



What Fuels Max Verstappen's Formula One Success

15 MINUTE READ

By Sean Gregory / Austin

Verstappen in Austin on Oct. 19, 2023, ahead of the United States Grand Prix Brent Humphreys for TIME

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NOVEMBER 8, 2023 7:00 AM EST

championships and crushed all comers during the 2023 season, is on the Austin campus of Oracle, the lead sponsor for his Red Bull racing team, in mid-October. As part of his responsibilities, Verstappen is pinballed from event to event, where he and his teammates must glad-hand Oracle employees and customers a few days before the United States Grand Prix, a regular stop on the F1 schedule that includes races in 20 countries. It's the sort of stuff Verstappen, who's happiest speeding more than 200 m.p.h. down a track, can grow tired of, fast.

The day's organizers have baked in a little childlike fun for the drivers, setting up a track on a grass field so Verstappen and his mates can race remote-controlled trucks. What was supposed to be friendly competition, however, has quickly devolved into a race to see who can inflict the most damage. At one point, Verstappen pushes his vehicle straight into a tire blockade, sending the top cover spiraling into the air. He then keeps driving the damaged car, which skitters around like a headless chicken.

Even during this ridiculous exhibition, Verstappen is looking for an edge. He stands atop a van, so he can view more of the track below. "It just comes natural to me to start thinking about these little advantages," he says the next day, during an interview in the Red Bull hospitality area at the Circuit of the Americas, the site of the F1 race. "I like to win."

This season Verstappen, 26, has turned in one of the most dominating performances in Formula One history, already winning a record 17 Grand Prix races—breaking his own mark of 15 from a year ago—including 10 in a row, another F1 record. It's a form he flashed nearly a decade ago, when Verstappen became the youngest ever driver to start, and win, an F1 race. But he struggled to turn in a consistent campaign while **Lewis Hamilton**, a seven-time world champ, **was winning** a quartet of consecutive titles. Now Verstappen has more than delivered on his early promise. "Max is a talent that comes once in a generation," says American racing legend Mario Andretti. "He's a tiger inside."



Verstappen prepares to drive during qualifying ahead of the Japan Grand Prix on Sept. 23, 2023, in Suzuka, Japan. Mark Thompson/Getty Images

He's replaced **Hamilton** as face of Formula One during a transformational time for the sport. F1 has exploded in popularity in recent years: it brought in \$2.57 billion in revenue last year, up 44% since 2017. Thanks in large part to the Netflix series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, which premiered in 2019 and gives viewers a look at the glitz locations, rocket-speed racing, and interpersonal rivalries, growth is particularly strong in the U.S., where it long failed to gain a stronghold. The U.S. Grand Prix is filled with 20- and 30-something fans who got into F1 because of what racing insiders call "the Netflix effect." Next, many of these gearheads will head to Las Vegas for F1's grandest U.S. stand yet: the inaugural Las Vegas Grand Prix, on Nov. 18, in what promises to be a spectacular nighttime sprint down the Strip. The city is projecting 105,000 spectators for each of the event's three nights, which include practices, qualifying, and the race itself. According to one analysis from earlier this year, the estimated economic impact—\$1.3 billion—will double that of the Super Bowl Las Vegas is hosting in early 2024.

Hamilton, a regular at fashion weeks with a host of A-list pals—he's producing an F1 movie starring Brad Pitt—Verstappen has little appetite for the sports-celebrity machine. "I have no desire to be able to hang out with famous movie stars," he says. He's the most polarizing driver in the sport, with a focus on winning that can come across as cold. And while Verstappen's loyal fans show up decked out in orange wherever he goes, over the past two seasons he's won with such relative ease, it's drained some drama from the races. In Austin, his supporters couldn't drown out the boos that greeted him on the podium. F1's fate may hinge on whether those jeers morph into an appreciation for his singular skills. "As great as Verstappen is," says Barton Crockett, senior research analyst for Rosenblatt Securities who covers Liberty Media, F1's U.S.-based parent company, "right now he looks like the biggest risk to the business."

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Racing courses through Verstappen's veins. His Dutch father Jos drove in F1 from 1994 to 2003, collecting two podium finishes. His Belgian mother Sophie Kumpen was a champion go-karter. (They split in 2008.) Jos got Max a quad

Once young Max showed an affinity for racing, Jos went all in. He built the engines for Max's karts, served as mechanic, and drove with his son, for 13 hours at a time, to tracks throughout Europe. If rain drenched a track, most families went home. Jos made Max keep practicing. "From a young age, I saw other kids running around, playing, not really thinking about the future," says Max. "But my dad, he had a plan. And I had to stick to the plan."

