

Formula 1 Recap: The U.S. Grand Prix's Texas-Sized Weekend

By Hannah Elliott - Nov 3, 2014

Contrary to popular belief, no sheiks roamed downtown Austin, Texas, last night leading tigers by gilded leash. The locals drinking there had been sure -- sure! -- there would be. Everyone said so.

Tigers, no. But semi-nude acrobats at a nearby party doling vodka from suspended hoops? Yes. Six-figure vintage Mercedes SLs cruising Congress Avenue? Yes. A \$24,000 bottle of champagne offered as the prize for a Grand Prix-related Halloween contest? Well, yes.

This is Formula 1, after all.

Texas-style F1. Which meant the million-dollar race cars, well-dressed young Europeans, and an apparently endless supply of Perrier came paired with trays of "shrimp diablo" (bacon-wrapped shrimp smeared in BBQ sauce), flag-twirling drill lines of cowgirls, and banjo music wafting by at the most unexpected times. It meant that the mostly Italian and Latin American crowd at Ferrari's "Authentic Texas BBQ" Saturday night wore artfully distressed cowboy hats as party favors and sampled pulled-pork BBQ crostini with vanilla old fashioned and a general tang of mesquite.

At the [U.S. Grand Prix in Austin, Texas](#) -- this is the third year it has run -- you were more likely to see Keanu Reeves eating lobster in the Infiniti Red-Bull Racing suite and Tony Parker sauntering by with a beautiful woman than to see Jeff Gordon, say, or Ricky Bobby.

"It is quite the frontier, isn't it?" said the Pirelli executive when I asked how he found his first trip to Texas. He wore a navy sweater tied artfully around his shoulders; his expensively cut blond hair was tinged with grey in that distinguished way Italians always seem to orchestrate.

A British photographer turned pink by the afternoon sun described it all as ‘droll’ -- Austin was an exotic place as far as he was concerned, and rife with amusements.

Winners Circle

Not least of all, the main event: Yesterday under the autumnal Texas sun Lewis Hamilton overtook his teammate Nico Rosberg to win the 2014 United States Grand Prix. That gave him a 24-point lead in the F1 Drivers' Championship and arranged next week's race in São Paulo, Brazil, to be a crucial showdown between the two Mercedes drivers. If Hamilton wins it'll be his second world title.

Mercedes had already amassed enough points by the end of the race in Sochi, Russia, earlier this month to secure the Team Championship, so the individual rankings are where the drama sits this late in the season.

Daniel Ricciardo, the Australian who drives for Red Bull and who has done exceptionally this year considering his status in previous years, took third, while Felipe Massa, a 33-year-old Brazilian who drives for Williams, was fourth. The Fin Valtteri Bottas placed fifth and Ferrari's Fernando Alonso -- a two-time world champion who makes \$30 million annually, according to Forbes -- came in sixth.

Hometown favorite Sergio Perez, a young Mexican star who makes passes at reporters and visibly basks in the adulation when the crowds chant "*CHE-CO CHE-CO*" during autograph sessions, had placed seventh last year but crashed in the first lap of the 2014 race. (A tangle with Sauber's Adrian Sutil.) He earned a seven-place grid penalty to be paid next week in Brazil. Better luck next time.

Economic Boost

During the races this weekend F1 generated \$507 million for the area, according to official estimates. That's well more than the boon brought by SXSW (\$315 million) and Austin City Limits (\$182 million), the city's two other premier gatherings.

Taco stands and brisket joints remained packed from open to close. Lodges like the chic Hotel Saint Cecilia and curiosity shops like Uncommon Objects benefited. Pop-up clubs produced by My Yacht Group and its rival, Amber Lounge, vied with Blu at the W Hotel each night of the week to attract post-preliminary-race revelers.

One morning the line to get into Franklin's BBQ wound its way so far past the wood pile in the back that the more enlightened of petitioners waiting there, hopeful they'd eat before the meat ran out, had brought lawn chairs for the wait. At Allen's Boots on Congress Avenue, the guy telling me about a pair of \$1,400 ostrich leather booties looked so tired he could have slept while we talked. It wasn't yet 5 p.m.

A week of goings on like this and you could be forgiven for forgetting the reason for the madness: the chance to watch 20-something males strap themselves into million-dollar open-top machines and hurl themselves around a hilly road course at 200 mph.

Nascent Popularity

Ah yes, the noble sport of Formula 1. I wish Americans embraced it like Europeans and Latins do. So does NBC and just about every F1 promoter the world over. They're working on it.

In the meantime, it is to your infinite advantage to jump onto the F1 popularity train before everyone and their mother gets the message two years from now. (That's when we may have a North Carolina-based team run by Gene Haas of NASCAR fame.) That way, when you're all watching races together and some johnny-come-lately wise guy starts to pontificate about the finer points of race strategy, you can mutter on the side to one of your better-looking friends.

"Dude, I've been following Formula 1 *since 2014*."