

The Business of Formula One

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Rules row mars start to season

A chaotic period of changes has flagged up divisions in the sport, says *James Allen*

Barely two weeks before the start of the new racing season in Melbourne on March 20, changes were proposed to the Grand Prix format that were akin to altering the length of a football match in the run-up to the World Cup.

The changes, which triggered a chaotic chain of events, were to qualifying sessions – a fundamental part of the Formula One offering. The one-hour qualifying sessions on a Saturday not only set the grid for Sunday's race, but also provide an important spectacle and valuable content for TV companies and other rights holders.

The new qualifying idea was based on an "elimination" format, with the slowest cars dropping out in succession.

Then, with little over a week to go before the Melbourne Grand Prix, F1's commercial boss Bernie Ecclestone said that the new format could not be brought in after all because of problems with the timing system. A few days later that position was reversed, the new qualifying format went ahead in Melbourne at the first round and was met with universal derision from fans and media.

Next, a vote was taken to revert to the old format – which was then reversed again four days later.

The chaotic bout of rule changes is an extreme example of the dysfunctionality currently at the heart of F1 and its rulemaking process. It is a state of affairs Ecclestone describes as the



Gear change: F1 champion Lewis Hamilton during his qualifying session at the Australian Grand Prix — Lars Baron/Getty Images

worst in living memory. Critics argue that the 85-year-old is one of the root causes of the problems. They point to other ideas that were tried and then quietly shelved under his tenure, such as awarding double points at the final round in 2014.

But Ecclestone argues that F1 worked

fine under the old "benevolent dictator" model, by which he used to run the sport. He singles out for blame the democratic process around the so-called F1 Strategy Group, constituted in 2013 and composed of leading teams, the FIA and F1's controlling shareholders CVC Capital Partners.

Ecclestone himself has said F1 is in the "worst shape ever", and fans and many sections of the media have gleefully followed in talking the sport down.

This April the group is scheduled to vote on a package of new rules to apply from 2017 onwards that could make or break the sport in the longer term, as it

seeks to refresh its appeal to younger audiences against a backdrop of declining viewing figures. After recent debates, there is some trepidation about the outcome.

On the table is a package of measures to make the cars look more aggressive and to increase greatly their performance by adding downforce from the wings, which allows faster cornering.

Critics, including many drivers, believe that this would be a bad move as the turbulent air coming off a high-downforce car makes it very hard for those behind to overtake. Rather than adding to the excitement, detractors say, the new package risks making F1 racing a procession.

If car designs were left alone, critics suggest, the nature of diminishing returns would see the performance gap between teams narrow and racing become more exciting. However, this sport of engineers and innovators has an insatiable desire to tinker, often to its own detriment.

The 2017 rules package could prove to be a costly failure. Even the F1 drivers have been moved to write an open letter attacking the decision-making process as "obsolete and ill-structured".

These are difficult times for F1 in terms of its image, but despite pressure on commercial revenues the sport continues to pull in sponsors, global audiences and broadcast deals.

A good example came in late March when Ecclestone negotiated an extension of a deal with Sky, this time taking F1 exclusively behind a paywall in the UK for the first time from 2019, with a resulting uplift of 150 per cent in the rights fee F1 was earning in the UK.

F1 was not in any hurry to do a

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The Business of Formula One

Teams suffer sharp fall in sponsorship income

Finance

Revenues are under strain as advertisers seek out better value for money from the sport, reports *James Allen*

Formula One's teams are losing sponsorship revenue at a rapid rate. Last year the 10 F1 teams raised \$750m, down from \$950m three years before. Switches to pay TV have also undermined audience in key growth markets such as Asia.

Teams' finances do not solely depend on sponsorship and media deals. Fortunes also rest on their success in competing for annual prize money distributed by Formula One Management (FOM) which was last estimated at nearly \$890m. That equates to an annual pot in excess of \$1.6bn up for grabs to support 22 cars racing in 21 venues around the world in a season.