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Photograph by Brent Humphreys for TIME

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driver passed him in a race near Naples. Instead of waiting to take back the lead, he tried a riskier move and crashed himself out of the race. Jos was furious. On the way home, Jos stopped at a gas station. “He wanted to talk, I didn’t want to talk,” says Jos. “So I said, ‘If you don’t shut up, I’ll send you out.’” Jos left Max at the gas station, before turning around to pick him up. He didn’t speak to Max for a week. Jos, who’s had a number of run-ins with the law including a conviction for a 1998 assault, has denied ever abusing Max. He tells TIME he hit him just once—on the helmet, before a race in England. “He needed that,” says Jos, who points out that Max won that one.

Verstappen graduated from karts to cars in 2014, when he joined Formula 3, the third-tier circuit, at 16. Helmut Marko, an influential Red Bull adviser, caught a few of his wins on TV. “He was on another planet,” says Marko, who called Jos. “I said, ‘Jos, forget everything. We do Formula One.’”

Verstappen spent the 2015 season with Scuderia Toro Rosso, then Red Bull’s junior team. At 17, he was the youngest driver ever to line up on the F1 grid, by nearly two years. In 2016, he was promoted to the main team. F1 driver Daniel Ricciardo, then his teammate, still remembers Verstappen’s first practice session. “He didn’t really care about taking a pragmatic approach,” says Ricciardo. “He was like, ‘I’m just gonna go and drive this thing and try to drive the wheels off of it. If I crash, I crash.’” Verstappen won.

Competitors weren’t exactly enamored with an aggressive upstart who looked like a child. “Yeah, for sure, people were questioning it,” Verstappen says. “But I don’t care. I’m not interested in other people’s opinions.”

Verstappen made his fair share of mistakes in his early years. “He was such a raw diamond,” says Red Bull team principal Christian Horner. “All the learning other drivers did in the lower categories, out of the spotlight, he did under the scrutiny of the world’s media.”



Verstappen and his Oracle Red Bull Racing crew at the United States Grand Prix in Austin on Oct. 22, 2023.

Brent Humphreys for TIME

Verstappen and Hamilton engaged in an epic duel in 2021; the season came down to the last lap in Abu Dhabi where Verstappen overtook Hamilton to win his first title. “Having achieved that world championship, it lifted a lot of pressure off his shoulders,” Horner says.

New regulations, designed to reduce the wake of “dirty air” released by cars that made passing difficult, changed the look and feel of cars in the 2022 season. Red Bull turned in a superior aerodynamic design. Some opponents have cried foul. Last year, the FIA, the governing body of motor sports, fined Red Bull \$7 million for exceeding F1’s spending restrictions. Horner denies trying to gain any advantage. “There was a lot of pressure on the FIA after 2021, especially from our biggest competitor, to say, there’s a reason [why Red Bull won] and this and that and the other,” he says. “The more you win, the less friends you have. We’ve done a lot of winning. So you can imagine, we don’t have a lot of friends.” Mercedes, Hamilton’s team, declined to comment.

Verstappen. Alonso finally passed Hamilton and finished third. Afterward, Marko told a victorious Verstappen he missed a battle behind him. Not true. “I saw it on TV,” Verstappen responded. He was watching the race on the big screens scattered around the track.

Verstappen also attributes his success to a happy home life. He’s dated Kelly Piquet, the daughter of three-time F1 champion Nelson Piquet, since 2020, and bonded with the 4-year-old daughter Piquet shares with Daniil Kvyat, the driver Verstappen replaced on the Red Bull roster. “I’m not the father, that’s not the aim,” says Verstappen. “It’s always very important that she has a good relationship with her own father, which she has. But I see her every day when I’m at home. We get on very well. She’s very cute.”

But when he returns to his home in Monaco—and even to his hotel rooms during race weeks—it’s not like he takes a break from racing. His most fervent hobby is simulated racing; he even runs an e-sports team. “I watch other sports, but there’s nothing really that I’m really passionate about,” he says. Piquet respects his side hustle but has her limits. “There have been times where I’ve been like, ‘OK, time to switch off,’” she says. “You have to give a gentle reminder that the sun is shining outside and, you know, there are other things to do.”

Verstappen has ascended a very different F1 from the one he entered in 2015. In January 2017 Liberty Media, the conglomerate that also owns SiriusXM and has a stake in Live Nation, completed its purchase of F1 for \$8 billion. Under Liberty, F1 has modernized its marketing and taken a more proactive approach to social media: subscribers to F1’s YouTube channel, for example, have risen from 272,000 to 9.61 million, a near 3,500% spike.



