



Javo Hellmund standing at the Circuit of The Americas site in December 2010, three days before ground was broken on the track.



THE

FAST

AN INSIDE LOOK AT HOW
TAVO HELLMUND
SECURED FORMULA 1
FOR THE CAPITAL CITY
BY ANNE LANG

TRACK

A large, bold, black graphic of the letters 'IN' is set against a bright yellow rectangular background. The letters are thick and blocky, with a slight shadow effect. The yellow background is positioned on a larger, textured, golden-brown surface that appears to be a book cover or a piece of paper with a fold.

addition to being known as the Live

Music Capital of the World, Austin is becoming increasingly famous for hosting popular, fast-growing festivals. While ACL Music Festival, South By Southwest and the Texas Book Festival have long led the pack, they can't compare to the city's first truly international event: the 2012 Formula 1 United States Grand Prix, which speeds to its Austin debut in the middle of the month. But it wasn't C3 Presents or another event-planning company that scored the massive feat of landing the F1 contract. It was Tavo Hellmund, a relatively unknown member of the community.

Ardent followers of Formula 1 racing and its imminent arrival in our city probably know that Hellmund is the man responsible for securing the F1 bid for Austin—and consequently, winning its enormous anticipated boost to the area's economy. But while Hellmund's name might not be a common topic of local conversation, the race on Nov. 16-18 at

Circuit of The Americas (COTA) race-track near Austin-Bergstrom International Airport certainly is. Even among those who couldn't care less about car racing (F1 or otherwise), it's hard to escape the increasing buzz surrounding this inaugural event. And Hellmund is arguably the unsung hero who laid the groundwork for the grand prix's Austin premiere.

"Probably, without Tavo, it wouldn't have happened," says Bernie Ecclestone, 82, president and CEO of Formula One Management. Ecclestone, a former race-car driver himself, is also part owner of the parent company of the Formula One Group, and is widely regarded as the leading authority on F1 racing. The London-based businessman chooses which tracks and locations will host F1 races, sets the dates and negotiates the monies.

"I wanted to make sure F1 was going to be good for Austin, and good for us," says Ecclestone about choosing Austin over cities such as New York and Las Vegas, a decision that was heavily influenced by input from Hellmund. "But I've known Tavo for a long time, so I knew whatever he was telling me was going to be correct. It's only because I knew him, could rely on him and trusted him that it happened."

"This is all I know," responds Hellmund, 46. "I'm not an expert in anything else, but I know an awful lot about F1, about racing and about how events have been done. Bernie knows that I'm straight up, and that I'm ridiculously passionate about the sport and the industry. But he certainly made me work for this."

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Hellmund's journey to becoming F1's go-to guy in Austin began during his childhood on Bowman Avenue in Tarrytown. That's where he and his younger brother, Mike, were raised by their mother, Bobbi, who was divorced from their father, Gustavo, when the children were young. The boys often visited Gustavo and their paternal grandparents in Mexico City, where their father worked as a promoter of auto racing, often alongside Ecclestone, with whom he teamed up to bring F1 racing to Mexico in the 1980s.

Young Hellmund attended Casis Elementary and O. Henry Middle School, but as his football skills emerged, Bobbi moved the family to an apartment in the Eanes school district to allow her son to play for Westlake High School. A subsequent shoulder injury cut short his gridiron days, but by then, Hellmund already had big dreams of becoming a racecar driver. Specifically, a Formula 1 world champion. He had spent part of eighth grade and the first three semesters of high school living with his father in Mexico City, learning firsthand about racing promotion and attending The American School Foundation.

"I actually met Bernie way before I moved to Mexico," Hellmund says one day in early September, while sipping a mid-morning iced tea at Hotel Saint Cecilia. "My earliest memories are of spending time with Bernie and my dad when I was a kid in the 1970s. Our families spent some holidays together, and I called him Uncle Bernie until I was in my 20s."