By failing to control costs over decades, and a tendency to skew payments heavily to the top teams, the F1 business appears to be perpetually on the brink

of a crisis — and the problem is self-perpetuating. Observers paint a gloomy picture of a sport where the funding of smaller teams is under threat, and audiences are declining on TV and trackside, which in turn deters sponsors.

"The costs are, to me, the single largest issue and the one that then drives many of the others," says Zak Brown, chief executive of Chime Sports Media, F1's largest sponsor finder.

"We have an industry that is exploding in cost, and collectively they are not able to gather and get those costs under control." He argues that rising costs in the sport are forcing up the cost of attending Grands Prix at venues such as Silverstone in the UK, threatening to make events unaffordable for many spectators.

Other industry leaders agree the sport's appeal among fans and advertisers is under threat. Bernie Ecclestone, F1's chief executive, claimed recently that the sport was in the "worst shape ever", dominated by engine technology that relegated drivers to secondary importance. He added that he would not pay to watch it.

Yet for companies such as oil major ExxonMobil, which sponsors

McLaren-Honda, the expensive technical demands of the sport are intrinsic to its appeal as a supplier.

Bruce Crawley, motorsports technical manager at ExxonMobil, says: "I'm not sure we'd be in racing if we did not have a technological justification. We are here for branding and marketing, business-to-business and technology. If you took out the technology side it would make it more difficult [to justify]."

Many companies are moving away from treating F1 as a pure branding exercise in favour of a more nuanced approach, according to Nigel Geach, of industry monitors Repucom.

"We're seeing a real shift in the commercial landscape of F1, where once brands were really only concerned with logo visibility and the global TV exposure," he says. Now, they are also focused on showcasing their own products and expertise through tie-ups with teams, as well as looking to exploit fully direct marketing and client hospitality opportunities over a race weekend.

Potential advertisers and sponsors are also concerned that the sport is not growing in the Asian market as had been hoped, despite the launch of Grands Prix in areas including China,

Singapore, Korea and India over the past decade. "Asia has probably had the largest drop in reach," says Mr Brown, "primarily driven by [broadcast rights] going to pay-TV, but that was the market most people were most excited in."

He adds China has not emerged as a popular venue for corporate entertainment. "They've had their new anti-bribery laws that just cut it [corporate entertainment] in half."

Summing up the challenges of "selling" F1 now, Mr Brown says: "Right now the racing is not very close and it's too expensive for people to attend. But I believe the decline that F1 is in can be addressed and fixed."

The sport's own leaders admit that F1 has lost some of its lustre. But Mr Brown argues that it still stacks up well against rival branding opportunities in sport for a range of corporate clients.

"There is tonnes of opportunity. It is clear to me that live sport, and sponsorship of sport, continues to be the fastest growing advertising medium. People are always going to want and love live sport, whether that's F1 or football. They are not going to tape it and watch it later. They want to consume it."

'Right now, the racing is not very close and it is too expensive for people to attend'

Success at the wheel needs early nights and clean living

Elite training Physical and mental fitness is vital to winning a place on the podium, writes *Roger Baird*

Few secrets are shared in the competitive world of Formula One. But one of the services that a dozen drivers on the grid do share is the work of doctor and performance expert Aki Hintsu, who has coached drivers to 10 world titles.

Three-time champion Lewis Hamilton, four-time champion Sebastian Vettel, two-time champion Mika Hakkinen and the 2007 champion Kimi Raikkonen have all made use of his services.

The 57-year-old Finn runs the Hintsu Performance clinic for elite sportsmen and business executives.

The doctor was in demand at the Davos World Economic Forum in January, where he conducted five sessions giving tips to the world's business and economic elite on how to keep working under stress.

Dr Hintsu began working with F1 in 1998, and was chief medical officer at the McLaren team before establishing his own practice in the mid-2000s.

His clinic looks after the medical matters, psychological needs and physical training of the drivers at McLaren, Mercedes, Red Bull and Toro Rosso among others.

