, given the gap and closing rate, Symonds somehow concludes that, "with a good lap, we're going to be within a second and a half of him, which is right."

An engineer then questions Symonds' decision to stop two laps early, asking "Pat, do you still not think that this is a bit early? We only (closed the gap by) six tenths on that lap," to which Symonds responded "No, no, it's

going to be alright.”

The engineer then points out that the gap to Nakajima is 3.1 seconds, to which Symonds replied “Yeah. I mean, we might be able to get one more lap (without being delayed by proximity to Nakajima) but I’m not gonna risk missing anything.” Alonso is then called in for fuel and tires, and after he acknowledges the instruction, Briatore is heard to say “Anyway, we had nothing to lose,” to which Symonds replies, “Exactly,” as Alonso rejoins 20th, and last.

Immediately, Symonds says “Right. Now let’s concentrate on Nelson”. Informed by an engineer that Piquet has a significant speed advantage over Rubens Barrichello, Symonds replies “Just hang on,” but Briatore says “Tell him to push.” Symonds then says he wants to look at the lap time at the end of the lap. “Just one minute, please. I just want to see where he is.”

Some 30 seconds elapse, and then, as Piquet begins the fateful lap 14, Symonds tells the engineer communicating with Piquet “you’ve gotta push him really bloody hard now. If he doesn’t get past Barrichello, he’s a...he’s going nowhere. He’s got to get past Barrichello this lap.” Briatore adds, “Tell him, push.” The engineer so instructs Piquet, and seconds later he’s in the wall at turn 17.

Evidently seeing the video of Piquet’s accident, one engineer is heard observing “Fucking hell, that was a big shunt.” Briatore then says “Fucking hell. My every fucking disgrace. Fucking.... He’s not a driver.” In November, Briatore will nevertheless do a deal with Piquet for 2009, though dropping his salary from \$1.5 to \$1 million and obtaining an option that will eventually allow them to drop him from the team after the Hungarian GP.

The Stewards’ Conclusions

The Belgian GP stewards drew several conclusions which led them to refer the matter to the World Council.

They were unable to ask Piquet about Symonds’ contention that it was the driver who raised the possibility of an intentional crash, but considered that Symonds’ admission that a discussion of the possibility had taken place to be “substantial support” of Piquet’s allegation that the crash was deliberate.

“Taken together,” the stewards concluded, Symonds’ admission of the discussion with Piquet, his refusal on the 27th and again on the 28th to answer question about what was discussed when he, Piquet and Briatore met prior to the race, and Symonds’ refusal to deny that he indicated where and on which lap Piquet should have his crash led them to “consider it reasonable, on balance, to conclude that the allegations made by (Piquet) are, in large part, true.

The stewards did not consider the telemetry alone to be conclusive evidence that Piquet intentionally crashed, but taken together with his admission caused them to find support for the admission and how he had caused the crash.

The allegations by Piquet and Symonds answers and refusals to answer “appear to the stewards to indicate that there may have been some discussion in Mr. Briatore’s presence of the possibility of causing a deliberate crash. However, they did not consider themselves to be in a position “to draw any definitive conclusion regarding Mr. Briatore’s knowledge or involvement. They did, however, observe that Briatore’s “reaction to being told by the stewards in interview that

his executive director of engineering had admitted to discussing a deliberate crash with (Piquet) did not appear to be one of shock and/or anger,” and that Briatore’s letter to the senior Piquet “was a strange reaction to such a serious allegation” of extortion. “The more logical response from a position of innocence might have been either to launch an internal investigation or to report the allegations to the FIA and take all necessary steps to confirm they were unfounded, thereby removing the alleged threat of extortion.”

In their report’s final paragraph, the stewards wrote that “there is evidence which, on balance, suggests that NPJ’s crash was deliberate and formed part of a plan aimed at securing a benefit for the team in which at least one senior Renault team member was complicit,” leading them to refer the matter to the World Council.

The View from Here

We are prepared to go a bit farther than the stewards, but not across the board.

A lot of drivers have struggled with Briatore’s rather unique approach to driver management and his conflict of interest arising from being both a driver’s manager/agent and his employer. And countless drivers new to F1 have faced not only the prospect but the reality of falling out of Formula 1 due to inferior equipment and a failure to deliver on contracted promises. Only Piquet, so far as we know, has deemed it acceptable in those circumstances to put himself and potentially others at risk by deliberately causing a high-speed accident. That he did, and judging by the video that was available on YouTube (until the commercial rights holder/Bernie Ecclestone had it removed), he actually practiced the incident on the formation lap. His decision cannot be excused by his admission, particularly as it was born out of his animosity for Briatore rather than contrition, nor by his age.

