

Barnes: Austin has learned from last year's Formula One parties

More locals expected to join global revelers

Posted: 5:11 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 14, 2013

BY MICHAEL BARNES - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Last year proved a learning experience for Austinites previously clueless about Formula One and its social scenes.

The media, relying on experts, warned of possible catastrophic traffic conditions, saturated downtown streets and cacophonous parties that would surely disrupt the lives of laid-back Austinites during the U.S. Grand Prix last year.

None of that happened. For the most part, traffic flowed easily. The off-hour social hub, Fan Fest, left little imprint on downtown and the legendary late-night parties – some imported, others indigenous – failed to levitate the clubs, hotels and event centers they occupied.

“The media did an unintentional injustice by making Austin think it was going to be a mess downtown,” said musician Ginger Leigh, who helped organize signature parties such as Blu at the W Austin Hotel. “To be honest, South by Southwest and ACL Music Festival bring more traffic to our city. But, the media, along with the rest of us involved in F1, didn't really know what to expect.”

For sure, Formula One fans took advantage of the Austin vibe – at various price points. Some grabbed street food downtown and around the track. Others paid tens of thousands of dollars for a spot at one of the pop-up clubs, the better to rub fleece-jacketed shoulders with celebrities and drivers.

Visitors generally stuck close to the Circuit of the Americas during the day, then took in a few local cultural curiosities by night. While fine-dining establishments did not, in general, see a big uptick in business, steakhouses bustled.

I guess that's what people taste when they think of our state.

"Having a University of Texas game the same weekend will certainly add some complications," predicted George Elliman, publisher of *Tribeza* magazine, who split his time between the track and downtown socializing last year. "But I think that the crowds will mostly be separate. Many of the people I know that were interested last year have 'been there and done that' and don't plan to go again this year. But then there are probably at least a small number of people that stayed away last year and have now become somewhat interested to at least go one day and see it in action."

Truth is, the vast majority of F1 fans didn't come from all that far away.

"Many were banking on an international crowd," said Austin fashion designer Linda Asaf, who promotes the Full Tilt Fashion Show during F1 weekend. "But in reality, the vast majority were from the U.S. and Texas with only a small percentage – less than 20 percent – being international."

Thursday afternoon, F1 fans were already mingling downtown. Fan Fest, promoted by Circuit of the Americas, has expanded to 12 blocks and moved a bit to the west, in part to avoid Congress Avenue and East Sixth Street, but also to accommodate more expected guests, officials said.

On Second Street – this time transformed into the fest’s luxury district – Canadian driver Jacques Villeneuve autographed a Stinger race car that will be auctioned to benefit St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital when the other living F1 champions have finished signing it.

It’s all a great way to learn about the sport.

“I’m not a ‘gearhead,’ yet I was fascinated by the sport that was new to me,” said Timothy Dillon, marketing director for Ballet Austin, site of the buzzy My Yacht Club party. “So I set out to learn more about Formula 1 auto racing and why it is so popular around the world. I met a lot of fascinating people and I even had the opportunity to sit inside and grip the steering wheel of a 2014 Lamborghini. It felt like I was sitting in a giant, fitted, leather glove.”

Another kind of learning curve faced the partying troupes, observed Annabelle Frankl, who stages My Yacht Club with twin brother Nicholas Frankl.

“While Austin is late to the F1 party, the town has proven itself as a great destination for both racing and partying,” she said. “However, unlike iconic races such as Monaco, where the post-race, Sunday night celebration is the big one of the weekend, when the drivers get to let loose and have some fun, Saturday night was definitely the big night at My Yacht Club last year.”

Some suggest that last year’s media hype actually might have helped to focus the minds of planning officials, while encouraging those locals averse to the global visitors to stay at home and curse the overhead helicopters – which turned out to be unnecessary luxuries.

“My gut reaction is that it will be really similar this year in feel,” said event promoter Matt Swinney of Launch787. “First, for the die-hard F1 fans, I wonder if many won’t travel to Austin. Sebastian Vettel having already secured the championship, I wonder if some might stay away. Also, since it’s not the first year, I wonder if Austin won’t be the shiny new penny anymore? However, for locals, I think we’ll all get out a bit more.”

Given that our city is a wall-to-wall festival from Labor Day to Thanksgiving, maybe we’ve learned to live with our social blessings. Or, if you are of another turn of mind, curses.

“Fan Fest was such a cool, family-friendly event, and I’m not sure moms and dads knew what to expect last year,” Swinney says. “Now that word has gotten out, I think you’ll see lots of families out with young kids, particularly on Saturday afternoon.”