

# US Grand Prix in Austin revitalized F1 in America

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When the checkered flag fell on the final United States Grand Prix at Indianapolis in June 2007, Formula 1's relationship with America couldn't have been much lower.

The tire debacle of two years earlier had proved too tough to recover from, and with the only American driver on the grid (Scott Speed) soon to lose his seat after having failed to score a single point, interest was slumping.

So when the concept of Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas, was raised – with the idea of it becoming the home of F1 in the U.S. – it was a big, big gamble.

But five years after the last race on American soil, F1 went racing once again at COTA, and 10 years later the event is one of the biggest on the calendar.

"Incredible," COTA chairman Bobby Epstein reflects from behind his desk. "It went by fast, and I think if we had drawn where we wanted to be at the end of 10 years, this would probably have been our goal. The path to get here would probably not have been drawn the way it happened, but we're pretty happy with it. One of the things you can't buy in terms of big events is history or tradition. When you have a decade under your belt like this and you have sold-out crowds year after year – which we now have – you've reached that point where your event is something really special.

"People want to keep coming back each year and put it on their calendar and look forward to it. When we first started, we were certainly a novelty and I think we've learned and grown and adapted to what people like. We're pretty happy to be here."

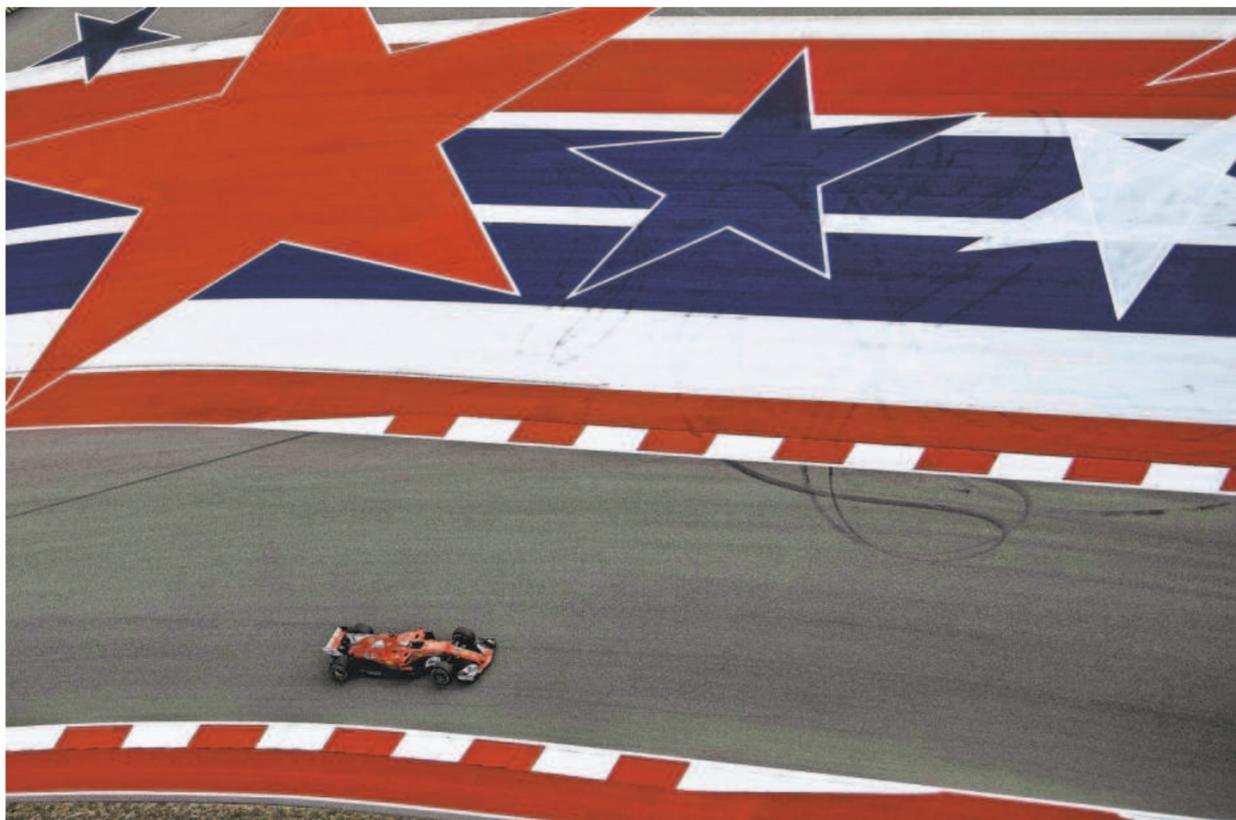
The path between the inaugural race and this anniversary has not been a smooth one. While Epstein is now spending some of his time trying to find more metal for additional bleachers – "demand has been incredible, we sold everything we put into the system the first two days" – that wasn't always the case.

