

After a taste of the good life in Bahrain, I had to sit out the Australian round of the 2010 season. Girlracer had a journalist based in Melbourne, and it would have been pretty pointless for me to have made the trip when she could just hop on a shuttle. Watching race one from the media centre and race two from my sofa was an interesting contrast, but at least I got to stuff my face with bacon sandwiches all weekend long.

## F1 Sofa Blog: Running on caffeine

So it's stupid o'clock in the morning, I'm on the wrong side of the planet, and my coffee machine is working overtime. It can only be a flyaway.

It's been two long weeks since Bahrain, and the garages around Albert Park are a hive of activity. That much I can see from my telly. The on-the-ground reporting is in the capable hands of Jacki Warnock, but the idea of spending a race weekend away from my laptop was too terrifying to contemplate.

Friday's first practice session was full of surprises, especially for team BMW Sauber Ferrari Kitchen Sink. Poor Kaui Kobayashi was responsible for both red flags, although the second one seems to have been down to a bad decision at team HQ. Having set the third-fastest time on a flying lap, the Japanese driver got a bit too intimate with a marker board and lost a chunk of his front wing. One corner later, and Kobs was sitting in the gravel at Turn 12, utterly bereft of downforce. Oops.

But there was a much bigger oops to come – once Kobayashi's car was back in the running, his outlap lasted what felt like seconds before the newly-fitted front wing decided to take flight and scatter itself across the track. Self-determination for aerodynamic parts? I challenge anyone to be witty and erudite at this time of the morning.

There were surprises in the timings – Michael Schumacher wasn't in the top ten; test driver Paul di Resta managed a good show, only one-and-a-sliver-seconds off Robert's time; Mark Webber and the two Williams' drivers managed to best only the new teams and the two Saubers. It's fair to say the Hinwil outfit haven't been having the best day so far.

But practice times don't mean much, not when you're lapping within a second or two of the leader. Everyone's running with different fuel loads and feeling their way around the track in this year's machines. The only sweeping statements that you can rely on are those that say cars lapping in the L34s are definitely going to have a slower weekend than those lapping in the L26s and L27s. Much as I would love to see Karun Chandhok on pole, I don't think HRT are quite there yet.

The list of teams who are there isn't hugely surprising – I wasn't expecting to see Robert Kubica come out on top, but the news didn't shock. The rest of the top ten was made up of both McLarens, both Ferraris, one Red Bull, one Mercedes, the other Renault, a Force India, and a Toro Rosso (although not in that order). Times in full are below.

The second session is about to start. Turns out I type a lot slower at this time of the morning, no matter how much coffee I've had.

### F1 times (unofficial)

- 1 Robert Kubica – Renault – 1:26.927
- 2 Nico Rosberg – Mercedes – 1:27.126
- 3 Jenson Button – McLaren Mercedes – 1:27.482
- 4 Felipe Massa – Ferrari – 1:27.511
- 5 Sebastian Vettel – Red Bull-Renault – 1:27.686
- 6 Fernando Alonso – Ferrari – 1:27.747
- 7 Lewis Hamilton – McLaren Mercedes – 1:27.793
- 8 Sebastien Buemi – Toro Rosso-Ferrari – 1:28.014
- 9 Vitaly Petrov – Renault – 1:28.114
- 10 Vitantonio Liuzzi – Force India-Mercedes – 1:28.192
- 11 Paul di Resta – Force India-Mercedes – 1:28.537
- 12 Michael Schumacher – Mercedes – 1:28.550
- 13 Jaime Alguersuari – Toro Rosso – 1:28.572
- 14 Mark Webber – Red Bull – 1:28.683
- 15 Pedro de la Rosa – BMW Sauber-Ferrari – 1:29.465
- 16 Rubens Barrichello – Williams Cosworth – 1:29.712
- 17 Nico Huelkenberg – Williams Cosworth – 1:30.249
- 18 Kamui Kobayashi – BMW Sauber-Ferrari – 1:31.588
- 19 Jarno Trulli – Lotus Cosworth – 1:31.652
- 20 Heikki Kovalainen – Lotus Cosworth – 1:31.654
- 21 Lucas Di Grassi – Virgin Cosworth – 1:32.831
- 22 Bruno Senna – Hispania Cosworth – 1:33.401

