

MONTREAL, RESTART YOUR ENGINES

The Canadian city was devastated when it was dropped from the Formula One calendar this season. But now that the race has been provisionally put back on the circuit, **John Mather** looks at what this means for the city and asks what lessons Abu Dhabi can learn

On a hot August Saturday, the speed limit at the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve is 30kph. To the right, a Dodge minivan leads a Toyota Yaris and an ageing Chevrolet as they vie for parking spots closest to the public beach. To the left, cyclists and roller skaters weave between one another, doing laps around the 4.3km track. Except for the fleeting sound of a car stereo, it's quiet and peaceful – two words rarely paired with the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve, the home of the Canadian Grand Prix.

Every year for nearly 30 years, exercise enthusiasts in Montreal, Quebec, were kicked off the track during the first weekend of June for the race, one of 17 in the Formula One Championship. They were replaced by 20 finely tuned cars, manned by the world's most skilled drivers. The circuit – carved on the man-made Ile Notre-Dame in the St Lawrence river – overflowed with fans watching racers reach speeds of up to 325kph. Some 300,000 would come to the island during the three-day race, and up to 50 million more would watch on television. For one weekend a year, Montreal felt like the sporting capital of the world.

Then, rather unceremoniously, it came to an end. In October 2008, after Montreal organisers and Bernie Ecclestone, F1's commercial rights holder, failed to reach an agreement on race fees, the race was cancelled. And so on the first weekend in June, the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve looked much as it does today, the quiet clacking of bicycle gears replacing the shrieking of F1 engines. The Ferraris, the McLarens and the Renaults were instead racing in Turkey, and a new Grand Prix in Abu Dhabi had been added to fill the hole. And while the capital

set to work preparing for its first Grand Prix ever on November 1, Montrealers were left wondering how they lost their race.

Now that Ecclestone has put the Canadian Grand Prix back on the provisional 2010 calendar, they grapple with what it still means to them.

The Canadian Grand Prix began in 1961, and for 16 years, it switched between the circuit at Mont Tremblant, a ski resort north-west of Montreal, and Mosport International Raceway in Ontario. It wasn't until the race moved in 1978 to Montreal that it took off.

And while there would be many memorable moments at the track – local hero Jacques Villeneuve crashing into the “Welcome to Quebec” banner in 1999, the Schumacher brothers finishing first and second in 2001, Lewis Hamilton winning his first Grand Prix in 2007 – nothing compared to the first race.

It took place on Thanksgiving weekend, October 8, 1978. Snow fell in the morning and by race time, patches of white had mixed with mud surrounding the track. “It's bitterly, bitterly cold for the competitors,” the BBC announcer Murray Walker said. “And a crowd of 100,000 Canadians here are rooting for one man, the man in the red car there, number 12, Gilles Villeneuve.”

At the time, the track was called Circuit Ile Notre-Dame. It would not be named after Villeneuve until his untimely death during a race in 1982.

In 1978, Villeneuve was still the French-

speaking province's first racing superstar. But at the beginning of the race, he was positioned in third place, behind Jean-Pierre Jarier and Jody Scheckter. Early in the race, Villeneuve slipped back into fourth, but fought back and passed Alan Jones and Scheckter to second place, where it looked as if he would stay. With a 21-second lead after 21 laps, Jarier seemed unbeatable. But then he unexpectedly pulled out of the race on the 47th lap with an engine problem. Villeneuve inherited the lead and cruised to victory.

“Villeneuve wins!” Walker exclaimed. “And 100,000 cheering Canadians went wild with delight at the first ever Grand Prix win by a Canadian in, of all places, Canada. It's Gilles's day without a doubt.”