Returning to Austin to finish high school, Hellmund graduated in 1984 and spent the following year and a half overseas, working as a gofer for Ecclestone's team. Along the way, he achieved success at all the junior levels of auto racing, yet realized that higher education would serve him well in the long run. After studying at the University of Texas for two and a half years, Hellmund transferred to St. Edward's University, mostly because his acquired fluency in Spanish enabled him to place out of the foreign-language requirement. In 1989, Hellmund graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology but immediately jumped back into the world he loved and knew the best: racing.

"I raced stockcars for a long time," he says. "I spent a lot of time racing in Europe; I did Euro-

pean Formula 3 in open-wheel racing. But I was in my late 20s by then, which is considered old. Most team owners look for 18-year-old kids to sign.

"It's nice to look back and know that I fared pretty well against guys who eventually went on to win some of the world's biggest auto races," Hellmund continues, "and we remained friends. But it got to the point where I wasn't well-funded; I didn't have the big sponsors behind me. I don't know if it was that I ran out of money or ran out of talent—or a combination of the two." Out of pride, he never approached Ecclestone for help in securing sponsorships.

"WE'RE NOT COMPETING WITH THE COWBOYS, THE SPURS, THE RANGERS OR THE ROCKETS. GEOGRAPHICALLY, IT'S THE PRETTIEST CITY IN THE STATE OF TEXAS, AND THERE ARE 22 MILLION PEOPLE WITHIN A 180-MILE RADIUS. IT WAS A NO-BRAINER!"

—TAVO HELLMUND

Hellmund made it to NASCAR's Grand National division in his mid-30s. "But by then," he says, "I knew my ship had sailed. I'd given racing a good shot. Meanwhile, Bernie was always asking me: 'When are you going to get out of the driving side and come over to the promotion side?'"

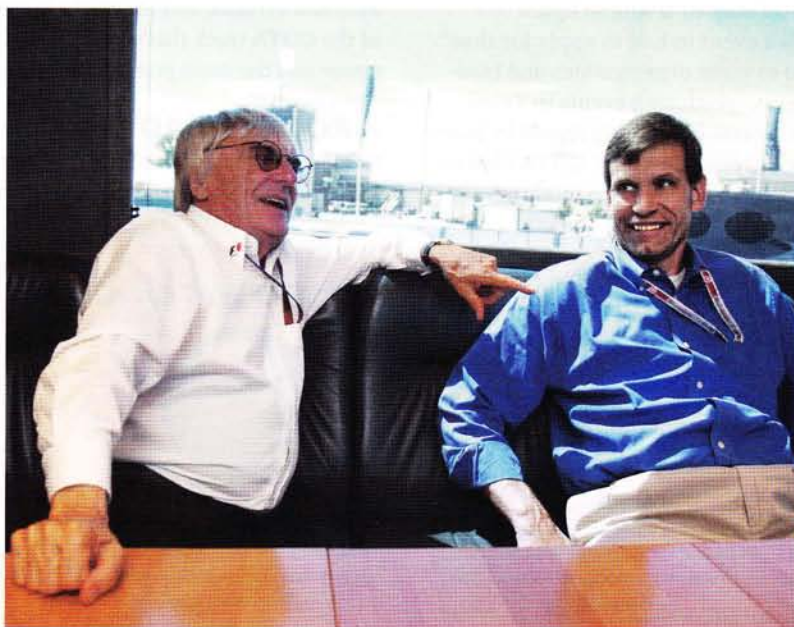
Hellmund raced for the last time in a road course grand national event in California in 2005. But at that point, he was already deep into auto-race promotional work, having launched his own company in Austin: Full Throttle Productions. "And I was already working with Bernie toward the eventual goal of landing a grand prix for Austin," he says.

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

Hellmund first mentioned the idea of bringing Formula 1 to Austin to Ecclestone in 1998. At that time, F1 racing had not taken place in the U.S. since 1991, in Phoenix. Ecclestone was looking to

make the Indianapolis Motor Speedway the location for F1's return to the States, with a target date of 2000—despite Hellmund trying to discuss other locations, pointing out that among other things, the facility was a purpose-built track for Indy cars, not F1 cars.

