



# Driving Force for Change

Electric cars are still undergoing a frustratingly slow journey to mass consumer viability, but the arrival of a new international racing series this September is set to make that journey much faster.

BY Richard Asher PHOTOS Courtesy of Formula E

Motorsport, often regarded with justifiable suspicion by environmental types, is perhaps the last topic you might expect to find in a publication championing greener living. But when you stop and think about it, the arrival of the world's first fully-electric racing series is likely to be good news for tomorrow's sustainable automobile.

So what is Formula E and what makes it more than just another gimmicky exhibition of glorified golf carts? For one thing, it's big news. This is a worldwide series of races, contested by drivers whose names you will have heard. It's sanctioned by the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the worldwide governing body of motorsport - and the FIA is not an organisation known for putting its name to pipsqueak PR stunts.

Not convinced? Formula E closed off Westminster Bridge for its global launch in London. It got away with that by playing its green card: this is news that goes beyond the sport pages. It's going to be very difficult for Joe Public to ignore races that will take place exclusively on

the streets of city centres. Think London, Buenos Aires, Berlin and Miami. If this is the first you've heard of Formula E, it probably won't be the last.

We've seen our share of motorsport pipe dreams come and go, but this feels different. Not least because the cars actually exist, and have already completed serious public test mileage - which began at Donington Park in the UK this English summer. But what lends it true credibility - and should make greenies leap for joy - is that major motor manufacturers are putting their names and technology into it.

Audi, Renault and Indian giant Mahindra are among the companies to have officially partnered with competing teams, and you can almost feel the rest itching to throw their hats into this golden ring of PR and development opportunity. Only a week before the first test, BMW decided to jump in, if only as supplier of race safety and medical cars in the form of its all-electric i3 and hybrid i8.

It's this manufacturer interest that should have the biggest impact for the

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Global launch, London



Formula E driver preparing to race

planet. They've all seen where the world is going, and they're all seeking to get a technological edge in the electric sphere. Racing in the public spotlight puts intense pressure on them to achieve that.

Whatever one says about the wastefulness of traditional fuel-burning motorsport, its advocates have always had the argument that racing's knack of pitting highly competitive boffins against each other improves efficiency and technology faster than any other method.

That line of defence may have become tenuous when the internal combustion engine's development flatlined, but when there's a vertical learning curve – as is the case with fully electric cars – it's a compelling case. The technology we want in our cities will get to us sooner with Formula E on the scene. With those big car firms, highly-regarded race teams, ex-Formula 1 drivers such as Jarno Trulli and Nick Heidfeld, and free-to-air television in most major markets, that is almost inevitable.

The focus will all be on the electric stuff, because everything else is restricted in keeping with the sustainable philosophy. For example, the standard-issue tyres are all-purpose, rain or shine. And the limited use of peak power (200kW) in the



*Formula E hosts prestigious Global launch, London*



*Formula E driver, Katherine Legge*

hour-long races will ram home the economy ethos. So will the compact, single-day event format.

For now the power package (a collaboration involving great F1 names McLaren and Williams) is standard-issue to all teams, but from season two (2015-16) the plan is to allow teams (and their partners...) to work on their own technology in their quest to win. That prospect is very good news for planet earth.

The people behind the championship are bold, but seem to have their hearts in the right place. Spanish businessman (and former politician) Alejandro Agag is the chap at the helm, and when he speaks about how Formula E can help change the world he does so with passion that's hard to judge with cynicism.

Perhaps more than the technological strides we'll reap from Formula E, Agag loves to stress his series' role in changing mindsets. By going into cities and racing high-performance electric machines that look like real racing cars, change-averse city folk will be made to see electric cars as viable. So, as he never fails to point out, where better to hold the first race than Beijing, a city whose sudden obsession with fossil-fuel cars has made the sky disappear behind smog shroud.

There may well be teething problems with the near-silent single-seaters in Beijing. There certainly were on that first day's testing at Donington. But there were far fewer on the second, and if that's the kind of progress, we can look forward to, then Formula E can only be good news for those of us itching for cheap and practical electric cars to arrive.



Formula E racing car



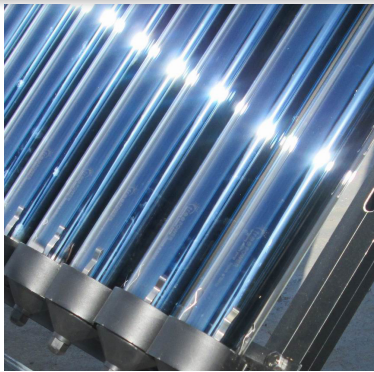
Global launch, London



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