Alamy



Liberty has also sought inroads in America. In the past F1 had staged races in Detroit, Dallas, Phoenix, Indianapolis, and the parking lot of Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, but they all fell off the calendar. *Drive to Survive* has turned F1 figures into recognizable stars. “We used to come here, and it would be my wife at immigration that they were all looking for a selfie with,” says Horner, who’s married to Geri Halliwell, a.k.a. Ginger Spice. “Now they go, ‘Hey, you’re the dude from *Drive to Survive*.’”

Through the first 17 races of this season, ESPN’s platforms attracted an average of 1.15 million viewers, more than double the audiences of five years ago. Last year **F1 debuted a race in Miami**, and six of the past seven North American races have sold out. Liberty has invested some \$500 million in the Las Vegas Grand Prix, which will take place the weekend before Thanksgiving. An opening ceremony, headlined by will.i.am, Keith Urban, Journey, and others, will kick off the festivities. Liberty is building a 300,000-sq.-ft. paddock facility in the city; passes to the Bellagio Fountain Club, overlooking the race on Las Vegas Boulevard, are going for over \$10,000. Rooms at the Cosmopolitan, with a racetrack view, cost nearly \$7,000 a night. “One of the goals with Vegas is to raise the bar,” says Liberty president and CEO Greg Maffei. “A night race down the Strip on a Saturday is going to be a whole other level of appeal and attraction and promotion for the United States audience, and the world audience.”

The Vegas race, however, is missing a key ingredient: any real meaning. Verstappen clinched the championship on Oct. 7 in Qatar. While drivers jostling lower in the standings may intrigue hardcore fans, casual viewers on, say, the East Coast of the U.S.—where the race will start at 1 a.m.—are unlikely to stay up. “I would get bored of it if I was watching,” says Kevin Magnussen, a driver for Moneygram Haas, the only American-owned F1 team.

Verstappen sees it differently. “The NBA survived when the Chicago Bulls were dominating,” he says. “At the time, or even afterwards, people are like, ‘Oh, that

Slight quibble: Michael Jordan's teams, in the 1990s, won three of their six NBA titles on late game-winning shots, in tight series. They didn't sweep every playoff series with ease. That's what Verstappen's doing now.

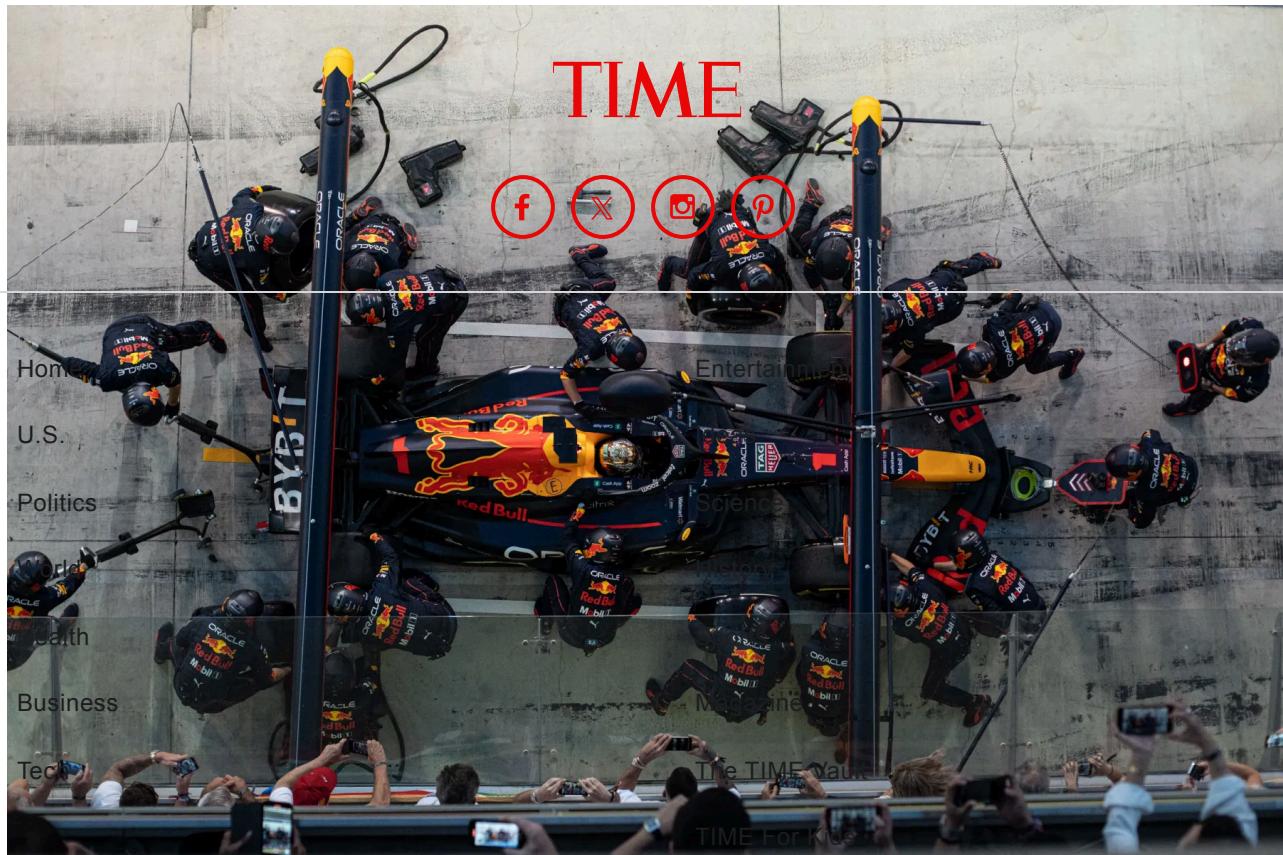
Fans tired of Verstappen's run may be pleased to know he's considered leaving F1. He's not waxing poetic about all-time records, like breaking the mark for most F1 titles in a career, seven, held by Hamilton and Michael Schumacher. "Would I like to win seven? Yeah, why not?" he says. "But even if I don't win seven, I know that there's still so many more things in life than F1. I'm already very happy with what I have achieved."

