



## SENNA (Cert 12A)

**Reel Issues author:** Stephen Brown

**Overview:** Ayrton Senna da Silva becomes the Brazilian Formula 1 star and three times world champion, urged on by a belief that he is called by God to this task

**Director:** Asif Kapadia (2011).

**Producers:** Universal Pictures in association with StudioCanal Features, Working Title and Midfield Films.

**Length:** 106 minutes.

**Cautions:** contains infrequent strong language and footage of motor racing crashes.

### THE FILM

**Warning:** includes plot spoilers

A documentary combining library footage, home movies and interviews regarding the young Brazilian Senna's swift European success as he moves from go-karting competitions to Formula 1 motor racing. His virtuoso performance at the June 1984 Monaco Grand Prix in torrid conditions heralds a rising star. The film pays attention to a long-term and increasingly bitter rivalry with driver colleague Alain Prost. Also, to the relationships he had with the Lotus, McLaren and finally the Williams teams. We're also shown Senna's deeper concerns, not least for poverty-stricken Brazilians in whom he heavily invested via his earnings. We get glimpses of Senna's affluent background, his basic decency as well as signs of a certain immaturity and keeping an eye on the main chance. There is a strong sense of vocation. Senna was a devout Roman Catholic. He sees himself as responding to a God-given talent. He drives because that is what he does; it's what living means for him. This seems to include a preparedness, if necessary, to die. He ignores the advice of Professor Sid Watkins, the

Formula 1 surgeon, to quit after another driver is killed. This is never an option for Senna. Under rather ambiguous circumstances he has a fatal smash at the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix. Senna had claimed post-retirement plans.

### FIRST REACTIONS

- What do you make of the circumstances leading to Senna's fatal accident at San Marino? What various explanations are you aware of? Which one do you believe?
- What sort of person do you think Senna was? What made him tick?
- Senna said 'If you have God on your side, everything becomes clear.' How does this work in regard to what we know of him from the film?

### INTERACTIONS

- Who do you think, apart from motor sports enthusiasts, would appreciate this film? What would make the film interesting for them?
- What is at the root of the bitterness between Alain Prost and Senna? If you had been team manager how might you have tried to resolve their differences? Have you ever been in situations where people were at loggerheads? What was the outcome?
- Senna has an overriding conviction that God is on his side. He doesn't seem ever to have any doubts about this. In **Isaiah 6** we read of someone who has a vision which leaves him feeling surprised but unmistakably called by God to perform a task. What are the differences and similarities between Senna and Isaiah's senses of calling?
- Senna doesn't display any fear of dying. Would you think this is something true of anyone who races

cars or is it that they take great care not to take unwarranted risks? Even so, it can be a dangerous occupation. What do you believe motivates motor sports champions to take such chances with their lives? What would or do you risk your own life for? How might Christian faith shape attitudes to our own death and risk-taking and why? (See **Philippians 1.21–24**, **2 Timothy 4.6–8**, **Acts 7.54–60** which all give insights into early Christians' attitudes to self-preservation and/or death). How do those in the group who have a faith actually think about this?

- Senna is very clear-headed about the money-making side of car racing. He appears to like being rich. Why do you think this is? His desire doesn't seem to make him feel it conflicts with his religious beliefs. If you take a look at **Matthew 6.24** Jesus tells his followers they cannot serve God and money. Does **1 Timothy 6.10** throw more light on this by talking of the dangers of loving money rather than having it?

Go back to **Matthew** and this time look at **19.16–24** which suggests that wealth is there to be redistributed. See also **2 Corinthians 9.8**; **Philippians 4.12**. Where do you think Senna fits into all of this? Is the pursuit of wealth an unchristian thing or is the danger more in how we use that wealth?

- Dead or alive, what made Senna such a hero, especially in Brazil? Who do you list among your own heroes?

### SCENE TO DISCUSS

Senna and his arch-rival Prost collide soon after the 1990 world championship race at Suzuka in Japan begins. It occurs after Senna tries to overtake on the inside of Prost's car. Both vehicles are damaged and as

a result they are out of the race. Senna believes the pole position was on the wrong side of the track.

- Judging by this scene as shown to us there don't appear to be any huge emotions raging. Is this because Senna is, in spite of the crash, world champion? If you didn't know from later interviews, what would your guess be as to how Prost is feeling?
- Prost later accused Senna of deliberately bumping into his car. He described Senna as bad for the sport. Is this a case of the pot calling the kettle black? How justified is it for sports people to perform 'professional fouls' in the cause of winning?
- Do you think Senna's complaints prior to the race that that his side of the grid was dirty, making for a slower getaway, should have been heeded by officials? If so, what are your reasons? Under what circumstances do you feel participants in sporting activities should be able to complain?

### OTHER ANGLES TO TALK ABOUT

- The Formula 1 surgeon talks about Senna's humility. Given that he could sometimes be hostile and do illegal things (like cutting a chicane) what does the surgeon have in mind?
- Senna had relationships with several women. He also married for a while when still quite young. Do you think his failure to remain in a stable relationship was symptomatic of a general restlessness, striving after perfecting his talent, a way of demonstrating his power or else? There are biblical heroes who found it hard to remain faithful to one woman like Samson (**Judges 16**) and King David (**2 Samuel 11**). Do we tend to excuse heroes' sexual behaviour more than that of 'ordinary' people? If so, why?

- Family and friends place religious interpretations on Senna's death. In what ways would you agree that some people's deaths and funerals contain spiritual meaning?
- What is it about Formula 1 racing that gives spectators such a buzz? How crucial to the crowd's enjoyment is the chance of them witnessing a spectacular accident? If so, can this be morally right? Are there any parallels with the rabble baying for Jesus' blood (see, for example **Luke 23.13–24**)? What gets into a mob that carries them away like that? What are your own experiences of being swept along by a crowd?

*Stephen Brown is an Anglican priest, group trainer and internationally known authority on feature films. He regularly broadcasts, teaches and writes for the Church Times and others about films .*

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