
I covered this race from my sofa, and shared [girlracer](#) coverage with a colleague. She took as-it-happened reports of practice, qualies, and the race, while I did the rest of it. As a result, there's not as much about Melbourne 2011 as I normally write...

Getting to know Albert Park

Albert Park is hardly the new kid on the F1 block. We've been racing there since 1996, and the circuit has hardly changed in the past sixteen years.

Even so, with an ever-increasing calendar and a longer than usual winter break, it doesn't hurt to remind yourself of the circuit and its characteristics.

As a racetrack, Albert Park is a street circuit primarily composed of public roads. But unlike Monaco, the most famous of all street circuits, the Melbourne race does not see cars passing within millimetres of buildings in the middle of a city. Instead, the cars wend through a public park, skirting Albert Park Lake.

Because the race is run on public roads, drivers begin their weekend fighting with a slipperier than usual track surface. But by the time the lights go out on Sunday, enough rubber will have been laid down on the racing line that – barring heavy rain throughout the weekend – grip levels will have improved. Lap times should fall from session to session, as the green track surface begins to rubber in.

The operative word there is should. The Australian Grand Prix weekend is no stranger to heavy rain, and the best laid rubber of mice and men is often washed away. The current forecast for 2011 shows showers on Friday but dry running on Saturday and Sunday.

The Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park is scheduled to last for 58 clockwise laps, each 5.303kms long, making for a total race distance of 307.574kms. Each lap will see the drivers face sixteen corners (ten right-handers and six left-handers), and the low-speed corners mean that most teams are likely to opt for a medium- to high-downforce set-up.

Pirelli will be bringing the soft and hard tyre compounds to this weekend's race. While each circuit has its own rubber-chewing characteristics, the general impression from pre-season testing was that the soft tyre compound lasted for around ten laps before performance disappeared, while the harder compound could go on for about 25. Unlike last year's Bridgestones, there is no plateau then recovery period on the Pirellis – once the performance is gone, it's gone.

Tyre wear will be vital in this year's race. Not only is Albert Park an unknown quantity where the Pirellis are concerned – all pre-season testing tyre data was harvested in Spain – but it is a notoriously rubber-hungry track. The cornering loads mean that the left front tyres are likely to be the first to go, and degradation will be made worse by the track's infamous bumps.

Pirelli are expecting between two and three pit-stops per driver; last year's race saw strategic pitting for wet and dry tyres as the weather conditions changed, although a number of drivers were forced into additional pit-stops for new components in what turned out to be a smash-happy race.

While not a full-throttle race, Albert Park is demanding of both engines and fuel loads. Approximately two-thirds of the lap are run at full throttle, and fuel consumption levels are some of the highest on the calendar, meaning teams will be running with a heavier fuel load than is typical. This will add to tyre wear in the early stages of the grand prix.

Michael Schumacher is the current lap record holder in Melbourne; in 2004 he did a 1.24.125s at an average speed of 226.934kph. That record is unlikely to be broken this year, as FIA-mandated changes to the cars and the tyres for the 2011 season saw lap speeds in winter testing drop from those times set in February 2010, at each of the three circuits the teams ran on.

Of the current crop of Formula 1 drivers, Schumacher (2001, 2003, 2004), Rubens Barrichello (2002), Jenson Button (2006, 2009), Lewis Hamilton (2008), and Sebastian Vettel (2010) have all scored pole at the Melbourne Grand Prix.

Button (2009, 2010), Hamilton (2008), Fernando Alonso (2006), and Schumacher (2000, 2001, 2002, 2004) have all won at Albert Park, while Mark Webber (2010), Nico Rosberg (2009), Heikki Kovalainen (2008), Alonso (2005), Schumacher (1999, 2001, 2004), and Barrichello (2000) have all claimed the fastest lap.

F1 Sofa Blog – Thursday press conference in Melbourne

Given the title of this piece, it will hardly surprise you to learn that I was not present at the first press conference of the 2011 Formula 1 season. But the bulk of the grid wasn't invited, so at least I'm in good company.

It was a mixed bunch of drivers who were invited into the first media firing line of 2011: Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Narain Karthikeyan (HRT), Kamui

Kobayashi (Sauber), Pastor Maldonado (Williams), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

First to find themselves in the harsh glare of the media spotlight were Williams rookie Pastor Maldonado, who acquitted himself well in his first press conference as a fully-fledged Formula 1 driver, and returnee Narain Karthikeyan, who was last seen on the grid in 2005, the year of Fernando Alonso's first drivers' championship win.

The Venezuelan driver acquitted himself well in his first press conference as a fully-fledged F1 driver, and talked about his preparations and experience of pre-season testing. He confirmed that he was in the right paddock by uttering the words 'for sure' in his very first answer. "For sure it was so great especially the pre-season," Maldonado said. "My first time with the team, working hard, looking forward to the first race especially. It was not so easy, but it was quite tough, quite difficult to adapt myself to a new team, new cars, everything, new rules but I really feel ready to do the race and start the championship."

