

F1 Circuits Past and Present - Kyalami

This is F1 Circuits Past and Present - a new mini series from Sidepodcast taking a closer look at the tracks that have shaped Formula One. We're not just concentrating on the calendar as it stands right now but also investigating the tracks that no longer appear in the sport. Today, we have just one such track - Kyalami.

South Africa began holding motor races in 1934, with various circuits enjoying hosting duties. When the South African Motor Racing Club was formed, though, they decided it would be better to build their own official track. At the end of 1961, construction was complete of the brand new Kyalami circuit.

The Rand Grand Prix was held at the new arena in 1961, and Jim Clark won that inaugural race. It wasn't an F1 World Championship race though, as the track wasn't inducted into the official calendar until 1967 after a few tweaks to the circuit. Pedro Rodriguez was the first man to pick up an F1 trophy at Kyalami, taking a victory for Cooper in a race where only six of 18 entrants made it to the end.

Jim Clark took the first win at the circuit, and Kyalami was also the scene of his final race in 1968. He broke lots of records during the weekend, and took the win in a Lotus 1-2 finish.

Some other notable, and rather tragic, events occurred in the 70s, when American Peter Revson died during testing in 1974. He was replaced at his team Shadow by British driver Tom Pryce. But a cruel twist of fate meant that just three years later, Pryce was killed during an accident also at Kyalami.

Despite the accidents, there was some excellent racing to be had at the track, with a fantastic race in 1979. It was wet, Jody Scheckter and Gilles Villeneuve were fighting for the win, and it went to Gilles - although Jody went on to become South Africa's first and only world champion.

Prost, Piquet and Mansell provided plenty of entertainment over the next few years, but in 1985, it began to go wrong. Renault and Ligier became concerned about the tense political situation in the country. They felt the best thing to do was to keep their teams from attending the Grand Prix, which in turn meant the race was a failure. It was hard to make the books balance when half of the teams didn't turn up.

F1 withdrew from the country as things became even more strained - a State of Emergency was declared in South Africa - and it wasn't until 1992 that the sport decided to make a tentative return. The circuit had been rebuilt and heavily modified, with new pits and a much narrower track. Some of the most iconic corners had been changed beyond recognition and the track felt like a hasty afterthought. The surrounding area was flourishing and becoming an important district despite the track, rather than because of it.

Nigel Mansell led the race from pole position in 1992, winning for Williams. Prost won for the same team in 1993, when the South African Grand Prix opened the season. Financial problems meant that was the last F1 race held at Kyalami. The track underwent some more modifications and has held the World Superbike race and a round of the A1 Grand Prix series. Recently, though, it has focused on national series' rather than the international events, so although Bernie Ecclestone is keen for F1 to return to South Africa, it may not be Kyalami that gets the gig next time.

That's all for this episode of F1 Circuits. I hope you're enjoying the series, please leave your thoughts about the Kyalami track on sidepodcast dot com, or email me christine at sidepodcast com. I'll be back tomorrow with another episode of F1 Circuits.