

Historic night race wows world

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by Leonard Lim

• And the winner is...Singapore!

Thrills and spills mark F1's debut in Singapore

ON A night when sporting history was made, the big winners were Renault driver Fernando Alonso, Formula One and its fans, and Singapore.

Over 100,000 spectators, close to half of them tourists, turned up in the heart of the city to witness the world's first F1 night race yesterday.

Thousands more watched it on TV at home, at parties, and at nightspots. Many others who were downtown did not catch sight of the cars, but heard the howl of F1 engines and said it was something not soon forgotten.

And after an incident-packed two hours which saw several crashes and a horribly botched pit-stop involving pre-race favourite Felipe Massa of Ferrari, they were left hungry for more.

The race, won by Alonso - who had written off his own chances barely 24 hours earlier after developing an engine problem in qualifying - served up plenty of thrills for spectators and a worldwide TV audience estimated at 500 million.

There were three crashes, several lead changes and wheel to wheel action.

But while locals and foreigners alike said the race was quite the treat, they reserved the bulk of their praise for Singapore.

Many agreed the \$150 million tab for staging it was worth it.

Said bank executive Joanne Lim, 27: 'To actually prepare to host the F1 in just over a year was amazing. Our successful staging shows the world the Singapore brand of efficiency.'

Foreigners vowed to return next year - Singapore has a five-year contract to host the race - charmed by what they had seen.

Said Briton Simon Crosse, 44: 'This is my first visit, and I've been overwhelmed. I've been to about 15 other Grands Prix, and this is the best.'

'The night atmosphere, the organisation, it was just fantastic.'

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong gave the event the thumbs-up from the Pit Building yesterday, after watching part of the proceedings on track.

'The race itself is one thing. I think the audience, we've got the stands full, people are enjoying themselves and we've got a lot of publicity from this for Singapore.

'I've been watching it on TV the last couple of nights, not watching the cars, but watching the skyline, to see whether the skyline shows up and we see Singapore showing off its best.

'And I think that it's a city we can be proud of, and this is a valuable buzz, publicity for us around the world, which will benefit us in many ways.'

The praise flowed from many other quarters.

The sport's supremo, Bernie Ecclestone, called Singapore the 'jewel in the crown of F1'.

Across the world, newspaper and TV reports hailed the event as a stunning success. Writing in London's Sunday Times yesterday, for example, columnist and former race driver Martin Brundle called the Republic a 'world-class venue'.

Of night racing, he added, 'all of the senses are heightened, and the atmosphere...was electrifying'.

The accolades mean that two of the main aims of hosting the race - global exposure for Singapore and bolstering the Republic's reputation as an entertainment and events capital - have been met.

It is early days yet to tell if the other aim - boosting tourist receipts - has been met as spectacularly, but several entertainment and food outlets said business was definitely up over the weekend.

Indochine chief executive Michael Ma said: 'We've been extremely busy, roughly doubling our business over the weekend. It was a boon, especially for our Orchard and Clarke Quay outlets.'

Many Orchard Road retailers also said business was up by about 20 per cent over the weekend, thanks to the big influx of tourists.

To be sure, not everything went off without a hitch.

Despite an extensive business continuity plan, for instance, stores in the Marina area were hit by road closures which left many tenants twiddling their thumbs over the weekend.

Parts of the Marina Bay circuit also got the thumbs-down after Friday's practice sessions, especially the bumps in some parts and the high kerbing after St Andrews' Road.

But after organisers fixed the problems, drivers were effusive in their praise.

Said championship leader Lewis Hamilton: 'The most impressive thing for me is what an amazing job they have done here in Singapore to prepare the circuit.

'I think they did a tremendous job.'

The race itself? It was practically consigned to second place behind the praise for Singapore, but for the record: Nico Rosberg of the BMW team followed Alonso home in second place, with Hamilton finishing third.

Massa ended 13th out of 15 finishers, after he roared out of the pit lane with a fuel line still attached to his Ferrari.

The result leaves Hamilton on 84 points, seven ahead of Massa in the world championship standings with three races left.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

'The race is lost. You can't overtake here and I'm starting from 15th, so I will be going out just to lap the track, but it's over already.'

- Race winner Fernando Alonso, after his car developed mechanical problems during qualifying on Saturday night

'Fantastic. The first podium of the season and the first victory. I can't believe it right now, I need a couple of days to realise that we could win a race this year...' - Alonso, after claiming his first win of the season last night

And the winner is...Singapore!

Republic hosted a great F1, rivalling Monaco's - let's do better next year

By Sandra Davie, Senior Writer

IT WAS an unexpected but nonetheless stunning victory for Formula One's two-time champion Fernando Alonso and his Renault team on the racetrack on Sunday, but the real winners were Formula One and Singapore in pulling off a race that was action-packed and equalled the glamour of the yearly spectacles at Monaco.

Singapore had wanted to join the Formula One race circuit for over two decades now, but only set the date last year.

