

But with Villeneuve's victory and the subsequent media hype, everyone realised, as he says, "Maybe this is fertile ground for this."

In 1981, when he was only 25, Legault was made general manager of the race. With this promotion began his relationship with Bernie Ecclestone, then the CEO of the Formula One Constructors' Association and owner of the Brabham team. Legault managed the race for two years, then left to start a graphic design company. He returned in 1989, at Ecclestone's request. In the meantime, the Grand Prix had been cancelled in 1987 over a sponsorship dispute between Labatt and their rival brewery, Molson. Despite the hiatus, the race was still popular, and Legault eventually bought the Canadian Grand Prix in 1996 from Molson.

Under his leadership as a general manager and owner, the Grand Prix quickly became a highlight of the F1 calendar. Legault pegs the success first and foremost to the Villeneuve family. It's a sentiment shared by Max Bitton, a local racing enthusiast.

"Gilles Villeneuve is a racing icon," Bitton says. "When he died, it was like Quebec lost his son."

Gilles's son, Jacques, continued the family tradition by becoming an accomplished driver himself. In 1997 he won the F1 Championship and is still racing stock cars today.

Beyond the Villeneuves, though, is Montreal itself. Sometimes called "Paris in North America", Montreal is the largest Francophone city in the world after the French capital. Old Montreal, a cobblestoned district across the river from Ile Notre-Dame, could fill in for an old town centre anywhere in Europe. It's even nicer in the summer, and in 1982, the Grand Prix

## ‘THEY WANT TO HEAR THE ROAR OF THE ENGINES. THE HAIR ON THEIR ARMS WILL STAND UP JUST FROM LISTENING ... THERE IS A LOT OF USER FRIENDLINESS FOR FANS. AFTER ALL, ISN'T THAT WHO WE DO THIS FOR?’

moved from the end of September to the first weekend in June. Now tied to the beginning of summer, The Grand Prix became an event for the entire city.

Most notably, Crescent Street would close down for three days to host a party. The street, just off the main drag of Rue St Catherine, is a strip of bars and nightclubs – including Jacques Villeneuve's New Town restaurant. In 2008, an estimated 500,000 people crowded into Crescent Street over a weekend filled with live music, celebrity appearances and much eating and drinking.

"You don't need to be attending the race per se, to be part of the Grand Prix spirit," explains Legault, adding that for some, "the race was just an excuse to go out partying."



Montreal fans watch McLaren Mercedes's Lewis Hamilton in the Canadian Grand Prix Qualifying, 2008.

**t**he Grand Prix was estimated to bring in 75 million Canadian dollars a year (Dh 276 million), much of which came from international tourists. In 2008, 7,000-8,000 fans came from Europe, 15,000 from the United States and about 3,000 travelled from Japan.

Once everyone arrived, they found access to the circuit easy: it's just a couple of metro

there was some form of compensation for the CAD\$29 million (Dh9.7 million) in lost revenue. At the time, he also criticised the circuit, saying it was in need of significant repairs. The crisis was averted only when the provincial and federal governments offered CAD\$6 million (Dh22 million) each.

The fact that Ecclestone seemed so willing to drop the race frightened local fans. Bitton says he soon realised that the race's demise would be "inevitable". And his fears were confirmed on October 7, 2008, when the FIA released its 2009 schedule.

The news sent the city into a brief state of shock, then anger, when it came out that the cancellation had been triggered by a dispute

over money. As Michel Flageole, who runs Flagworld, a popular news and photography website from Laval, Quebec, says, "We did not understand why Bernie would ask so much money for a race that was so successful, so loved. We just did not understand."

Ecclestone's asking price was reportedly CAD\$31 million, and Canadian newspapers took aim at the British billionaire. "He became the official devil of the city," Flageole says. "Every paper, every report – nothing positive came out on Bernie."

Dean McNulty, writing for *Sun* newspapers in Canada, pointed out that "Legault had a contract with Formula One Management – Ecclestone's promotional and financial arm – that gave Montreal the rights to the Canadian GP through 2010.

"Turns out contracts with the diminutive Briton are like putting in an offer on a new house – it's good only until some one else comes along with a better deal."

Their anger, in many ways, was understandable. "It was huge. It was a very, very popular event," Peart says, adding he was surprised by the decision. "It was one of the few Grand Prix that sold out. Literally sold out."

Legault, who was in Europe at the time, was silent at first. Sitting in his office nearly a year later, he reveals he had been in the midst of negotiating race fees with Ecclestone. The cancellation, he says, was a hardball play that took him by surprise. Legault called Ecclestone's bluff, arguing that F1 is now no longer affordable for a private enterprise. A businessman, Legault concluded, would be forced to pass the cost on to sponsors or ticket buyers, both who have their limits – especially in a recession. "In today's environment, they'll say: 'No way'."

