

The Rain-Soaked Drive of a Lifetime That Blew Away Formula One

Joshua Robinson

For the first time in years, Max Verstappen was looking a little ragged. And the longer the most chaotic season of his career dragged on, the more he began to resemble the petulant rookie he'd been at 17, not the polished world champion he'd become.

In Budapest, he raged at his own race engineer over the radio. In Austin, Texas, he ran his closest rival straight off the road. And in Mexico City, he cut across a corner so brazenly that officials had no choice but to dock him time. Verstappen, who had grown used to untouchable dominance, was completely furious. For four months, he just couldn't buy a win.

So when he landed in Brazil earlier this month, Verstappen responded in dramatic fashion. Instead of buckling under the pressure, he delivered the drive of his life—through traffic, in the rain, and out of his skin.

"It was a master class from Max," Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said after watching Verstappen come from 17th on the grid to win the São Paulo Grand Prix. "To win from that far back was beyond our wildest dreams."

Verstappen, whose previous race victory came in Spain back in June, hadn't gone 10 Grands Prix without a first-place finish since 2020. And during that spell, a host of other challengers had emerged. Verstappen's Red Bull car, which previously looked like a fighter jet in a field of tricycles, was no longer so unstoppable. Teams such as McLaren and Ferrari were suddenly closing the gap and British driver Lando Norris had turned himself into a title contender.

But by stamping his authority back on the season, Verstappen did more than put himself on the brink of a fourth consecutive world championship. He also reminded the world why he is already one of the sport's all-time greats. All he has to do this weekend in Las Vegas is cross the finish line ahead of Norris and he will become just the fifth man ever to be crowned a four-time F1 champion.

"We made all the right calls again, stayed calm, and executed when we needed to," Verstappen said. "Honestly crazy."

Verstappen has delivered plenty of dominant performances in his career, usually starting on the front row and building unassailable leads before anyone had a chance to do anything about it. In recent years, the other drivers have openly admitted that they were racing for second place, while Verstappen cruised around on a Sunday, doused himself in Champagne, and declared the weekend, "Simply lovely."

What set Brazil apart was that, this time, Verstappen started a long way from the front. A bizarre, aborted qualifying session, combined with a penalty for taking a new engine, had landed him in 17th place out of 20 on the grid. Verstappen knew that slicing through the field would require every ounce of the elbows-out racing skill that he's possessed since his first-grade go-kart days.

Once the race began, he wasted no time getting to work. The moment the start lights went out, he charged his Red Bull through the spray and round the outside of the first two corners. By the end of

lap 1, he was up to 12th place. By lap 5, he was ninth. And soon, he was in seventh. The rain, however, wouldn't let up. Which left Verstappen and his race engineer, Gianpiero Lambiase, with a big decision to make on strategy.

While others ducked into the pits for different tires, the two men agreed over the radio to trust Verstappen's wet-weather touch—or possible disregard for his own safety—and hold off.

“S—, it's a lot of water,” Verstappen told him. “Let's try a lap.”

“Just keep it on track, mate,” Lambiase replied.

Before he knew it, Verstappen was up to fourth and wrestling his car around the slippery surface with only a fraction of the grip that F1 drivers are accustomed to. That's when he caught a stroke of luck. Following a crash behind him, officials waved a red flag to stop the race temporarily, allowing Verstappen to make a free pit spot without losing track position. The gamble to stay out had paid off.

Then, on lap 43, Verstappen made his advantage count for good. In a single ice rink of a corner, he took the lead from Esteban Ocon while Norris slid off the track behind him. Norris, who needed to outscore Verstappen to keep his championship hopes alive, would ultimately finish sixth.

When Verstappen finally took the checkered flag, he became one of only six drivers in Formula One history ever to win a Grand Prix from as far back as 17th place—and the first to pull it off since Kimi Raikkonen in 2005. More surprising still was the sight of the most gifted racer of his generation fighting his way through the middle of a pack, something that had become all too easy to forget as he cruised through the 2022 and 2023 seasons. Over those two campaigns, Verstappen racked up 34 victories in 44 races, and even he had to confess that things were a bit dull.

That's why a performance like São Paulo does much more than add a line to his long list of achievements. Over 71 frenetic laps, Verstappen made the emphatic point that even without the best car, he remains the most explosive driver in the game today.

“It's been a long time coming, mate,” Lambiase told him as they celebrated the victory. “But boy was that worth the wait. You are the man.”

Write to Joshua Robinson at Joshua.Robinson@wsj.com

Copyright ©2024 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8

Appeared in the November 22, 2024, print edition as 'The Rain-Soaked Race That Put Verstappen On the Brink of a Title'.