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The Inside Track of the
2022 Formula One Season



Foreword by Karun Chandhok

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Foreword	9
Prologue	17
Breaking the Mould	28
<i>Sector One: Reliability and Revival</i>	69
Coming to America.	149
<i>Sector Two: Turning the Screw</i>	157
The New Era	246
<i>Sector Three: Record-breaking.</i>	255
From a Certain Point of View	335
Epilogue	349

BREAKING THE MOULD

TAKING ON the team principal role for the Renault F1 team, having only been in the Formula 1 paddock since 2016, Frederic Vasseur was still a relative novice in the role compared to others along the pit lane holding the same position. He was far from being green around the gills though, with a storied background in Formula 3 and GP2 – now the successful Formula 2 series – and then designing a brand-new chassis for the Formula E series, and he was the founder of the Spark Racing Technology team that still supplies to that championship now. Vasseur has bounced around a bit in his time since joining Renault, moving to the Sauber team in 2017, and was soon promoted to CEO of Sauber Motorsport AG, who then forged a partnership with a giant from racing past, Italian outfit Alfa Romeo. This team was now fully under the stewardship of the Frenchman; still acting as team principal, he is hands-on as well as

being the managing director. Racing is what matters most though, and at his level you have to take the rough with the smooth, and with the team struggling to generate points, let alone push for anywhere near a podium finish, tough choices were about to be made.

Thankfully, one decision was pre-empted, with former champion and ever-popular Finnish driver Kimi Raikkonen announcing that the 2021 season would be his last, so his farewell tour was coming to an end at the time of year when new driver contract rumours start to surface, and more often than not, and with the driver pool being quite limited, those rumours often turn into the worst-kept secrets in motorsport. For three consecutive seasons the Alfa Romeo team had gone with the 'Iceman' Raikkonen and Antonio Giovinazzi partnership, but after bagging a decent points haul of 57 in 2019, they could only manage a combined 21 points over the next two years. And now with the Iceman stepping away, it was crunch time for Vasseur. Giovinazzi was a capable driver, but the Italian was finding consistency in his car an issue, and the car itself was not getting any better without any serious cash injection, something that most teams struggle with, even with multi-millions already being pumped in. As always, if you're not winning, you don't pull in the big sponsors and wealthy backers.

Another reason why this was the perfect time for change is that the new number one driver was the steady hand of Valtteri Bottas, another driver from Finland; this one had helped the Mercedes team to the last five of their consecutive eight World Constructors' titles, so his pedigree was good with ten race wins and 67 podium finishes heading into 2022. A fresh start was needed for him, after years of being the ultimate team player, and playing second fiddle to Lewis Hamilton. It was, to be fair, a considerable downgrade in machinery, but this was a new generation of car for everybody, so with his experience he would be aiming to get everything he could out of his new drive. It was a win-win for Vasseur, gaining the huge talent to fill the void of the other one that had left his paddock, and the sport. 'We always kept a very good relationship,' he explained, as they had known each other since the Finn's Junior race days, 'and very early into the season we were in the same hotel, and we discussed it together one evening. I said, "OK, if one day you are looking for a team, Valtteri, I will be there."' Staying true to his word, and Bottas being a loyal man, he remembered this and now hopes the future will be a prosperous one.

But what of the number two car? The decision was made, and the Italian was relieved of his white and scarlet overalls. 'Saying goodbye to a driver is

never easy, especially so in the case of Antonio, who has been part of the team for so long,' Vasseur commented on the release. 'As we part ways, we will cherish the memories of the good times and learn lessons from the bad ones, knowing the moments all made us grow together as a team.' Obviously, there's always a flip side to these outcomes and the driver, despite his best efforts on the track, will feel hard done by. Giovinazzi was left angered by the outcome and took to his personal Instagram to convey how he felt. Accompanied by a picture of himself as a toddler sitting in a scaled-down Ferrari, he wrote:

@f1 is emotion, talent, cars, risk, speed. But when money rules it can be ruthless. I hope to change my mind about this soon. I believe in the surprise of an unexpected result, of big and small victories achieved thanks to one's commitment. If this was my first picture on a F1, the last still has to be taken.

