

F1 to pave way for female drivers

2026 will be a significant year for Formula 1. It is the next chapter in the sport's revolutionary regulations overhaul, with a greater emphasis on electric power and sustainable fuels. German giant Audi will join the grid. Porsche, Honda and Andretti could be in the paddock too. With the sport's snowballing popularity, who knows how many races there will be by then too?

Yet it will also mark 50 years since a woman last started a grand prix: Lella Lombardi finished 12th at the 1976 Austrian Grand Prix in Spielberg, the last of her 12 races. Appropriate, then, that the launch of the new all-female racing series – the F1 Academy – should start later today at the same track, now named the Red Bull Ring, in the Styrian Mountains.

Lombardi and Italian compatriot Maria Teresa de Filippis are the only two drivers to have started an F1 race in the sport's 72-year history. Stefano Domenicali, Formula 1 chief executive, stated last year it was "very unlikely" that the sport would have a female driver in the next five years. But the former Ferrari boss has done more than most to accelerate the prospects of girls competing in single-seater competition.

F1 Academy is aiming to give 15 drivers the tools, experience and – most important of all – the financial backing to progress up the ladder. Seven meets this year will see 21 races, all at solidified elite-level tracks, culminating with action at the United States Grand Prix weekend in Austin, Texas in October. There will be three drivers per team; teams already knowledgeable in feeder series' like F2 and F3.

Domenicali was scolded for his prediction in some quarters last year. Yet Susie Wolff, managing director of F1 Academy, was even more pessimistic. It seems the next

decade is, in actual fact, a more realistic timeframe.

"I believe it is eight to 10 years away from happening," Wolff said, in remarks to The Guardian. "That's not just because we are lacking the female talent pool and lacking those who progress through the sport but also because of the realization that getting to F1 is incredibly tough."

"It's tough for all of the male drivers. There are only 20 spots on the grid and that's why it is going to take time."

Wolff would know better than most. The 40-year-old Scot, married to Mercedes boss Toto Wolff, was the last woman to drive in an F1 car on a race weekend, in practice at Silverstone in 2015. Driving for Williams, she finished an impressive 13th out of 20 cars.

Wolff got close, with no cigar. By the end of 2015, she had retired. She emphasized then that the lack of girls karting at a young age and the absence of a female role model were the key reasons blocking the path of women into Formula 1; a pair of topics she is keen to meet head-on in her latest venture in charge of F1 Academy.

As well as the series' formation, a grassroots program to encourage girls and create a clear pathway for the next generation will receive backing from F1 and its owners, Liberty Media. Everything is, it seems, in place.

But we have been here before. In 2018, W Series was launched, with chief executive Catherine Bond Muir then stating: "We still don't have a woman in F1. This is just another method of trying to do that."

Yet by the end of 2022, the all-female competition did not have the capacity to finish their third season due to financial struggles. The Independent understands W Series are in the midst of fundraising, with legalities delaying any potential relaunch. A 2023 season looks unlikely at this stage.

Jamie Chadwick, who won all three seasons of W Series comfortably, is not amongst the 15-strong F1 Academy field. The 24-year-old Brit, in a respectable plunge stateside, has joined Indy NXT: the feeder series for U.S. IndyCar.

She told The Independent in December, "There was always that focus to try and step up... it was a big thing to get an opportunity outside of W Series."



Susie Wolff is the big-hitter tasked with getting F1 Academy up and running
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NFL:

Atlanta Falcons get Robinson



● ESPN

ESPN- The Atlanta Falcons bolstered one of the best ground attacks in the NFL, taking Texas running back Bijan Robinson with the eighth overall pick in the NFL draft on Thursday night.

Robinson, 21, is the first running back to be taken in the top 10 since the New York Giants' Saquon Barkley, who went second overall in the 2018 draft.

"I understand the running back position has been looked at as a less-than position, but for me it's a blessing that I can get these guys, even that are in college now, running backs, seen and looked at the right way," Robinson said.

"And obviously for me, being a guy that can play running back, play receiver, be really versatile and to get an opportunity to do the same thing is definitely a blessing and I'm happy to share with those guys as well."

Robinson joins a Falcons team that ranked third in the league last season with 159.9 rushing yards per game. No team recorded a higher designed rush percentage than the Falcons last season, at 51%, according to ESPN Stats & Information research.

Tyler Allgeier led Atlanta with 1,035 yards and three touchdowns as a rookie last season, while Cordarrelle Patterson had a team-high eight rushing touchdowns.

"Obviously the offense is really good, with really good talent, and for me, I just want to be a piece in that offense, man, do as much as I can no matter where they line me up at," Robinson said. "I know that the rushing attack is really, really good with a really good running back already, and I just want to go in there and learn from him and be a good teammate and hopefully we can make something special happen."

At Texas last season, Robinson won the Doak Walker Award as the nation's top running back and was a unanimous first-team All-American after rushing for 1,580 yards on 258 carries with 18 touchdowns.

It's the third straight year Atlanta has taken an offensive skill position player in the first round after drafting tight end Kyle Pitts at No. 4 in 2021 and receiver Drake London at No. 8 last season.

Another Wimbledon title still my aim: Andy Murray

Former world No.1 Andy Murray wants another chance to play at the French Open while he is still fit and healthy, despite making just one appearance on the Paris clay since reaching the semi-finals in 2017, Reuters reported.

The 35-year-old, who reached the Roland Garros final in 2016, suffered his second early exit of the clay season on Thursday with a 6-2 7-6 (9-7) first-round defeat by Italian Andrea Vavassori at the Madrid Open.

Reports have suggested Murray, who also lost in the first round of the Monte Carlo Masters, could skip the May 28-June 11 French Open to focus on Wimbledon but

the Scot insisted he did not want to miss the chance to play at another grand slam.

"I would like to play just purely because I don't know if I'll get another opportunity," he said.

"Whilst I (still) feel fit and healthy, I would like to give it a go."

"I also have ambitions of competing for Wimbledon titles and that sort of stuff."

"I know that sitting here today that probably doesn't sound realistic but I do believe that's a possibility."

"It's impossible to say what the right thing to do is, but it's a grand slam. I would like the opportunity to play."



● EPA

Angry Tuchel smashes pole in half as Bayern Munich struggle to win

Bayern Munich boss Thomas Tuchel briefly lost his nerve during team training as he smashed a training pole in half out of frustration.

The 49-year-old was not satisfied with how the Bayern stars presented themselves in the final game on the diamond small field, a training form with cut corners. Tuchel tried to correct the attacking patterns and player movement several times, but to no avail. Out of sheer frustration, the ex-Chelsea boss grabbed a slalom pole and broke it with his knee whilst discussing the issue with his assistant coaches, as reported by Goal.com

Things are just not going well at Bayern Munich at the moment. Tuchel was appointed Bayern manager last month following the departure of Julian Nagelsmann. He won his first game in

charge convincingly, beating his former club Borussia Dortmund 4-2 at Allianz Arena, but the Bavarians have since dropped down to second in the Bundesliga table and crashed out of the Champions League as well as the DFB-Pokal in disappointing fashion.

And it now looks like the pressure is starting to get the better of him, resulting in a training ground freak-out in this case, with rumors flying he's at risk of losing his job just months after joining the club if he's unable to salvage their season by winning the Bundesliga.

Dortmund currently sit at the top of the Bundesliga table, one point above Bayern Munich, who will look to improve upon their wretched recent form and return to winning ways against Hertha Berlin in front of their home crowd at the weekend.

A frustrated Tuchel smashing a training pole as job stress proves to be effective.
● BILD