The Government had agreed to foot 60 per cent of the \$150 million annual bill to host the race for the next five years in the hope that it will showcase the Republic as a global player in the 21st-century economic landscape and will boost tourist arrivals.

Did it work? Was it money well spent?

Briton Jamie Symmonds, an ardent F1 fan and now a Singapore convert, summed up the sentiments of many a visitor when he said: 'Wow, Singapore... Wow. I am blown away.'

As the 38-year-old bank manager said, the three-day races and the activities wrapped around them had all the ingredients that makes F1 one of the most watched sport - that heady mix of danger, glamour and exclusivity.

For hard-core F1 fans, Singapore's debut on a racing calendar could not have been better scripted. With one point separating McLaren's Lewis Hamilton and Ferrari's Felipe Massa, the championship shootout battle was highly anticipated.

There was also the element of the unknown as F1 organisers took a shot in the dark and decided to move the race start to 8pm, instead of the usual 2pm.

Add to that the fact that the drivers had to manoeuvre on a new track and the weathermen had predicted a high chance of the track being lashed by a thunderstorm. Fans were fired up by the possibility of crashes or drivers making crucial driving mistakes.

No wonder then, that Singaporeans, who were initially tepid about the race, clamoured for race tickets closer to the weekend. Some like sales supervisor Lim Teh Jin paid \$1,000 for a \$298 ticket. Never mind that he can't tell the pit from the paddock. He wanted to witness Singapore make history.

The race for pole position on Saturday and the final shootout on Sunday did not disappoint.

On Saturday, with Massa grabbing the pole position, Hamilton coming in a close second and Ferrari's Kimi Raikkonen qualifying in third position, Singapore could not have asked for a better front trio on the starting grid.

The race proper on Sunday was even better. From the word go, it was a race packed with action and drama, both on track and in the pits and it ended with Spaniard Alonso gaining from the shift in the balance of power after a crash by his team-mate Nelson Piquet Jr on lap 15.

The 100,000 spectators leapt to their feet at the start and remained standing for much of the two hours.

The cars battling for lead position as they streaked past distinctive landmarks like the Singapore Flyer, City Hall and the Esplanade at 300kmh, were a stunning spectacle.

F1 officials like Mercedes motorsport vice-president Norbert Haug gave the Singapore setting a glowing review, calling it the 'best pictures ever seen in F1...like in a movie'.

It was enough to make any Singaporean's heart swell with pride. F1 fans who had come from overseas vowed to return.

Singapore also shed its staid city-state image off the track and showed how to throw a great party. There were lavish soirees for the rich and famous and for the rest there were massive dance parties, where an army of top DJs, such as Johan Gielen from the Netherlands and Britain's Rob Wilder and Carl Cox, worked the decks at clubs.

Americans Janine Tindle, 27, and Carly Verdane, 28, who had stationed themselves at the Ministry of Sound to do some celebrity-spotting, declared Singapore the 'Cannes of the East'.

No doubt it was a big, big step forward for F1 and Singapore's ambition to become as a 'global city with buzz'.

What remains to be seen though is whether Singapore will be able to repeat the feat and draw in the accolades and even more tourist dollars that will be much more needed next year.

For many Singaporeans, all the praise and festivities of the race weekend did not completely chase away the economic storm clouds that had gathered in the

last few weeks.

The Government had already warned that economic growth is expected to fall below 4 per cent this year against 7.7 per cent last year, and Singapore is on the verge of slipping into a technical recession, with two consecutive quarters of contraction.

Some took comfort in a report released this week by ING and Formula Money, an industry publication, which claimed that nations that held F1 events had a return of 553 per cent on their costs because of higher retail and tourist revenues.

Hotels that have rooms with a vantage view of the race circuit such as Swissotel The Stamford, are encouraged by the advance bookings which poured in. Some 350 rooms have already been snapped up at the Swissotel.

Still, some remain less buoyant about the future of F1 in Singapore. Like Mr Michael Ma, group chief executive of the IndoChine Group, who complained of excessive road closures and businesses such as hotels being too opportunistic and not giving F1 fans value for money.

He warned: 'Next year, Singapore will no longer be the newest venue on the racing calendar. Singapore has to do much, much better next year.'

He has a point. The novelty of Singapore being a new race circuit and hosting a night race will not be there next year, as Abu Dhabi will host its first race next year and countries like China and Australia are also looking at making the switch to hold their annual races under the floodlights, instead of daylight.

Race organisers and businesses must also remember that by September next year, the economic downturn would be felt much more deeply. They have to price things just right to lure back the 50,000 F1 spectators who flew in from as far as Europe and the United States for the weekend.

F1 supremo Bernie Ecclestone heaped high praise on Singapore on Saturday when he put it on par with the Monaco and declared it 'the other jewel on the Formula One crown'.

Singapore must pull out all stops to put on a bigger, better, bolder show next year, if it wants its F1 future to sparkle.