Dr Hintsu developed his approach in Ethiopia where he worked for two stints as a missionary surgeon. During that period he met Olympic long-distance champion Haile Gebrselassie and other elite runners and studied their training routines.

He reasoned these athletes were so dominant in their sport because of radical lifestyle regimes fully geared towards running success.

Dr Hintsu focuses on what he calls "the circle of better life". This is a

six-part programme centred on general health, nutrition, mental concentration, exercise, mobility and balance training and sleep.

It is a far cry from 1976, when British racing driver James Hunt would spend the night drinking with hangers-on, yet still find time to win the drivers' world championship.

Over the past few years, Dr Hintsu has stepped back from the F1 frontline. Last year he became ill with abdominal cancer and endured months of chemotherapy before being pronounced strong enough to undergo an operation in March.

After three decades of constant travel, Dr Hintsu decided to take a back seat from his day-to-day business but he remains involved in exploring how his coaching methods could help business leaders and organisations.

Over the past three years he has passed the reins of his business to Luke Bennett, who holds the centre's top job of medical and sports performance director.

"Around 80 per cent of the game in F1 is keeping your energy levels up and keeping your focus," says Dr Bennett. "This is particularly true in the second half of the season, which involves a lot of long-haul travel."

Dr Bennett separates the demands of F1's nine-month, 21-race season into three periods. Pre-season practice and the first few months of the year sees everyone motivated and doing their best. Drivers may flag in the middle part of the season, but after the midseason break in August, energy levels pick up again.

Demands peak again from September to the final race in Abu Dhabi in



Lewis Hamilton (left), world champion, pictured in 2013 with Aki Hintsu
James May/Press Association Images

November this year, when the championship gets serious.

Dr Bennett says: "This period is about who can survive the pressures of the races, the long-haul travel, and the politics of the sport — because it's at this time that talks about who will drive in which team next year hot up."

Perhaps the most important element in the Hintsu programme fitness regime is sleep and recovery.

Men in their 20s who train in the day need up to nine hours' sleep at night, says Dr Bennett. "If you are not fresh when you wake up, then it becomes hard to keep physical and mental energy levels up throughout the day."

Sleep management becomes important on long-haul travel, particularly controlling a driver's exposure to light and darkness, which upsets the body clock. On some trips Dr Bennett advises drivers to stay in a darkened hotel room for three hours to let the body acclimatise. And if they have to go out, they should wear sunglasses.

By contrast, a businessman in his 50s can get by on seven-and-a-half hours' sleep.

Controlling sleep is crucial on long flights, particularly exposure to light and darkness

Younger generation forced to bide its time for a slot on the grid

Team selection

Long careers for top performers snag up the career paths of emerging talent, reports *Simon Gray*

Belgium's Stoffel Vandoorne, last year's GP2 champion, is considered by some motorsport analysts as the most outstanding prospect to emerge from Formula 1's premier feeder series since Lewis Hamilton in 2006. Yet he was not on the grid when the new season got under way in Melbourne in March.

At McLaren, where Vandoorne has been part of the young driver programme since 2013, he is the team's reserve driver for 2016, third in the

pecking order behind former world champions Fernando Alonso and Jenson Button. To keep race-sharp, he will also compete in Japan's Super Formula.

Vandoorne is a high-profile sufferer from the lack of available seats in Formula 1, even though there is a new team, Haas, on the grid. Drivers' careers in the sport are getting longer and openings for emerging talent are few.

There are just three rookies in F1 this year. These include Jolyon Palmer, the 2014 GP2 champion who took a year away from racing as a test and reserve driver for Lotus, the team acquired by Renault last December, hoping his patience would be rewarded with a race seat in 2016. Palmer admits that had the opportunity not come round this year, he would have considered Germany's DTM touring car championship or

crossing the Atlantic to race in the US IndyCar series.

"When I won GP2, it was tough to accept that I wasn't going to be able to race in Formula One, but I wanted it enough that it was worth taking a year out of racing," he says. "But if I had missed the opportunity this year, I would have needed to go back to racing somewhere else."