The money he alluded to, that indeed does rule where racing is concerned, was coming in from Asia. 'This is a great opportunity for us as a team, for the company, for the sponsors, for Formula 1 in general to open up a completely new market in China,' Vasseur said after revealing that 22-year-old Zhou Guanyu would be the

second driver for Alfa Romeo in the 2022 season. Born and raised in Shanghai, Zhou comes from a wealthy background; his parents, keeping their heads down and wanting the best start for their son, sent him to boarding school; then in 2012 they moved to England, and his talent was nurtured at the Ferrari Driver Academy in his early teenage years. This was around the same time Vasseur was working on the junior circuit, so he had always been able to keep an eye on the impressive youngster. The talent pool is vast at that level, and it always takes something outstanding to rise above the competition, and Zhou had enough about him that he was eventually elevated into the Formula 2 Championship after working at Renault F1 as their test driver. In a season largely dominated by Australian Oscar Piastri, Zhou had a bright start and won two races, the opening round in Bahrain, and then at the midpoint of the season at Silverstone. Staying in contention for the title throughout the eight-race series, he fell away to finish third in the overall standings but had done enough to convince Vasseur and the top brass at Alfa Romeo that he was ready for the big time.

Zhou knows that getting the drive puts the spotlight on him, and he explained in an interview for Italian newspaper *Gazzetta dello Sport*, 'Of course there will always be pressure when you become a

Formula 1 driver, knowing all the world is watching you, watching any mistake you're making. So, you have to try to make as few mistakes as possible and try to talk on track. I think that's the most important part.' Signing for a team with such a lavish racing history wasn't lost on him either, 'Having the people working behind you, I think they really have the [right] spirit and you got to do well too.' Another of the great generation of young drivers, Zhou knows that the learning curve will be steep but he has confidence in his ability, 'My target firstly I think is, you know, to learn as much as possible, especially in the first part of the season, to put my feet into the Formula 1 world and then build up my momentum, build up my experience in this scenario. But in general, I want to finish in the points, not just one time, hopefully more often.' And of course, he will be representing his country in what is a first, 'I dreamt from a young age of climbing as high as I can in a sport that I am passionate about and now the dream has come true. To be the first-ever Chinese driver in Formula 1 is a breakthrough for Chinese motorsport history.'

The money involved in this deal will always be subject to speculation, but early estimates suggested that as much as \$30m would be brought in by sponsors from China, which still brings the Swiss-based team under the new spending salary cap rules for the 2022

season. The cap was introduced to help bring some parity on the grid, and stop a monopolisation from the top teams. 'We are focused on the performance of the team and we don't have to hide the fact that the budget is part of the performance, and we are also targeting to get to the cost cap because it's an important step for us,' Vasseur said of the extra income. 'The decision [to bring Zhou in] is crucial for the future of the company. It was not only based on the fact he is Chinese, but it will be a mega-push for the company, for sponsors and I think also for F1 in general. Formula 1 today is a bit tough. If you are not in the top two plus Ferrari, the exposure is very low, and this is probably the best way we will have to move up the classification of exposure.'

It wasn't long before the two new drivers got to work for their new team, as just two days after the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, and the crazy finish to the season, Pirelli had scheduled two days of testing. The pageantry of the Formula 1 circus had all but gone from the Yas Marina Circuit, but the motorhomes remained, as well as most of the top drivers staying in them, and key staff. The testing was primarily for the new 18-inch tyres, going away from the traditional 13-inch – a radical change considering the technical advances over the last five decades or more that the 13-inch wheels have been used. The change goes

alongside the plethora of new regulations that teams had to adhere to for the 2022 season, and now was as good a time as any for Pirelli to test the new rims. It was important to go bigger, as the new designs would be great in straight lines, but need better handling in corners, so the more rubber on the surface the better the grip as you fly around Eau Rouge at Spa, or Monza's Parabolica. The new tyres would give improved purchase during turns, and therefore better racing, something that drivers in particular have been striving for. The rewards are great for those that take more risks on track and, with the reliability that the bigger tyres bring, allows them to be braver and more instinctive on the track.

