



# On and off the track

Blair Hughes considers glaring issues of fan engagement facing F1 and the Australian Grand Prix

**I**n the aftermath of the opening race of the 2015 Formula One season at Melbourne's Albert Park there are loud calls for drastic changes to be made to not only level the racing field but also to further engage fans.

The management of Formula One is under pressure away from the track from motorsport fans, F1 drivers and racing team bosses, as well as sports business commentators, who argue that fan engagement in F1 has been lacking for far too long.

However, the 2015 Australian Grand Prix delivered a world-class best practice experience for every person that attended the event.

In a day and age where sporting organisations are doing everything they can to establish fans loyalty with memberships available for new fans as soon as they leave the cradle, F1 boss Bernie Ecclestone out-of-touch comments on fan engagement in June 2014 reveal where F1 is at with fan engagement.

At the time, Ecclestone made the bizarre comment "I don't know why people want to get to the so-called 'young generation'. Why do they want to do that? Is it to sell them something? Most of these kids haven't got any money" reveal the problem with where the F1 is with fan engagement.

A view that the sport does not need young fans shows an appalling lack of understanding of the audience of F1 fans and what they want from the sporting experience.

However, that comment is not the least worrying for motorsport aficionados as, in March this year, Ecclestone stated that he's not alarmed by declining television audiences – as well as stating that social media is a fad that he sees no value in having.

That being said, immediately prior to the 2015 Australian Grand Prix, F1 did finally set up a YouTube channel, which may be a sign that the sport's administrators are looking to embrace new technologies having learnt more about how younger fans are consuming the F1.

It also seems that team owners are trying to win back fans, with, during F1's pre-season testing, Ferrari team principal Maurizio Arrivabene taking himself, the reserve driver and the sporting director into the stands to work and sit with fans. Now that is fan engagement!

Looking forward, there are encouraging signs in F1's engagement.

Having attended the 2015 Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne I have to congratulate the Australian Grand Prix Corporation on a truly world class fan experience.

For a fan, the anticipation starts building from the moment you catch the free trams from Melbourne CBD down St Kilda Road to the Albert Park racecourse. After a short 10 minute walk from a tram stop and over a bridge with fans decked out in F1 team sponsored gear you make your way to the entrance



where you're greeted with free copies of Sunday's newspaper and free #CMONDAN Daniel Ricciardo cards to wave while you're in the circuit.

Give-aways also included a lanyard, AUSGP map, can of RedBull and even sunscreen.

However, the experience is not for the inactive as in walking from fan zone to fan zone I walked 7.4 kilometres throughout the day.

### Off the Track

Some of the simple cost effective activities included face painting, photo boards (where fans can stick their head through and be a grid girl or their F1 hero) and free race track simulators. It's also just great to see how fans were so well catered for with ATMs, free sunscreen and free mobile phone charging stations placed around the circuit.

There are five fan zones included in the general admission ticket price that include:

- Legends Lane with motorsport nostalgia including classic cars and the industry and innovation precinct that featured educational motoring displays and student workshops
- V8 Village devoted to the V8 Supercars with huge merchandise tents, autograph areas, giveaway tents and panel discussion stages
- Action Zone with live bands, segway and pit stop challenges, Panna football cages, Australian Defence Force vehicle exhibitions, motocross action stunts, kids dirt-bike rides and an aerosol art display
- F1 Central with access to stand right in the action behind the V8 teams in the pit and take part in the other sponsor challenges.
- Kids Corner, which is decked out with a Porsche junior driving school and Disney attractions



All of these areas offered multiple catering options including healthy choices; umbrellas for sun protection; and bean bags and large LED screens to take in the race if you didn't have a



grandstand ticket or didn't want to find a spot along the outside of the track.

Along with these entertainment zones, fans also had the option of upgrading their existing ticket for around \$60 to enter the James Boags Premium Fan Zone which featured better access to the grid; bean bag seating; and bars including a shipping container rooftop bar which afforded an elevated viewing deck to watch the race from.

### On the Track

While activities off the track represent value for fans, the action on the track is, of course, the key attraction.

While some F1 meets only have one or two races throughout the day, the Australian Grand Prix has a total of seven races programmed as soon as gates open until the first Grand Prix race of the season at 4pm.

Race day on Sunday 22nd March saw seven races, and only short periods of less than 15 minutes when there was not a car on the track. Races such as the Porsche Carrera Cup, V8 Supercars and Heritage Touring cars constantly showcased something exciting for fans to engage with. The Ultimate Speed Comparison test where they give a normal car a head start over a V8 Supercar, which also gets a head start over a F1 car as they all race for one lap, was also fun to watch, especially as they hit the home straight.

Above the track, fans were entertained by an RAAF aerial display, an FA-18 jet flyover, with its epic booming sounds, and a Qantas 747 jetliner seemingly floating just over the circuit.



After the highlight of the opening race of the F1 season, and with Lewis Hamilton completing his victory lap, fans experienced walking the length of the track and having their picture taken under the famous 'Melbourne, Australia' sign.

Watching the fans eagerly line up behind the fences and then race to the starting line represents the ultimate fan engagement - fans being able to stand on the track where the F1 cars have just raced. It was also fascinating to watch as racing enthusiasts picked up scraps of tyres and debris off the track to take home as a memorable souvenirs.



This year also included the unexpected appearance of Arnold Schwarzenegger who relocated from his Arnold Classic Fitness Expo at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre to take charge of the post match presentations and interviews on the podium.

It was revealed later his payment fee for this was just a few hamburgers and some water!

Throughout the day I enjoyed participating in 73 different activities offered at the Australian Grand Prix and there were probably some that I missed, in not wanting to miss the start of the race.

Motorsport is not for everyone, but the Australian Grand Prix is a brilliant example of fan engagement at its best and should be applauded for creating an unrivalled fan experience for both the casual and hardcore fan.

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