

F1 Circuits Past and Present – Spa-Francorchamps

Hello and welcome to the third part in the F1 Circuits mini series brought to you by Sidepodcast. We're taking a look at some of the tracks that have made Formula 1 what it is, and some of those that continue to do so. Today's circuit remains an extremely popular event on the calendar, it can only be Spa-Francorchamps.

The Belgian Grand Prix has been on the calendar since the very beginning of the F1 Championship - although it took a detour away from Spa during the 70s and early 80s. When the race is at Spa, though, it is the highlight of the season. Everyone in F1, drivers, teams and fans alike, all love the challenge and the racing it produces.

The track began life as a 14 kilometre beast, winding it's way through the forests deep in the heart of Belgium. Utilising public roads, it took the shape of an enormous wonky tear drop, with twists and turns, exceptionally fast, and incredibly dangerous. Such a long circuit meant the weather at one end of the track could be completely different to the weather at the other end. How do you set up for something like that?

Fatalities, not unknown in F1, were a particular problem at a track like Spa. When I said a minute ago that everyone loves the circuit... I was wrong. Jim Clark did not like it, in fact he would openly admit his hatred of the place, but he had good reason. On his first race there, in a 1958 sportscar event, he watched colleague Archie Scott-Brown succumb to a fatal crash. A few years later he was participating in the Belgian Grand Prix and just managed to avoid a crash that killed Chris Bristow, whilst his teammate Alan Stacey was also killed - the two incidents within a quarter of an hour of each other.

Given the dangers, safety was always a paramount concern. Armco was added to the circuit and that reduced the number of deaths, but it was still woefully underprepared for incidents. Jackie Stewart's horror crash in 1966 and his subsequent campaign for safety improvements was a real wake-up call for everyone involved. After the Grand Prix of 1970, the race moved elsewhere in Belgium - to Zolder and Nivelles - until a redesigned Spa was allowed back on the calendar.

The new layout cut the course from it's epic 14 kilometres to about half that - still long by F1 standards, but a much more reasonable distance to race upon. The major overhaul included several new chicanes to slow speeds down, wider run offs to allow for mistakes and better safety barriers where run offs were not practical. Racing returned to Spa in 1983, missed a year to Zolder and was back full time on the calendar in 1985.

Financial difficulties came to the fore in the new millennium, with the Belgian GP knocked off the calendar in 2003 and 2006. It was a great moment when it returned though, because who can resist what has often been hailed the best corner in F1 - Eau Rouge. Named after the small river that it crosses, the Eau Rouge corner appears at the end of a straight towards the beginning of a timed lap. It flows swiftly up-hill and jinks to the left, to the right and back again, with drivers unable to see what lies ahead thanks to a blind summit. It's just beautiful.

The challenge of Spa - both in track design and weather conditions - means the race can often throw up a surprise. In 2009, Giancarlo Fisichella managed to haul his mid-field Force India to pole position, and fought for the win to the very end - eventually missing out to Kimi Raikkonen to take second place.

Spa doesn't just play host to Formula 1, they also welcome plenty of club racing and is home to a 24 Hours endurance race, plus the 1000 kilometres of Spa, which is part of the Le Mans endurance series. Whoever is racing there, they are bound to enjoy it.



That's all for this episode of F1 Circuits - please let me know your thoughts and memories of racing at Spa - either email me christine@sidepodcast.com or leave a note in the comments at sidepodcast.com. I will be back tomorrow with the next circuit on our worldwide tour, I hope you will join me then.

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