Pirelli have always been about looks, as well as performance, so even though they were now making bigger tyres for the Formula 1 teams, they needed to stay on-brand. A slimmer profile and less sidewall give them a modern look, and the wheel covers aren't just pleasing to the eye – they have a feature that reduces air turbulence, and that is of course key to the new car designs. They are much stiffer to help that contact on track, and you might think that would mean more degradation, but it's the opposite. This will also help with strategy – more one-stop races will become the norm, and if a driver can push hard on each set, that adds up to more pure racing. The full

range of compounds were available to the teams, from the hardest C1, to the softest C5.

Even though the teams were preparing for the new season's regulations, the cars were far from ready, so 'mule' cars were used. This is fairly standard when testing new technology and parts, and in this two-day test all but one of the teams had prepared a mule car, usually using an older chassis modified for the bigger tyres, with the Williams team stating financial reasons as to why they opted not to. The teams had the opportunity to test privately throughout the 2021 season, but Pirelli had arranged this time to be the final chance they, as well as all teams, could collect fresh data.

Alongside the new tyres, it was also a testing time for several of the next generation to showcase their talents and gain valuable experience both on and off the track. The young driver talent on display, apart from the aforementioned Zhou, included New Zealander Liam Lawson; the 20-year-old is part of the Red Bull Junior set-up and would be given the wheel in an AlphaTauri, their sister F1 team, for testing. Lawson had just completed a dual season of racing where he competed in both Formula 2 and the DTM (German Touring Car) series. Nick Yelloly was at the controls of the Aston Martin for part of the session, after another successful stint for the British driver in the ADAC GT Masters, a grand-tourer racing season.

The immensely talented Robert Shwartzman would be taking on two different cars, the Ferrari and Haas; the Russian, aged 22, was hot property and touted to be a Ferrari driver in the future. The Italian outfit also gave some time to their simulation driver, 25-year-old Antonio Fuoco. After a couple of seasons in Formula E, Fuoco had spent more time in Endurance racing. The name Fittipaldi strikes many chords in the world of motorsport and one of the new breed is Pietro, and the Brazilian-American is a highly thought of driver – his association with the American-owned Haas team saw him get some laps with them. McLaren turned to IndyCar prodigy, the exceptional Pato O’Ward from Mexico, allowing him a drive as a reward for winning an IndyCar race for the sister team in that series. In great hope of getting a drive in Formula 1 soon, the 22-year-old was ready to impress.

Perhaps the next in line of future Dutch driving champions was Nyck de Vries; already a champion in the Formula E circuit, he was already on Mercedes’ books, and was ready to assume position again for the team. Red Bull Racing were loaded with talent and Estonian Juri Vips was pushing hard for a chance after two wins in Formula 2 in 2021, where he finished in sixth place overall in the standings. Alpine signed possibly the best talent outside of Formula 1, Oscar Piastri, as their reserve driver for 2022. Piastri had

won three consecutive titles leading into this new year – the Formula Renault Eurocup was followed up by both the Formula 3 and 2 titles – and even though a backup drive with Alpine was his, he could count himself unlucky that he never had a full drive for the 2022 campaign; any slip-up by anyone on this year’s grid could see the Australian, 20, get his chance. American Logan Sargeant is another that many will keep an eye on in the near future, and maybe after another year in Formula 2 he could be better prepped. Nevertheless, Williams had enough faith in him to hand him some time after only being part of their Academy team for three months.

For Pirelli, the two days were a success in terms of overall performance, but the data had to be unravelled before the first major scheduled testing period, which would take place in Barcelona. Head of F1 and racing, Mario Isola, looked back as well as forward in his comments, ‘Today marked the final chapter in a development story back in 2019, leading to a completely new range of tyres and compounds for 2022. We saw some graining during the first day on the front tyres that led to a bit of understeer, especially with the softer compounds, which were run most often as they were best suited to this track. We need to keep in mind that mule cars were used and that the goal of this test was to allow the teams a chance

to gather data to analyse over the winter. We'll only get a true picture at the start of next year, when the teams will be able to test these tyres with 2022 cars, which will have completely different aerodynamics, different brakes, and wheel rim covers as well.'

