The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

2014 Russian Grand Prix Brings Formula One to Sochi Amid Tensions

October 10, 2014



Red Bull Formula One driver Sebastian Vettel of Germany adjusts his helmet during the first free practice session of the Russian F1 Grand Prix in the Sochi Autodrom circuit October 10, 2014.

SOCHI — Formula One's eye-catching arrival in Sochi as part of the Russian resort's Winter Olympic legacy plans makes perfect sense to Romain Grosjean, whatever the wider world might think.

As the Lotus driver explained before lapping the first grand prix circuit to be integrated into an Olympic Park, Sunday's inaugural race will allow him to reconnect with his own family's sporting history.

"My grandfather competed twice in the Olympic Games, 1948 and 1952, so it means quite a lot to me," said Grosjean, who was born in Geneva and holds dual nationality from France and Switzerland but races under a French license.

"I think it's good that we come here because the Olympic Games is a huge event, and I love skiing. I should have been a skier. Racing was kind of a second turn. So it's good to be here,"

he added.

His grandfather Fernand Grosjean skied for Switzerland and finished eighth on home snow in the 1948 St. Moritz Olympic Alpine skiing downhill and 11th in the 1952 giant slalom held in Oslo.

Grosjean, a podium regular in 2013 but whose three best results this season have been two eighth places and an 11th, was hoping some of the old magic might return in a city with the Olympic rings still very much in evidence.

"If I do eighth, I will be happy," he grinned. "Eleventh, not so good."

Bigger Picture

While the Sochi Olympic ski pistes are high in the mountains at Rosa Khutor, miles from the coastal Olympic Park, the new F1 facilities are now the center of attention against a backdrop of the venues used for February's Games.

During the Olympics the main grandstand and pit complex was a building site, and even now there are signs of hurried completion of the finishing touches, but the circuit was always designed as part of a bigger picture.

A shorter permanent circuit will be used all year for track days and other racing events.

Ultimately, and perhaps as soon as next year, the grand prix could become a night race with the stadiums and venues highlighted to maximum effect.

For now, Formula One has a fast new circuit that drivers expect to be somewhere between the former Valencia street track and Singapore's metal-fenced layout in characteristics.

Just how exciting it proves to be for fans and drivers remains an open question but designer Hermann Tilke expects average speeds of around 210kph, with top speeds of around 320kph.

The Sochi Games, which cost a record $50 billion, were a showcase close to the heart of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who wanted to show the world what Russia could deliver, and the Formula One race is designed to maintain that attention.

Organizers hope Putin will attend the race on Sunday, when an audience of hundreds of millions around the world is expected to tune in, despite controversy as a result of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Russia has come close to hosting a grand prix in the past, with races mooted for Moscow and St. Petersburg at various times over the last 30 years, but it took the Winter Olympics to make it a reality.

"The great thing was that all the infrastructure was there for the track because of the Olympics," said Richard Cregan, a consultant to the local race promoter and former Abu Dhabi circuit chief executive.

"But it goes beyond that. It's not just about the Olympics, it was always trying to be about

Sochi itself and the region in the sense of let's try and combine all of these facilities and get the most out of them by maximizing their use."

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