Symonds is at the least guilty of conspiracy, by his own admission. His statement that he and Piquet discussed an intentional crash means that, under the most favorable scenario, he and Piquet were co-conspirators once the crash took place. Even if one assumes Symonds told Piquet not to do it, given the crash and his failure to report the conversation to Briatore and the FIA, he entered into a conspiracy with Piquet. If, under those circumstances, he told Briatore, then the team principal became a co-conspirator for also failing to inform the sanctioning body. Rather, given what Symonds, at least, knew, Piquet was re-hired for 2009, and on terms more favorable to the team.

In reading the radio transcript, we were reminded of President Richard Nixon and Watergate. In an Oval Office conversation with John Dean, Nixon told Dean to get hush-money to the burglars. Then — knowing as only he did that the conversation was being recorded — Nixon added the self-serving comment for posterity, “But it would be wrong.” We here echoes of that in Briatore’s post-accident comment about Piquet not being a driver, and in his and Symonds admonishing Piquet to push harder at the beginning of the lap on which he would crash.

The radio comments can, however, be viewed two ways, but given the questions to which Symonds refused answers, and the answers he did provide, we strongly suspect that Symonds was attempting to avoid the additional burden of lying while shifting the blame for

the crash to Piquet and shielding Briatore.

One of the most significant statements made in defense has potentially ominous implications. Symonds told the Belgian stewards that he had not lied, but had “reserved my position just a little.” Clearly the reservation was accomplished by not answering the more important questions put to him. By failing to provide those answers, Symonds appears largely to have been shielding Briatore from accusations of complicity. We find it more than difficult to avoid concluding that Symonds believed in the stewards’ meeting that he was toast in any event and that he shielded Briatore with silence pending cutting a deal that will take care of him after he, like Mike Coughlin and Nigel Stepney not long ago, will be banned from the sport.

Unless Symonds corroborates Piquet’s contention that Briatore was involved in a discussion about deliberately crashing, what we’ve seen is not sufficient to convict the team principal, even under the largely undefined and highly individual standards of evidence and proof that apply in the World Council. The evidence, and Briatore’s own actions and statements, justify a high level of suspicion — and for us, based also on his history, a belief that he was a conspirator — they do not constitute what would be a court requirement: proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Briatore spoke to the Belgian stewards at length about Piquet’s emotional state — the ‘rogue employee’ defense — though he neglected to mention that he’d created it and repeatedly exacerbated it. What no one seems to have noted is the emotional state of Briatore and Symonds, among others in the team. At the time, there were serious questions about whether Renault president Carlos Ghosn would keep the team alive in 2009, having previously

stated that the team had to perform. Both drivers were out of contention for the championship, but Piquet’s intentional crash was decisive in Alonso beating Nick Heidfeld to fifth, and it significantly helped Renault beat Toyota to fourth in the constructors’ championship. That’s motivation, and juries consider motivation.

On the other hand, we’ve not yet heard from Renault, beyond what little Briatore and Symonds told the Belgian stewards, and any pre-hearing response from the team is not due until September 14th. It therefore seems prudent to withhold final judgment, despite what appears to us to be damning evidence in hand, and even more prudent to avoid predicting how the World Council members will view all this on the 21st.

Assuming a guilty verdict, as most who are privy to all or part of the evidence seem to be doing, the question shifts to the penalty. Our view is that what evidently was done in Singapore was as serious as what was done in the McLaren spying case, given the safety implications, that a race was fixed, and the fact that, absent the Piquet crash, it is not difficult to see last year’s championship having gone to Felipe Massa, rather than Lewis Hamilton. We therefore believe that the precedent has been set, and should be followed, which would mean another \$100 million fine, and the banning from the sport of Piquet, Symonds and, quite possibly, Briatore.

If it comes to that, FIA president Max Mosley will have had quite a final year in office, driving from the sport not only his old arch enemy Ron Dennis but Briatore as well, and, we would then assume, obtaining as a knock-on benefit the departure of another of the dwindling number of manufacturers participating in Formula 1.

