

The man behind Pirelli's rise

Paul Hembery, a Briton, is the motor sports director for the Pirelli Tire company, which returned to Formula One this year as the series' sole tire provider after an absence of 20 years. Hembery worked for 20 years in research and development in the tire industry before moving to the commercial side of the business. He joined Pirelli in 1992 and has led the motor sports program for 11 years. He was responsible for the company joining the world rally series in 2008 and he was also behind its return to Formula One. He spoke recently with Brad Spurgeon of the International Herald Tribune.

Q. Why did Pirelli return to Formula One?

A. Pirelli are well known as a supplier to the higher end of the automotive market — the luxury cars, sports cars — and have been renowned for that positioning in the market for many years. Formula One being the top international motor sport category, it is almost a perfect match for a company with our aspirations and our reputation and history.

On top of that there are very few sports — and I always struggle to think of any sports — that are actually a world championship, a genuine world championship, and that occur every year. Other famous world championships either occur every four years, like the Olympics or the soccer championships, and even then they are fixed in one country and they don't travel the world. So it is almost a unique proposition from that point of view.

Q. How do you balance Formula One's need for tires that wear out quickly and thus require pit stops and tire changes that spice up the show with the goal of spreading the image of Pirelli technology and tires that are durable on the road?

A. Formula One is entertainment and you want people to watch it. So from that point of view, we can supply anything. If Formula One wants a tire that lasts all weekend, we'll give them that. We have the technology to do that and we will have it available to them tomorrow morning. But people will turn off their television screens because it won't be something they want to watch. So it is a brave decision from ourselves to go with this approach. But we think it shows that we are willing to work with the sport, we want to create entertainment, we want Pirelli to be seen as an exciting brand.

Q. What challenges have you had in Formula One without another tire company to drive technological development?

A. People say there is no driver of technology, but the reality is that being the extreme of motor sport in terms of vehicles — you have the most extreme downloads, traction, braking — quite frankly, there are not many companies that can be ready to do F1 racing as quickly as we were. That does require a very high level of technical ability, and technological ability, and that in itself is probably unseen to the general public. Because they don't know maybe how tires are made and the great challenges that we have. As tire experts, we know very well that there are very few companies in the world — if not certainly able to be counted on one hand — that would be able to make tires for this.

Q. How do Formula One tires undergo more stress than those in other racing series?

A. The aerodynamic load. You've got tires that will receive up to 1,200 kilograms [2,640 pounds] of vertical load at certain points around the circuit. And you can imagine, 1,200 kilos is very extreme. There are 4.5 G cornering forces. When you take any of the numbers and characteristics of a Formula One car, they are like a factor of five or six more than anything you see in any other category. Your braking is like nothing you've seen. You watch the cars going into the corners, and they are braking once they have turned into the corner, and that, from a tire-maker's point of view, has a big impact on the way your product is performing. And so everything about the tire is stressed beyond any level that you see in any other category.

Q. Did Pirelli have to invest, add staff and factory space, update technology, and change other things to take on this program?

A. Yes, absolutely, you can imagine a 20-event world championship is a huge investment in terms of resources. We have a dedicated logistics team; we have expanded our motor sport factory in Izmit, in Turkey; we have an R&D center in Milan that does all the design work; and we have a logistics group and technical support team based in the U.K., in Didcot, which provides basically the movement and management of the tires all around the world and the technical support on the actual event. So it is a very complex international, almost military-like operation.



SECTO'S PANORAMIC

"If Formula One wants a tire that lasts all weekend, we'll give them that," said Paul Hembery, director of motor sports for Pirelli Tire, sole tire supplier to the series this season.

