Formula 1’s driver chaos, explained

Enlarge / There’s a game of musical chairs happening in F1 right now.
Mark Thompson/Getty Images

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The 2020 Formula 1 season has already guaranteed it will be unlike any other in the 70 years since they started keeping score of the championship. By now, we should have had six races completed, with the Monaco Grand Prix a week away. Instead, we have no races on the books yet, but we do have provisional plans for a slightly abbreviated season that’s supposed to kick off on July 5 in Austria, then cross the globe a further 18 times before wrapping up in Abu Dhabi on December 13. The absence of any on-track action hasn’t meant things have been quiet, though

The team bosses have been hard at work, arguing with each other and the sport’s governing body about finally implementing cost caps that could level the playing field (a little, hopefully) between the three very, very rich ones (Mercedes, Ferrari, and Red Bull) that win everything and the other seven. And this week has seen quite the game of musical chairs as drivers are switching things up for 2021, which all got started with the sudden news that four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel’s days as a Ferrari driver are over. Let the silly season begin.

Vettel hangs up his red suit

Vettel’s rise through the F1 ranks was meteoric. He impressed the world when he stood in for an injured Robert Kubica at BMW in 2007, then impressed everyone even more the following year when he scored Toro Rosso’s first and only win to date at the 2008 Italian Grand Prix. The following year he was in a Red Bull car and finished second in the points at year’s end. 2010 was his first world championship with Red Bull, and he took the crown again in 2011, 2012, and 2013.

In 2015, however, he moved to Ferrari, lured in by the chance to emulate his hero, seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher. But by the time he arrived, the man who hired him was gone, and Scuderia Ferrari was being run by Sergio Marchionne, who was not interested in letting Vettel build the team around himself the way Schumacher did to such good effect. Fourteen wins in five years still makes him Ferrari’s third-most-successful driver, and in 2017 and 2018, he finished second in the championship. But even when Ferrari designed a car that was faster on track than Lewis Hamilton’s Mercedes, it managed to snatch defeat from jaws of victory too often.

In 2019, Ferrari promoted rising young star Charles Leclerc into one of its two race seats, and by the fall, Leclerc had become the dominant driver. Which is why earlier this week, the team and Vettel announced that by mutual agreement, Vettel’s contract would not be renewed for 2021.

Enlarge / Vettel and Ferrari never really gelled, and he will leave the team at the end of this year.
Mark Thompson/Getty Images

No matter how good you are as a driver, the fact remains that you need to drive for one of the top three teams if you want to win. In fact, the last time anyone other than Mercedes, Ferrari, or Red Bull won a race was the 2013 Australian Grand Prix. Since each team can only enter two cars into each race, that means there really are only six seats anyone wants, so a vacancy in one of them is a big deal.

It was a buyer’s market for Ferrari. Antonio Giovinazzi is the next product of Ferrari’s young driver program in the pipeline, but the team rarely hires a young driver for one of its cars and wasn’t about to hire two. So he’ll stay at Alfa Romeo for now. Instead, the company has opted for Carlos

Sainz, who counts as a seasoned veteran these days, even though he’s only 25.

Sainz held his own against Red Bull shining star Max Verstappen when both drove at Toro Rosso, and after being dumped by Renault at the end of 2018, he moved to McLaren and shined as the team rebuilt itself. He’s polished, intelligent, fast, and speaks fluent Italian, but will he be asked to play second fiddle to Leclerc? By this time next year, we may know the answer.

Daniel Ricciardo was the next domino to fall. He no doubt wanted the Ferrari drive for himself; at 30, he’s one of the older drivers on the grid and desperately wants to bag a championship for himself before it’s too late. Last year, he traded a Red Bull for a Renault, a move that any viewer of Netflix’s *Drive to Survive* could tell was a gamble. And it was one that didn’t really pay off, as the team remains in perilous times, in part because of the downfall of Carlos Ghosn.

So Ricciardo is packing his bags once more, retracing Sainz’s steps from last season. In 2021, he will wear the orange and blue of McLaren as the team trades its Renault hybrid V6 for one built by Mercedes.

What about that Renault drive?

Assuming Renault’s F1 team survives into 2021—no guaranteed thing—it has the next vacant seat on offer. Vettel is unlikely to fill it. Overtures to Red Bull and McLaren were politely turned down, so I wouldn’t be surprised to see him retire from the sport. With four world championships already, he’s unlikely to want to spend his weekends in an uncompetitive car chasing for seventh or eighth, particularly as he’s been vocal about his dislike of the heavy hybrids used since 2014.

And that leaves the door open to another former champ and

everyone’s favorite anime fan, Fernando Alonso. Alonso won his two championships with Renault in 2006 and 2007, and he wouldn’t be the only veteran of those days to return, as its former technical boss Pat Fry is back with Renault once again. Alonso’s business with F1 is more unfinished than Vettel’s. He left the sport for a turn driving Toyota’s hybrids at Le Mans to plenty of success, and even a midfield F1 ride will surely be more attractive than trying to win the Indy 500. His fans definitely agree on that last point, and the rumors are swirling that the sport’s owners Liberty Media will stump up the cash to make that happen.

Since you mentioned Indy…

Before the silly season got underway, the main story coming out of F1 was about the planned budget cap. Next year, teams won’t be able to spend more than $145 million during the year (not counting marketing costs or the salaries of the drivers and three other highest-paid people). Originally, the cap was supposed to be $175 million, but that was before COVID-19 started cratering the economy. Teams like McLaren actually want the budget cap to be even lower, but they faced stiff opposition from Ferrari.

The Italian team’s argument has been that anything below $175 million means it needs to fire people. But on Thursday, it emerged that there may be an alternative—an IndyCar program that would run alongside the F1 effort.

The plan makes a heck of a lot of sense. IndyCar is much more locked down than F1 when it comes to developing new technology, and much of the car is standard equipment. Even the planned hybrid system for 2022 will be a spec unit for each team, so Ferrari would only have to develop a 2.2L turbocharged V6 engine, plus run a team of race engineers and mechanics. And $30 million should be sufficient to run up front with the likes of Team Penske.

The PR benefit to IndyCar is probably hard to even calculate—the arrival of then-reigning F1 champion Nigel Mansell in 1993 might be the most recently comparable event. (The huge bump in attention given to Alonso's first Indy 500 attempt didn't extend to the rest of the season.) Ferrari has explored the idea of running an IndyCar program in the past, but then only ever as a threat to get its own way in one of F1's Machiavellian power struggles. Here's hoping this time it goes all the way.

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