

MotoGP: British Grand Prix threatened by legal action

The fate of this year's British MotoGP event at Donnington Park hangs in the balance - and may be decided as much by the speed of the UK's legal process as by any one of the dozens of factors that create uncertainty in racing.

The history is simple: Donnington Park is privately owned by Tom Wheatcroft who made a very large fortune building and operating shopping malls in England's Midlands. He bought the track more than 30 years ago. Donnington has always been a fans' favourite: wide open with excellent views over much of the circuit, with sweeping corners and following the natural undulations of the English countryside. And drivers love it for being like driving fast on real roads.

Donnington was home to several Formula One events but the FIA demanded changes that Wheatcroft said he would not make. Their attitude amounted to a simple position statement: if Formula One wanted to use their track, it was welcome to do so. But whilst safety standards would be implemented, the character of the circuit - and the relaxed family atmosphere for spectators - would not be compromised.

Wheatcroft spent almost a decade turning what had fallen into disrepair after being commandeered by the British military in 1930 and kind of forgotten.

After all, Donnington had been a very successful venue for first class racing. Why change a winning formula?

But as he aged, Wheatcroft decided he didn't want to manage the circuit any longer. And in 2007, Wheatcroft leased the property housing the circuit - and his racing museum - to a company called Donnington Ventures Leisure Limited. Immediately, that company started negotiations to host the British Grand Prix - and at the same time, MotoGP negotiated with Silverstone. The result of the two sets of discussions is that MotoGP will run at Donnington in 2009 and at Silverstone in 2010. And Formula One will run at Silverstone in 2009 and Donnington in 2010.

In readiness, Donnington Ventures has published and obtained plans for extensive work at the site - and started work in early this year. Some parts of the new facility are designed by current favourite in the GP world, Hermann Tilke - which some Donnington purists are not happy about.

The removal of The Dunlop Bridge in February 2009 was seen as a symbol of the dumping of Donnington's heritage.

But at least things were going smoothly in terms of getting facilities and even transport arrangements in place for the 2010 F1 race - despite rumours in late 2008 and early 2009 that Donnington Ventures was running short of money.

But last week, Wheatcroft issued proceedings in the County Court in Derby, seeking arrears of rent amounting to GBP2.47 - and in default of payment forfeiture of the lease.

That means two things: first that next year's Formula One debut under the ten year contract is in doubt: the agreement to host the event is with Donnington Ventures and if they are not in occupation of the land, then the agreement must fail: Bernie Ecclestone is sanguine about that saying that if Donnington is not available - and ready - there will be no British Formula One GP.

But much more imminent is the potential disruption for the MotoGP race scheduled for July 2009.

English courts grind exceedingly slow (to misquote someone or other) and are proceedings are easily de-railed by applications by a party who wants to buy time. But Wheatcroft is a past master at court proceedings in commercial lease cases. And his timing is clever.

With three months to go to the race, he can put serious pressure on Donnington Ventures. They have already sold tickets, and they are contracted to hold the race or face serious penalties from MotoGP. They cannot afford to delay and run the risk that fans, aware of the threat to the event, don't buy tickets.

So they must do whatever they can to stave off any action to take possession of the track before the MotoGP race.

However, depending on the company's cash-flow and its ability to raise funds, it may be that July's MotoGP takes place but that it is the last major race until Wheatcroft either finds another tenant or again takes over the running of the circuit.