Other forms of motor racing, like the endurance circuit—which has fewer events each year—intrigue him. "At one point you have to outweigh the success against just general quality of life," he says. "I feel like I'm living out of a bag, out of a hotel, all the time. At the moment that's fine. I love driving. I love winning. But the older you get, maybe one day that's not anymore what I want."

Verstappen's also growing weary of F1's focus on marketing, which has undoubtedly fattened his wallet (his contract reportedly pays him some \$50 million per year). "I would just keep in mind that the actual sport comes first, instead of the show," he says. "That, for me, is very important, and that eventually will also decide if I stay or not."

For a while, he wouldn't participate in *Drive to Survive*. He thought it concocted drama. Even now, his involvement is minimal. "I don't need to watch it because I know what happens," he says. "I'm also not very interested to hear from our neighbors how they saw their season. I know my side of the story. For me, that's enough."

twice. One guy asks for the Dutch pronunciation of *Broadway* and *Brooklyn*. Verstappen plays along, reluctantly. “I think it’s better just to pronounce it in English,” he says.



Verstappen at a pit stop during the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, which marked the end of the 2022 season. Philipp Spalek—laif/Redux

Marko, the Red Bull adviser, recognizes the need to cut back on Verstappen’s off-track obligations. “He doesn’t like doing it,” he says. “I want to have a relaxed and happy Max. Maybe some less sponsors.”

Masthead

Still, Verstappen has a knack for staying focused on race day. About an hour before the start of the U.S. Grand Prix in Austin, Prince Harry stops by the Red Bull garage. Verstappen gives him a quick greeting. “I’m not a people pleaser,” he says. “I mean, super nice guy. And it’s good to shake hands, say hello. But I’m here to do my job.”

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“He should have come earlier,” quips Jos.

some dissatisfaction. “Mate, these brakes are so sh-t compared to yesterday,”

he radios to his race engineer. “What a piece of crap.” He snaps when his

engineer updates him while he’s concentrating. “Please, no talking. I’m in the

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braking [zone],” he yells at one point. With a few laps to go, the engineer

informs him he has a 3.6-sec. lead over Hamilton. “No talking in the braking,

man,” Verstappen says. “F-ck!”

After his victory, Verstappen notes that he was at least polite. “I said *please* when I asked.”

I later mention those boobirds in the stands. “Yeah, very heartbroken,” he says, with sarcasm and a smile. “The thing you have to remember is that when I’m walking off with the trophy, that’s the most important thing.”

Does he have any message for those fans?

“Nope. No. They don’t deserve it.”

With that, he walks toward the Red Bull garage for a team debriefing. On to the next race. On to the next victory.

—*With reporting by Leslie Dickstein and Julia Zorthian*

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