

Racing's New Lone Star

The Formula One track in Austin brings a taste of Monaco to the Texas Hill Country



BOB LATHAM

It was always an unexpected surprise in school when the new kid in class proved to be totally cool. In auto racing, that new kid has a name: the United States Grand Prix at the brand-new Circuit of the Americas (COTA) track in Austin, Texas. What is particularly noteworthy is that the event distinguished itself in one of the most exclusive and discerning classrooms in the world: Formula One racing.

The debut of COTA in southeast Austin on November 18 as the latest venue for F1 racing in the United States was spectacular. The course itself is state-of-the-art, with the natural undulations in terrain providing both a challenging course for the drivers and many excellent viewing areas for spectators throughout the course. Each area had its own allure: Turn 1 with its steep rise and high vantage point, Turn 15 with a view of the long straightaway followed by a series of sharp turns, Turn 19 with its westerly view, and of course the Paddock Club where the likes of Ron Howard mingled with the likes of Mario Andretti, the latter still being the last (and only the second) American to win the F1 World Driver's Championship, in 1978. That may be one reason why F1 has not gained permanent traction in the United States, despite previous F1 races being held in nine locations, including Las Vegas, Detroit, Phoenix, Dallas, Long Beach, Watkins Glen, and most recently Indianapolis. But with the globalization of sports, Americans may now be ready to see the greatest drivers in the world, and COTA is certainly ready for those drivers.

The Formula One crowd comes from all corners of the globe, and provides a noticeable contrast to NASCAR fans. There are more Ferraris and Lotuses (Loti?) than RVs, more blazers than black T-shirts, more Pippa Middletons than Honey Boo Boos. The valet stand at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin was almost indistinguishable from the starting grid of the race; at one point I counted 11 Ferraris lined up in front of the hotel. The concession stands at COTA were not the norm either; try finding a paella and sangria stand at Talladega—or Indy for that matter.

Yes, Austin is used to the arrival of glitterati, with events such as the South by Southwest music and film festivals. But I was curious to see how the F1 crowd

would mix with the '60s escapees who are committed to promoting the local motto, "Keep Austin weird." When the promoters of see-and-be-seen parties that inevitably spring up around a high-profile event such as this bill them as "Monaco meets Austin," it's a bit like trying to pair James Bond with David Crosby. In fact, one establishment in the hipster South Congress part of Austin put on its marquee, "This isn't Monaco, it's SoCo." But for whatever reason, the mix worked. There is nothing like a festival atmosphere to bring the culture and counterculture together.

In addition to the atmosphere at COTA, the Austin Fan Fest made for a great scene, with five outdoor stages throughout downtown in addition to headliner entertainment at signature music venues. This is, after all, the live music capital of the world, and COTA would not be complete without a huge performance stage in the Grand Plaza area.

Whether Monaco itself indeed came to Austin is uncertain, but Monaco prices certainly did, based on what hotels were charging for a night. The Red Roof Inn was \$600, the Comfort Inn charged \$475, and Howard Johnson's set you back a mere \$475 for the night, fried clams not included. Perhaps the party promoters should have used the tag line, "European Debt Crisis Meets Austin."

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One of the great things about COTA is that it allows for real racing, in addition to its aesthetic splendor, and on this day it produced a very true result, with a podium of Lewis Hamilton, Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso, each of whom has won a Formula One World Driver's Championship in the last six years. Almost all of the drivers afterwards said they were pleased that they were able to put on "a good show" for 117,000 spectators. I can't imagine any of those 117,000 not being back every year through 2021, the length of the commitment between F1 and COTA. ■

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