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Felipe Massa, Ferrari F2008 leads the field at the start of the race. (Singapore Grand Prix)

Night racing in Singapore: Grand Prix tour de force

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

SINGAPORE -- Formula One Grand Prix racing at night? Unheard of -- until the high-revving economic engine of this powerful metropolis managed to turn night into day.

An estimated 40,000 visitors were among the more than 100,000 who watched the historic Singapore Grand Prix along a spectacular, brilliantly lit citywide raceway late last month. They were not disappointed.

An army of engineers, designers and racing pros created a technological and civic tour de force for the race. Nearly 1,500 projectors bathed the Monaco-style track through this city's streets with light -- and what light. The course was illuminated to an average of 3,000 lux, up to HDTV broadcast standards -- and to the exacting demands of world-class racers at speeds exceeding 200 mph.

From river bridges to the marina bay and channel, the track was flanked by eleven separate grandstands. The Asian/European architecture of a bygone colonial era and today's mammoth skyscrapers provided the brilliantly backlit setting. And just like the circuitous, carefully engineered racetrack, the story of this Grand Prix was one of unexpected twists and turns.

There was defeat for some, opportunity and luck for others that neither could have ever fantasized. The final results were so fanciful and the performance so spectacular that the race might be coined "A Late Summer Night's Dream."

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The three days of racing started with qualifying on Friday and Saturday for the Sunday race. Each day there were races in other classes with Formula BMW Pacific, the Aston Martin Asia Cup and the SC Global Carrera Cup. Each of these classes features nearly identical competition cars, enabling the drivers to truly showcase their skills on an even field.

By the end of the second day, Brazilian F-1 driver Felipe Massa, racing in a Ferrari, had gained pole position, meaning he would start Sunday at the beginning of the grid.

It was the talk of the town. If Massa were to win the race, he would gain standing to become this year's world champion. McLaren Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton of the UK placed second in qualifying on the 5 kilometer track and the ranking world champion, Finnish Kimi Raikkonen, finished third. Raikkonen is the other team driver for Ferrari. Hamilton led Massa by one point to be the world champion.

Each team has two drivers and cars. There are ten teams for the 18-race season; Ferrari, BMW Sauber, McLaren Mercedes, Renault, Honda, Toyota, Red Bull, Williams, Toro Rosso (the Italian arm of Red Bull), and Force India. The races take place at exotic locations around the world, from Bahrain and Budapest to Melbourne and Montreal. There are currently no races in, nor drivers from, the United States. The Singapore Grand Prix is the 15th in the series, and the three races left to complete are in Japan, Shanghai, and Sao Paulo.

On race day, amidst the fears of rain (it poured Friday morning) and the lingering concern that passing would be difficult, the race took on a life of its own.

The event began as expected with Massa taking and maintaining the lead.

A nasty accident happened in lap 13 of the 61-lap race. Nelson Piquet totaled his Renault, smashing into the wall. The emergency retrieval team picked it up like a banana peel, though Piquet was fine. A yellow flag served to contract and confirm the positions of the drivers as they prepared for the final laps.

And then it happened.

Massa went to the pits, his crew frantically servicing his car in near-record time. But somehow, the up-and-coming race leader was misdirected back onto the grid while still attached to his fuel hose. The hose broke from its mooring and snapped like a whip, knocking over two of the pit crew and spewing fuel and vapor all over the pit lane.

It took what seemed like a full minute for the Ferrari crew to reach Massa to remove the hose.

As he reentered the track he went from the lead to position 15. Meanwhile Spain's Fernando Alonso in a Renault was able to come from position 15 to position 2.

In a fierce battle with Hamilton and Germany's Nico Rosberg driving a Williams, Alonso won the race with Rosberg and Hamilton placing second and third respectively.

For complete results, visit: <http://www.formula1.com/results/season/2008/801/>

With a five-year license for the event in hand, the Singapore Grand Prix promises to further attract international visitors and participants in the years to come, serving as a national advertisement for Asia's emerging playground for the rich and famous -- the "Monaco of the East," as it has been called.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was reported to have been elated with the results and to have commented that the event created "valuable buzz."

One thing is certain, even as worldwide markets continue to swing and seesaw, and as automobile manufacturers continue to watch their year-on-year sales figures tank by one-third: Singapore and its world-class Formula One Grand Prix have a future as bright as the beacons that turned night into day.

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