Maldonado's goals for the weekend are "to finish the race first of all. To get the maximum out of the car and, for sure, to be in the points. I think we have all the potential to be there and to improve race-by-race during the season. I am quite confident even because my team-mate is so experienced, so quick so I think we can improve together during the championship."

It was a harder job for Karthikeyan, who had to dispel doubts about his team's competitiveness in light of HRT's failure to complete a single lap in the 2011 car during winter testing. "Yeah, we had some mileage in the old car but the new car, we will have to see how it goes tomorrow as it will be the first time," the HRT driver said. "An uphill task but I will go with the flow and see what happens."

"The car was designed very late and we have some clever people in the team, Geoff Willis is the main man behind the new design of the car, so as the season progresses and when updates come we should be in a reasonable position," he added. "It is easy to sit here and say we want to be the best of the new teams but Lotus has made a big step forward. Anyway we will go with the flow and it is an important year for me with the Indian Grand Prix. As you know motorsports in India is going to grow a lot. I am looking forward to it so hopefully we will have a reasonable year. ... [H]opefully we finish the race. First qualify and then finish the race, we will see."

Likely title contenders Mark Webber and Fernando Alonso got the bulk of attention during the press conference, with the assembled media interested in their pre-season preparations, their 2011 challengers, and their thoughts on the new tyres, new rules, and the weekend ahead.

"Winter has been smooth for us as well with not particularly big problems, always new challenge when the regulations change so you need to adapt your car to the new regulations," Alonso said. "There are many things to test and many things to learn about the new things but I think we did enough mileage to understand more or less everything that we introduced this year."

Webber was also pleased with his team's pre-season work. "We have had a pretty smooth winter," the Australian said. "It is always easy to have niggles and little problems with it being a completely new concept, new regulations as well so the team have done a good job to get on top of those to a degree. There are always niggles here and there but in general a pretty smooth winter."

"Both myself and the team put a lot of effort in, also Seb [Vettel] to make the most of the limited testing days that we have," he added. "We couldn't quite achieve the mileage Ferrari did. They did a good job in terms of mileage but in general it went pretty well for us getting an understanding of the new regs. Bit of rain here and there in the testing but generally it was a good winter for us and we will find out in the next few weeks where we are performance-wise, so the first three races will be interesting."

With millions of testing miles now under his belt, Alonso is unfazed by the proliferation of buttons on the 2011 steering wheel. "In my case, I don't think there is any particular problem with the new rules so all the things we need to do on the steering wheel, they are part of our job," he said. "We are professional drivers and we need to understand between us and our team, to make the most comfortable way of using all the new things. If you have no time to do all the things on the steering wheel, you don't do it, it's not a mandatory thing to do. It will take time and I think that for us, we did a lot of mileage in the winter. I think I can say that for Felipe and me we can get used to the new things and it comes automatically the things that we need to do on the steering wheel, corner after corner, and I don't see any particular problem or anything to discuss in the near future."

But despite his confidence in his mastery of the new buttons, Alonso acknowledges that the weekend will be a learning process for all the drivers. "I think there are many things to learn this weekend," he said. "We've just tested with these tyres. For sure there is a new way of doing the races in terms of strategy, so let's say that a new Formula 1 is starting here in Melbourne in terms of the strategy point of view, but we need to learn from here and keep all the new things for the coming races but this is like a new one and we need to be very focused, very concentrated on the strategy because I think it can play a big part of the race result. On the other hand, maybe qualifying on Saturday has a little bit less value compared to last year, because on Sunday there will be more things to come, more factors on the track."

Webber agreed with his rival, saying that there were still a number of unknown quantities. According to the Red Bull driver, there are "a lot of questions for us to answer this weekend. We have done mileage in the tyres in the winter. They have given us a rough idea of what we should expect, but we need to go racing to see how best to adapt that within a grand prix race. We have got a pretty good idea what the tyres are going to do for us, but how do we integrate that into a grand prix with pit-stops, strategy, things like that. There are some things which are not going to be a surprise probably and that is going to be the tyre performance, but it is how we are going to skin the cat in the grand prix in terms of where you elect to pit, how you are going to tackle the grand prix in terms of the strategic side. Those are going to be the things that need answering and then I suppose a trend will start from this race and in subsequent events after this we will get a trend on how grand prix will unfold in a dry situation."

While the bulk of questions were directed at Webber and Alonso, Kamui Kobayashi was asked about his promotion to lead driver, and his thoughts on the Sauber C30, which was responsible for the majority of red flags in pre-season testing.

