

Perfecting Honda's 2026 F1 powertrain is "not so easy," says racing boss

The new rules have been extremely attractive to carmakers. In addition to causing Honda to reconsider its exit, Ford is also coming back (developing the hybrid system for Red Bull Powertrains), and both Audi and Cadillac are also entering the sport, although the American brand won't have its own engines ready until 2028.

Audi and Cadillac will both count as new engine suppliers, so they are allowed some extra development resources. However, Honda is counted as an existing manufacturer and doesn't get any special treatment.

When I asked Watanabe how the work was progressing, he said, "Not so easy. We are struggling. Now we are trying our best to show the result next year," he said. "Everything is new. [The] motor is new, [developing] 350 kW—it's a very compact one that we need. And also the lightweight battery is not so easy to develop. Also the small engine with big power. So everything is very difficult, but we try our best."

Getting it right will be vital—although Aston Martin now has the advantage of legendary designer Adrian Newey among its staff. Newey is on record saying that the 2026 rules have a "big chance" of being an engine formula, where each car's aerodynamics are far less important, unlike today's situation.

Trickle-down

OEMs go racing to raise their profile and sell more cars, but they also do it as a way to learn how to make their products better. Honda and HRC are no exception to that. But concrete examples of technology transfer from track to road are rare these days—it's more about cross-pollination between engineers.

“There is a group within Honda that shares technical information yearly. It's not just the racing; it's all across Honda, so I think there's been some interest in the technology and software we've developed,” Fu said. “Whether it trickles down to road cars... it's a big jump from a race car to road cars, but I think some of the fundamental technical ideas can propagate down there.”

“From the F1 project, we can learn how to improve the hybrid system itself, and of course, we can learn how to create high-efficiency batteries and motors for the future. That's why we decided to reparticipate in Formula 1,” Watanabe said.

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