

**FORMULA ONE IN AMERICA:**

# **RE-Born** *in* **the USA?**

**How Netflix, new tracks and new fans are powering a Grand Prix renaissance**

by TOM GLATCH

**THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF** the Formula One Heineken Silver Las Vegas Grand Prix coming this November brings the number of Grands Prix in the United States this year to three. It's an amazing accomplishment, since no other country has ever hosted three Formula One events in one season. But this is hardly the first time there has been a Grand Prix triple-header in this country.

The United States has long been the big brass ring Formula One has tried to capture — yet somehow it always eluded their grasp. The first United States Grand Prix was raced at Sebring in December, 1959. Holding the event three months after the penultimate race of the season, along with Sebring's remote location, kept interest so low the prize money checks bounced — until wealthy sportsmen Briggs Cunningham and Charles Moran volunteered to bail out promoter Alec Ulmann and cover the expenses.





## FORMULA ONE IN AMERICA

Southern California's Riverside Raceway next hosted the event in 1960, where Stirling Moss won from pole in his blue Rob Walker Lotus, and Briggs Cunningham and Charles Moran again had to pay the prize money due to poor promotion of the race.

The picturesque Watkins Glen circuit then began a 20-year Golden Age of successful United States Grand Prix events starting in 1961. The upstate New York permanent track was ideal for Formula One, and since it was at or near the end of the F1 season, The Glen was the site of some epic championship battles, including the 1974 World Drivers' Championship fight between Emerson Fittipaldi and Clay Regazzoni. But by then the surface and facilities had started to deteriorate, and the expense of revitalizing both the track and the event was too much for the organizers. The race in 1980 was the last USGP there.

The Formula One Constructors' Association had already begun expanding in the States, with the United States Grand Prix West on the streets of Long Beach, California from 1976 to 1983, along with a race in downtown Detroit from 1982 to 1988. Then there was the truly awful Caesars Palace Grand Prix held in the parking lot of the Las Vegas resort in 1981-82, the revived United States Grand Prix on the blistering grid-pattern streets of Phoenix in 1989-91, and the equally miserable Dallas Grand Prix on the Fair Park street circuit in 1984. Now the U.S. had up to three Formula One events each year, but the sport had hardly ingrained itself into the fabric of the nation, and the Phoenix race in 1991 would be the last Formula One event in the U.S. for almost a decade.

### Racing's triple crown

In 1998, it was announced Formula One would return to the United States — this time to the hallowed Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

With both the Indianapolis 500 and NASCAR Brickyard 400 races in its portfolio, the Hulman family, owners of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, believed the facility could successfully host Formula One, giving them racing's equivalent of the Triple Crown.

A two-year program of track improvements, including the addition of a 13-turn, 2.607-mile FIA Grade 1 road course, brought 225,000 fans to the inaugural United States Grand Prix in 2000. But interest faded the following years, and after Lewis Hamilton won the 2007 event, Indianapolis Motor Speedway CEO Tony George and Formula One Management Ltd. CEO Bernie Ecclestone mutually agreed to not schedule Formula One racing in 2008 at Indianapolis.

### The renaissance begins

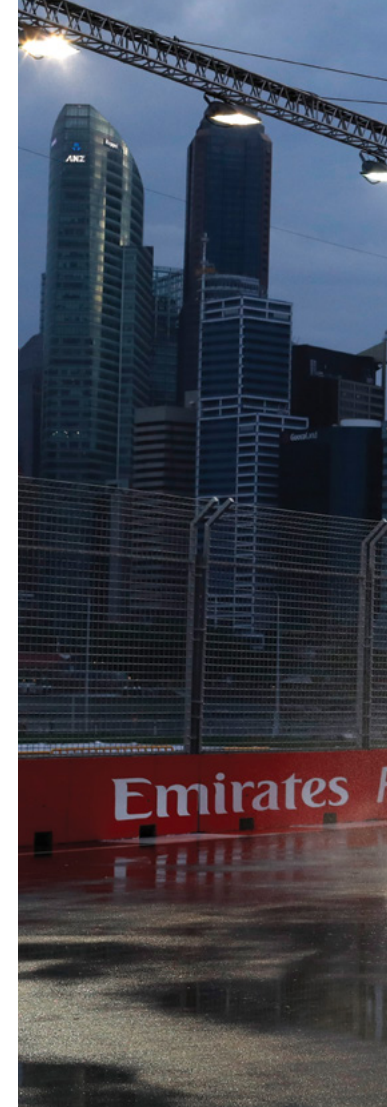
Formula One would not return to the United States until 2012 with the opening of the Circuit of the Americas. The 3.426-mile FIA Grade 1 track located