The son of former Grand Prix driver Jonathan Palmer, Jolyon has longstanding connections in the sport, as well as his obvious ability in the car. But during the tough economic climate of recent years, backing from big sponsors has been key for F1 newcomers. Pastor Maldonado from Venezuela, for example, has enjoyed backing from PDVSA, his country's state oil company.

A couple of decades ago talented

drivers were helped up the ladder by programmes sponsored by groups such as auto manufacturers and oil companies. Many of these fell into abeyance with the economic downturn and manufacturers, such as Renault, left the sport at the end of the last decade.

One exception has been Red Bull, which uses its junior Toro Rosso team as an incubator of such promising talent as four-time champion Sebastian Vettel and Max Verstappen, who came into F1 last year at the age of 17 and took 12th

'Our eyes are very much open to other promising prospects for the future'

place in the championship with a mixture of raw speed and aggression.

Even Red Bull's competitors admire its success in nurturing young drivers. It has been a "shining light in respect of driver talent progression in the past few years", says one member of a rival team.

That said, Mercedes has a development programme that this year helped Pascal Wehrlein — who was champion last year in the German Touring Car Masters race series, the DTM — on to the F1 grid with the Manor team.

"It is very pleasing to see young drivers earning their spot in Formula One on merit and to see that talent rewarded by the system," says Toto Wolff, Mercedes-Benz head of motorsport. "Our eyes are very much open to other promising prospects for the future."

Claire Williams, deputy principal of

the Williams F1 team, says although independent teams, such as her own, do not have as much money as manufacturers to devote to young driver programmes, they have other ways to develop talent.

"Our scheme gives young drivers the opportunity to spend a year at our factory, working across the whole of the business, which is worth more than pure cash," she says. The Williams team gave Jenson Button his first opportunity in F1 at the age of 20 and he is still in the series 16 years later.

Williams points out that a number of veteran F1 drivers will be out of contract at the end of this year: "This could give a new generation the opportunity to enter the sport."

Stoffel Vandoorne will hope to be among them.

Interview Alejandro Agag, chief executive of Formula E

Formula E used to be viewed with suspicion — even disdain — by many motorsport fans, but over the past 18 months it has begun to gain credibility.

Just as electric motoring has gradually established a foothold in the car market, the electric racing series has steadily built a fan base. It has also the backing of some blue-chip sponsors and manufacturers interested in demonstrating the prowess of their battery-driven vehicles.

Launched in 2014, the series offers an experience quite different from F1. Formula E races on purpose-built temporary street circuits in city centres, allowing fans to arrive by public transport.

Alejandro Agag, Formula E's chief executive, concedes that junior competitions have often wilted in the shadow of F1.

"There have been many championships that have started and they have faded," he says. He acknowledges an element of luck in getting his series running.

"We picked the right time," he notes. "The technology was just beginning to be ready. We jumped on it and the times have gone in our favour."

In contrast to F1, events are priced to attract families and young spectators; Formula One chief Bernie Ecclestone memorably said in 2014 that he had no interest in attracting younger viewers who could not afford a Rolex.

F1's three days of track action are typically compressed into a single day, with practice, qualifying and the race all taking place in quick succession on a weekend.

Competitors in the Formula E championship — held by Brazil's Nelson Piquet Junior — last year drove cars supplied by Spark-Renault. Formula E cars can reach a maximum speed of 250kph (155mph) and are capable of accelerating from zero to 100kph in three seconds.

Noise levels generated at and around temporary urban tracks are a relatively modest 80 decibels.

The "ePrix" events, however, are not without controversy. This year's event in London's Battersea Park scheduled for July has attracted protests about the temporary loss of public space.

Attendance is priced at a relatively modest level with basic standing tickets available at £22. Those in a fan zone with limited views go for £8.

The viability of the series will depend on

Alejandro Agag



The Business of Formula One

Wolff calls for governance shake-up

Reform

The head of Mercedes tells *James Allen* how he believes his sport is being hampered by poor decision-making

Toto Wolff is frustrated. The Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 team, of which he is the principal, is dominant on the racetrack.

