

THE CIRCUS RETURNS: FORMULA ONE 2014

The lads are back from the winter off. The 2014 F1 season opens this weekend in Melbourne down under Australian way. But things are different this time. After several years of relative stability in the top teams, there has been all kinds of driver movement. And, of course, there are entirely new specs for the cars and engines. In short the whole snow globe is turned upside down.

Qualifying will be at 2 am EST Saturday morning (11 pm tonight PST) and the race goes off at the same times one day later, all coverage on NBCSports Network.

Four time defending World Champion Sebastian Vettel is back to defend his title. But no longer will he pair with Mark Webber, who has moved out of F1. Instead, Vettel is partnered with young Daniel Ricciardo for Red Bull. Likewise at Maranello, Fernando Alonso returns for Ferrari, but longtime partner Felipe Massa is gone and replaced by the aging, but still very fast, Kimi Raikkonen. Massa has moved over to Williams, where he will be paired with up and coming hopeful Valtteri Bottas. It is good to see Kamul Kobayashi back in the show, but he is saddled with a back bench team in Caterham. Jenson Button is back at McLaren, and can't possibly have a worse year than he did last year. Button will be paired with another unknown quantity, Kevin Magnussen. Lewis Hamilton returns again for Mercedes, where he will be paired again with Nico Rosberg. A rundown of all the teams, drivers and principles can be found here. Somewhat sadly, Vitaly Petrov once again could not find a ride, even as a tester.

More importantly, the equipment is vastly changed for 2014. Gone are the naturally aspirated screaming engines of the recent past and in are turbocharged 1.6 litre power units with enhanced energy recovery systems (ERS). An

extra gear has been allowed in the gearbox which, combined with the more efficient motors, allows reduced on board fuel load. Aerodynamically, the noses have been substantially lowered and the rear wing architecture tailored. The new lower front wing design makes this year's car (with the possible exception of the somewhat pug nosed Ferrari) quite a bit more attractive. The tire compounds seem to be overall harder, resulting in longer life, but reduced cornering grip. It also results in less rubber being laid down on the course, which also reduces grip. Bottom line is the cars look a little squirrely early on.

So, who is fast coming out of winter testing at Jerez and Bahrain? Not Red Bull. Despite having Vettel and Adrian Newey, the airflow design engineering genius, Red Bull is lagging badly. Mercedes powered vehicles are the clear leader so far, and this was borne out in the first practice session in Melbourne. Ferrari and Williams are close but not quite there. But the Renault engines are just flat bad right now, and poor Lotus is behind even Red Bull in the Renault pecking order.

One thing should also be mentioned. The season starts with a bit of a cloud over it as Michael Schumacher still seems to be languishing in a coma. The latest report is Michael is showing "small, encouraging signs" of progress in awaking from the medically induced coma he has been in. That is certainly good news, but it still seems rather bleak. The sport is just better with Michael in it. Wake up Schumi.

There is so much that is different that there has to be a shakeup. Good, things had gotten too predictable the last few years, it was time for a change. One thing I don't care much for so far is the voice of the new engines. They are quieter and the awe inducing scream is gone. The sound is going to take some getting used to.

Okay, that is it for now. We will check in with the circus at key points as the season progresses. Consider this wide open Trash Talk,

all subjects welcome whether sporting, food or political.