"I had always pestered Bernie, telling



Formula One Management President and CEO Bernie Ecclestone (left) has been close friends with Hellmund for more than 40 years.

him, 'Austin's the right place,'" Hellmund says. "But he'd always thought that Austin was just a little hippie town and didn't realize how much it had grown up over the years." So the grand prix was awarded to Indianapolis, where it continued through 2007, at which time Formula One Management and track officials failed to reach an agreement on a continued contract. During the Indianapolis years, Hellmund had never quit promoting Austin as an ideal city for F1 racing. Eventually, Ecclestone started listening.

"My wife [then-fiancee] and I were with Bernie at the Belgian Grand Prix in September 2007 when we first talked about Aus-

WHILE THE PRICE TAG FOR COTA WAS \$300 MILLION, THAT'S ALSO THE AMOUNT OF MONEY EXPECTED TO BE GENERATED BY THE GRAND PRIX EVENT, IN ADDITION TO THE ESTIMATED 2,000 JOBS IT'S CREATED.

tin being a legitimate candidate," Hellmund remembers. "I told him I felt Austin was cosmopolitan enough in a hidden way, and had the right connectivity—hotels, highways, airports and all that—in close proximity. F1 loves a hip lifestyle and a big, active music scene, like in Singapore, Budapest, Montreal and Monaco.

"Austin has all those things that are kind of chic and unique," he adds, "as well as a huge tech sector, kind of like Silicon Valley. And there are a bunch of Fortune 500 companies that have a presence in Austin, or within a couple of hundred miles of Austin. We also don't have a professional sports franchise. We're not competing with the Cowboys, the Spurs, the Rangers or the Rockets. Geographically, it's the prettiest city in the state of Texas, and there are 22 million people within a 180-mile radius. It was a no-brainer!"

However, Hellmund acknowledges, "Bernie's business model is tough on a promoter, so I knew I had to figure out a way to have some help, from tax revenue or an incentives package. Fortunately, the people who brought the 2004 Super Bowl to Reliant Stadium [in Houston] had created the Major Events Trust Fund, so I started trying to figure out how we could get a Formula 1 event in line to apply for that."

The state fund is designed to assist organizations and businesses that bring major revenue-producing events to Texas. Money allocated from the fund is subsequently repaid by taxes that the state collects on such events. Last July, COTA filed an application with the state comptroller for \$30.6 million from

the fund. The first payment would be issued after the November race, but only if COTA meets certain criteria. Ideally, money from the fund would be allocated annually to COTA for the duration of its 10-year F1 contract. But as of press time, various factions of state government remained at odds as to whether COTA's application should be approved.

"I spent two years [lining up funding sources]," Hellmund says, "and Bernie and I were pretty far down the road at that point, but there were other cities involved. New York wanted the grand prix; also Vegas and Miami. It was hard. I made a lot of trips to see Bernie."

In April 2010, the first phase of Hellmund's longtime dream came true when Full Throttle Productions was awarded the 10-year contract that would bring F1 racing to Austin. And indeed, Hellmund's mind was already in full throttle. Earlier, in anticipation of the contract, he'd been scoping out a potential race-track property called Wildhorse Ranch, near the intersection of Texas 130 and U.S. 290. But at the start of 2010, his vision had shifted to an undeveloped tract of land called Wandering Creek in Elroy, situated just southeast of the airport.

The property was owned by businessman Bobby Epstein, to whom Hellmund was introduced. Epstein came on board as a partner in exchange for contributing the land for the racetrack. At about the same time, San Antonio entrepreneur Red McCombs joined the partnership, which the trio dubbed Accelerator Holdings. In April 2011, the track name was unveiled.

The facility, which spans about 1,200 acres, is intended for multiple year-round uses, including concerts and other sporting events. The winding, undulating 3.4-mile COTA track was designed by Hellmund (aided by world champion motorcyclist Kevin Schwantz, who laid out four of the turns) and engineered by the Germany-based Hermann Tilke company, which Hellmund describes as "the world's best engineers of Formula 1 tracks, and for tracks in general." The only elements of the COTA track that were not designed by Hellmund are the tower and the main grandstand.

