

## Final Lap

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Engines roared, a symphony of speed and power echoed through the air as the boys gripped their steering wheels, eyes fixed on the horizon. The straight stretch of track blurred before them, the sun beating down, making the asphalt shimmer. Every movement felt magnified—the twitch of the wheel, the subtle shift in weight as they veered into another curve. The cars were practically flying, tyres barely kissing the road.

“Keep your line, don’t let them box you in!” screamed the crew. Franco Colapinto’s hands were tight on the steering wheel, every muscle in his body taut as he navigated through the winding path. The vibrations from the car shot up his arms, grounding him in the moment, where the world outside the track barely existed.

Beside him, Lewis Hamilton was gaining ground, his bright black car a blur in the rearview mirror. “I’m coming for you, Franco!” he taunted over the headset, with a mixture of joy and determination.

The sun glared off the visor of their helmets, distorting the edges of the track, making everything around them seem like a dream. The grandstands passed in flashes, packed with spectators. Their minds were fully submerged in the race. The heat, the smell of rubber burning against asphalt, the pulse of the car beneath them—it all felt too real to be true.

Another sharp corner came up, and Colapinto braced himself, feeling the tyres bite into the track, pulling the car dangerously close to the barriers. The radio crackled again. “Careful, you’re going too wide!” It was Charles Leclerc, far behind but still watching, his voice laced with tension.

Colapinto grunted in response, fingers twitching as he shifted gears, heart hammering in his chest. He knew he had to take this risk. The race was nearing its climax, and if he didn’t push now, he would lose his shot at victory. The engine screamed as he accelerated, taking the turn tighter than he should, the edge of the track a blur of grey and green.

Ahead, the lead car veered slightly, its driver clearly struggling to gain control on the final laps. Colapinto’s pulse sped up. This was his chance. His tyres screeched, protesting as he pushed the car beyond its limits. He could feel Hamilton’s presence behind him, too close for comfort.

“Final lap! Push it!” The crew’s voice was urgent, filling the helmet as the race entered its final moments. Colapinto’s knuckles turned white against the steering wheel. He could almost feel the trophy in his hands, the cold metal, its weight, as the crowd roared in celebration.

Leclerc was right there, though, his car nudging Colapinto’s rear bumper, a constant reminder of the danger. “You’re not taking this away from me,” Charles muttered through the radio (focused, with a lower voice).

The final straight was in sight, the chequered flag waving somewhere in the haze ahead. Colapinto squinted, sweat running down his forehead, vision blurred by the speed and tension. He felt the car beneath him hum with energy, vibrating through his whole body. This was it; the moment they’d been racing toward for hours.

But then, just as he was lining up for the final turn, the world around him flickered... the image of the track wavered, colours blending into static. The roar of the engine faltered, sputtering out, replaced by a disorienting silence. Franco blinked, confusion flooding his senses.

The screen in front of them went black. The steering wheel in his hands stopped vibrating. For a moment, everything felt like a dream slipping through his fingers.

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"What the..." Lewis's voice broke through, but it wasn't through the radio this time. It was too close, too real.

Then Franco heard it. "Franco!" His mother's voice pierced through the silence, frustration dripping from every word. "I've been calling you for the past ten minutes!"

He turned, blinking, as his eyes adjusted to the dim room around him. His hands weren't on a steering wheel, they were gripping a plastic controller. The smell of burnt rubber was gone, replaced by the faint scent of dinner. He stared at the TV's, the black screen, reflecting his confused face.

His mother stood beside the television, the power cord dangling from her hand. She exasperatedly shook her head. "I told you to come down. It's time for dinner."

Franco let the controller slip from his hands, the tension in his body evaporating as reality crashed down around him. The race, the track, the speed—it had all been inside that screen. He glanced at Lewis, who sat on the floor, his own controller discarded beside him.

Lewis sighed, leaning back against the couch. "Right at the final turn? Seriously?"

Charles, sprawled out on the carpet, shook his head with a chuckle. "That was savage. I thought you had it man".

Lewis laughed, rubbing his eyes, still half-expecting the race to snap back into focus. "Guess I'll have to settle for dinner instead of a championship."

As they stood up, the room felt smaller, quieter than the world they had just been in. The intense heat, the burning tyres, the roaring crowd... it had all been pixels and sound. Just a game, though the adrenaline still lingered in their veins.

"Next time," Charles said, cracking his knuckles. "But, seriously, right at the finish line?"

Franco beamed. "Yeah, next time. For real."

The boys left the room, the hum of the game console fading into the background. The dark TV screen stood still, the echoes of a race that never was.