

Audi parks driver for using a ringer in charity esports race

Enlarge / Daniel Abt in happier times, taking part in a sim race at this year's Santiago ePrix in Chile. After doing unusually well in a sim race this weekend, it turned out Abt had brought in a ringer.

Audi Communications Motorsport / Michael Kunkel

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The combination of racing drivers and esports is turning out to be full of drama. When COVID-19 put a stop to real-world racing in March, professional series moved the action, using sims like *iRacing* and *rFactor 2* along with streaming platforms like Twitch to give drivers something to do and fans something to watch. But the transition hasn't been a smooth one for some of the professional drivers, particularly those who had little interest or experience in the simulation side of things before the pandemic.

Audi's Daniel Abt is the latest to discover that it's not just a game when you're being paid to show up. The latest incident took place on Saturday in Formula E's Race at Home challenge, where the sport's real-world stars show up to compete in *rFactor 2* to raise money for UNICEF. Set in a virtual version of Berlin's Tempelhof airport, Abt qualified well and raced to third place, a performance that was in stark contrast to his previous esports races. This, and the fact that he was

obscured from view in his video feed, raised suspicions among some of the other drivers.

Rage-quitting, racist remarks, now a ringer

Those suspicions had merit. When the esports race organizers investigated, they checked IP address data and discovered the presence of a ringer—sim racing professional Lorenz Hoerzing, who raced pretending to be Abt. Disqualified from the race, Abt was ordered to donate \$10,817 (€10,000) to charity. (Hoerzing was also stripped of his sixth-place finish in the companion event held for professional sim racers, and banned from competing in that series again.) After admitting he swapped in Hoerzing, Abt apologized in a statement on Sunday.

“I would like to apologize to Formula E, all of the fans, my team and my fellow drivers for having called in outside help during the race on Saturday. I didn’t take it as seriously as I should have. I’m especially sorry about this, because I know how much work has gone into this project on the part of the Formula E organization. I am aware that my offense has a bitter aftertaste, but it was never meant with any bad intention. Of course, I accept the disqualification from the race. In addition, I will donate 10,000 Euros to a charitable project,” he said.

On Tuesday, the other shoe dropped when the Audi Sport ABT Schaffler team announced that Abt has been benched with immediate effect. “Integrity, transparency and consistent compliance with applicable rules are top priorities for Audi. This applies to all activities the brand is involved in without exception. For this reason, Audi Sport has decided to suspend Daniel Abt with immediate effect,” it said in a statement. (The irony of this from one of the companies involved in dieselgate was not lost on everyone.)

By my count this is now the fourth case of a professional racing driver coming unstuck online. At the beginning of April, NASCAR's Bubba Wallace lost a sponsor after rage-quitting an esports event. A week later, Kyle Larson was fired by his team and Chevrolet for dropping the N-word in another NASCAR esports event. And at the beginning of May, drama flared between fans of IndyCar and Formula 1 when rising F1 star Lando Norris got wrecked on purpose when he was invited to take part in IndyCar's pro-driver esports series, embarrassing that series' regulars in the process.

The start of an anti-esports backlash?

For some drivers, this is all too much. On Tuesday morning, fellow Formula E star Antonio Felix da Costa told Twitter he was done with Twitch streaming, a sentiment echoed—then deleted—by one of Porsche's professional racers, Laurens Vanthoor.

- A now-deleted tweet from Porsche factory driver Laurens Vanthoor
- A tweet from Techeetah racing driver Antonio Felix da Costa.

While these esports sim racers might just be a game to some, racing drivers are professional athletes under contract to big organizations. And when you're being paid to represent a big brand, there are consequences for making it look bad. Unsporting conduct, smoking weed, and even speaking out politically will get you in hot water in professional esports, and although Abt wasn't signed by Audi to play *rFactor 2*, he was still representing the organization—which bears his family name, no less—on Saturday. At a time when Twitch streams are bringing many racing stars closer to their fans, it seems like a shame that drivers of the caliber of da Costa and Vanthoor

are retreating over someone else's mistake.

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