

F1: Japan to enter new team in 2006

There will be an additional team in F1 for 2006. Japanese team Super Aguri will run Honda engines and almost certainly bring back into F1 the recently dumped Sato. But it's not the only big news in the world's most popular motorsport.

When Super Aguri made its application to join F1 in November, it was rejected. Several teams voiced concerns that F1 didn't need another team that would turn up, potter around at the back of the field getting in everyone's way and whilst adding numbers not actually add value.

Of course, another big point is that adding an eleventh team means that there are 10% more teams to share in the F1 revenues. For the teams at the back - which basically means Jordan / Midland now that Minardi have been taken over by Red Bull and are expected to become consistently ahead of the Russian owned, UK based team.

But Super Aguri (it's called that because the owner, Aguri Suzuki can't call it *Suzuki*) has persisted: it's announced a deal to use customer engines from Honda which puts it on an equal footing with other teams which won't have works support next year - Williams included. Whilst the new team's engines won't match the cutting edge stuff that Honda (formerly BAR) will use (although the Honda team has said that both teams will use the same engine, it is unlikely that the new team will get the latest developments on a race by race basis - after all, last season, Honda sometimes only put one of the two BARs on the track with the latest version), they will have another advantage - well, sort of. It's expected that Takuma "shit, there's a corner" Sato will join them. He's very experienced in F1 and knows every bump at every track - after all, he's had an accident on most of them. And he knows the people at Honda very well, knows their culture and knows their capability.

But like everyone else, Super Aguri will be starting off the new season with a new type of engine and many significant rule changes. Ironically, at the beginning of the season, this will put them on a similar footing to several other teams - although development budgets will inevitably mean a widening gap before the end of the season.

And, without wishing to labour the point, the bills for Sato's crashes have to be brought under control. The new team cannot afford to have new cars, or nearly new cars, at each meeting.

The team owner is no stranger to Formula One: he raced for seven years starting his F1 career in Larousse in 1988. Although the team will be an official Japanese entry and have headquarters in

Tokyo, it has already taken over the former Arrows facility at Leaffield in Oxfordshire. There are rumours that it may run Arrows chassis - but it's a long time since Arrows died and Minardi bought the last of their chassis expecting to run them but found that modification costs to bring to latest specification exceeded the cost of updating their own chassis. Now Paul Stoddart, who sold the Minardi team to Red Bull has the chassis sitting in the cupboard under the stairs, so to speak and cashing in what amounts to dead metal would reduce the losses he has made in F1 over the years. But it's six weeks since Stoddart said he was talking to the new team and since then it's been all quiet on the eastern front.

But, F1 being what it is, there are rumours and counter-rumours. One centres around the proposed primary sponsor: Japanese software house Softbank. Softbank's been having its own interesting time lately and the rumours say that the company has not yet signed on the dotted line to confirm its sponsorship deal. Although Super Aguri has been able to meet its USD45 million deposit requirement with the FIA, it doesn't have enough money to run the team. To a degree, that may be alleviated for the first race or two if another rumour is true: as much as USD12m may be available to the team if they take on F1 beginner Yuji Ide. Ide has been reasonably successful in Formula Nippon (top three in the Championship in the the past two years) - but it's a big step up from that to F1, although he did do a season in domestic French F3. And he's old, by modern standards, to be starting in F1. He's 31. Even so, he has extremely limited international experience and will depend on computer games to learn the tracks if he does join F1. Even so, tech company Mobilecast may be prepared to fund his seat and contribute to the team's running costs.

The new team may be the first of a wave, and possibly even a resurgence in F1's previous character where there were many more teams and many more cars on the grid. Speaking to French newspaper l'Equipe, Max Mosely who heads the FIA said that there are already "four or five" teams who have expressed interest in joining F1 from 2008. That's when the existing concord agreement runs out. Five teams, BMW, Mercedes McLaren, Toyota, Honda and Renault have formed a breakaway group (The Grand Prix Manufacturers' Association) but Ferrari, Red Bull I and II, Williams and Midland have all signed up for the "new look" F1. The plan is to reduce the cost of participation to somewhere between USD100 m and USD120 m per season. At that price, Mosely believes, teams will be queuing up to join F1. Rumours include a return by Dave Richards who set up BAR based out of his successful ProDrive concern and even Penske which so dominates some US formulae that a new challenge would be welcome.

However, one challenge will be to maintain the character of F1. The damaging fuss over team orders (which this writer believes should be reintroduced) has opened the way for the breaking up of the team nature of the sport. Yet it is that team nature with identically liveried cars (remember BAR wanted to have cars in different livery but were told "no?" which marks F1 out, visually, from other forms of single seat racing. Hearing US commentators speak of "team mates" when their cars are visually so different makes little sense. But the fact that a single car and single driver can be sponsored does reduce the financial input from each sponsor so increasing the pool of available contributors.

McLaren has already backed the single sponsor route: it has just signed a deal with Vodafone for five years from 2007 to become the name sponsor of the team. The new Vodafone Mercedes McLaren team has not signed up for F1 after 2007, and Vodafone's history of sponsorship is chequered: Eddie Jordan lost a court battle with them over an alleged sponsorship agreement where the communications company put its stickers on Ferrari instead and it's just pulled out early from a sponsorship deal with Manchester United.