

SPINNING AROUND

Ahead of his first Indy 500, ex-Formula 1 driver Max Chilton tells us why oval racing is more exciting than he thought

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Words Amit Katwala

EVERY YEAR, 300,000 PEOPLE DESCEND ON THE MOST FAMOUS OVAL IN MOTORSPORT - the Indianapolis Motor Speedway - for the Indianapolis 500. "It's the biggest sporting arena in the world," says British driver Max Chilton, who is set to race there for the first time in his rookie season in IndyCar.

The 25-year-old spent two seasons (plus one as a test driver) in Formula 1 with Marussia. But, since leaving in 2015, he has embraced an unexpected career path with Chip Ganassi Racing in the IndyCar Series. We caught up with Chilton ahead of Sunday's Indy 500 - its 100th edition.

What first attracted you to IndyCar?

"Nothing! It wasn't the plan, and I always said I would never do it. But now I've learnt [to say] 'never say never', because actually it's a good place to build a career. Yeah, it's a little bit more dangerous, but at the end of the day you can go out on your push bike training and get hit by a lorry."

Why did you say you'd never do it?

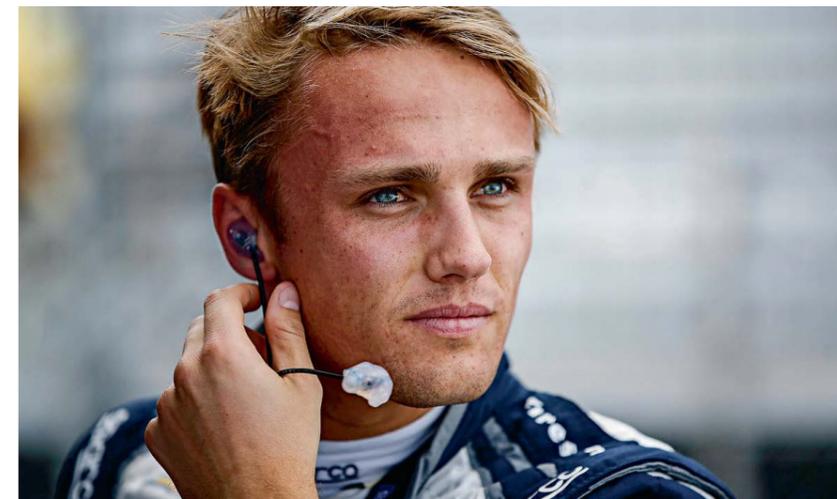
"Ovals are not what has appealed to me, and it is more dangerous. But the more you look into it... I learnt with Jules [Bianchi, who was Chilton's teammate at Marussia when he suffered his fatal crash] that freak accidents happen. I nearly had the same in 2014 - Kimi Raikkonen's tyre flew straight in front of me and missed me by about six inches. Whatever you do, there's risk."

How does the IndyCar series differ from Formula 1?

"It's a completely different mindset. I never really watched IndyCar, but I've watched the odd Indy 500 and it's exciting because there's so much overtaking and it's such a long race. There's such big prize money up for grabs. There's nothing that compares to it. On TV it looks exciting, but you don't think it's going to be that exciting because, well, you're just going left the whole time. But now that I've done it, it is properly exhilarating. You're tensing your bum the whole way round. You never really know what is going to happen."

What's been the hardest thing to get your head around?

"Ovals. Every oval is different, and the weirdest thing is most are symmetrical -



"YOU DON'T THINK IT'S GOING TO BE THAT EXCITING, BUT YOU'RE TENSING YOUR BUM THE WHOLE WAY ROUND"

so one end is exactly the same radius and angle of banking as the other - but they're completely different corners. It's a weird thing to get your head around. Sometimes you go into a corner and think: 'F**king hell, I've got to do this flat out.' And you go to the other end of the track and feel like it's easy flat out. It's the smallest of changes - if one corner has a little bump in the middle, it completely unsettles the car."

How are you finding IndyCar so far?

"It's really competitive - more so, I'd say, than F1 because everyone is in pretty much the same car, so you can't necessarily predict who's going to win. The cars are definitely a lot bigger and heavier than what I'm used to in F1, but they're still mightily impressive. I've enjoyed learning the new tracks, new style of driving, and that pit strategy is really crucial."

You have finished 17th, 7th, 14th, 21st and 14th in the five races so far...

"We've had a couple of times where bad luck has sort of ruined the weekend. But there's a long way to go. Top 10 in the championship is where I want to be [Chilton is currently 16th of 28 drivers]."

What have you learnt about the 500?

"It's a lot bigger than I thought. I didn't realise you had two weeks of practice, and qualifying the week before, and 300,000 people here on race day - especially this year because it's the 100th edition, so I'm sure it's going to be even bigger. I'm lucky to have done the Monaco Grand Prix, and Le Mans 24 Hours last year. With this, they're the three top races in the world."

What are your first impressions of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway?

"It's very fast. It's unlike any other oval because it's so big, and yet it has very little banking. You don't feel the G-force as much, but you feel the limit of the car quicker than you do at other places because you don't have that banking to lean on."

The yard of bricks - part of the track's original surface - remains in place at the start/finish straight. Can you feel it from the car?

"Yeah, the car steps out as you pass that. It's an iconic thing that has been there for 100 years, so it's nice to know you've gone across it with many other great drivers." ●

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THE INDY 500 IN NUMBERS

200 **1911** **5** **\$2.5m** **x2**

A total of 200 laps of the 2.5-mile oval circuit make up the 500-mile race

The rearview mirror made its motor racing debut at the first ever Indy 500, in 1911

Chilton is one of five rookies competing in the Indy 500 for the first time

is on offer for this year's winner, from a total prize purse of \$13.4m

Double points are on offer at the Indy 500, making it potentially pivotal in the IndyCar series