"This is how big we thought it would be when we started," he says. "I couldn't believe how few fans there were at one time, and it makes it all that much more rewarding to have the sold-out crowds today because it wasn't always that way. We thought this would be the response we would get, but a few years into it was admittedly very tough."

Despite the struggles that COTA has sometimes faced, especially when it comes to putting on a grand prix that features a hefty race hosting fee, Epstein insists he never felt like he wanted to cut and run because of the way fans were responding to the event and making it a regular part of their sporting calendar.

"Well it was always big, but we wanted to be bigger," he says. "I just think we always felt 'What can we do next year so that more people will want to come back?' It's a slow process, and if we continue to do that then people will continue to come back and the campgrounds will keep growing. I love that we keep having to expand those every year, because those are people that really in many cases this is their time off, and people's time is absolutely their treasure. We appreciate that they're choosing to spend that with us.

"The campgrounds are a lot of fun, and those are people telling other peo-



Ferrari's Sebastian Vettel of Germany drives during practice for the United States Grand Prix at Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas. JEROME MIRON/USA TODAY SPORTS



Red Bull driver Max Verstappen, center, Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton, left, and Red Bull driver Sergio Perez celebrate following the Formula 1 U.S. Grand Prix in Austin. DARRON CUMMINGS/AP

ple 'I'll meet you back here next year,' and the same thing that's happening there happens with people that are staying in hotels but are coming back to Austin each year. Austin's been a great host city and we knew that it would be, but we just needed people to experience it."

There will be at least five more chances for fans to keep coming back, too, after a contract extension was signed earlier this season. It was timely, coming in a year when Miami joined the calendar and Las Vegas was confirmed for 2023, meaning Austin is now doubling down on its position as the race that provided the platform for F1's growth in the States.

"We always felt like we were going to get a five-year extension because we built this to be here for Formula 1 and I think it'll be here for a long time," says Epstein. "So we were always invested in the circuit. I think we can just focus on delivering a great experience. And also with Miami and Las Vegas each being the destination cities they are, it gives

us the chance to focus on being truly the United States Grand Prix, and represent the great things about our whole country ... with a little bit of Texas – OK a lot of Texas – thrown in there. But we really want to be the 'United States Grand Prix.'

"We're very proud of that, we're very proud that's part of our identity and our title. We've been that for a decade and we'd like to see that for decades to come."

To be a permanent fixture, you need demand to stay high because fan confidence allows a circuit to invest. COTA was criticized for some of the logistical problems when it welcomed a record attendance of over 400,000 a year ago, and Epstein says that preparations for the 2022 edition have not been solely focused on marking its anniversary, but also on ensuring the overall experience improves.

"We are going to celebrate our birthday a little bit," he says. "We're working on that. We think we've got the music

right again this year with Ed Sheeran and Green Day, and we're upgrading a lot of things around the circuit for the fans just in terms of service and things we've learned in the past that I think we can do better. Our food service is going to be a lot better than it's been in the past, our transportation. ... We've increased the public transit to 600 buses this year, which is 200 more than we've had in the past, and the goal is really to make the overall experience really easy as well as fun. That's what we have to focus on.

"Then we're battling around the fact that we'd love to find a way to celebrate Sebastian (Vettel) and recognize him for his contributions before he retires. We're talking about that and we've got some ideas we're going to come out with soon."

Vettel himself is a fan of the circuit, having finished second at the inaugural race as he chased his third drivers championship, and taken victory the year after.

"Obviously, I made my debut in Indianapolis five years before that, but I think there's been a different vibe in Austin right from the get-go," Vettel said. "It's been really exciting because the whole city was happy to have the race and welcomed us. Obviously, the interest across the U.S. has grown in the last couple of years. But Austin has always been exceptional. So probably more a question for Austin, how they handle it now with more requests or people. But I also feel that Austin isn't your 'typical America' if such a thing exists.

"So I think for us, it's been great to go there right from the start. And it's been a highlight of the season for many years now, for 10 years."

After what went before and the hole F1 had dug itself in the States, you'd have been brave to bet on this milestone coming around. But a 20th anniversary? Now that feels a lot more like a sure thing.

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