

McLaren Shadow Project: the Esports Tournament That Picked One Driver from Half a Million

By Jason England on 30 Jan 2019 at 2:11PM

So there I was, in the audience watching a tense 12 laps around Sebring to determine the victor and new driver for the McLaren team.

Brazilian Formula 3 driver Igor Fraga put in an incredible performance, never losing his cool even when his lead was a minuscule 0.3 seconds and Portuguese competitor Nuno Pinto was all over the back of his car. After building a comfortable lead, and successfully holding off some brave undertaking attempts from Nuno, Igor's victory soon began to seem inevitable.

To some this level of dominance, akin to a Mika Hakkinen in his racing prime, would be boring to watch. As mum used to say when dad and I were watching F1, "it's just cars going around a track." My usual and well-practiced counterpoint is that the drama comes from the near-artistic precision of it all, and the test of human endurance.



The semi-finals

However, after I told her what I was doing on this assignment — sitting in a circular studio that makes me feel Jeremy Clarkson's about to walk out, watching three people compete in various racers — even this counterpoint no longer worked.

“You’re just watching people play video games,” she said, doubtless encapsulating the thoughts of every esports sceptic.

As a Kotaku reader you’re more than aware of esports, there's no need to 'sell' the concept, but this perspective helped me go into this event with two questions: is this type of hardline driving simulator esports entertaining as a spectator? And moreover, would someone like my Dad — a staunch motorsports fan — find this entertaining?

Some context about the tournament: it’s basically a massive job interview for a seat on McLaren’s F1 esports team. The winner will join a development programme, hone their skills, and work with the McLaren F1 team.



The finals venue

Races across *Forza Motorsport 7*, *Real Racing 3*, *Project Cars 2*, *iRacing* and *rFactor 2* were paired with some intense human performance testing, pretty much identical to what McLaren put their F1 drivers through for peak conditioning (and with no **gamer energy supplements** in sight).

This includes replicating the high G-forces you feel in a high-speed car, testing for motion sickness, and looking for insane levels of hand-eye coordination. All of which culminates in a final showdown in front of an audience.

This isn't McLaren's first foray into esports. You may remember it used to be called the **World's Fastest Gamer (WFG) tournament** last year, so why change the name? In its own words, McLaren now sees the esports programme as a "shadow" of their work in real-life motorsport.

"This project is the personification of shadowing something we do in real-life. We run a race team in F1, going to NASCAR and Indy 500. To have something in esports that

reflects what we do in real motorsport is a great thing,” says Ben Payne, head of esports at McLaren.

But the differences with the previous tournament don't stop there. 31,000 entered last year compared to the Shadow Project's 500,000+, and while Netherlands-based sales manager Rudy Van Buren realised his dream and won last year, this year's winner, Igor Fraga, was someone with a lifetime racing pedigree.



Rudy Van Buren

Fraga has been karting from three-years-old, won the Formula 3 class in 2017, and saw previous esports success at the FIA Gran Turismo Sport Nations Cup last November. It's clear he was made for this, delivering consistent performances on the track and scoring the highest in his human performance testing.

“Winning the McLaren Shadow Project is a dream come true,” says Fraga. “McLaren has a great history and is a team I am so proud to now be part of.”

It's this emerging crossover of talent which makes motor racing esports so exciting to watch. Don't get me wrong: the cognitive skill and dexterity needed for the likes of FIFA and Call of Duty also make for great viewing. But FIFA gamers don't have to be good football players, and the best Call of Duty players aren't necessarily soldiers.



This year's winner, Igor Fraga

Racing sims are the most direct translation of a real-life sport out there, a point supported by a recent race. This tool that “democratises motor racing for all,” as Ben Payne describes it, helped Enzo Bonito, a McLaren Shadow driver, **beat two champions from the world of motorsport** at their own real-life game. Pay close attention to the end, and particularly the level of dumbfounded surprise in the voices of the commentators.

That shared discipline can take you either down the road of esports, or onto the actual track. When I asked, Igor Fraga said he preferred the feel of a real motor race over being a sim driver, and last year's winner Rudy Van Buren is also going on to live out his dream by debuting in a “big international motor racing series” for McLaren. But that doesn't mean he's abandoning the other path.

“There’s always the assumption that a good sim racer wants to be a real racer,” says Van Buren, “but they don’t. And that is how esports will grow. These kinds of organisations should replicate their own races in a racing simulator context and essentially double their audience.”

What makes the McLaren shadow project interesting is McLaren itself. The fact that a company with such outstanding racing pedigree, prestige, and professionalism is taking esports racing seriously. This commitment is starting to pay off, too, on tracks both physical and virtual. Getting off to a fast start, after all, pays off for the whole race.

Racing esports has all of the dramatic storytelling and depth you’d expect to see on real-life tracks across the world. But there does seem to be one key difference. You look at F1 drivers on the TV, popping champagne at Monaco and celebrating with supermodels, and every single one comes from relative wealth. There are few working class heroes in F1.

Turn to esports, however, and you find much more varied personal stories. Some are the classic underdog — Rudy Van Buren was a salesman who gave up racing due to lack of money, but now his dreams are coming true in another way. Some tales, like that of Igor Fraga, are about coming from a humble background but having the talent and determination to eventually win through.



The McLaren Shadow F1 esports team

It is these stories that fuel the on-track drama with context, tinging the racing action with a grandeur that, I would hope, even someone who's not into games could appreciate. You can bandy about terms like 'real' and 'virtual' all day but, when watching any kind of endeavour, it's the human drama that can really elevate something — and make it feel like it matters.

As for my dad? Well I tried to tell him all this, but he was more jealous of the fact I took a picture of myself next to Mika Hakkinen's championship-winning F1 car. You can't win 'em all.