But he argues that the sport itself is not performing at full tilt, due to a governance structure under which the teams, the commercial rights holder and the federation are failing to pull together for the common good.

This situation, he argues, has led to controversy and a series of poor decisions on rules and other fundamentals.

His own house is in such good order that the chasing pack still cannot catch Mercedes on track. But Wolff is uncomfortable with the fact that the wider sport is not thriving.

Mercedes has dominated F1 in recent times. Some observers cite the regularity of its victories as a reason for declining interest among audiences and fans in the sport. Boring or not, the scale of Mercedes' success has been spectacular. In the past two seasons the team has dominated F1 like never before. It has won the drivers' and constructors' championships by huge margins, achieving more wins, pole positions and points than any team in the sport's history. Last season, it scored an unprecedented 86 per cent of the maximum points available.

While he plots continued dominance on the podium, he also is campaigning for a radical shake-up in how the sport is governed.

Wolff argues that F1 is struggling because of botched reform of the rulemaking structure, put in place around the time he took over at Mercedes in 2013.

Reform put power in the hands of the F1 Strategy Group, made up of the top six teams – including Mercedes – the FIA and Bernie Ecclestone, F1 chief executive. The three parties had an equal one-third vote. The body, established to set the strategy for future growth, excluded smaller teams and, argues Wolff, became a forum for bad ideas. Last month leading drivers themselves, represented through the Grand Prix Drivers' Association, issued a statement criticising “disruptive” rule changes and described the decision-



Sitting pretty: Toto Wolff, principal of Mercedes

making process in F1 as “obsolete and ill-structured”.

“The current governance creates more controversy than unity,” says Wolff. “So many controversial ideas are just thrown into the room, which creates even more controversy and hardline standpoints, rather than trying to find out what the common denominator could be, and then developing and taking it from there.”

Simmering tensions between teams and the sport's commercial rights holders threaten to spill over again, as all parties position themselves for a renegotiation of how the sport will be run by the end of the decade.

Mercedes and the other car manufacturers in F1 will have the chance to force the issue and reshape things in 2020 when the Concorde Agreement, the contract that binds competitor teams to F1, is due for renewal. But Wolff believes that F1 must act now.

“I think 2020 is too late . . . to reset some of the structural deficits in F1. Certainly 2020, with a new Concorde and new governance, also means there is opportunity. But beforehand we all

need to align ourselves and understand that this is a joint platform, a common platform that we need to continue to develop – rather than dragging it through the dirt.”

Aside from tackling controversies over race rules and strains on team finances, F1 leaders also need to stay alert to the revolution in digital media use, which threatens to undermine the traditional broadcast appeal of the sport. “All media are facing that challenge and you just need to embrace that and [realise] what functioned

‘I am not a traditional manager. I would not survive in a corporate environment’

yesterday doesn't function today any more,” he says. “This is a digital revolution – everybody who puts a video on YouTube is a competitor and you need to acknowledge that.” His insistence on a fluid and rapid

approach to challenges reflects his career both in and outside the sport.

Wolff is an entrepreneur, who built his fortune in private equity, investing in tech businesses. He was a keen racer in his youth, and an investment in the Williams F1 team in 2009 brought him into the F1 arena. In 2012, Daimler invited him to become a shareholder and principal of the Mercedes F1 team, bringing with him his ally and technical chief, Paddy Lowe.

Wolff also heads Mercedes' global motorsport programme. Mercedes took a risk on trusting his more entrepreneurial approach, he argues. But it avoided the temptation to adopt the sort of tight corporate grip imposed by other carmakers in the past, such as Toyota and Honda, both of which abandoned F1 in the 2000s.

The nature of F1, with its emphasis on innovation and fast decision-making, does not lend itself to a conventional corporate model, says Wolff. “I think the risk [for Mercedes] has paid off and certainly they have chosen a bold approach, a different approach to all the other car companies who have been in the sport before.”

