

HOW DO YOU START AN F1 RACE?

Grands prix used to be kicked off by a man waving a flag (and then getting out of the way *very* quickly). Modern F1 has a high-tech alternative...

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The tension. The excitement. There's nothing more thrilling in F1 than the start of the race, when the five red lights go out and 20 cars blast into motion.

The man who has been responsible for starting races for the last decade is Charlie Whiting. When he decides the race can commence, his index finger presses a button marked – oh yes – 'start'. In such a complex sport, it's probably the most simple thing of all.

Up on his gantry overlooking the grid, he uses a box of tricks that controls the start and pitlane lights.

As the drivers come to rest on the grid, Whiting will be looking for any driver who has stalled, but if there is no need to abort, the five red lights are illuminated, one-by-one. This system was introduced back in 1996 (Bernie's idea, apparently) to increase the tension prior to the start. But why did F1 decide to ditch the green lights? "A couple of times in the past, the green didn't come on because of a malfunction and the race still started," says Whiting. "So that was a clear indication the drivers were only looking at the red lights going out."



F1 race director Charlie Whiting has been starting grands prix for more than 10 years



PITLANE EXIT LIGHTS
Used to control cars exiting the pitlane. For example: the pitlane is 'closed' during a Safety Car period until all cars on track pass the exit (see Canada '08). Then it's changed back to 'open'

CAUTION
Warns a driver leaving the pits of a car approaching at speed, but normally this is automated when a car passes a detection beam on the pit straight. 'Clear' turns the blue light off

MAIN SCREEN
The order of the starting grid appears on the right-hand side. As each driver stops on his correct grid slot, the name will change colour. Once everyone is in position, the race can begin

PITLANE ENTRY LIGHTS
For the past two years, when the Safety Car has been deployed, the pitlane is closed. 'On' initiates two flashing amber lights at the top of the pitlane entry to warn drivers the pits are closed. 'Off' re-opens the pitlane

SELECT AND CANCEL
These are menu buttons that control aspects of the main screen. The countdown to a race's formation lap is pre-programmed and automatic, but Whiting can override any aspect manually using these buttons

START
After the cars line up on the grid, Whiting presses this button and the five red lights come on in sequence. After two or three seconds, he presses it again and they disappear. The race is on

FINISH
At the end of any practice or qualifying session, this red button is pressed to activate the red lights above the pitlane to indicate that the session is over

ABORT
Hidden under a military-style latch, this is pressed when yellow flags are waved, or if Whiting can see a stalled car. Amber lights appear and the field sets off on another formation lap

SAFETY CAR
If a Safety Car is required, Whiting lifts the latch to activate SC mode – this is when the pit exit lights are controlled manually

CLEAR
This button turns the overhead gantry starting lights off

HORN
During the countdown to the formation lap, an audible warning system alerts the pitlane at intervals of 10, five, three and one minute before the start