

F1: teams known but drivers are not

Only a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable to reach the end of a season and not know who the drivers would be in F1 teams for next year. But for many reasons, that has changed.

As Takuma Sato seemingly crashed out of what is probably his last season in Formula One, he was not the only one wondering where his next drive would come from.

Not since the early 1970s, where drivers routinely paid for their seats, has there been so much FUD* in the pitlane.

Ferrari have announced their line-up: Michael Schumacher will be joined by Brazilian Felipe Massa, who has been groomed for stepping up whilst serving his apprenticeship at the now defunct Sauber.

Ferrari's previous Brazilian, Rubens Barrichello has gone to Honda F1, which has lost its BAR tag as a result of its recent purchase by the Japanese company. He's being named above Jenson Button which means, in effect, a demotion for the Briton who has not sparkled this year - largely it has to be said due to a vehicle that some would say demonstrated canine tendencies.

Still, if the BAR - Honda was a dog, it was at least a reliable dog which is more than can be said for the McLaren of championship runner-up Kimi Raikkonen. The McLaren was cat-like in its agility and the Finn's was butterfly-like in its fragility. A bit like Montoya's shoulder, one might think

McLaren is one of only four teams to keep the same drivers for next year, although some had predicted that Giancarlo Fisichella could not cut it compared with his young team-mate and 2005 World Champion. But he has demonstrated that he's not World Champion material but he's a very able assistant who has clocked up points that ensured Renault gained the Constructors' Championship. Another team to stay the same is Toyota - a Japanese owned German car hence Ralph Schumacher, who suddenly found his way around the tracks at the end of the season will remain. The man with the worst hairstyle in motor racing, Jarno Trulli, is staying on, too.

And Red Bull is to keep Coulthard (whose deal to take a pay cut and then get substantial bonuses for points has worked out nicely for Red Bull because they've got him on the cheap - but then

again, he was out of a drive for 2005 until he came up with that plan and joined a team that was in total disarray as its parent had peremptorily shut it down and sold off its engine supplier) will again be joined by Austrian Christian Klien who has been something of a star in 2005.

The man who used to be known as "Quick Nick" Heidfeld is heading for a German drive at last. But he's not been told who his team mate will be. And no, it won't be Danica Patrick. "Quick Patrick" (you have to say it in a faux French accent for the internal rhyme to work) has raced in the UK but right now she's the darling of the US Indy fans - and both loving and coining it.

Williams have lost their engines, a big sponsor and Heidfeld. Mark Webber's almost the only constant about the "front of house" team for next year.

Bit at the back of the grid Midland (formerly Jordan) and Red Bull Junior (which is technically still Minardi until the end of the year) have not confirmed anyone, not even their existing drivers.

Pizzonia is out of a drive - but he sees himself as lucky to have got the drives he did get this year: they were largely as a result of Heidfeld's incapacity.

The word is that several teams are courting American Scott Speed. The trouble is that he's quick on ovals but he is currently demonstrating an ability to potter around proper race circuits in his stints in the A1 Grand Prix. He's been good in qualifying but seems to have a problem racing. Red Bull are said to be most interested but they've gone a bit cool since his performances have not shown him to be quite the star he was expected to be - he was the 2004 Formula Renault champion with Red Bull support and third in GP2's European series but it's looking more and more like he's not ready to make the step up, despite the ambition he emphasises on his website at scottspeed.com. And there are few other American pretenders: indeed, at the pointy end of US racing, it's Brits and New Zealand with increasing frequency.

Vitantonio Liuzzi has been named by Red Bull as most likely to be the number one driver in their number two team and had said the Scott Speed was the likely number two.

But there is competition for the fifth Red Bull seat (three at the first team and three at the second) with three drivers who have fallen off the back of the grid hoping to have a go. Narain Karthikeyan, Takuma Sato and Tiago Monteiro - even though none of them have a Red Bull history.

But there is one other campaigner: Katherine Legge. The Englishwoman will be the first female driver for more than two decades to run a Formula One car when she tests with Minardi in November. Yes, Minardi can't sign her because they won't have a team next year but RB Jnr will be watching. All the fuss over Dana Patrick has made publicists sit up and take note. Put a reasonably pretty girl in a fast car and it's instant front page coverage, they realise. Legge has been described as "the first woman to win a major open-wheel race in America." It was her first professional race.

*FUD = fear, uncertainty and doubt.