## F1 Sofa Blog – The weather's better in Oxford

Friday afternoon in Melbourne is looking a bit soggy from where I'm sitting. But at least I'm indoors, curled up on the sofa with the journalistic necessities of a laptop and a duvet. Some of the poor sods I can see on the telly look freezing – their teeshirts were fine earlier on, but extra layers are definitely needed in the drizzle.

And surprise, surprise – the rain is also affecting the drivers. Pedro de la Rosa is one of the first out for Sauber, and quickly comes back in after telling the team "there is too much rain now". Ferrari are of a similar opinion, tweeting to all and sundry "No point in running now... the track is neither fully wet nor OK for slicks."

Tyre choice seems to be a general conundrum, and no one's quite sure which compound to go for. The track is certainly greasy, but we're not seeing much in the way of rooster tails of spray.

Twenty-odd minutes into the session and the rain seems to have eased off somewhat. At least, we're seeing a lot more drivers on the track and they're posting some pretty fast times. Lewis Hamilton has taken the top slot with a 1.26.648s, and before I've finished typing teammate Jenson Button has snaffled the top spot with a 1.26.076s. Lewis then steals it back, and is the first man to post a time in the 1.25s – 1.25.801s, to be precise.

So will we see a McLaren 1-2 this weekend? Don't get too excited just yet – this is Friday practice, not Saturday qualifying, and 24 hours is an eternity in F1.

And it's raining again. But this time the teams are gritting their teeth and getting on with it – they're running out of time in this session, and everyone needs to get as much telemetry as possible now that no one can do any in-season testing.

Times are not great, thanks to the on-track conditions – it looks like Michael Schumacher is miles off the pace, but he's not actually done any dry running in this session. F1 Pole on pole Robert Kubica has posted a time 10 seconds slower than Hamilton's flying lap.

Clanger of the session belongs to Nico Hulkenberg, who could do with reminding that the world can hear his radio transmissions – he was just on air asking the Williams pit wall if he should go out on another low-fuel run. Fancy telling us any more of your strategy? I'm sure we'd all like to hear it...

And now I have to contradict myself, as Schuey's just popped up in third with a 1.28.716s. The German managed to get a few laps in as track conditions were improving, but it's now raining again. Not sure if we'll see Schumacher climb further up the timesheets, as the weather gods could make that decision for him. This is the first session in which Schuey's posted a faster time than teammate Nico Rosberg – can Rosberg pull a flyer out of his hat in the final seconds?

Lewis and Jenson have been sitting pretty on the top of the timesheets for ages now. Both talented men, they were very lucky with the weather when they set their times. Track conditions were about as good as they've been in this session, and it's unlikely that anyone will knock them off in the limited time remaining.

Sebastian Vettel and the two Ferraris are down towards the back of the pack, in P15-17. They've all been doing longer runs, but the three men don't really need to work on their qualifying pace if Bahrain is anything to go by. So nothing to worry about, Vettel or Ferrari fans!

And the session ends with another clanger, this time from Pedro de la Rosa. The experienced Spaniard was bimbbling around the track in scenic route mode, and failed to notice the much faster McLaren of Jenson Button coming up behind. Got in Jenson's way, and seconds later did the same to Lewis.

De la Rosa then rounded off a magnificent performance by failing to spot the chequered flag. How long did it take him to realise there was a reason he had the track to himself? Who knows – he might still be out there!

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## F1 Sofa Blog – The marathon

It's coming up for 3am, and I've not slept since the first free practice session. In that time I've filed copy, done a full day's work, and spent the remaining hours prepping pieces for the weekend. I've also had about eleven billion cups of coffee, and am beginning to bounce off the walls.