Speaking of his new role as team leader, Kobayashi acknowledged that the pressure was on, both for him and for Sauber. "I think it is a really different situation for myself," the Japanese driver said. "I have a lot of responsibility, but I think this is the way we have to be. Okay, we have a lot of pressure, second year at Sauber, a very difficult winter because we have a lot of trouble. Finally we found quite good pace so I am very happy and now we start to race. The aim is to score points. Still, we know we are not a top team. If we can score points, that is a good goal for us."

As for the car's performance in Spain in February and March, Kobayashi sees the C30 as a potential points-scorer that is continually improving. "I think the car's performance overall was quite okay," he said. "In the beginning we had quite a lot of car issues but I think winter testing was going quite well as we had a lot of problems. Last year we didn't have any problems in the winter tests but then we had trouble during the season. I think it was a good sign. I hope. All the testing went quite well – especially the last Barcelona test – so I think we are looking quite well. Not fighting for the top, just scoring points like last year. I think that was enough for us. We have a new teammate which is working quite well, I am very happy. Very difficult situation with tyres but I think we still improve a lot."

Possibly the highlight of the press conference came from Webber, who used one of his responses to make a not-so-subtle dig at an earlier comment by Lewis Hamilton.

"We are just a drinks company," Webber said, "but in the end we had a pretty good season last year so hopefully we can build on what we did last year. We have some sensational rivals, like Fernando touched on. The red guys are a phenomenal team, phenomenal history and that's what gives us great rewards to come out and compete against those guys. The team again has a high bar set in terms of looking for championships. Both of them would be nice but again as we saw last year if we go to the end it can go either way. That is the goal for the team."

F1 Sofa Blog – Components, upgrades, and aero packages in Melbourne

Does it count as an upgrade when it's part of a package being brought to the first race of the season? Probably not, but I've never let semantics get in my way before.

But as it's the first race of the season, there's little on display in Melbourne this weekend that we didn't see in the final week of Barcelona testing. Little, that is except a car from HRT.

The F-lll has yet to make waves in the paddock: it spent most of Friday being worked on in the garage before limping round a solitary lap shortly before the close of play, but given that the single-lap run was effectively the car's first shakedown, I would say that HRT win the prize of having brought the biggest upgrade to Australia. The Spanish team have gone from having no car at all a few weeks ago to a hunk of carbon fibre with four wheels and an engine. If that's not progress, I don't know what is.

The majority of the assumed front-runners have remained quiet on the subject of upgrades and new parts for Melbourne, but it is widely known that McLaren have stripped back their car in the pursuit of reliability and downforce, and that there have been extensive revisions to the exhausts.

In the middle of the pack the teams are more forthcoming about their bells and whistles.

According to technical director James Key, Sauber arrived in Melbourne "with the specification of the car that we finished the Barcelona test with, with some final refinements to it after what we learned from that test."

Williams are in a similar boat to Sauber where new parts are concerned, and in a pre-race preview said "we have all the [aero] parts that we ran on the final days of testing in Barcelona, plus a few additional changes that we will test on Friday." According to technical director Sam Michael, the team have also revised their troublesome KERS unit and are testing a new front wing on Rubens Barrichello's car.

Ferrari are another team running with a revised front wing in Melbourne, although Pat Fry did not elaborate further when discussing the Scuderia's weekend programme.

The final team to admit to a new front wing this weekend is Force India, who have brought a host of new parts to the table. According to Adrian Sutil, the team have "quite a few new components on the car to test," although he was unable to elaborate further, given the hush-hush nature of the sport.

Lotus, who hope to be picking points off the mid-field this season, are still working on harvesting engine data, thanks to delays in their pre-season testing plans. But according to Thierry Salvi, Renault Sport F1 Support Leader, Friday saw "some positive feedback from the drivers from those tests, for example with the blown-floor strategy, so this has been a pretty encouraging day for us." Work on the blown-floor is of particular importance, as the right strategy there will make the difference between a Lotus fighting for points and a Lotus languishing at the back of the pack.

None of the remaining teams were forthcoming with details of new or revised components, although technical analysts have spied some changes based on paddock photographs. For an in-depth technical analysis of the parts being run in Melbourne, check out the detailed posts on [Scarbs' F1 Blog](#).

F1 Sofa Blog – Friday press conference in Melbourne

With one day's worth of practice under their belts, it was time for the chosen five drivers to make their way to the press conference room in Melbourne, where they fielded questions on (among other topics), the tyres, the moveable rear wing, and their readiness for the season ahead.

Present were Sebastian Vettel, Paul di Resta, Nick Heidfeld, Sergio Perez, and Jerome D'Ambrosio.

