

A Formula 1 Season Like No Other

The pandemic has forced the sport to patch together a schedule with new races and new tracks, with more to come. What's the same is Mercedes, which is still on top.

By Ian Parkes

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Five months ago, Formula 1 came within two hours of starting its season.

The coronavirus was spreading globally, and when a member of McLaren tested positive and the team withdrew from the Australian Grand Prix in mid-March, the event was canceled before the first practice session on a Friday morning.

It sparked a tumultuous period for the motorsport series.

"When we left Australia, we were obviously entering into a massive unknown, and none of us knew where we would go or what was needed to be done," Ross Brawn, managing director, motorsports, at Formula 1, said in an interview.

"Fortunately, Formula 1 is the sort of industry that thrives on logistics, thrives on organizational challenges and thrives on complex problems, and so once we started to put our heads together, we began to see a way we would be able to operate."

On July 5, racing resumed with the Austrian Grand Prix, with no fans at the Red Bull Ring. It had been more than seven months since the final race of 2019 in Abu Dhabi and the longest off-season in Formula 1 history.

Formula 1 worked with the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile, the sport's governing body; the 10 teams; and other stakeholders, such as the tire supplier Pirelli and the circuit promoters, to discuss a way forward.

Along with Australia, a further nine races, in China, Bahrain, Vietnam, the Netherlands, Spain, Monaco, Azerbaijan, Canada and France, were either canceled or postponed.

There is now a 13-race calendar that started with two in Austria and includes two at Silverstone in England, with the second on Sunday, and three in Italy at different tracks. More races are expected to be added, and Formula 1 hopes to hold 18 over all.

"We knew the protocols to be put in place had to ensure the people in the countries we were planning to visit, and the people from within Formula 1 who were participating, were all kept safe and had the best conditions," Brawn said.

"My ambition, and the ambition of everyone in Formula 1, was to make the paddock one of the safest places in the world to be."

Dr. Gérard Saillant, president of the medical commission of the F.I.A., worked with the World Health Organization to carry out the protocols.

"The key principle was to create this biosphere within which we all operate," Brawn added, "and within that we create individual bubbles. The reason for the bubble is if there is a case then I hope we can contain it within that bubble."

A bubble consists of one to 12 people, who are not allowed to mix with others in another bubble. "We don't want them too big because if we do get an outbreak, then the bigger the bubble the bigger the problem," Brawn added.

Mercedes, for example, has 24 bubbles of one to five people, broken out according to the vehicles they travel in. So a crew of 12 mechanics has been split into three bubbles.

Each team is also restricted to 80 employees per race. That figure had been cut from about 200. Each person entering the paddock is tested every five days and must always wear a mask or face shield.



Each Formula 1 team is restricted to 80 employees per race this season. Mark Thompson/Getty Images

Formula 1 is working with a Luxembourg company, Eurofins Scientific, which analyzes the tests. There have been 17,504 tests conducted from June 26 to July 30, the latest figures available. There have been only three positive results so far.

For the first two, neither person was with a team. But the third person was Sérgio Perez, a driver for Racing Point. He was quarantined along with his personal assistant and physiotherapist, who both tested negative. Perez missed the British Grand Prix and will also not drive in this Sunday's race after he tested positive again. He was replaced on the team with Nico Hülkenberg, who drove for Renault last year.

The Coronavirus Outbreak

Sports and the Virus

Updated Aug. 7, 2020

Here's what's happening as the world of sports slowly comes back to life:

- Baseball tightened its virus protocols again: Players and staff members must wear masks in more places and cannot visit "bars, lounges or malls" when they are home.
- With no live crowd noise as a buffer at baseball games, on-field sounds are easy to hear on broadcasts — and it's not all rated PG.
- The University of Connecticut canceled its football season, and Divisions II and III scrapped all of their fall championships.

"We're pleased and proud of what we've been able to do so far, but we're not getting complacent," Brawn said.

"We realize what we are dealing with is a very dynamic problem. After each race, we've had an intense debrief with all the people involved, worked out how to tie up any loose ends or fix any issues, and so as we go on we're only going to get stronger and stronger in our way of meeting this new challenge."

The issues included the drivers Valtteri Bottas of Mercedes and Charles Leclerc of Ferrari returning to their homes in Monaco in between the races in Austria in July. Formula 1 personnel had been requested by the sport and the F.I.A. to remain in the country in their bubble.

Leclerc was given a warning by the F.I.A. because he had strayed outside of his bubble; Bottas did not and was not warned.

Leclerc said he went home, but was tested for the virus before returning.

“Yes, I went back home for two days and then did two tests to be sure of the result,” he said, noting that the tests were negative.

Brawn said that “one or two drivers haven’t quite understood the importance of the protocols which have been put in place and which have to continue, even when they are away from the circuit, so we have had to remind them of their responsibilities.”



Each person entering the racing paddock is tested every five days and must always wear a mask or face shield. Pool photo by Andrew Boyers

The pandemic has financially affected most Formula 1 teams, but McLaren and Williams are the only ones that have made figures public.

McLaren lost \$227 million for the first quarter of this year. On May 26, it announced it was laying off 1,200 of its 4,000 employees across its three divisions. About 75 of the job losses will be from the Formula 1 team.

On June 29, McLaren received a \$195 million loan from the National Bank of Bahrain, which Zak Brown, chief executive of McLaren, said put the company in a good financial position.

“The bad news is behind us,” he said. “We’re financially healthy and benefiting from playing offense when Covid hit.

“We ran toward the problems so we could address them quickly and turn the page. We’re now exactly where we want to be, and looking forward we’re sitting on a better business model, so we’re in quite good spirits.”

Three days after McLaren announced job losses, Williams disclosed a \$45.5 million loss in Formula 1 revenue in 2019.

Williams said it would consider a sale of the whole company or of a minority stake to help it through its crisis.

“We have received a number of very interesting potential investors, and we’re talking to those at the moment,” said Claire Williams, the deputy team principal, who would not say who the investors were.

“They are of a high quality, which we’re delighted about, and we continue to go through that process. We said we anticipated that the process would last for anywhere between three to four months, and we’re still on that timeline.”



The Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton won last week's British Grand Prix at Silverstone. Bryn Lennon/Getty Images

On the track, Mercedes continues to lead the way. Lewis Hamilton, who is trying to equal the record of seven titles won by Michael Schumacher, has a 30-point lead over Bottas, his teammate.

The first four races have all been held without fans. That will continue for the next four grands prix. For the events that follow, starting with the Gran Premio Della Toscana Ferrari 1000 in Italy, Formula 1 will decide depending on a country's situation.

Brawn said he was satisfied with the plans that had been put in place and what had been achieved in a short period.

“While one would not wish this to have happened, in some ways it's been a great challenge to meet, and that's the nature of people in Formula 1; they love meeting challenges,” he said.

“It's not one we wanted, but we've met it and found solutions, which in itself has been rewarding.”