News story of the day has been Lewis Hamilton's naughty behaviour on the roads – the McLaren ace had his car impounded by the Australian police when he was caught being more boyracer than professional driver. Nice to see the polished mask slip occasionally, even if Friday's incident doesn't mesh well with the FIA's road safety campaign.

Waiting for the final free practice session of the Australian Grand Prix to begin, watching the drivers sitting in their carbon fibre cocoons. Track temperature in Melbourne is 29 degrees, and air temperature is a cooler 21 degrees. Cars have just started filing out of the pits, and we are underway.

Installation laps are now complete for the bulk of the grid – the two Mercedes and Mark Webber have yet to venture out, and most of the drivers have come back in. Out setting early purples is the Renault of Vitaly Petrov, but he has fast competition from the likes of Ferrari's Felipe Massa. The Brazilian is topping the boards with 1.27.190s, while Petrov is just behind with 1.27.532s. More times are being posted, and the leaderboard is constantly changing.

Laptimes are falling, and more drivers are posting 1.27s. The slowest driver to have posted a time is Michael Schumacher, on 1.44.070s, but he is only

just beginning what looks like it could be a long stint. Petrov, who had been running well, has a slight wobble across the track but maintains control of his car.

Schuey's just jumped up into fourth, and times are changing faster than I can type.

Sebastian Vettel has leapt to the number one slot with a 1.26.242s, although Lewis Hamilton is on a flyer – 1.25.706s as he crosses the line. Four cars are lapping in the 1.26s – Vettel, Nico Rosberg, Massa, and Schumacher, who is milliseconds from the high 1.25s. Jenson Button's 1.26.138s slots him in to fourth place, while Vettel joins Lewis in with a 1.25.963s.

The Red Bulls are looking good today – Mark Webber has just displaced his teammate in second place, posting a 1.25.774s. Can he translate this performance into a pole position for his home Grand Prix?

It's very close between the two Red Bulls and the McLarens – both teams drivers are lapping in the 1.25s, and so far no one's been able to match them, although Schumacher is close. Of the four, only Button is still out on the track.

Fernando Alonso isn't having the best day of it – every time he looks like he is on a fast lap, he gets stuck in traffic. It's happened three or four times now, which would try the patience of a saint.

Robert Kubica is on the team radio, complaining about a lack of grip. Looks like we won't see a repeat of Friday morning's headline-setting time for the Pole. Teammate Petrov has been driving well this morning, but his earlier off and on-track wobbles suggest he may be suffering from the same problems.

Another wave of drivers hits the track – Hamilton, Schumacher, Rosberg, and Massa are all out of the pits. Alonso manages to find some empty track and pops up in third place, with a time of 1.25.916s, the first non-Mercedes powered car to break into the 1.25s. There's still plenty of time left in the session for a major shake-up on the timesheets, although today's session has largely seen the same names tussling for the top.

And the shake-up comes at the hands of Alonso, who goes top with a 1.25.559s, just over a tenth faster than Hamilton. Schumacher knocks Lewis into third with a 1.25.690s; the Brit's flying lap was affected by loss of speed from proximity to the car in front. Vettel pushes Hamilton down further still, posting a 1.25.692s.

Michael Schumacher goes top of the boards with a 1.25.494s, and things are really hotting up at Albert Park. Mark Webber leapfrogs Schuey with a 1.25.309s, but then the track calms down a bit – nearly everyone's back in the pits.

Taking a look at the bottom of the timesheets, you won't find much to surprise you. The bottom six are made up of the three new teams, with a 1.30.396s for Heikki Kovalainen, 1.30.780s for Jarno Trulli, 1.31.114s for Timo Glock, 1.31.683s for Lucas di Grassi, 1.34.334s for Karun Chandhok, and Bruno Senna is bringing up the rear with a 1.36.649s.