One of the biggest questions about the forthcoming season has been the efficacy and relevance of the moveable rear wing, also known as the drag reduction system. But in today's practice sessions, few of the drivers had been able to test the DRS, and none had successfully used it in an overtaking manoeuvre.

"Basically I tried [to overtake with the DRS], did not succeed," Red Bull driver Sebastian Vettel explained. "I tried but it was not enough to get past. In the end, that's a good thing because you don't want racing to be artificial, but to really answer this question I think we have to wait until Sunday when

everyone is on similarly aged tyres and the same fuel load.”

Of all the drivers present, Vettel had the most to say about the DRS, and the current world champion appeared to have used it more than his competitors during the two Friday sessions. “Similar to the F-duct, you try to work on [the DRS] as soon as you can to try to get the biggest benefit,” he said. “I would be surprised if everyone else is much later operating it. I think that is partly what we have been talking about pre-season and not all of us yet probably do understand. As you can see and as you said it was the first time a lot of people got to see it. Qualifying and practice is very different to a race as in a race ideally you use it once a lap or maybe twice, but you know where and how so it is quite different to practice conditions.”

Paul di Resta, Force India’s 2011 rookie driver, agreed that it was harder to get a sense of the DRS in testing and practice sessions than it will be during the race. “I think a lot of people have been using the DRS through most of their runs to try and get data on it,” he said. “In testing, you can’t really get an idea when one car is not using it and one car is allowed to use it.”

There have been questions asked as to why drivers can use the DRS throughout the lap in practice sessions, and Vettel explained that it all came down to giving the drivers the best possible learning opportunity for gear ratios and braking points on each track, with and without the DRS in use.

“The reason why we’re allowed to use it at all in qualifying and practice is because otherwise we would probably select a different gear – top gear especially in the car – which then would not allow us to overtake because we would be sitting on the limiter as soon as we stalled the wing,” the Red Bull driver explained. “So that is obviously the background, so to have the ability in practice and qualifying, to have similar ratios to in the race, working in the same range, so of course, that’s the first time we are now having to make this decision and it’s extremely important.”

The next major topic of conversation was the switch to Pirelli tyres. There were complaints from the drivers throughout winter testing that the levels of degradation were higher than anticipated, but the cooler temperatures in Albert Park on Friday seemed to help with durability.

Asked about the differences between the two compounds brought to Australia – hard and soft – Vettel explained “they are different. I think it was good finally to come here and start the season and race on a different track. All winter we have been in Barcelona and I think we know it inside out and we know exactly what the tyres do.

“Today we were, I wouldn’t say surprised, but in a way probably surprised as the tyre behaviour is different,” he continued. “No doubt compared to last year the tyres are different. You cannot compare. There is a big difference. But I think we expected worse conditions here in terms of how long the tyres last et cetera. I think this morning and this afternoon was quite useful and helped us understand what to do in the race on Sunday. So far I think it is positive. Still we cannot race with one stop only. I think we have to come in a couple of times so ultimately we will find out on Sunday if the track improves or not as it is also something we have seen in the test. In four days running the track does not rubber in so we will see how it is here, different tarmac, different track, different lay-out, different conditions but so far we are positively surprised.”

Renault driver Nick Heidfeld was one of Pirelli’s test drivers for the new tyre programme, and had more feedback to offer. “From testing in the winter we thought the soft tyres would only last one lap,” he said. “I did my quickest lap here today on the second lap; the third lap wasn’t too bad either so this hopefully makes qualifying a bit less of a problem, because we will see more pit stops. And then on top of that, we see that the lap time difference between hard and soft tyres is quite big, huge – at least, compared to last year. That means that maybe only the very quick cars like the Red Bull may be able to use the hard tyres and save some soft tyres, but most other cars will already have to use soft tyres in Q1 to get through. That means that you only have two sets left for later on which you might also have to use in the race, so it makes things very different, quite interesting and complicated.”

Heidfeld also spoke of pit-stop strategies in light of the unexpected durability of the soft tyre compound. “Of course they will last a bit longer,” he said, “but I don’t think that is the big issue; the big question is how many stops is it after that? On simulations, in winter testing in Barcelona, we’ve seen most cars and people doing three stops but you also saw that their lap times became quite slow towards the end of the stint. That was just to find out where the limit is. So it might be that in a real race situation you would have seen four stops. That, again, will be interesting to see. Today’s degradation was obviously a lot better but it should spice up the racing. It will be interesting to see how difficult it is to overtake during the race. It’s going to be new for everybody.”

Another key point of discussion was the reintroduction of the 107 percent rule. Based on their performance across the two sessions on Friday, both Virgin and HRT appear to be at risk of failing to qualify for this weekend’s race. Virgin rookie Jerome D’Ambrosio was asked for his thoughts.

