

NIGHT MOVES

LEWIS HAMILTON AND HIS FELLOW FORMULA ONE SUPERSTARS DESCENDED ON SINGAPORE LAST SEPTEMBER FOR THE FIRST-EVER F1 NIGHT RACE. HERE'S AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE FUTURE OF THE SPORT

**Photography Mitchell Nguyen McCormack
Text Darrell Hartman**

The furious whine of the Formula One racecars reached Singapore at dusk one Friday last September. The banshee wail of engines bounced off bridges, overpasses, and skyscrapers, as the drivers, each visible only as a helmet and a pair of gloved hands, stormed through their first practice runs on the tiny nation's brand-new street circuit. Grand landmarks like City Hall and the colonnaded Fullerton Hotel were suddenly transformed into a backdrop for an invading army of bright, screaming capsules. With their tapered snouts and huge wheels, riding so low they seemed glued to the ground, they looked like a different species from the Porsches and Aston Martins that had appeared on the track earlier in the day. The spectators gaped wide-eyed as they plugged their ears.

If Singapore's inaugural race felt like a science-fiction movie, that's because it represents the future of a sport that's already laps ahead of modernity. Long gone are the days when auto racing was the weekend pastime of joy-riding aristocrats; more than ever, the Formula One Grand Prix, established in 1950, is a high-tech global obsession. The only sporting events with bigger audiences are the Summer Olympics and the World Cup.

Singapore, though, signals an upshift. For one thing, it's a street circuit. Cities have been transformed into racetracks before—Monaco, most famously—but today, hype-mad organizers seem increasingly willing to take on the logistical burdens. (Valencia also debuted a street circuit last season.) More significantly, Singapore hosted the first night race in Formula One history, illuminated by a state-of-the-art lighting system four times as bright as the lights in a soccer stadium. Even so, you got the feeling that demons had been unleashed into the night.

All the drama is great for business, of course—as is the emerging Asian market. While America remains stubbornly fixated on sluggish stock cars, Singapore is the latest success story in Formula One's eastward expansion, which has also brought the sport to Malaysia, Shanghai, and Bahrain, with Abu Dhabi and India on the horizon. The Singapore Grand Prix, like the former British colony that hosts it, was a fastidiously managed rendezvous of East and West. Hotels made inaccessible by road shutdowns enlisted brigades of golf carts to shuttle guests. Complaints about the surface, coarser than most despite a costly bitumen-emulsion resurfacing and the substitution of custom-made manhole covers, gave way to almost universal appreciation of the curvy, 3.1-mile circuit's quirks. And concerns that a wet track at night would produce disastrous glare were rendered moot when the weather cooperated.

The careful stage managing was to be expected, since, for all the romance and sex appeal of fast cars, Formula One is as rational and precise as any other big-money industry. The cars themselves are physics experiments on wheels that can slingshot out of a turn like no other machines on earth. The main preoccupation of FIA, Formula One's Paris-based governing body, seems to be keeping them from becoming guided missiles. The regulations are strict: a 2.4-liter V8 engine is the maximum allowed, and all cars must weigh at least 605 kilograms (1,333 pounds) and max out at 19,000 RPM. To keep the smaller teams competitive, FIA froze engine development in 2006. Since then,



Turn 13, from the rooftop of the Fullerton Hotel



Lewis Hamilton in the McLaren suite after the race



Grand Prix winner Fernando Alonso's Renault in the pit area



Lewis Hamilton comes in for a pit stop



McLaren mechanic



Fans scramble to get a glimpse of the podium



Waterfront grandstand



Force India's Giancarlo Fisichella on a straightaway, with live telecast projection in front of the Supreme Court building



Ferrari mechanic



Red Bull Racing's David Coulthard



Paddock girls after the race

most innovation has taken place in aerodynamic design. The latest car from the English racing team McLaren offers the most breathtaking example. A futuristic masterpiece of grooves and curves, its carbon-fiber body resembles a 3-D map of airflow patterns. Even sitting still, it looks like it's in motion.