A rookie with the Williams team, Floridian Logan Sargent is the only American driver currently in Formula One.



Red Bull's Max Verstappen and Daniel Perez have won every Grand Prix this year before the August summer break.





Try to imagine the Las Vegas “Strip” as the backdrop to the Formula One Heineken Silver Las Vegas Grand Prix instead of the desert landscape of Bahrain and Abu Dhabi — or the modern skyline of Singapore. This could be the glitziest Formula One event ever.



If you'd like to watch the incredibly fast Formula One pit stops in Las Vegas, you'll need to join the Paddock Club at \$15,000 per person. Sorry, this and all other tickets for the November event are already sold out.

east of Austin was built by investors Bobby Epstein and Red McCombs with support from the State of Texas.

Its first Grand Prix attracted 117,429 spectators; the 2022 event saw nearly 440,000 attend the three-day festivities.

Then in 2017, an American company, Liberty Media Corporation, purchased Formula One from Bernie Ecclestone and a consortium of sellers.

“When Liberty Media came in and acquired the sport, they recognized what a diamond in the rough they had: Here’s this huge sport that the U.S. would fall in love with if they understood the characters, had some access — which is not how Formula One had operated,” McLaren CEO Zak Brown told “Hemispheres” magazine. “So they opened it up, and Netflix came. Austin has been a huge success. Now they’ve got Miami. Our sport has always been great, but now we’re letting people in. That’s the difference.”

### Drive to survive

“Drivers, managers and team owners live life in the fast lane — both on and off the track — during each cutthroat season of Formula One racing.” That’s how Netflix describes its “Formula 1: Drive to Survive” series.

Now in its fifth season, the 10-part series is the “first to truly immerse the audience inside the cockpits, the paddock and the lives of the key players in Formula One” with “unparalleled and exclusive access to the world’s fastest drivers, team principals and owners, as well as Formula One’s own management team.”

This April, “The Athletic” reported, “Season 5’s gross viewing minutes for its debut week was nearly 224 million, per Nielsen, which shattered last year’s premiere week number of 169.1 million viewing minutes for the first week of Season 4. That’s grown from 109.7 million viewing minutes when the show debuted in March 2019.”

That new interest among young male and female fans is one reason an additional Formula One race was added to the U.S.: The Miami Grand Prix.

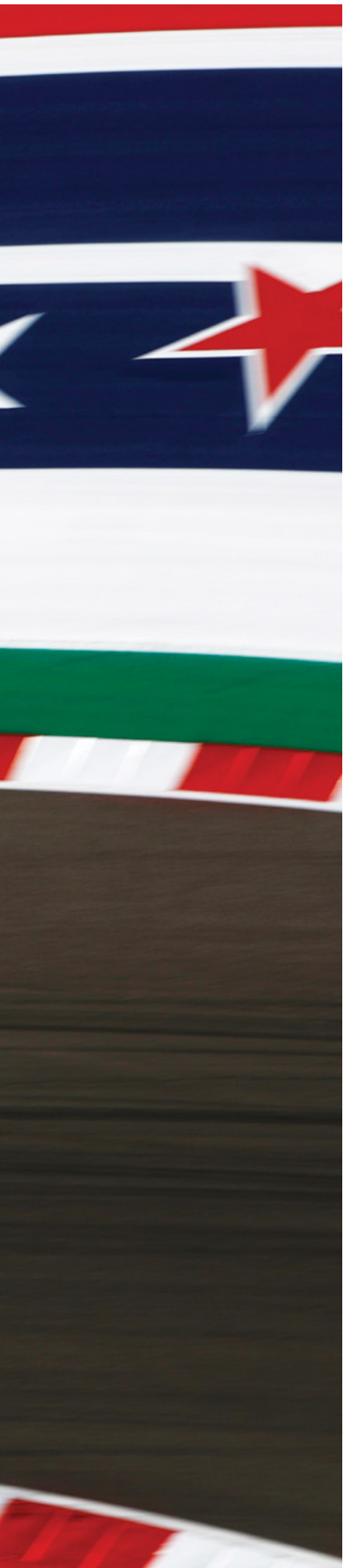
The semi-permanent Miami International Autodrome course around Hard Rock Stadium, the home of the NFL’s Miami Dolphins, could have been another Caesars Palace Grand Prix debacle. Instead, the debut race in 2022 was masterfully executed. “You can really feel it,” Stefano Domenicali, Formula One’s CEO, told “USA TODAY” during the inaugural Miami event. “You go around the city; everyone is talking about Formula One. We are international. And that’s the beauty between the connection of the American community and Formula One. We bring that together, and this is something that is super-positive.”

