

Putin Roars Off in Formula One Race Car

November 07, 2010



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin getting instructions from Renault officials as he prepares to drive a race car at a track outside St. Petersburg on Sunday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

Vladimir Putin just cannot stay away from manly pursuits.

The prime minister took a Formula One race car out for a spin on Sunday, reaching speeds of almost 240 kph.

Putin signed a deal last month with Formula One chief Bernie Ecclestone to bring F1 racing to Russia starting in 2014, and his televised test drive could help raise the profile of the sport in Russia.

The stunt also matches the action-man image that Putin has cultivated over the years, beginning with his startling flight into Chechnya in 2000 in a fighter jet.

Since that publicity stunt, Putin has been seen flipping opponents on the judo mat, riding a horse bare-chested through the mountains and swimming the butterfly stroke in a Siberian river.

This summer he showed his prowess by firing darts from a crossbow at a gray whale while choppy seas tossed him around on a raft. He also took the controls of a firefighting plane in August to dump water on wildfires that were choking Moscow with acrid smoke.

After receiving instructions Sunday from a Formula One team, Putin climbed into the bright yellow race car wearing a matching jumpsuit and then drove off by himself along an empty road near St. Petersburg.

He spun out at one point but regained control.

When he finished the drive and was told his maximum speed, he smiled and said in English, "For the first time, it's good." Formula One cars reach speeds of well over 300 kph.

Under the Formula One deal, Russia will hold grand prix races near Sochi, the Black Sea resort that also is hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics.

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