“It is really nothing I should worry about as that is not going to be anything productive,” D’Ambrosio said. “The only thing I can do, and we all can do as a team, is to focus on getting the best out of what we have now. We will progress and we will get better but for now, for this weekend, we just have to focus on getting the best out of the package and that is the only thing which will bring us to a result that will hopefully be in the 107.”

Despite both D’Ambrosio and experienced teammate Timo Glock failing to lap within 107 percent of the pace set in either session, the Belgian rookie pointed to the hard work done over the winter break, and the progress made at Virgin. “Obviously we worked quite hard throughout the whole winter and we probably hoped for better progress but in the end, Formula One is tough, it’s a high level competition and we improved a lot compared to last year,” he said. “Obviously you guys only see performance, but there are a lot of things that go around that like reliability and things like that. We did make progress – obviously we would like to be quicker but again, sometimes it doesn’t go exactly according to your plan and you’ve got to work hard to catch up and I’m sure we will do it, but we can only get better.”

Asked about their aims for the season ahead, D’Ambrosio said that “it is difficult to give an aim in terms of results or points or things like that, quite concrete. There is a lot of data missing for that. I think for me I need to learn a lot from Timo and get as close to him as possible through the season. Get closer and closer and that’s the main things really.”

Finally, both Paul di Resta and Sauber rookie Sergio Perez were asked about making the move into Formula 1.

“[DTM and Formula 1] are quite different, there is no denying it,” di Resta said. “But Formula 1 has always been my dream to get here. It is the car I want to drive. You can’t really compare them. They are both at a different level. Equally I enjoyed racing DTM with Mercedes-Benz. I had four great

years there. I think it has prepared me well but this step is also very big and only time will tell how the transition is. But relatively, up until now, I feel quite confident, quite comfortable. I need to put a lot of effort in and work up.”

Perez spoke of the differences between F1 and GP2. “It is very tough, it is very difficult to get the most out of it with the traffic, with the tyres, with all the things you have to be moving which I was not used to. In GP2 you do not have to move anything like this. It is very critical not to get everything right for just one lap but to be consistent as well, so it is quite a big step but overall I am comfortable.

“I would say the [biggest difference is] amount of things you do have,” he added. “Not only inside of the car, out of the car you have also a lot of people around you. You have to be very focused to be right and don’t do any mistakes as it is very easy to do mistakes. You are very busy moving a lot of things on the steering wheel which I was not used to. You have to worry about the tyres, it is a big package. It is not only one thing, I think it is a bigger picture.”

F1 Sofa Blog – The post-qualifying analysis

Saturday afternoon at Albert Park offered some surprises, although pole position going to a Red Bull was not one of them.

Sebastian Vettel partied like it was 2010 all over again, planting his RB7 on pole with a commanding series of laps and no use of KERS. Mark Webber struggled to match his teammate for pace, but it is hard to imagine any team beating Red Bull’s pole record this season if today was any indication of the car’s abilities.

But while it might be 2010 all over again where Saturdays are concerned, Sundays should offer more variety, thanks to the drag reduction system, the return of KERS, and the change to Pirelli rubber, all of which should lead to a variety of racing strategies, at least in the early part of the season, until teams have worked out the most effective way of winning races.

Crossing the finishing line first is undoubtedly the way to go, but we should see mixed strategies in the preceding laps now that teams can deploy the DRS and theoretically overtake for the win at the beginning of the final lap.

So Red Bull were fastest, no surprises there. What was surprising was Ferrari’s relative lack of performance when viewed in light of their strong showing in pre-season testing. Felipe Massa was happy with the tyres in February, but visibly struggled this afternoon, while even de facto lead driver Fernando Alonso was out-paced by both McLarens, cars he thought he’d be watching in his wing mirrors.

McLaren took a gamble between Barcelona and Melbourne, simplifying their exhaust system and floor with a view to finding more speed and better reliability. Based on Lewis Hamilton’s P2 and Jenson Button’s P4, that gamble paid off. Where some drivers struggled with the lack of grip on offer in Albert Park on Saturday afternoon, Hamilton appeared to revel in it. He flat-spotted his right front tyre on every lap, but that didn’t seem to hamper his style at all. Rather, given that tyre wear in Melbourne concentrates on the left front, flat-spotting the right front appeared to equalise Hamilton’s front end, giving the British driver better balance going into corners than his teammate in an identical car.

Mercedes were in a similar boat to Ferrari today, and both drivers qualified lower than expected. Nico Rosberg made it into Q3, and ended up in P7 on the grid, while teammate Michael Schumacher was out in Q2. The Silver Arrows were struggling with their KERS unit in qualifying, but given that the Red Bull drivers completed the session without using the device, that is slim consolation. Few expected Mercedes to be faster than Red Bull after winter testing, but no one expected them to be as far off the pace as they were.