Isola went on to explain that so far the teams had expressed that the new cars were around five-tenths of a second slower in simulations than their predecessors, something that will be rectified during proper winter testing, but with a smile he added that Pirelli were already looking beyond the horizon, 'Throughout the course of next year, we have 25 test days scheduled that will allow us to refine the tyres, if necessary, for the following season. So now, all that's left to do is wait to see the new 18-inch tyres in action on the latest cars.' An intriguing little quirk was the use of LED lights that the McLaren team tested over the two days, 'There was an idea to put some LEDs into the wheel covers, to use these wheel covers also for marketing purposes. That means you can display any kind of message. But clearly you have to test them, because the covers are also an element that could unbalance the tyre. It's really important that the tyre is properly balanced, otherwise they start to have vibrations.' Isola continued, 'When you fit this device and the device is working, you can do whatever you want. You can display the position, you can display

logos, you can display the lap time in qualifying or something like that. There are many possibilities. You have the technology, so it's easy to programme what you want to display.'

Testing is not always about quick lap times, although as a driver it's always good to put the hammer down on a few laps and post a tidy time up on the board. More importantly it's about the mileage and reliability, and that was key on these two days for Pirelli. The young drivers on track did lay down some important markers, though, and raised some eyebrows. On day one it was Nyck de Vries in his Mercedes who went quickest; in fact he was a good 1.5 seconds clear of the rest and put in a fair shift too with 77 laps, but it was the newest Mercedes driver George Russell, still under contract with Williams, that put in the most miles on the day for the team with 132 laps completed. Liam Lawson, in the AlphaTauri, was second-quickest out of the young drivers' class, with Piastri in the Alpine fractionally slower.

Lawson couldn't contain his excitement any longer when he spoke after his day under Red Bull's wings, 'I was definitely nervous pulling out of the garage for the first time. I tried not to show it, but I definitely felt it. It took me a while to get to full throttle but when I did, I thought "Holy moly, that's a lot of power!" The ability to have the team update me as I'm out on track

was really interesting, although you couldn't make a mistake without them knowing! I really didn't want to get out of the car today, it's been amazing to get my first taste of F1.'

The McLaren of Pato O'Ward followed, with Zhou marking his debut in the Alfa Romeo fifth quickest. The session was interrupted three times, keeping the marshals busy, wielding their red flags; on one occasion it was at Turn 14 when the Red Bull driven by Vips clipped the wall. Speaking after the session he said, 'I had a small moment in the afternoon but fortunately everything was okay, and I was back in the car soon after. I've been looking forward to this test for a while now, it is such a privilege to drive a Formula 1 car, even more so a Championship-winning one.' As with other drivers stepping into an F1 car, it took time to adjust, 'It took my brain some time to get used to the speed of the RB16B because the pace is just crazy but then it is like any other car, and you just get used to it and do your job.'

His incident was the sandwich of the trio of stoppages – the first was caused by Lance Stroll when his Aston Martin broke down due to mechanical failure, then late on Logan Sargeant had trouble with his Williams' power unit, but that was after an impressive 92 laps: 'The team did a great job preparing me for today and giving me the confidence to go out

there, enjoy it and do the best I could. It's definitely a massive step up from the Formula 2 and Formula 3 cars, the brake performance is much better, and there's a lot more downforce. The stopping power was like nothing I've felt before! The more you drive, the more you learn and the more pace you find.'

Ferrari had a busy day with three drivers all getting decent runs, Shwartzman taking the wheel from Fuoco, with the Russian going faster than Charles Leclerc. After 87 laps, and his last drive of the year, Leclerc was pleased to get a feel for the new rubber, 'It's useful to continue to get an understanding of the new size of tyre, which is bigger than those we used to the end of this season.

'The feeling through the wheel is quite different. The team has acquired plenty of data, which will be useful in preparing the 2022 car, even though I doubt the feeling from this car will be the same as those from next year's one, given that it will be conceptually very different.' Shwartzman had test-driven for Ferrari before; his skills were put to the limit with the current car though, 'I managed to get through the day's work plan with the team despite a few red flags during the session. I've also learned a few new things compared to previous tests, such as start procedures, which was also very positive for me. Overall, I was quite consistent with the race runs and that was one

of the main targets. A big thank you to the Scuderia for this opportunity.'

