

race happen. It states that we are going to have a next seven years ... in Montreal, of course.”

Finally, last month, a preliminary agreement was reached and when the F1 calendar was released last month, Montreal was back – albeit provisionally – with the race scheduled for June 13. Whether the race actually takes place still depends on a final contract being agreed between the league and the city of Montreal.

As if to reinforce the fickleness of F1, Abu Dhabi also discovered that it had lost the privilege of hosting the final race of the season next year. That honour now goes to Brazil.

in September, Legault also issued a release saying he and the Formula One Administration had settled their contractual dispute, though it is unclear what impact this has on the ongoing talks. In the release, Legault confirmed he was still stepping aside as promoter.

During our interview Legault says he’s content to stay in the stands. “It would have been a difficult year for us to put on a race,” he reflects. For the first time in years, he went to his summer house during the first weekend in June. “There was no nostalgia. Even if we had the race, the economic impact meant it would not have been what it was before. When it was all said and done, maybe it was best that we did not have a race this year.”

But Greene puts a slightly different spin on it, “The loss of it might have been good, in fact, to remind people of the greatness of Grand Prix.”

If – as is looking likely – the deal goes through, the new organiser is likely to be Francois Dumontier, who ran the Nationwide Napa Auto Parts Nascar race at the end of August.

Flageole, however, sees the damage done. He had not missed a Grand Prix since 1978, and worked at the race throughout the years as a pit exit man, assistant to the starter and other roles.

When we met, Flageole, like all Quebec racing fans, was gearing up to cover the Nationwide Nascar at the end of August, which featured Canadian drivers Patrick Carpentier and Jacques Villeneuve. Organised by Dumontier, it was set to be the racing highlight of the year.

“F1 is not the ‘in thing’ any more,”



The track in Montreal was renamed after Gilles Villeneuve after he died in qualifying session for the Belgian Grand Prix in 1982.

Flageole says. “If you are a local fan – and I’m not talking Mr Millionaire – you will have a budget for a race.

“There is only so much you can spend for one event... stock car is the new phenom in Canada.”

ticket prices have risen as F1 seems to be targeting a high-end audience, a perception reinforced by the introduction of the Bahrain and Abu Dhabi races. “Today, F1 is a luxury brand on the same scale as, let’s say, Louis Vuitton,” Legault says. “It’s image is intertwined with yachts and Monaco.”

This is one reason, he says, the carmaker Honda pulled out of F1. Nascar, on the other hand, is the populist sport. The stock car series has taken over in North America and is known for the crashes, blatant product placement and well-fed fans.

Two lower levels of Nascar racing – the Nationwide Series and Canadian Tire series

– have so far made it to Canada, and have been well received.

Unlike an F1 event, where a fan’s best chance of seeing a driver is at a staged press conference, Nascar racers mingle with the crowd. There is a set autograph session in the pit, where anyone can get a photo with a driver.

Quebec drivers are also finding success in Nascar. At a recent Canadian Tire race in Trois Rivières, three French Canadians were in spots one, three and five in the race. Andrew Ranger, a 22-year-old driver from Roxton Pond, Quebec, won the race. “Someone in the US will grab him and he’ll become the next Gilles Villeneuve, in Nascar,” Flageole says.

If he does, there is nothing stopping stock cars from recreating 1978’s magic moment – but at the time of our meeting Flageole was content to return to the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve in the summer, whatever race was on.

“There’s going to be tons of kids in two weeks’ time in Montreal,” Flageole said. “They can relate more to a Nascar car than an F1 car ... F1 is now out of reach for normal people. I don’t think anything Bernie or FIA decide to do will bring back the race to what it was 40 years ago.”

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS.

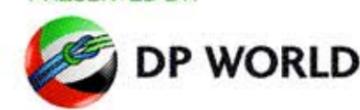
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