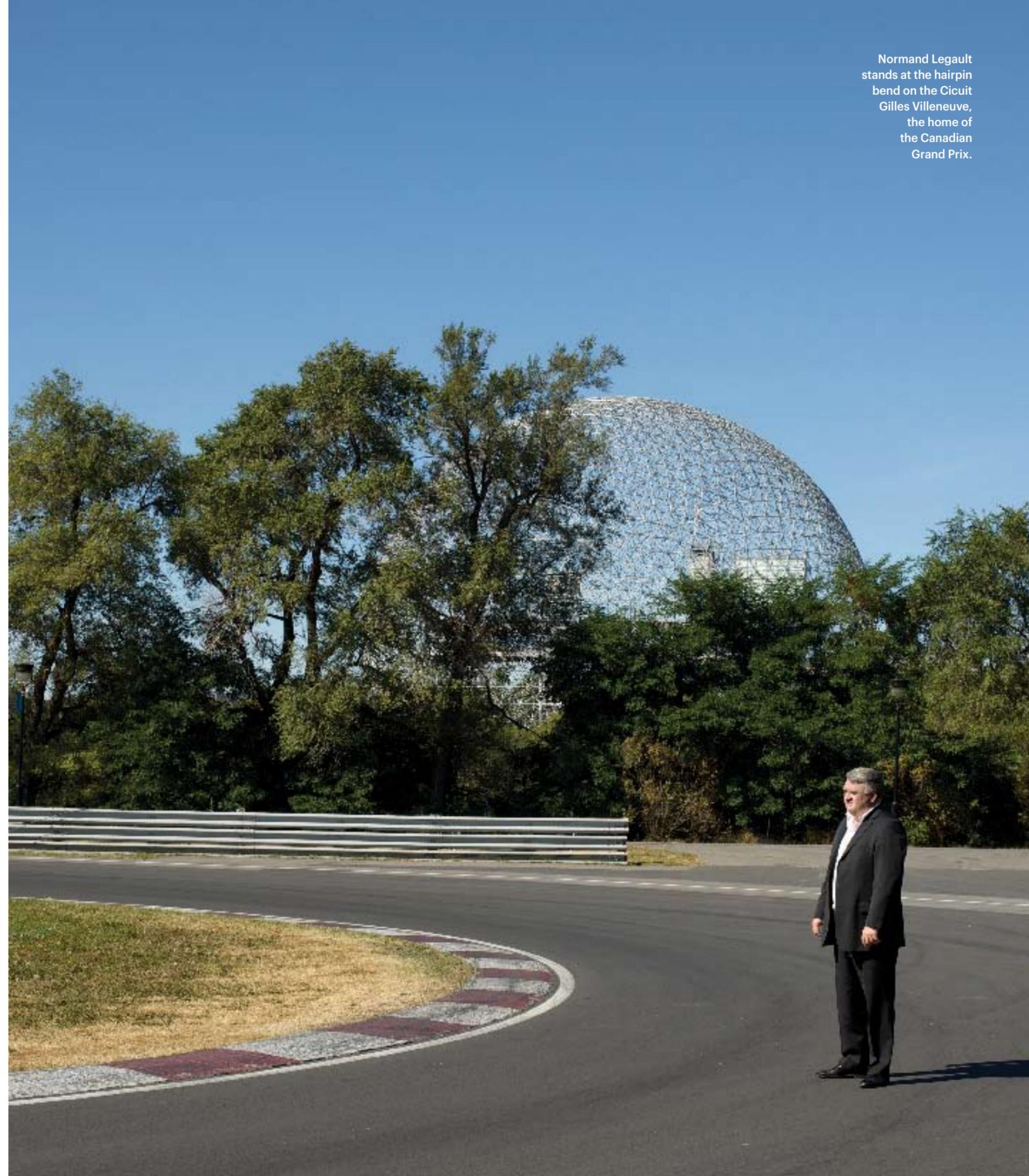
But it was more than Gilles's day; it was Montreal's, too. And it marked the beginning of the city's obsession with Formula One.

“It was almost too good to be true,” says Roger Peart, who designed the circuit and is now the Canadian delegate to the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), which oversees F1. “People have asked me many times how I managed to fix it so he could win.”

Normand Legault, whose name would later become synonymous with Grand Prix in Montreal, was also amazed. “Gilles won his very first race of the very first Grand Prix. It was love at first sight,” he says.

At the time, Legault was a young business marketing student from Université de Sherbrooke. He had been picked by Labatt Breweries to help organise the first Grand Prix in Montreal, which the company sponsored. “We didn't know what we were doing,” Legault says. “Before 1978, Quebec fans didn't know an F1 car from a snowmobile.”

Normand Legault stands at the hairpin bend on the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve, the home of the Canadian Grand Prix.



PHOTOGRAPH: TONY FOUHSE