A ROCKY ROAD

Originally, COTA was scheduled for completion by June 2012, with the grand prix to occur that same month. But in the sum-

SPEED RACERS THESE ARE THE FOUR DRIVERS TO WATCH AT AUSTIN'S GRAND PRIX



SEBASTIAN VETTEL, GERMANY

He's only 25, but Vettel, who drives for Red Bull Racing, is the current and two-time World Champion; he took home the top title in 2010 and 2011.



FERNANDO ALONSO, SPAIN

Named World Champion in both 2005 and 2006, Alonso, 31, drives for Scuderia Ferrari and currently leads the 2012 World Championship.



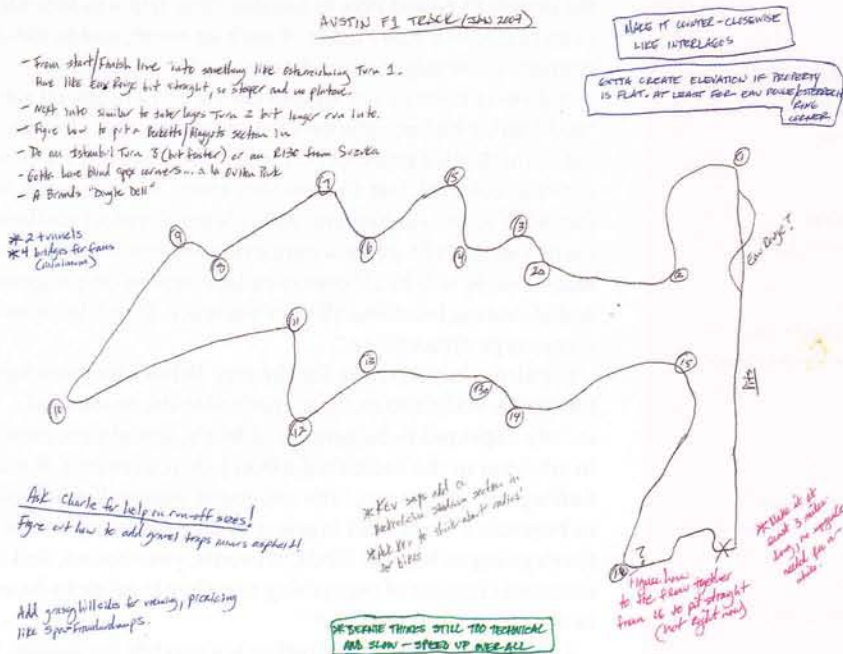
LEWIS HAMILTON, GREAT BRITAIN

Known in the U.S. as being the on-off boyfriend of former Pussycat Dolls singer Nicole Scherzinger, the McLaren driver, 27, is the 2008 World Champion.



MICHAEL SCHUMACHER, GERMANY

This 43-year-old is the seven-time World Champion. Schumacher races for the Mercedes team and is known as the winningest F1 driver of all time.



The original drawing of the track sketched by Hellmund in January 2007 is nearly identical to what the Circuit of The Americas track (left) looks like today.

mer of 2011, myriad stumbling blocks, including slow funding, prevented construction from moving forward as planned, and it soon became apparent that the deadline for the following June would be impossible to meet. Hellmund appealed to Ecclestone for an extension to November 2012.

"It was just a really tight timeline, with a lot to get done in two years," Hellmund admits. "We weren't doing the things that we said we'd do in the timely manner that we'd initially promised. Moving your race date back five months is huge, but fortunately Bernie helped me out when I begged him to change the date. He was very gracious about that, and I was grateful."

However, ongoing tension and conflicts between Hellmund and his two partners finally escalated to a breaking point that Hellmund never could have anticipated when the project was launched. Having been effectively edged out of the partnership in the fall of 2011, he ended up signing a buyout agreement for his share of Accelerator Holdings—but only after he offered to buy them out first. Hellmund subsequently sued Epstein and McCombs for breach of contract, and the case was settled out of court in June 2012 (with no details made public).

But despite all the bitterness and turmoil of the past two years, Hellmund remains proud of three things that weren't affected by the drama: His success in bringing F1 racing to Austin, his design of the track and his continued strong bond with Ecclestone. "I've never really had any differences with Bernie," Hellmund says. "My relationship with Bernie was like family before this project started, and I'd say it's probably even closer now."

