

FORMULA ONE IS EXPERIENCING A SHAKE-UP, SO WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE 2022 SEASON...

by Seb Kristensen



Formula One is at a crossroads. With its increasing predictability over the past few seasons, coupled with COVID-19 throwing a curveball at the sporting world, the sport is at a point where changes must be made for it to continue to thrive. From the perspective of dedicated fans, it is simply no longer exciting to watch races with Hamilton and Mercedes exhibiting unwanted levels of domination in their field.

Ahead of the 2021 season, new owners Liberty Media determined they would be imposing a number of restrictions on all teams in a bid to bring back F1's 'glory days', however due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the new restrictions and rule changes have been delayed until the 2022 season. Any number of different drivers or teams could therefore be in with a shot of winning races and the constructor's championship. The new regulations stipulate that each team will have a spending cap of \$175 million per year, which applies to anything related to on-track performance. However, driver salaries and the salaries of the top three personnel in the team, alongside marketing costs, will be excluded from the cost cap. Other rule changes include a limit on car upgrades over the course of a race weekend, the number of aero upgrades throughout the course of a season and the number of wind tunnel runs a team is permitted to carry out.

The restrictions imposed on all twenty teams have been brought in to bridge the gap and to try to ensure a more level playing field, with the intention of making F1 a far more competitive spectacle. The imposition of the new regulations will not completely change F1 from the outset however, as with any new rules and regulations, there will undoubtedly be teething problems from the beginning. Despite having a budget of hundreds of millions, Ferrari were a long way off the pace last year, demonstrating that large R&D budgets do not always translate into podium places and wins.



Having a limit on aero upgrades and wind tunnel runs in my eyes is counter-intuitive, as Formula One is meant to be the most technologically advanced sport in the world. F1 is a sport that continuously innovates; yet limiting upgrades and wind tunnel runs hinders teams' ability to do so and goes against F1's USP. Obviously, limitations are needed, however, teams should have freedom to innovate, as long as they operate within the cost cap, without breaking any design rules.

With the spending cap excluding marketing costs and driver salaries, this will undoubtedly result in driver salaries increasing to even higher levels, as team performances become even more reliant on the driver's skills and ability, rather than the car's performance. However, marketing costs being excluded from the spend cap may contribute to the problem and increase the gap between the top teams and the chasing pack even further. This is partly due to several of the teams, including the likes of Haas, whose marketing and brand exposure is not one of their core values. The likes of Red Bull and Mercedes, however, believe marketing and worldwide brand exposure is an integral part of their business model. Whilst this will not overtly lead to an on-track advantage, it will still give the wealthier teams an off-track edge over their less-wealthy competitors.

Whilst these changes have been long overdue, further changes are needed. There have been various discussions about additional changes, such as potential reverse-grid and sprint races, in order to ensure F1 stays at the forefront of motorsport. Various issues have arisen on the subject of Reverse Grid races, primarily the opposition to the proposal by the vast majority of drivers, along with Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff, who said "reverse grids would be an attempt to design freak results and F1 should only move towards this format if F1 wants to abandon its sporting integrity". Four-time World Champion Sebastian Vettel also voiced his discontent for the new format stating: "a reverse grid would be proof that the new regulations have not worked" and that they would be "wrong in the name of the sport". I don't believe that we will see full reverse grid races for a long time, however, I think there is an opportunity to hold sprint races similar to Formula Two. In Formula Two, the top eight finishers of the first race, are then reversed for a second 'Sprint Race'. The races are worth less championship points, but over the years these 'Sprint Races' have produced some classics, such as Ferrari Driver Charles Leclerc's epic battle through the field in Bahrain back in 2017.

Despite all the uncertainty surrounding the 2022 season, I expect racing outcomes will be much closer due to some of these new restrictions, however, it may take a few seasons before we see multiple teams competing for the championship. With racing between the teams becoming significantly more competitive, I believe it will impact the sport in a number of ways, with the most significant being the increase in viewing figures.

One of the main reasons that fans ceased watching F1 was due to the predictable nature of the sport. With increased viewership, F1 will become a more attractive outfit for brands, in particular those interested in sponsorship and hospitality, as they gain increased exposure and opportunities that the current F1 does not maximise.

Whilst COVID-19 has thrown all sports into a tailspin, it is not all negative. COVID-19 has opened F1's eyes throughout the lockdown period, with young drivers and esports proving to be the silver lining.

Throughout the last few seasons, a new era of young drivers has come into the sport and they have very quickly become fan favourites, both on and off the track. Drivers such as Leclerc, Lando Norris, George Russell and Alex Albon have brought a new lease of life to the sport. Throughout the lockdown period, a number of drivers, predominantly the younger ones, engaged in an esports series, which saw them competing against other sports stars and celebrities, such as Real Madrid goalkeeper, Thibaut Courtois and PGA Golfer, Ian Poulter. The series was a tremendous success, engaging fans from all around the world from the comfort of their own homes. A percentage of those who tuned in to watch the series will no doubt cross over to watch the 'real thing' in a bid to continue to follow some of those sportsmen who brightened up their lockdown. The young drivers have done a fantastic job of portraying themselves as incredibly relatable and although quite unintentionally I'm sure, they have bridged the gap between the drivers and their fans, something that didn't exist with the majority of their F1 predecessors.

With young drivers proving to be so marketable, it may well affect the way teams recruit their drivers in the future. Obviously the number one priority for teams in their recruitment process remains the driver's ability to drive faster than the rest of the pack, however, in the future I predict teams will pay more attention to the overall marketability of their drivers, enabling the teams to maximise the potential of their drivers as an overall asset.

One thing is for sure, with the new regulations coming in; the emergence of exciting young drivers competing in esports as well as the real thing, coupled with the dramatic makeover the cars will undoubtedly receive, the 2022 season will be incredibly different and far more exciting for F1 fans. In my opinion, Liberty Media is some of the way there to restoring F1.