Wolff replaced Ross Brawn as head of the Mercedes F1 team in 2013. His predecessor was an engineer who enjoyed success at Ferrari with Michael Schumacher and later with his own Brawn team in 2009, winning the world championship before selling to Mercedes in 2010. Brawn put in place much of the technical groundwork for Mercedes' current dominance, but Wolff and Lowe have delivered the success.

Managerial freedom and a clear economic stake in the business are key to Wolff's motivation. In spite of his ultimate responsibilities, he does not consider himself a conventional company man.

“I need to have a stake in the business, I am not a traditional manager, I would not survive in a corporate environment,” he says.

Despite his impatience with infighting and poor business decisions by the sport's leaders, he insists F1 remains in reasonable shape.

“It is actually pretty robust when you consider some of the mistakes that we have made most recently, and how the sport has been talked down.”

Rules row mars start to the 2016 F1 season

Continued from page 1

long-term deal; it had recently negotiated the early withdrawal of the BBC from its £15m-a-year deal to show half the races live and the rest in highlights, replacing it with a similar offering on Channel 4 that runs until 2018, valued at £24m. Playing Sky off against BT Sport in their relentless drive for acquisitions, the new six-year deal is worth close to £1bn to the sport.

There is inevitable concern that by disappearing behind a paywall in important markets such as France, Spain and the UK, F1 is becoming a niche sport.

But supporters of the strategy of seeking value over viewing figures argue that by the start of the next decade there will be no top-level live sports on free television in Britain, apart from so-called “Crown Jewel” events such as Wimbledon, whose free-to-air status remains protected by law in the UK.

At the same time, the broadcast arm of Ecclestone's Formula One Management business has been developing new technologies to cater for the digital age.

A gaming platform using GPS and real-time data capture promises to allow gamers to race virtually in a Grand Prix as it is taking place live. F1 is now working with partners to stream its races on tablets and other online platforms with no delays in signal.

If sport is equipped technologically to profitably exploit its spectacle though such innovative digital channels, the question remains who will lead it there. The sport's private equity owner, CVC, recently revived talk of a succession plan for F1's chief executive, but Ecclestone continues to stay one step ahead of the financiers.

CVC had an offer on the table last year from a consortium looking to buy the sport for in excess of \$7bn. CVC turned down the offer and, despite the fund holding on to the sport for longer than some might have expected, its chief, Donald Mackenzie, remains in thrall to F1 and continues to see potential for further growth.

On the track the Mercedes cars driven by Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg continue to dominate. Last season they

Bernie Ecclestone, the sport's chief executive, is at the centre of controversy over rule changes



F1 designers put wind in sails of top yachts

Aerodynamics

Motorsport technology is behind the British contender for the America's Cup ‘Auld Jug’, writes *James Allen*

When Martin Whitmarsh, former McLaren chief executive, started work in Formula One in the late 1980s, his team had two specialists in aerodynamics. When he left in 2012, there were 140.

Such is the increase in financing and headcount in F1 over the past 25 years. As money poured into the sport, aerodynamics became an important battleground for teams and car designers, attracting huge investment.

Design gains are now being applied in the more rarefied arena of high-end yachting – and the America's Cup competition in particular.

Whitmarsh is chief executive of the Land Rover BAR team, established by Sir Ben Ainslie, the UK's Olympic sailing champion. The venture employs 100 people, all working to prepare their challenger vessel to compete in the next America's Cup edition in June 2017. The team will deploy 21st-century techniques learnt from F1 in its bid to bring the America's Cup – the world's oldest international sporting trophy – home to the UK for the first time in its 165-year history.

Aerodynamics and hydrodynamics are essential technical disciplines in yacht design. The days of cumbersome monohull boats are long gone. Instead, prototype boats have multihull designs and, when travelling at the maximum speed of around 50mph, as little as 1 per cent of the boat is actually touching the water. The rest is left “flying” above it. It is to a normal sailing boat what an F1 car is to a Mini.

