

F1 abandon the use of grid girls in a bid to move with the times

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The President's Club Dinner scandal has forced a number of sports bodies to frantically re-assess their use of hostesses or 'promo girls' at their events. First came the PDC who announced that they would not be using walk on girls at any upcoming darts events, followed by Formula 1 announcing they would stop using grid girls from the 2018 season onward.

When the PDC announcement was made there was a lot of resistance, both from those who viewed walk on girls as part of the tradition of the sport and also from the walk on girls themselves – and indeed a high profile petition to reinstate them. At least one of these women has said she enjoyed the role, did not feel objectified and was now facing a substantial drop in her income. Had the liberal left apparently behind the sponsors pushing for the change in fact done a huge disservice to women with this move?

Probably not.

Many question whether having women as 'decoration' minimises their importance as athletes or sports professionals in their own right. The use of 'promo girls' in sport has therefore been under scrutiny for a while, not least due to some high profile embarrassing incidents. In particular, at the Tour of Flanders in 2013 one woman was groped by cyclist Peter Sagan on the podium. Despite this there was no immediate change to the use of podium girls, although last year's Vuelta a Espana announced it would replace the 'girls' with tastefully dressed men and women.

That Formula 1 have now stated that grid girls are not in line with their brand values or societal norms is no real surprise and perhaps long overdue. The announcement has been welcomed by women in the sport, including Claire Williams. Whilst the move has its detractors, Formula 1 are perhaps faring better than the PDC has as they have said that the grid girls would be replaced by grid kids made up of up and coming young racers. Dina Asher-Smith has talked about how inspiring it was for her to be a volunteer kit carrier on Super Saturday at the London 2012 Olympics and there should be a similar effect for the grid kids. Countless professional tennis players – both male and female – have volunteered as ball kids in their youth, including the GOAT himself, Roger Federer. This makes it quite hard to credibly complain about or criticise the change. Hopefully Formula 1 will take steps to ensure that a good number of these grid kids are young women, who can use the experience to go on to challenge the male domination seen in motorsport.

It is not clear who will replace the walk on girls at the darts and there are still a number of sports using women in these types of roles. This perpetuates the image that the men are the athletes and the women are there for decoration, and not the main event. The changes outlined above are unlikely to change anything overnight with regard to how women's sport and women in sport are viewed, but it is a welcome step in the right direction.

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