There are fewer than ten minutes remaining of this final free practice session, and more cars are coming out for their final pre-qualifying runs. Alonso pushes Schumacher down to third while Hamilton pops up in fourth. Mark Webber's RB6 is flying around Albert Park, giving the Australian fans something to cheer. Webber's just broken into the 1.24s, where he was quickly joined by Fernando Alonso.

Vettel pops up into third, and Schumacher is on a flying lap. The German wasn't able to outpace Webber, but the timesheets are going mad as lap after lap is posted – I can barely keep up.

And the chequered flag has fallen, and that's that until qualifying. Webber stays on top, and the rest of the top ten was Fernando Alonso, Michael Schumacher, Sebastian Vettel, Nico Rosberg, Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton, Adrian Sutil, Felipe Massa, Tonio Liuzzi.

Not a bad showing for Force India, with both cars in the top ten. In fact, the top ten was comprised of only five teams – the so-called big four of Ferrari, Mercedes, Red Bull, and McLaren, plus the two Force India drivers. Given Sutil's good qualifying performance in Bahrain, we might be in with a chance of some decent points for the team.

Back very soon for qualifying..

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## F1 Sofa Blog – The aftermath

Learned an important lesson this weekend. It is simply not possible to stay awake for all three practice sessions and qualifying and make any sense afterwards. It's taken me hours to recover enough to be coherent.

So, qualifying.

By now you'll know that Red Bull have managed a 1-2, with Sebastian Vettel on pole and Mark Webber just behind. The biggest story in qualies was Lewis Hamilton dropping out in Q2; he will start tomorrow's race from P11. While I'm sure Lewis would have preferred a different end to Saturday's session, the race is beginning to look like it could be a blinder.

Cast your mind back to Melbourne 2009 – Hamilton qualified at the back of the grid and managed to wrestle the dog-like MP4-24 to what could have been a fourth-place finish were it not for Liegate. This year, given a faster car – and fresher tyres than the car head – we should see Lewis pushing for position from the very beginning.

Fans have been complaining of the lack of overtaking in F1, and a contributing factor is qualifying. When the fastest cars qualify ahead of slower machines, it's unlikely there will be significant changes in position. But when a strong car qualifies in mid-field, one of two outcomes is likely: either

he will get stuck in traffic with more inexperienced drivers and risk collision, or he will push as hard as he can on Sunday to make up for a disappointing Saturday.

With any luck, Lewis' poor qualifying will lead to a brilliant race for fans. The advantage to P11 under the current regulations is that the McLaren driver will be the front man on new tyres. Robert Kubica and Adrian Sutil, who qualified ninth and tenth respectively, will need to be fast off the line to prevent Lewis from taking advantage of his rubber in the first corner.

But both Kubica and Sutil have something to make up for that could bring an added dimension to their performance this weekend. The two men – who, incidentally, qualified ninth and tenth at the season opener in Bahrain – finished just shy of the points in the last race after an early collision, and did well to climb back up the field. Neither will want to cede position if they can help it.

Of course, anything can – and will – happen in the race. But I went to sleep after qualifying thinking that the stars had aligned for an interesting display on Sunday, and I'm going to hold on to that until proved otherwise.

Other points of potential interest are a likely tussle between Red Bull teammates Mark Webber and Sebastian Vettel, and another between Nico Rosberg and Michael Schumacher. Webber will be looking to improve on his P2 if at all possible – this morning saw his best qualifying session at his home GP, and while I don't see the Australian taking out his teammate intentionally, he will do his best to capitalise on any errors.

The Rosberg-Schumacher intra-team battle is of particular interest to pundits – everyone wants to know if Michael's back in the swing of things. The seven-time world champion spent much of the third practice session at or near the top of the timesheets, and for a while it looked like he was in a position to make the weekend his own. But Rosberg again out-qualified his teammate, albeit by less than half a second.

Given that Schuey was complaining of the difficulties of overtaking in Bahrain, I expect to see the elder German make his move as early as possible on the first lap. The question is, will Nico be able to fend him off?

There's a lot to watch out for tomorrow – my advice? Get as much sleep as you can now, so you don't miss a second of the action.

