

by Dr Oh Jen Jen



Making Grand Prix History – A Medical Perspective

Volunteering for the Track Medical Service at the 2008 FORMULA One™ SingTel Singapore Grand Prix was, for many of us, a huge leap of faith. While some signed up because they are Formula One™ enthusiasts, others – like myself – had different reasons for participating.

After missing out on previous high-profile events such as the World Bank and International Olympic Committee summits due to scheduling conflicts, I jumped at the chance to be a part of local and Formula One™ history.

Preparations for the medical team took 14 months, as Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Dr Carl Le, Deputy CMO Dr Kelvin Chew and Assistant CMO Dr Quek Lit Sin worked tirelessly with Medical Delegates from the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) in overseeing the set-up of a comprehensive Track Medical Centre, co-ordinating our training modules and managing the Spectator Medical Services.

As part of the Fast Intervention Vehicle (FIV) cohort, I learned the basics of rapid extrication in the event of encountering a critically injured driver, as well as the various response codes we had to radio in to race control. The real test, however, began on 25 September, when we reported at the circuit and reality fully set in. We donned thick green Singapore Grand Prix overalls, strapped on

our walkie-talkies and toured the pit lane under the blazing hot afternoon sun. The anticipation and building excitement was palpable, but somewhat overshadowed by our physical discomfort. I spent all four days at the track perspiring profusely each time I stepped out of an air-conditioned environment, and toilet breaks (“code 10” in radio jargon) were scarce and unpredictable. Colleagues stationed at track posts remained on their feet for many hours, battling heat exhaustion, imminent danger and even unwanted attention from spectators. We arrived at 10am and left close to midnight every single day.

Despite all the difficulties, morale remained high throughout and 99% of those who signed up stuck it out till the end. Kudos to our excellent medical team leaders for keeping our spirits high with their witty banter and entertaining briefing/debriefing sessions. Team members also established camaraderie quickly through the training sessions, regular interaction at the Track Medical Centre and during bus shuttle rides.

We received invaluable guidance from the FIA Medical Delegates. They attended training sessions and showed deep interest in our progress, offering advice and bestowing praise as needed.

My FIV driver, Ron, is an Australian paramedic who has volunteered at car racing events for 10 years.



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Extrication training session (photo credit: Singapore GP Pte Ltd).



Fast Intervention Vehicle Team Members. L-R: Dr Andre Cheah (NUH Hand Surgery registrar), Ron, Dr Oh Jen Jen and Steven.



Lifting the injured "driver" out of the vehicle (photo credit: Dr Eugene Goh).



Briefing session on procedures to follow (photo credit: Dr Lee Ser Yee).

My complete ignorance about Formula One™ procedures provided the perfect opportunity for him to teach me everything there is to know about safety and medical chase cars, qualifiers, tyres, penalties and winning strategies.

My team was incredibly fortunate to be allocated "floating" positions at the pit exit, pit entry and various locations as required. These vantage points afforded close-up views of the drivers, pit crew and their vehicles, as well as exhilarating glimpses of cars as they zoomed off right past our FIV.

Memorable moments include chance encounters with Red Bull's Mark Webber and race champion Fernando Alonso at the pit entry and paddock respectively. Those lucky enough to be at the medical centre on Sunday evening were also thrilled by an unannounced parade of Formula One™ superstars through the ambulance parking area. Lewis Hamilton proved to be the friendliest of the lot, beaming and waving at stunned onlookers, before flashing a thumbs-up at a nurse who could not resist shouting a greeting.

Feedback from the senior race officials at race control lauded the medical team's radio communication skills and medical inspections

garnered compliments for being well-coordinated and lively. As the final inspection on Sunday night concluded at the medical centre, we were pleasantly surprised when the Delegates hopped out of the safety car and bounded over to convey their appreciation, shaking our hands and kissing female team members on both cheeks.

When I asked Kelvin, our Deputy CMO, for his closing thoughts, he understandably expressed incapacitating exhaustion, which he would need "2 weeks' leave to recover" from. However, he agreed that this historical event has highlighted the medical team's volunteering spirit and professionalism, and offers his sincere appreciation to everyone who contributed their time and effort willingly without asking for anything in return.

On a more personal note, I leave Singapore's first Formula One™ race – and the world's first Formula One™ night race – with fond memories of celebrity encounters, new friendships, funny stories (mostly involving frantic "code 10" radio messages) and great affection for the many race officials we got to work with.

I hope this account helps inspire others to volunteer for the race next year. ■