Ecclestone seems to agree. "I think that Tavo, like me, will be happy when [the inaugural grand prix] is over and done with and has been successful," he says. "Then Tavo can sit back and feel proud that he's done this."

Hellmund says he and Ecclestone, with whom he speaks weekly by phone and visits in London about every three weeks, are already moving on to the next project, which includes the Mexican Grand Prix. "Bernie has a full plate," Hellmund says. "He's got 20 of these babies, plus all his other business interests, television contracts and manufacturer contracts. And I can't really do anything more in Austin; I already did it. Now my work is finding new [F1] venues in different locations."

Deeply immersed as he is in promotions, the racecar driver in Hellmund has not entirely disappeared; in fact, he's contemplating a return to hobby racing at some point in the near future, "just for fun." When he talks about the sport, Hellmund's eyes shine with excitement, and his speech is sometimes peppered with phrases like "kinetic energy recovery systems" and "carbon-fiber brakes." Hellmund certainly isn't alone in his passion. Asked why he thinks F1 racing is such an enormously popular sport around the world, he pauses to consider.

"I think with motor sports as a whole, it's the danger element and the mystique," he says. "And with Formula 1, you've got the technology component—it's the most technologically advanced sport in the world. There are people who are NASCAR fans, and people who are F1 fans. It's like a competition between the two. But personally, I love it all. I love NASCAR racing, because I think there's an art form to it; I love sprint car racing on dirt and, of course, I love F1."

"If you've never heard a grand prix car on a flying lap," he adds, "there's no prettier sound in the world. It's incredibly loud, but the pitch and the tone of a grand prix are like nothing else."

BETTING ON SUCCESS

Even Mayor Lee Leffingwell has become a F1 fan. In July, Leffingwell and a small team of other city leaders traveled to

GETTING IN ON THE ACTION THINGS TO DO AND SHOWS TO SEE DURING F1 RACE WEEKEND

**unless specified, you need tickets for each individual concert or event

FRIDAY, NOV. 16

10-11:30 a.m.: Practice No. 1 at Circuit of the Americas

Get your first look at the drivers as they check out the new track.

11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.: Blu at the W fashion show

Check out the latest looks from top designers, including Linda Asof and Hugo Boss. (For more Blu at the W events, including VIP breakfasts and nightclub, go to bluatthew.com.)

2-3:30 p.m. Practice No. 2 at COTA

From 6:15 p.m. to 1 a.m.: Austin Fan Fest (austinfanfest.com)

This free street party downtown will stretch from Fifth Street to Second Street and Congress Avenue to Lavaca Street; it will feature interactive exhibits from Formula 1 teams, food, beer gardens and plenty of live music, including performances by Erin Ivey and Akina Adderley & the Vintage Playboys.

7 p.m. VIP Race Ball at Gold at the Four Seasons

Enjoy pre-dinner cocktails, a five-course meal and music from Soul Track Mind. (For more Gold at the Four Seasons events, including brunch and an art show lunch, go to goldatthefour.com.)

8 p.m. Choose between two big concerts

Flo Rida and Cobra Starship at Austin Convention Center or Aerosmith and Cheap Trick at the Frank Erwin Center

9 p.m. Juanes at ACL Live at The Moody Theater

SATURDAY, NOV. 17

10-11 a.m. Practice No. 3 at COTA

10:30 a.m. to midnight: Austin Fan Fest

More free music and fun at the downtown street party, including shows from Quiet Company, The Midgetmen and more.

1 p.m. Qualifying race

8 p.m. Enrique Iglesias and Nelly at the Austin Convention Center

9 p.m. Lupe Fiasco at ACL Live at The Moody Theater

SUNDAY, NOV. 18

11 a.m. to midnight: Austin Fan Fest

Free shows from bands such as Driver and T-Bird and the Breaks.

1 p.m. Race time—start your engines!

8 p.m. Circuit of The Americas "Official After Party"

Celebrate at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum with performances by Ghostland Observatory, Fitz & The Tantrums, The Wailers and Tje Austin.