Now the Formula One Heineken Silver Las Vegas Grand Prix comes on board this November.

“Las Vegas is a destination known around the world for its excitement, hospitality, thrills, and of



United States Grand Prix at  
the Circuit of The Americas  
in Austin, Texas



course, the famous Strip,” Domenicali told the *New York Times*, with The Strip not only the backdrop for the event, but a long high-speed straightaway on the course.

The Saturday night race will be like the evening street races in the Middle East and Singapore, but with a uniquely Vegas vibe. Tickets are already sold out.

“I think it’s going to be probably the largest global sporting event in the world this year, I can’t think of something that’s going to be bigger,” Zak Brown told “Yahoo! Finance.” “The excitement is going to be off the charts, and I can’t wait to see everyone who shows up — it’s going to be the celebrities, the athletes, the CEOs, and, of course, hundreds of thousands of fans.”

## The challenges

What could possibly go wrong?

“Motor Sports” magazine summarized this year’s Hungarian Grand Prix as, “So close, yet so far — boredom snatched from the jaws of mild interest yet again.”

The British publication has been covering Formula One since the first race in 1950, and despite recent rule changes attempting to improve the competition, the series is currently dominated by the Red Bull team, easily winning every race this year before the series’ summer break this August.

It’s been the way of the sport for much of its history — Lotus, Williams, McLaren, Ferrari, Mercedes — someone has always dominated the sport. Right now, it’s Max Verstappen, Sergio Perez, and Red Bull winning 13 straight Grands Prix, breaking the record set by McLaren in 1988. With victory foregone, watching the other teams fight for the best-of-the-rest is often the only interest.

Then there is the lack of American participation in the sport.

McLaren is run by an American, Zak Brown, and the New York venture capital firm Dorilton Capital purchased the venerable Williams team from the family of the late Sir Frank Williams, but both squads are utterly British to the core.

The Haas F1 team was founded by American businessman Gene Haas in 2016, but the Ferrari-powered machines have had European drivers and minimal success. Plus, the only American driver in the series, rookie Logan Sargeant driving for Williams, played the game and came up through the European Formula 4, Formula 3, and Formula 2 ranks to earn his FIA Super License, but that made him virtually unknown in the States.

Wouldn’t a successful young American driver like IndyCar’s Colton Herta piloting an Andretti Cadillac Formula One racer do wonders for the sport? But the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile has made it almost impossible for an IndyCar driver to earn the required Super License despite their talent, and most of the 10 current F1 teams have thwarted Michael Andretti’s efforts to join this series with a new team backed by General Motors’ Cadillac division, fearing an additional entrant will dilute their current revenue streams (the F1 charter allows up to 12 teams and 24 cars on the grid).

These challenges will need to be addressed to break Formula One’s history of waxing, then waning in interest in the U.S. Yet Zak Brown is highly optimistic about the sport’s future. He told “Yahoo! Finance,” “I think it’s early days, which is amazing. A lot of people are saying, ‘How long do you think it will continue?’ And my answer is, ‘I think we’re actually just getting started.’” ☺