It was a day of mixed fortunes for Renault, who saw one driver go out in Q1 and the other qualify on the third row. It will be an interesting start to the race for Vitaly Petrov, who is lining up alongside Alonso. Petrov managed to keep Alonso behind him for the duration of the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, and cost the Spanish driver a chance to fight for the championship as a result. Should he get ahead of the Ferrari driver off the start, expect to see fireworks in the race. On the other end of the grid is Nick Heidfeld, who got stuck in traffic during his Q1 flying lap and will start from P18 as a result.

It was a disappointing afternoon for Lotus, who had hoped to be challenging the likes of Toro Rosso and Sauber for points. But both Toro Rosso and Sauber seem to have dramatically upped their games in the off-season, and both teams saw a man in Q3. Lotus, on the other hand, were around two seconds off the Q1 pace. As a result, both drivers dropped out in the first session, although they can find some consolation in the fact that they remain fastest of the “new” teams. Both Virgin drivers managed to lap within the magic 107 percent of the pace-setter’s time, although it was a close call for rookie Jerome D’Ambrosio.

Williams and Force India battled each other for P6 in the 2010 constructors’ championship, but today’s battle was of another sort entirely. The two teams appeared to be fighting for the title ‘most depressing Saturday in Australia’ in a qualifying session that saw accidents from the established driver at each team, and decent but average performances from their rookie teammates. Rubens Barrichello, the most experienced driver on the grid, ended his qualifying session beached in the gravel early in Q2, while Adrian Sutil’s hopes disappeared in a cloud of smoke when the Force India driver span on track towards the end of the same session.

HRT had an ignominious start to the season: neither Tonio Liuzzi nor Narain Karthikeyan was able to qualify for tomorrow’s race thanks to the return of the 107 percent rule.

So what predictions can be made about tomorrow’s race on the basis of qualifying? Very few, I’m afraid. While the Red Bulls appeared to have race pace when doing longer runs during pre-season testing, Ferrari looked to have greater speed over a single lap than they were able to demonstrate this afternoon. As it’s the first race of the season, and one held at a circuit with variable track conditions – and changeable weather – almost anything can happen between the lights going out and the chequered flag falling.

The only thing I’d be prepared to put money on is the gamble that we’re in for a thrilling race tomorrow, whatever the outcome.

F1 Sofa Blog – Saturday press conference in Melbourne

Surprising no one, two of the seats at Saturday's post-qualifying press conference were filled with Red Bull drivers. The surprise came in the man who split them – not Fernando Alonso, as was widely expected, but Lewis Hamilton, whose McLaren was thought to be off the pace before the weekend began.

As expected, Sebastian Vettel scored pole position for Sunday's race. But the big surprise came not from his commanding performance, but from the 0.866s that split the two Red Bull drivers. Mark Webber admitted to being somewhat surprised himself.

"Couldn't do the times today," Webber said. "I was disappointed, obviously, with my performance. Seb put in a very good lap. Obviously, disappointed to get bumped off the front row as well. Tried my best. Mystified to the gap to Seb, to be honest. I will have to go through it and have a look at where I can improve and go from there. ... It is not the best day for me. The bar is high but I would like to have done better today but we still have to reflect on the performance of the team today and what they have done over the winter is a great effort."

With neither Red Bull driver using the KERS device in qualifying, there is still the potential for more speed to come from both men. There are currently mutterings that Red Bull are running a start-only unit, to negate any start line disadvantages from not running KERS, while also benefiting from the weight saved by not running a full-sized device. But the team have yet to confirm this, and the drivers remained coy.

Webber gave the fullest answer to the KERS question, but his response was hardly illuminating: "We didn't run it today for reasons we will keep in the team."

Much of the press conference concentrated on the now typical PR-friendly statements we have come to expect from the drivers, using a lot of words to say very little, while offering up just enough soundbites to enable the media to write their pieces. (Yes, including this one.)

Asked about the unknown quantity of the Pirellis in tomorrow's race, Sebastian Vettel said "it is a hard race with the new tyres. It is a bit racing into the unknown. We kind of can guess how the tyres will behave, but in the end we have to see how it is and also racing all the others, having probably more than one stop, it will be quite entertaining for us as well. A lot of things that we need to keep an eye on and focus on, so looking forward, but today was the base and couldn't have been any better."

Hamilton was pleased with the progress made with the McLaren since winter testing ended in early March. "It was a very brave and tough decision for us to kind of pull back from what we had been developing over the winter test and after the last test to decide 'okay, we are going to come back in another direction'," he said. "I think since I have been here we have never ever done that before but the results from the wind tunnel looked good and the guys worked harder than they have ever pushed before to get the components here and the car feels a huge improvement for us and a great stepping stone for us. A great foundation for us to really push on.