So he decided to retire, refusing to seek government support. "I'm not the minister of tourism," he says. "My mission is not that the world discovers Montreal. My job is to put a race together."

The government did jump in to save the drowning race. Less than two weeks after the Grand Prix was cancelled, three representatives from the federal, provincial and municipal branches flew to London to meet Ecclestone. During discussions, the government offered CAD\$110 million over five years, but Ecclestone insisted on CAD\$175 million for five years, and the government backed away. The race, it became clear, wasn't going to happen in 2009 – and potentially ever again.

**a**t 26, after a car accident ended Max Bitton's dreams of being a racing driver, he decided to begin selling F1 merchandise. He had realised that no one in Montreal had the rights to sell Ferrari gear, and so he flew to London and approached the company responsible for F1's licensing. At first, they turned him away – so he came back with investors and a business plan. Now, he runs a 60sq m store, F1 Boutique Canada, in the Old Montreal neighbourhood. As he gives me a tour of the shop, he points out the back half is being turned into a Nascar section. There is a Nascar race coming up in two weeks – at the end of August – and he wants to boost sales. Still, he likes to show off his CAD\$1,000 motorised toy Ferraris in the front window, and says he is working on bringing Ferrari bicycles to

Canada. He also sells race-worn drivers' clothes, including a Michael Schumacher jacket.

On the way to last year's race, Bitton was one of many fans waiting for the first train early in the morning. Once there, he'd set up booths selling F1 merchandise. For him, it was the best time of the year. "In Montreal, you are in a cross-cultural type of environment. You have European flair. You have American marketing power. You are between Milan, New York and Paris. It's like... wow."

With the Grand Prix's cancellation Bitton says he's had a 50 per cent drop in sales this year. He's opened a restaurant facing the scenic Old Port to compensate. "I was very, very sorrowed and not just on a financial



Max Bitton has seen a 50 per cent drop in sales of F1 merchandise after the race was dropped.

level," Bitton says, explaining he hires family members and 75 students each summer for the race.

To help lobby for the race's return, Bitton formed a Facebook group. In fact, he had to create multiple Facebook groups, because the social networking site only allows 5,000 members per group. He says he heard from everyone, from doctors to firefighters, who were upset. "This is an insult to the memory and legacy of Gilles Villeneuve," one user wrote on the site.

Bitton summarises the disappointment succinctly: "It was a way of life in Montreal. The Grand Prix comes with the sun, and when it comes it's time to party."

For Sandy Greene the party used to start in January, when she began securing licences and equipment for Crescent Street's bash.

Greene is the director of the Crescent Street Merchants Association, one of the groups hardest hit by the Grand Prix departure.

The Crescent street festival had become "the largest outdoor event in North America", Greene brags, and she would rent a nearby hotel room so she could be on site every morning at 5am. "I pretty much used it just to bathe," she says. For three days she had to make sure the city, fans and car companies were happy – a difficult balancing act. But this year she didn't welcome the break. "It was the most devastating news for the association. And it made my job much more difficult."

The merchants, she says, made about four times as much during the Grand Prix compared to a normal summer weekend. So she had to try to find something to fill the void. The vendors originally thought about holding a Grand Prix party regardless, but "we thought 'Does that present a shrinking image of Crescent Street?'".

Instead, they held a large party to celebrate the street's 50th anniversary. Many people came out, Greene says. But while it was fun, "there is no way of replacing Grand Prix... nothing could fill the void".

Even when rumours began circulating in August that the race would come back, Greene was only "cautiously optimistic". She says some damage is irreversible. The street lost a few *dépanneurs* (small grocery stores), a sandwich shop and an Indian restaurant. She also says the Hard Rock Cafe is closing down. "We can't say it's directly related to the Grand Prix, but it's obvious."

**t**he mood changed in the summer when Ecclestone declared he wanted the race back. In early August, the "F1 Supremo" told Switzerland's *Motor Aktuell* magazine "I promise we will be in Montreal in 2010. Everyone in Formula One loves the Canadian Grand Prix."

Reaction, though, was cautious. They had heard this before; at one point, rumours swirled that Montreal would take the race back from Abu Dhabi in 2009 because Yas Island wasn't ready. "Between Ecclestone's assuring words and the reality of F1 returning to Canada is a gulf the size of Mexico," Dean McNulty wrote in the *Toronto Sun*, referring to the difference in money. "There's not a bridge in the world that can span that gap." But, during a subsequent interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Ecclestone said: "We have an 'in-principle' agreement of how we're going to make the