

## **Driving change: How women get back on F1 circuits**

Everyone knows Formula 1, it's the pinnacle of the motorsport world. Marked by the contrast between the longstanding history of the sport and the constant need for innovation. If you want to work there, you need to be at the top of your field. Doesn't matter if you're an engineer, mechanic, or marketing specialist.

With ten teams currently on the grid and a budget cap in place the chances of getting a job working in F1 are very slim. Even more so if you are a driver. Only twenty men can get a fulltime seat and compete against each other for the world championship.

Wait a second ... Is it actually only men? Looking at the past 30 or so years you could definitely think so. In fact, since 1992 there was not a single female driver who has taken part in a Formula 1 Grand Prix event. But why is that? Is it the regulations or is there an entirely different set of reasons?

### **Women on track - A historic rarity**

First things first: It is not the regulations. Women are allowed to compete in F1. The first one to do so was Teresa de Filippis back in 1958. Following in her footsteps were Lella Lombardi (1974), Divina Galica (1976), Desiré Wilson (1980) and Giovanna Amati (1992). Out of these five Lombardi was the only one to score points in the F1 world championship, her best result was when she finished sixth in the 1975 Spanish Grand Prix in Barcelona.

However, since then female drivers at best had the chance to work as a test- or development driver. The one to come closest to actually taking part in a Grand Prix event was Susie Wolff when she had the opportunity to drive in Free Practice 1 (FP1) of the British Grand Prix 2014 in Silverstone for Williams. That means, she partook in one of the designated driving sessions of a race weekend, where teams have the chance to fine-tune their cars to the specific track, assess performance and gather data to be used for race strategy. A normal race weekend has three of these sessions, a weekend including a sprint race has two.

### **Roadblocks for girls**

So, if it is not the regulations then what is holding back female racing drivers from joining the likes of Hamilton and Verstappen on the current grid?

Like most things in life, it is complicated. There is no one single reason for the lack of women competing in F1. Instead, it is a combination of multiple different hardships that holds girls back from climbing the ladder all the way from karting through the feeder series to Formula 1.

One of, if not the most contributing factor however is the fact that motorsport often was and still is a "boys club". A space where women are not only marginalized but actively discouraged from participating. The consequences of that? Fewer girls trying their hand at karting in the first place, let alone taking it up as a long-term hobby.

According to a recent study by "More than Equal", an initiative co-founded by F1 racer David Coulthard aiming to find the first female F1 world champion, girls only make up around 13% of participation in karting. A number which drops further to about 7%, when it comes to formula and GT racing. In addition to that this study discovered that girls receive less funding and sponsorship opportunities from the get-go. In a sport that is as expensive as karting and formula racing it is this lack of financial support that puts the final nail in many racing careers coffins.

### **W Series- The first of its kind**

In order to combat these issues, efforts are being made by multiple different organisations to support female drivers. These efforts range anywhere from special karting and community events just for girls to professional female racing series like W Series and F1 Academy.

W Series had been the first ever all-female racing series with the inaugural season taking place in 2019. Unfortunately, it faced a lot of problems during its short-lived existence. One of which was the

Covid-19 Pandemic that led to the 2020 season being completely cancelled. And, once again, financial troubles. As a result, the 2022 season had to be cut short and the management company behind W Series had to file for bankruptcy in 2023.

### **F1 Academy – Continuing the drive**

The end of W Series did not mean the end for female racing series in general though. Formula 1 announced its own all-female driver category in the form of F1 Academy in November 2022 with the aim to help prepare young girls to progress to higher racing series such as Formula 3, Formula 2 and eventually Formula 1.

F1 Academy therefore already has a more stable financial backing as well as direct ties to other feeder series that W Series has been lacking. Five teams with three drivers each take part in the series providing opportunities for 15 young girls in total. Each of the teams competing has a history of success in other feeder series such as F2 and F3. Come 2024 ten of the drivers will be nominated by Formula 1 teams and each F1 team will have their livery on one car, further strengthening the bond between F1 Academy and Formula 1. The first driver-team pairing announced was Bianca Bustamante who joined the McLaren Driver Development Programme and will therefore represent the British team during the 2024 F1 Academy season.

In addition to all of that F1 Academy has Susie Wolff as its Managing Director. Someone who not only has experience being a female driver and team principal but also the passion needed to promote genuine change. Since the end of her own racing career, she has continuously worked to help women in motorsport with her Dare To Be Different (D2BD) initiative. Founded in 2016 D2BD aims to increase female participation in all aspects of motorsport as well as other male dominated industries across the world. The initiative later teamed up with the FIA Women in Motorsport Commission to create “Girls on Track”, a new educational programme aimed at girls ages 8 to 18.

### **Starting line for change**

The first F1 Academy season came to an end on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023, at the Circuit of the Americas, where for the first time the F1 Academy races were held within an F1 weekend. It was also there that 23-year-old Marta Garcia from Spain was crowned the first ever F1 Academy champion. A couple of days later it was announced that she will receive a fully funded seat for the 2024 Formula Regional European Championship by Alpine (FRECA) with F1 Academy providing a financial contribution towards the cost of the seat.

With all these positive developments after just one season it is safe to assume that F1 Academy will continue to help young female drivers find their footing in professional racing. Of course, the series as well as its drivers will still face many challenges before one of them makes it to F1, but for what seems like the first time the right support structure is there.

Combine this with the efforts being made on lower levels of racing as well as the success of female drivers in other categories, such as Jutta Kleinschmidt (Winner of the 2001 Dakar Rally), Danica Patrick (3<sup>rd</sup> place at Indy 500 2009), and Sarah Bovy, Michelle Gatting and Rahel Frey (All female World Endurance Championship team, Winners of the 8 hours of Bahrain 2023), it is only a matter of time before we get to witness a woman making her rounds during an F1 Grand Prix again.

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