But Hamilton's praise of the MP4-26 was tempered with a note of caution. "I know we have got some good things in the pipeline from this base where we are but, of course, the gap," he said. "If [Vettel] didn't use KERS, that is another half-a-second so that is 1.3 seconds, which is not normal. ... At least we are in the fight and from there we can score good points, continue to work on our reliability and, of course, closing the gap is going to be very tough. It is a big gap still, but the car feels fantastic so I can't even imagine what [Vettel] feels like round the corners."

The general feeling is that qualifying is not going to be as important in 2011 as it was in 2010. With the return of KERS and the introduction of the DRS, drivers will have more overtaking opportunities than they did last year. Both Hamilton and Webber will be doing their best to use every tool at their disposal to fight for the win in Melbourne.

"Today didn't go to plan for me, obviously," Webber said. "I'm not overly rapt to be third on the grid. ... It's not like last year in terms of qualifying, how powerful it was, but nevertheless it's still important, you know. I would rather to be here than eighth or ninth."

Fernando Alonso's absence from the press conference was remarked on, and the drivers were asked to give their opinions on any potential problems at Ferrari.

"I think today it's pretty clear that people are still getting used to the tyres and maybe it's not the right window for some people, so this is moving the lap times around a lot," Webber said. "Some people are still finding their way. Maybe Ferrari are in that boat."

Hamilton agreed that the Scuderia's qualifying session was probably affected by the need to adjust to the new tyres. "I think they've got a great car," he said. "I find these tyres very easy to use, and obviously these guys have found them quite easy to use, but I guess some people down the field have not really been able to switch them on how they would like but this is very early, we're all learning as we go along. ... I would have thought that Ferrari would have been a bit closer to us but I think, again, it's just the tyres. Maybe if they got the tyres working they would be able to close the gap."

Vettel admitted to being surprised by Ferrari's qualifying performance and results. "I was surprised in qualifying," he said. "[In] Q1 I saw that they put on some option tyres already. It was quite tight for Felipe to get through – not tight, but he had one last shot. And then it's difficult to judge from the inside of the car what was going on, so that's really all I saw, more or less. After that, you focus more on yourself. In Q1 you have a bit more time to watch TV, I would say. Yeah, I was surprised."

The best exchange came at the end of the session: I have copied it below for your amusement.

Q: Mark, how hungry are you going into your home grand prix tomorrow?

SV: You'll have lunch before, no?

MW: Yeah, Seb said I would have lunch before the race!

F1 Sofa Blog – Analysing the Melbourne Grand Prix

Sebastian Vettel may have won the Australian Grand Prix, and Lewis Hamilton may have come an impressive second in a car that was falling to pieces, but the undoubted man of the match was Vitaly Petrov, who scored his first career podium.

Petrov's P3 was also a national first – as Russia's first grand prix driver, he gave the country its maiden podium.

A close runner-up for man of the match accolades was Sauber's Sergio Perez, who managed an impressive P7 on his Formula 1 debut, having qualified in P13. Perez was the only driver to complete the race with a single tyre change under his belt, and the Mexican rookie could turn out to be a man to watch when it comes to tyre preservation.

Jenson Button was frustrated to be stuck behind Felipe Massa in the early stages of the race. Attempts to pass the Ferrari using the DRS did not bear fruit, and the McLaren driver eventually lost his trademark cool, passing Massa by cutting the chicane and earning a drive-through penalty in consequence. Button's past successes have come as a result of his clear head and tyre management skills, so it was a surprise to see the Briton issued with a penalty in a race that also saw him pit for new rubber three times to his teammate's two.

Massa had a very disappointing afternoon after a promising start off the line. By the end of the first lap, the Brazilian driver was up to P4 and was holding off the faster Button behind. But his Ferrari was visibly slower than the McLaren, and over the 58 laps of Albert Park Massa ceded place after place, ending the afternoon in P9. Despite praising the Pirellis in the pre-season, the Ferrari driver appeared to struggle on the new tyres. If he is not able to get the measure of them in the next few races, and if he loses more ground to teammate Fernando Alonso, Massa's Ferrari future will be called into question once more.

While the latter stages of Sunday's race delivered some DRS-driven passes, the much lauded festival of overtaking turned out to be something of a damp squib. That could be track specific, and we should wait at least until the European leg of the season to pass judgement, but there is a chance that the FIA will scrap the device if it fails to deliver as promised.

The Pirellis were the star of the show this afternoon, and the majority of overtaking manoeuvres came about as a consequence of varying grip levels between drivers on different strategies. The degradation was better than feared, but the Italian tyre supplier appear to have done an excellent job in fulfilling their brief to spice up the show. Based on Perez' one-stop success, however, we might see a lot of teams opting to return to the dependable – if dull – strategy wherever possible.

