

# The Business of Formula One

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## Chase for viewers puts sport at crossroads

One dominant driver, technical false starts and a shrinking television audience are concerns for next season, write *Roger Blitz* and *James Allen*

The Formula One season has come to resemble a car at the back of the grid: fast-moving but prone to technical problems and in need of something new and exciting.

Any big sporting competition hopes to sustain interest up to and including a season finale. While F1 has had its share of tension-packed denouements in the past, that is not the case this year.

Sebastian Vettel's victory at last weekend's Indian Grand Prix sealed a fourth consecutive drivers' championship for the German, elevating him to equal third in the list of multiple title winners. Yet the much-predicted outcome also means the final three races of the season, in Abu Dhabi this

weekend, and the US and Brazil later in the month, will be processionals – of interest only as historical footnotes and likely to hit audience ratings.

In terms of sustained sporting interest, 2013 has been a write-off in F1. Vettel had already mounted the winner's podium nine times before his victory in India, leading the drivers' championship from the second race and rarely looking back. The 26-year-old is as dominant as his compatriot Michael Schumacher was for a decade from the mid-1990s, turning F1 into a sport of dull predictability.

Vettel and his Red Bull Racing team are as symbiotic as Schumacher and Ferrari, and equally potent. This is Red Bull's fourth consecutive constructors' championship, with Ferrari,



Victorious: Sebastian Vettel's win at last weekend's Indian Grand Prix gave the German his fourth consecutive world title AP

McLaren and Mercedes all left trailing in the Austrian team's wake.

Vettel's relentless supremacy prompted rival driver Lewis Hamilton to comment that this season had reminded him of watching the start of Schumacher's races when he was a child: "Going to sleep, then waking up when it ended because I already knew what would happen."

Bernie Ecclestone has been acutely aware of the risk of 'sameness' damaging public interest in the sport

Is F1 sleepwalking into stagnation? Bernie Ecclestone, F1's commercial superno, has been acutely aware of the risk of "sameness" damaging public interest in the sport.

Yet Ecclestone has also talked up Vettel's achievements, describing him as probably better than Ayrton Senna, the Brazilian driver.

"People complain about [Vettel] winning everything," Ecclestone told news agency Bloomberg. "But the racing is good."

That will not stop Ecclestone and his F1 colleagues trying to find ways to address the lack of competition.

The latest wheezes to spice up the show were to get Pirelli, tyre provider to all the teams in the sport, to make tyres that had to be changed every 20

laps, and for the teams to fit their cars with an adjustable rear wing (drag reduction system, or DRS) to improve their overtaking capability.

The idea backfired for two reasons: in many races, DRS made overtaking too easy, undermining in the eyes of many one of the fundamental skills of being an F1 driver; and tyre failures plagued the first half of the season, the worst instance coming at the British Grand Prix in June when six cars suffered blowouts.

The issue became a political battleground. Pirelli's desire to revert to the 2012 design featuring Kevlar instead of steel was blocked by the better-performing teams, only to be enforced by

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