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## F1 Sofa Blog – Reports of F1's death have been greatly exaggerated

Formula 1 is a bittersweet sport, full of emotional highs and lows. The Melbourne Grand Prix was a race to silence the critics, a race that demands a rewrite of the premature obituaries written in the wake of the season opener at Bahrain.

The worst moment of the race surely belongs to Sebastian Vettel, who led for 26 laps before retiring in the gravel with a brake failure. The young German lost ground in 2009 to reliability issues, and could have won the championship but for the car beneath him. The 2010 season is looking eerily similar – Vettel has qualified on pole in both races, but issues with the car have lost him the lead.

And Vettel wasn't the only Red Bull driver to suffer on the streets of Albert Park. Mark Webber, who started on the front row and hoped to claim honours at his home Grand Prix, scraped into the points with a ninth place finish after a scrap with Lewis Hamilton on lap 56 when the latter was looking to overtake the Ferrari of Fernando Alonso.

Alonso gave us the best quote of the race weekend, no question – when Hamilton was tearing up the track in pursuit of Alonso, the Spaniard cried "I don't want to know!" when his race engineer told him of his collapsing lead. But the double champion managed to keep his former teammate in his mirrors until the incident with Webber cost the Brit a position.

The race was a nail-biter, no doubt about it. Lewis Hamilton qualified eleventh on the grid, but fought his way up to what should have been a podium finish before a poorly-timed decision to call him into the pits for a tyre change put paid to his earlier efforts. And he wasn't the only one – Alonso, who finished fourth, fought his way up from the back of the grid after a first lap collision with Michael Schumacher.

Thanks to a combination of the rain, retirements, and some early crashes, the Melbourne GP looked nothing like the start order when the chequered flag fell. Jenson Button, who won the race for McLaren, had started in fourth. Second-placed Robert Kubica had fought his way up from ninth. Massa moved up from fifth to third, Rosberg gained a position to finish in fifth.

Despite his troubles, Hamilton turned an eleventh-place start into a sixth-place finish, while Tonio Liuzzi was even more impressive – 13th to seventh. Rubens Barrichello, Mark Webber, and Michael Schumacher were the only point scorers to have lost position over the course of the race.

But while there was a lot of jostling for position on the streets of Melbourne this weekend, there are still concerns about overtaking in modern F1. Lewis Hamilton's race was ruined by a poor tyre decision on the pit wall – the British champ was fighting in third for what could have been a 1-2 McLaren finish when he was brought in to change his tyres. Hamilton rejoined the circuit on an offensive charge that saw the MP4-25 gobbling up track like there was no tomorrow – until he reached the dirty air of Fernando Alonso's Ferrari.

The two Ferraris were on knackered tyres, and had been visibly losing traction. But every time the McLaren got close enough to consider a move, the loss of grip in the dirty air put paid to any attempts. The new regulations were supposed to create battles between old tyres and new, but if today was any indication, such battles are still an F1 pipe dream. Hamilton's two-stop strategy did not prove effective in Melbourne this weekend, and that will have been noted in every garage. We may not see many more this season...

There will be long faces in the Red Bull hospitality area this evening. The team should have been looking at a decent points haul tonight, having locked out the front row in qualifying. But Sebastian Vettel's retirement and Mark Webber's ninth-place finish have seen the Milton Keynes outfit slip into fifth in the constructors' standings, where they are tied with engine supplier Renault on 18 points.

Adrian Newey is widely-regarded to be one of the best in the business when it comes to designing an F1 car. But something seems to be going wrong in

the build process – the 2009 season was beset with retirements and engine problems, and so far 2010 looks worryingly similar. Vettel's troubles this weekend were as a result of brake failure, so at least the spark plugs aren't a recurring problem.

But it is the retirements and the struggles that keep Formula 1 interesting – it is a battle of both man and machine, and the best drivers in the world can be hampered by an uncooperative piece of kit. With any luck, we'll see as much action at Sepang as we did at Albert Park.

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