The following day, Haas had the services of Shwartzman, and he put them on top of the time charts with a flying lap of 1 min 25.348s. This saw him half a second clear of Lando Norris's McLaren. The Russian, the only one of the young drivers' pool that was to test on day two, had the distinct advantage of being in a 2021 car, as opposed to the older mule cars that the top drivers were using. Norris finished his day an hour short of the chequered flag, still covering over 100 laps; only Russell ran fewer, and the new Mercedes man was one of only two men that ran on both days, the other being Zhou, who posted 150 laps, only surpassed by Carlos Sainz in the Ferrari. Almost his equal was Pierre Gasly, 149, and Fernando Alonso, 148, in their AlphaTauri and Alpine respectively. The large amount of run time was helped by there being only one red flag on the day; this was caused by Sebastian Vettel, his technical problem stopping the session under the midday sun.

Australian Piastri was having the time of his life, and this was just testing. After winning three titles on the bounce, it was clear that his future lay in the Formula 1 arena, 'When your engineer comes on the radio and says that [Max] Verstappen is three seconds behind you, that's pretty cool,' he beamed. He was

also aware of the job at hand, and despite being close to 1.5 seconds down on the Mercedes, the official test driver for Alpine took his new drive for over 130 laps for valuable experience, 'It was very special. The run plan was very mixed, the morning we did quite a few set-up items, which was nice. I feel like I got up to speed quite quickly. It's nice they trust me for that. In the afternoon we did some driver-based stuff, high fuel longer runs and then we ended the day with some qualifying [simulations] as well. It's such a massive step from F2 to F1, in every aspect. You've got a lot more power, and a lot more grip, and a lot more downforce. The amount of grip you have never fails to blow your mind.'

Having mentioned the new world champion, it would be worth a mention that Verstappen finished 25th overall in timing, from the 27 drivers that participated in the tests, and his rival from the enthralling title race Lewis Hamilton was absent as he returned home to England to receive his knighthood at Windsor Castle. Both were still probably nursing sore heads for very different reasons from the final 2021 race just two days prior. It was Hamilton's new teammate that felt the weirdest after putting the Mercedes mule through its paces, 'It's a strange feeling because I've tested with the team numerous times after races, end of season, and here we go again. Obviously, it's my

first time as an official driver for the team. It was a really great day to be back with the guys and learning about the new tyres. It's going to be very different next year, as the cars are going to be drastically changed compared to these current cars. It's always a pleasant experience driving a World Championship-winning car, the 2019 Mercedes, and with these 18-inch Pirellis, which seem to be reacting pretty positively. Let's hope that carries through to next year and see how they react with the new regulations.'

Pirelli left Abu Dhabi happy with the feedback and knew they had secured the faith of the teams up and down the paddock, their future in the sport is locked in. The next generation of drivers coming through the ranks who would feature in another highly competitive Formula 2 Championship had their taste of what could be in their futures. The fire was stoked, none more so than O'Ward, 'I'm going to do absolutely everything I can, and I'm going to push to my absolute maximum to make sure that I leave nothing on the table, because you've got to take it. You've got to try, because if I don't, I will regret it for the rest of my life. In terms of driving and feeling what it's capable of, and feeling its limits, nothing comes close to this. The feeling an IndyCar gives you is crazy. But you get into this, and just the way it's able to do everything so fast and everything is so

compressed, it's like a video game. It's unreal. The best experience I've ever had in a race car in my life.'

The year 2021 had been a long, long season. It had its mentally exhausting climax, which saw a new champion crowned. Red Bull had pushed the Mercedes machine to its limit and, despite losing out in the constructors' title, they had helped steer a new driver to the summit. Max Verstappen is at his best behind the wheel of a race car, and even though he was happy to help his team less than 48 hours after the greatest moment of his career, he was equally happy to get some rest, 'It felt good to be back behind the wheel and it was good to get a feel for the new tyres. Everything went smoothly and there were no major shocks around the tyres, which is always positive.' It was time, though, for Super Max to switch off, 'It was a good day today [testing] at the end of a very long but massively rewarding season and now I'm very much looking forward to some time away from the racetrack!'

After breaking the mould, even champions know when to rest.