

F1: Teams ready for Bahrain

It was a momentous moment - Lotus packed their trucks with kit, people and (to the surprise of many) two cars and set off for the airport en route for Bahrain. Williams is chuffed for a different reason.

In Barcelona, Williams ran their car in more or less the trim it will race in Bahrain. There are "a couple of additional parts" that will be fitted for the race.

Having watched the Australian V8 series at the Sakhir circuit ten days ago, one wonders if any of those parts are headlights to see through the dust.

Williams say that they are "working on" reliability in high mileages, but don't say whether that translates to engine or gearbox issues within one race or over a series of races as the installations age.

The Bahrain circuit has a new portion for 2010 - a short straight has been replaced by a series of twiddly corners in an extension to the track.

The Bahrain race will be the first where refuelling is not allowed. Some teams are aiming at tyre-only pitstops of under three seconds . According to Williams the time lost in making a pit-stop (excluding stationary time) is 18.6 seconds.

Williams say that the average speed is 210kph - but that's without the new twiddly bit.

The new section adds a new dimension to the track which, since its inception in 2004, has been primarily straights and high-speed corners where the primary limitation on cornering speeds has been lack of traction on sand and dust. But the new section will bring new challenges: if drivers think there is room for a dive inside, or to race around the outside, the off-line dirt could lead to a rapid trip into the dunes.

Williams, with the experience of Rubens Barrichello entering his 18th season and young gun Nico Hulkenberg, have a good driver package. Cosworth say they've finished tinkering with the engine and its ready to go. Williams is not an emotional team and as the cars head off to Bahrain, a sense of calm - and business as usual - is apparent.

It's not at all like that in Norfolk where Lotus are about to bring to life the hopes and dreams of millions of fans that have mourned the team since it ran out of money, its top driver Johnny Herbert consistently slagged them off and even the man from Squidgate couldn't interest enough sponsors to keep the team going despite a mid-season deal with MECCANO. The team signed Miko Salo - a month after Team Lotus called in the administrators. 1994 was a terrible year for Lotus: At Imola, the same weekend that Senna, a former Lotus star, died; Pedro Lamy ran into JJ Lehto's stationary car on the grid and Alboreto crashed in the pit-lane sending debris into the Lotus pit injuring mechanic Neil Baldry; Pedro Lamy crashed in testing at Silverstone, causing serious injury to both legs; by mid-way through the season, the type 109 was ready but Lotus could afford only one car: alongside it they fielded the 107C similar to the one Lamy had crashed. Alex Zanardi stood in for Lamy but when it was clear he was not coming back and Herbert left, Philippe Adams stepped into the second car. The cars were plagued with niggling faults causing unreliability - a sign both of shortage of money and a rapid pace of development: in the background Lotus were developing new fly-by-wire technology. Worse, the cars suffered from difficult handling setup, seemingly beyond fixing. At the German Grand Prix, Peter Collins, team principle, was furious: having finally got both balance and grip in some sort of shape, and with the additional power from the new Mugen-Honda engine, both cars had reasonable grid positions, only to be forced out by aggressive driving. Collins said "The start showed that Alex was unceremoniously driven off the road by de Cesaris. You would have thought that after 200 Grands Prix he would know how not to cause an accident at the start of the race. Equally, the television shows Brundle blatantly driving Johnny off the circuit, which I find totally unacceptable." At the following race, Herbert said "Once again the car is undriveable." Later, as the Type 109 development began to take shape, Herbert said "Well, it's a great feeling to have a car I can really do something with." His something, unfortunately, turned out to be Eddie Irvine's punchbag leading Collins to say "Irvine's three race suspension at the beginning of the year was far too short. His brain has obviously been removed and it is about time that his licence is too."

But by Mid October, it was all over bar the shouting. Herbert had gone, Zanardi was racing some events but not others, Stand in drivers sat in the second seat including Eric Barnard, Mika Salo (who finished 10th in Japan saying the car was very fast in a straight line but didn't go round corners very well).

In the last race, Adelaide, Lotus retired both cars with mechanical problems after disappointing practice and qualifying sessions. Peter Collins said "It's been a tough season with a disappointing end, but there's no point in looking back. Now is the time to look forward." But the team was dead long before the new season started and administration turned into Liquidation. The road cars division, due to Colin Chapman's foresight in separating the racing activities from production and design, were not affected. The road cars company had its own problems: struggling to come to terms with Chapman's sudden death and the loss of revenues from, amongst other projects, de Lorean, it fell into the hands of General Motors who, if they were honest, would have to admit they had no idea what the company did or what its potential was. Under their ownership, it produced its first front-wheel drive car - named the Elan but with little

relationship to the 1960s original; designed for the mass market, but capable sports car underneath, it was relatively low tech - and looked more like a fun car than a real Lotus. The patterns were sold off to a Korean company which made a few and then dropped the project. The company was sold off to Proton, a Malaysian screwdriver plant for obsolete Mitsubishi cars. But the then Prime Minister, Mahathir, saw in Lotus what GM did not: it was not about the badge and it was not about the money: it was the unbridled passion for innovation. For years, Lotus cost Proton but, gradually, Proton began to build its own cars and engines and running gear all benefited from Lotus input, much of it kept quiet so Malaysia could claim the credit for developing its own cars. As time has gone by, Lotus has developed not just giant-killing sports cars in the original spirit but the kind of race towards advanced technology that Team Lotus brought to Formula One.

In the background fans never forgot Lotus and its glory years in F1. It was a lost name: and one millions wanted back. A first effort to bring it back by Lightspeed was ill-considered. But it sparked an idea in Tony Fernandes, boss of AirAsia.

AirAsia is a strong sponsor of Williams. But with Kingfisher and Virgin both running their own teams, Fernandes may have decided he needed one, too. Even if it was a "me too" exercise, the reality is that, between September 2009 and today, Fernandes and his team have put together a package that has more credibility than other new entries - and more, even, than some established entries.

Yes, the team has a new logo; yes it is officially entered as a Malaysian team and, yes, it has said it will move its development to Kuala Lumpur in due course, the only F1 team to be based outside Europe.

Of course, the fans would rather see the proper Lotus logo - ideally the black and gold Chapman memorial version - on the nose of the car. And some will be saddened by the impending move from Norfolk.

In truth, there is absolutely no link between the 1994 team and the new one.

Except for one thing: even before the team turns a wheel at Bahrain, it has honoured the spirit of Colin Chapman: it's done the impossible. A brand new car, from scratch, with - initially - basically few staff and very little money. It's not going to be like Chapman's early entries into motorsport where he just turned up and blew away the competition; there will be tough times at the back of the grid but, if they can finish races then, with the new points system, there is a good chance that they will pick up at least a few points this year.

Trulli, the number one driver at Lotus, is past his prime - but he is the current lap record holder at Bahrain. Fernandes is just hoping for a finish.

And as they arrive, no one has tested or raced at the track in its new format. As the drivers and engineers do their track-walks or scooter rides on Thursday, they will be looking for the slippery bits on the new track, and testing the surface.

The new section may prove a leveller - or a killer for teams that have trouble creating a setup that will get around the twiddly bits quickly and still be able to achieve high top speed on the long straights and not-very-bendy corners of the old track.

But whichever it is, Williams and Lotus, for entirely different reasons, will be very pleased to roll out their cars.