

F1 TRASH: BERNIE ECCLESTONE TAKES A SWING AT SULTANS OF BAHRAIN

This week is the Canadian Grand Prix at Circuit Gilles-Villeneuve in Montreal. We will get to that shortly, but perhaps the most significant news from the Circus this week is the swing of F1 from reinstating the Bahrain Grand Prix, which was previously pulled from its season opening slot in mid-March due to civil unrest and corresponding governmental oppression, to again yanking it from the schedule.

The race was called-off Friday after Bahrain International Circuit (BIC) announced its withdrawal to stage the event in the wake of objections from the teams and its drivers. The FIA's World Motor Sport Council last Friday had reinstated the race to October (28-30) but removal of it now is most likely to make way for the staging of the inaugural Indian Grand Prix on the same dates.

"We will be back to normal. We have to put it to the World Council. I sent something this morning, so it will be quick," Ecclestone was quoted as saying by The Guardian Wednesday.

Ecclestone, while defending his earlier decision, said the teams had the right to object to the re-scheduling of the race that was cancelled in March due to anti-government protests.

"The truth of the matter is we put the calendar together and the teams race on the calendar," he said. "We were trying to help Bahrain, who have been very helpful to Formula One, and hoping they could get themselves sorted out."

“I don’t know whether there is peace or not. I have no idea. The FIA sent somebody out to check and they said it was all OK. I think the teams had different information and they have the right to say they don’t want to change the calendar.”

Since not everybody can translate jive, here is the deal. After the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt began in late January and started to spread, there was a brutal crackdown on protesters in Bahrain. A wave of pressure was placed on F1 and its governing body FIA by supporters of the protesters and reform movement to pull the Grand Prix. I certainly doubt I was responsible for diddly squat, but I was among the early suggesters that putting the GP in play would be perhaps the biggest single blow that could be leveraged against the oppressive Bahraini government and the Khalifa clan that owns, runs, and dictates it.

They paid dearly and through the nose to build the facility and buy their way into the F1 schedule and, like the crown jewels to a monarchy, it is the very symbol of their belonging and relevance in the international community. It means everything to them. To Bernie Ecclestone, who does not just run F1, he IS F1, it is simply a giant wad of money. And Bernie likes money. Having seen Bernie in action over three plus decades, and casually meeting him a couple of times, my take is Ecclestone does not care about the Shia, Sunni, Arab Spring, oppression or anything else; the bottom line is his and F1’s deal. So, when Bernie said:

“The FIA sent somebody out to check and they said it was all OK. I think the teams had different information and they have the right to say they don’t want to change the calendar.”

What he meant was he sent someone to make sure the Khalifas had their little civil rights

problem sufficiently snuffed out to allow the beautiful people to bring the circus to town. Here is how Foreign Poolicy's Blake Hounshell aptly described it last Tuesday:

In making its decision, the FIA sent a "fact-finding mission" to Bahrain in late May to determine whether it would be safe to hold the race, which was canceled earlier this year amid the violence. According to Formula 1 chief Bernie Eccelstone, quoted in the Guardian, "The FIA sent people out there to check on the situation, they came back and reported everything is fine."

The report, a copy of which was provided to FP by the New York-based human rights group Avaaz, was signed by FIA Vice President Carlos Gracia, who traveled to Bahrain on May 30 and May 31 along with an assistant, Carlos Abella.

It appears to be a complete whitewash.

According to the report, Gracia and Abella met with several government officials, including Minister of Culture Mai bint Mohammed al-Khalifa, Interior Minister Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, Public Security Chief Maj. Gen. Tariq bin Dana, Bahrain International Circuit Chairman Zayed R. al-Zayani, and BIC CEO Salman bin Eissa al-Khalifa – and seem to have accepted their views uncritically.

They also met with Tariq al-Saffar of the pro-government National Institute of Human Rights, who was appointed in 2010 by King Hamad. (Saffar is also managing director of advertising firm Fortune Promoseven, which lists the F1 Grand Prix as a client.)

Gracia and Abella did dine with several unnamed foreign business leaders – a dinner arranged by their government host – **but met with zero members of the**

opposition or with independent rights groups, and did not tour Shiite neighborhoods that have reportedly been under siege for weeks, though they did visit a shopping mall.

And that would have been fine for Ecclestone, but the drivers and teams had other ideas. When F1 constructors – the actual teams – and respected commentators and former drivers like Martin Brundle start jawing that it is a mistake to sully the F1 brand with a trip to the oppressive Bahrain, it starts to leave a mark. Heck even Max Mosely, who has some issues with repressive governments, slammed it as a stupid idea:

“By running the race they hope to show the world the troubles were just a small, temporary difficulty and everything is now back to normal” said the 71-year-old.

“By agreeing to race there, Formula One becomes complicit in what has happened. It becomes one of the Bahrain government’s instruments of repression. The decision to hold the race is a mistake which will not be forgotten and, if not reversed, will eventually cost Formula One dear.”

Ouch. And, so, Bahrain is pulled again. Good; Max Mosely is exactly right in the message and damage that would have been done. If only the US Government and Barack Obama would have the decency and balls to call out their little client oil sultans for who they are and what they are doing. When Max Mosely and Bernie Ecclestone are making you look like moral midgets, it is time to recalibrate. Let’s hope the US does just that.

Now, back to the Canadian Grand Prix that is up on the plate this weekend. As said above, it is at Circuit Gilles-Villeneuve in Montreal. It is

a fast course, but not particularly exciting not overly taxing on the drivers' skill set. With the new rules and tire situation in place in F1 for 2011, pit ability and strategy could be critical. The walls are also a little tricky and unforgiving, as even Sebastian Vettel found in practice. As seems to truly benefit the talent that young Vettel is (seriously, the guy is on a Senna trajectory), he and Red Bull recovered to claim pole. That is six out of seven poles this year for the German, with the remaining one seized by Red Bull teammate Mark Webber. that is pretty dominating.

But Ferrari is getting its act together and closing the competitive gap with the Red Bull boys, with Alonso and Massa taking P2 and P3 respectively. Michael Schumacher, somewhat sadly, continues to be outpaced by fellow Mercedes driver Nico Rosberg, a nice little driver but, unlike Vettel, will never be compared to Senna or Schumacher in his prime. That said, as Brad Spurgeon notes, Michael is certainly not embarrassing himself and, while improved over the initial two years of his "comeback", his Mercedes equipment is certainly no match for the Red Bulls, Ferraris or McLarens.

The race is broadcast live on Fox instead of SpeedTV this week, with coverage starting at 1 PM EST and 10 AM PST.