9 p.m. The Wallflowers at ACL Live at The Moody Theater

the British F1 Grand Prix in London. The trip was intended to increase their knowledge of such an event, and to identify strategies that might or might not work well in Austin.

"I'd never been to any kind of car race," Leffingwell says, "and frankly had no interest in going to one. But after going to the British grand prix, I was blown away. It's a very exciting, colorful, fast and modern sport. It's also noisy, but that adds to the excitement. And it's not a typical stadium event, like an NFL game where everyone just stays in their seats. People will be all over the place: sitting on the grass and in seating locations all over the track. It will be more of a picnic-type atmosphere."

It's also a lucrative gig for the city. While the price tag for COTA was \$300 million, that's also the amount of money expected to be generated by the grand prix event, in addition to the estimated 2,000 jobs it's created. But as Leffingwell points out, "the economic impact is not limited to Formula 1. Formula 1 is going to take place in a venue that's going to host all kinds of events, year-round, and the economic impact of everything together is going to be well in excess of \$300 million."

Leffingwell feels that F1 racing is a good fit for Austin. "We have several major, annual festival events here already," he says, "so we're used to handling this type of thing from the perspective of crowd control, emergency facilities and all of that. I think we're going to do a lot better than a lot of people thought we were going to do in the beginning. It's important that we do well, because this is a 10-year contract."

"Austinites like to get out and have a good time," Leffingwell concludes, "and I think Austinites as well as a lot of people from out of town and outside the country will be here to do that. I think once people get a taste of it, they'll want to come back for more."

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Meanwhile, nothing in the world could keep Hellmund away from COTA on the weekend of the grand prix. Even though he's no longer part of the COTA team, he's certainly part of Ecclestone's team, which will have full control of the facility for the duration of the F1 race week, as well as two weeks prior.

"I can't miss it—it's my event!" he says. "My family and I [including wife Aryn and daughters Kate, 12, and Lyla, 2] will be down in the pits. It will be special for my dad, too. He's only 66, but he was diagnosed with terminal cancer a year and a half ago, so he's been living vicariously to see this."

Hellmund's normally animated expression turns somber. "He's undergoing treatment in San Antonio right now, and I'm pretty sure he's going to make it to the race," he says. It's priceless to Hellmund that his father and Ecclestone—the two men who brought him to where he is today—will be there to share in his joy.

Opening day, Hellmund predicts, "is going to be great; really emotional. It's been a long journey. The last five years feel like 20. It will be sweet, really sweet. The sound of a grand prix car in my hometown, on an actual track, in a world championship event, is going to be a dream come true." ■

FORMULA 1 FACTS

NUMBER OF TEAMS

12

NUMBER OF CARS PER TEAM

2

RACES PER YEAR

20

CIRCUIT OF THE AMERICAS TRACK LENGTH

3.427 MILES

NUMBER OF TURNS

20

NUMBER OF LAPS

56

TOTAL RACE DISTANCE

192 MILES

TOP SPEED OF THE CARS

200 MPH

CAR TALK

HERE'S THE LOWDOWN ON A F1 CAR, BASED ON THE 2012 FERRARI

ENGINE

NUMBER OF CYLINDERS:

8

HORSEPOWER:

Around 900

NUMBER OF VALVES:

32

WEIGHT:

210 pounds

ELECTRONIC INJECTION AND IGNITION FUEL:

Shell V-Power

PERFORMANCE

0-62 MPH:

1.8 seconds

0-124 MPH:

3.8 seconds

0-186 MPH:

8.6 seconds

0-100 MPH AND BACK TO 0:

4.9 seconds

5.5 LATERAL GS IN HIGH-SPEED TURNS

6.0 DECELERATION GS UNDER HARD BRAKING

CHASSIS

NUMBER OF GEARS:

7 + Reverse

BRAKES:

Brembo ventilated carbon-fiber disc brakes

SUSPENSION:

Independent suspension, pull-rod activated torsion springs, front and rear

WEIGHT WITH WATER, LUBRICANT AND DRIVER:

1,410 pounds

OZ WHEELS (FRONT AND REAR):

13 inches



CAR PHOTO: COURTESY SUTTON IMAGES