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Photo By Brian Cleary/Getty Images “Grey’s Anatomy” star and racing enthusiast Patrick Dempsey (right, with driver Charles Espenlaub) is expected in Austin this weekend.

BY MICHAEL QUINTINILLA

Celebrity watchers, start your engines. The race is on this weekend for a brush with fame when the glitterati will make the party rounds as Austin welcomes the much-anticipated Formula One United States Grand Prix.

It's the first U.S. date on the international Formula One season in five years, following stops in such glitzy locales as Barcelona, Monte Carlo, Kuala Lumpur and Abu Dhabi. Sunday's race, before 120,000 fans at the new 3.4-mile Circuit of the Americas track, also could determine this year's world champion — favorites are Sebastian Vettel and Fernando Alonso. Located a few miles east of Austin Bergstrom International Airport, the track will get its international debut with the race, the second-to-last of the year.

It's expected to be a magnet for movie stars, athletes, socialites and tycoons.

Lisa O'Neil, a publicist promoting a three-night benefit for the Austin Ballet, says the weekend's slate of parties will attract “international jet-setters and the beautiful people who want to see and be seen. This weekend will be Wimbledon on acid.”

Two-time Oscar-winning director Ron Howard, who was in Austin earlier this month to promote his upcoming F1 movie “Rush” (set for a spring 2013 release), is creating a lot of pre-race buzz, says Ali Putnam, the Circuit of the America's communications director.

Just weeks ago Howard spoke at an F1 kickoff luncheon and screened a four-minute video of vignettes from his action drama, which centers on the 1970s rivalry between drivers James Hunt and Niki Lauda. He told guests how he immersed himself in F1's history and culture and became a fan of the prestigious motor sport. His film stars Chris Hemsworth and Olivia Wilde, who, along with Howard, have been invited to many of the weekend's glamorous shindigs.

Also invited to a variety of bashes, according to party-giving insiders, are Mario Andretti, Eva Longoria, Enrique Iglesias, Steven Tyler, Peter Fonda, Dennis Quaid, Matt LeBlanc and Austin-based celebs such as director Robert Rodriguez and tennis champ Andy Roddick.

Then there's Dr. McDreamy. That's Patrick Dempsey of “Grey's Anatomy,” who also owns Dempsey Racing, a professional auto racing team based in Flowery Branch, Ga., near Atlanta. The part-time racer is a sure bet to be spotted here and there, especially on race day. He and Andretti, the Circuit of the America's official ambassador, took a high-speed test drive on the track last month.

Lance Avery Morgan, editor of the Austin-based *The Society Diaries*, a glossy magazine that follows the state's movers and shakers, says socialites such as Houston's John and Becca Cason Thrash also will be in attendance, as will billionaire Austin mogul Jon Paul DeJoria, who owns the high-end hair care company John Paul Mitchell Systems and other businesses. Morgan says Austin has never seen anything like the partying scene that comes with F1 racing. “It is really going to put us on the map as an international player,” he says. The *Society Diaries* is the media sponsor of three nights of parties produced by My Yacht Group that are being touted as “European-style nightclubbing.”

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Former Olympic bobsledder Nicholas Frankl, My Yacht Group's CEO, arrived in Austin a week ago to set up the venue — and sell tables for eight at a cost of \$3,000, \$6,000 and \$10,000 per night. Guests at the higher-end tables can indulge in Comte de Mazeray's 24-karat gold-flecked Champagne (valued at \$10,000 per bottle), which will be making its American debut.

Former “Friends” star LeBlanc has RSVP'd “and will arrive on a jet Saturday night,” Frankl says.

Many of the partygoers, he adds, will be the kind of people who “are accustomed to top-notch, sophisticated, high-end, exclusive, private and secure venues — guys with private planes who have no problem spending \$20,000 or \$30,000 without thinking about it.”

Morgan agrees, adding that high-society types often like to keep a low profile, even when it comes to partying.

“A lot of them will make it a last-minute decision to come to Austin — certainly for the very, very rich,” he says. “But they'll be here.”

Some may attend events coordinated by the party planners at Formula VIP Events.

Formula VIP executive producer Ginger Leigh is working on 18 parties and events that kick off today and conclude Sunday at two luxury venues: Gold at the Four at the Four Seasons Hotel and Blu @ the W, a dance club and lounge created on the W hotel's second floor specifically for the F1 weekend.

Blu's \$400 cover charge includes all the cocktails and gourmet finger food you want. A private suite for 30 is available for \$30,000 a night.

Gold at the Four parties include a an after-race party with a Prohibition theme on Sunday; tickets cost \$225 and \$500.

“We've got a lot of business VIPs who have purchased tables, and we are reserving space for celebrities, but we won't know who they are until they get here,” Leigh says, adding that she has been asked not to leak names.

Famous or not, “we are working very hard to make sure that everybody is welcomed and well cared for,” she adds. “Everyone will be treated like a celebrity.”

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