The drivers are equally impressive pieces of machinery. Able to withstand g-forces that would fell an ordinary human, they're finely tuned hybrid athletes with "the upper body strength of a boxer, the reactions of a fighter pilot, and the stamina and aerobic fitness of a long-distance runner," as a recent article in the fanzine *F1 Racing* put it. "Everything in Formula One has developed towards perfection," says Mika Häkkinen, a former McLaren driver. "The drivers are more fit than ever. They are more mentally prepared than ever. They have more support than ever from the team. It's more like preparing for the Olympics—every millisecond is important. Muscle training, nutrition, rest. Your traveling, your quality of life. Everything."

If all this perfection has a face, it's Lewis Hamilton. The 24-year-old McLaren-Mercedes driver competed in Singapore on his way to becoming the youngest in history to win the title. The heir apparent to the record-shattering Ferrari driver Michael Schumacher, Hamilton has an understated charm and bright good looks to go with his fierce power slides. He also comes with a great narrative: he grew up outside London in a public-housing complex, his father taking a second job to support his son's need for speed. At age 10, the legend goes, Hamilton strode up to legendary McLaren boss Ron Dennis at an awards ceremony and announced he'd be racing for him one day. Three years later, he was. Oh, he's also the first black Formula One driver.

Hamilton, who is compared (perhaps too often) to Tiger Woods, has shaken up the sport—not only with his aggressive driving, for which he's been penalized repeatedly, but also with his meteoric rise to stardom, which has caused friction with his former teammate, Spain's Fernando Alonso (now with Renault). In Singapore, Hamilton's visage was splashed across magazines and newspapers everywhere. One local headline heralded the arrival of "Lewis and Friends." But despite Hamilton's outsize image, the spotlight finds every driver—there are only twenty on the circuit, after all. There's Scottish vet David Coulthard, with his insouciant sense of humor. Alonso, who once intentionally blocked his own teammate in the pit, is both loved and despised for his outrageous theatricality, while Finland's Kimi Räikkönen is the opposite, oddly captivating in his utter lack of personality.

In recent years, two major incidents garnered the Formula One headlines beyond the racing world: first, a disgruntled engineer leaked top-secret Ferrari designs to McLaren; then, last year, FIA president Max Mosley was caught, on camera, acting out Nazi-flavored S&M fantasies with hookers. But Singapore was free of such off-track tabloid fodder, while the race was, entertainingly, chock-full of mishaps. For Ferrari, it was a catastrophe. Räikkönen smashed into the wall with three laps to go, and during a pit stop, Räikkönen's teammate Felipe Massa was mistakenly given a green light, causing him to exit with his fuel line still attached, knocking over a mechanic in the process. Even the winner was a surprise. Former champ Alonso took the checkered flag for the first time since rejoining Renault, which hadn't scored a first-place finish in two years.

After the podium ceremony, visible only to spectators with seats along the pit straightaway, the drivers retreated to the team area outside the pits, where Alonso was swarmed by TV crews and joyous teammates. Nearby, Ferrari mechanics pulled sourly on cigarettes. BMW's Nick Heidfeld emerged wearing flip-flops. Hamilton, who had finished third—and more importantly, scored crucial points over Ferrari—took his time coming out. Meanwhile, Hamilton's McLaren teammate, Heikki Kovalainen, did TV interviews. Then, press obligations satisfied, Hamilton and his cohorts made ready to leave the city that laid all this expensive groundwork for them, at least until next year (Singapore has signed a five-year deal with Formula One). Soon they would go back to a normal sleep schedule—in Singapore, they'd been going to bed around four and waking up at noon to avoid jet lag—and continue with their workouts and test drives as they readied for the next race two weeks later in Japan.

For the mortals, there was one more night of lavish parties, with the Beckhams, Jackie Chan, and the Malaysian royal family reportedly among the revelers. One partygoer at the Fullerton said it best: "Monaco, in the future, will be referred to as the Singapore of the West."