“We're looking at wings, hydrofoils, aerodynamics, we're looking at hydrodynamics, control systems, and we're looking at material technology and man-machine interface,” says



Technology ahoy: Land Rover BAR crew training in their multihull test boat

Whitmarsh. “In other words, all the things that you look at in F1, aside from internal combustion engines.”

Whitmarsh has hired nine engineers from McLaren to bring F1 know-how

to complement the boat designers. One of them, Richard Hopkirk, became famous on TV as the voice in Lewis Hamilton's ear on radio messages during races. He is now head

of simulation and control systems at BAR.

“There is just a crisper level that F1 operates at,” says Ainslie, who won medals at five consecutive Olympics from 1996 to 2012.

“To have someone who has been at the forefront with F1 is a massive boost to this team in helping jump that gap to get where we need to be.”

But it is not only in technology and team management where Whitmarsh is transforming his new sport. He also spent several, ultimately frustrating, years as chairman of the F1 Teams' Association, negotiating collectively on behalf of the F1 teams with Bernie Ecclestone, chief executive, on commercial matters and with the FIA on regulations.

Now he is attempting to build a political consensus among America's Cup teams, aimed at transforming the competition from a sporadic event funded by maverick billionaires into a professional sport. This, he says, could be funded through media rights and long-term sponsors, with a commitment to holding the competition every two years. The recent history of the cup has been riven by acrimonious commercial and legal disputes and delays between events.

‘Because of computer graphics on screen, it's a more understandable and exciting sport’

“This is a winner-takes-all sport, whereby the victor is the rulemaker and the commercial rights holder,” says Whitmarsh. “There are pros and cons of that; one of the significant cons is that having won, they then take time to establish which challenge is accepted and the protocols and manner of the next campaign.”

“We're in the 35th campaign at the moment for this cup but the teams realised we've got something that is televisual, it's dynamic, it's got the backdrop of

people, it's tight, it's exciting and also – because of computer graphics that are on the screen now – it's a more understandable and exciting sport.”

The aim is to create a clear consensus among interested backers which will attract more popular and commercial interest in the historic yachting competition.

“The teams are working together to agree a framework agreement for the next campaign,” says Whitmarsh.

Backers of America's Cup teams have sometimes made the same mistakes as their F1 counterparts, whose arguments about rules and revisions of technical standards have hampered the smooth running of the sport.

But avoiding such pitfalls, says the F1 veteran, could transform yachting's most prestigious event. The America's Cup could consolidate its position not only as the world's oldest sporting competition, but also transform the extent of its exposure and earnings and breaking its dependence for finance on the whim of individuals, who may or may not choose to compete next time.

While involved with McLaren, Whitmarsh worked closely with some of F1's greatest drivers. Ayrton Senna, Alain Prost, Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton were among them. How does Ainslie, Britain's most decorated sailor, compare?

“People who win, like Ben and those great drivers, they all have different personalities, but they all have this singular intensity about winning,” says Whitmarsh. “They don't win these things by good luck and they don't win it on talent alone. You've got to have talent, commitment and opportunity, but you also need this intense desire to win.”

As captain of a start-up team challenging well-established sailing outfits, such as Team New Zealand and Team Oracle USA, Ainslie will need all his legendary will to win.

If Whitmarsh and Ainslie do succeed in regaining the trophy, known in yachting circles as the Auld Jug, for the UK, they will validate their strategy of injecting F1 professionalism into the niche sport.

broke records that had stood for 65 years including the most victories, the most one-two finishes and scoring the greatest percentage of the maximum points available.

The main challengers this season are Ferrari, led by four-times world champion Sebastian Vettel. Early signs are that it has halved the performance gap to Mercedes over the winter, but they remain elusively just out of reach.

Red Bull Racing, Williams and McLaren are set for another season of making up the numbers. The arrival of a highly professional new US team, Haas F1, has breathed fresh life into the sport and they scored a strong points finish on debut in Australia, proving that there is some good news in F1 from time to time.

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