Renault had a game of two halves. While Petrov drove mightily to score his first career podium, Nick Heidfeld was largely invisible, finishing the race in P14 and one lap down on the leaders. Heidfeld's race was essentially determined by his poor qualifying position, and Petrov's performance shows that, with the right result on Saturday, the Enstone team will be one to watch on Sundays this year.

Force India were another team whose day was marred by poor qualifying positions on Saturday. Adrian Sutil managed to get ahead of rookie teammate Paul di Resta, but neither man finished in the points. Given that the Mercedes-powered cars were fastest through the speed trap this weekend, Force India should perform better at the high-speed, low-downforce circuits on the calendar.

It was a largely positive day for Toro Rosso, and Sebastian Buemi squeaked into the points in P10 following a moment of brief contact with teammate Jaime Alguersuari – who finished in P13 – on the first corner. But expectations were high going into the season opener, as the Italian team's double-decker floor showed a lot of promise in winter testing. While Toro Rosso are unlikely to be regular podium visitors this season, a contact-free race should see the team regularly in the lower end of the points with both drivers.

Like engine-mates – and court house opponents – Renault, Lotus' race was one of mixed fortunes. The car showed better race pace than it was able to demonstrate in qualifying, but Heikki Kovalainen was sidelined with a water leak on lap 19, prematurely ending his afternoon. Jarno Trulli had a better time of it, finishing two laps down on the front runners and one down on Heidfeld. Lotus have undoubtedly made progress in the off-season, but their targeted opponents of Sauber and Toro Rosso appear to have made greater leaps forward, especially where qualifying is concerned. If Lotus can get to grips with the new Renault engine, and improve its integration into their car, they should be able to see better qualifying pace and better race results as a consequence.

Sebastian Vettel commanded the race from pole, handing over the lead only when pitting for new tyres. The current world champion got an excellent start, held the lead going into the first corner, and opened up a 2.4s lead on Hamilton over the course of the first lap. Vettel has clearly started as he means to go on, and the young German will be hard to beat over the course of the season if he doesn't run into any mechanical gremlins along the way.

Teammate Mark Webber had a more challenging afternoon. He was in P3 until the first round of pit-stops, but struggled on the harder tyre compound and never really recovered. Tyre strategy is obviously going to play a major role in Webber's 2011 championship campaign, but it will be vital that the Australian driver – whose P5 finish today equaled his previous best result at Albert Park – find extra pace in qualifying before Vettel disappears off into the distance.

Hamilton brought home a podium finish for McLaren, an impressive result given his dramatic afternoon. The British driver's floor spent much of the race slowly unpeeling itself from the car following a run over the kerbs and onto the grass, and Hamilton lost a lot of downforce as a result. But the 2008 world champion demonstrated impressive car control, nursing the MP4-26 to a P2 finish in the race. Also of note were Hamilton's impressive tyre management skills, which seem to have undergone a dramatic improvement in the off-season. He managed to pit twice to his teammate's three stops, and Button is widely acknowledged to be one of the paddock's great preservers of rubber. If Hamilton can keep a mature head on his shoulders for the rest of the season, today's result seems to imply that he will be a strong candidate for the title come Interlagos in November.

Kamui Kobayashi and Fernando Alonso did not perform according to expectation this afternoon, although neither had a bad race. It was more that their results were not particularly noteworthy – Alonso spent another Sunday staring at the back end of Petrov's car, much to his frustration, while notorious overtaker Kobayashi found himself passed by cars on fresher rubber.

Alonso got a bad start, and dropped from P5 to P9 by the first corner before fighting his way back up to P4. The first man the Spaniard passed on his battle to the front was Kobayashi, who didn't seem able to fight for his position in the manner to which we became accustomed at the end of last year.

But neither Alonso nor Kobayashi should be written off at all, never mind this early in the season. Both drivers are thrilling to watch on track, and given better starts in future races we should expect to see battles from them both.

It was a disappointing day for both Mercedes and Williams; the two teams saw double retirements. First out was Pastor Maldonado, who retired on lap 10 with mechanical issues. Next to fall was Michael Schumacher, who pitted for a tyre change on lap 1 after contact with Alguersuari. The collision resulted in damage to the German driver's rear end, and likely suspension issues, so the seven-time champion elected to retire in the name of safety.

Nico Rosberg joined his teammate in the pits on lap 22, thanks to cooling problems caused by a collision with Rubens Barrichello; the Brazilian driver hung on until lap 49 before admitting defeat and retiring. Before his retirement, the stewards issued Barrichello with a drive-through penalty for causing the collision that led to Rosberg's retirement.

Given that three of the four Williams and Mercedes retirements occurred as a direct result of on-track action, the unfortunate Sunday afternoon is unlikely to spell season-long doom for either team. Mercedes would appear to be in a stronger position than Williams, however, as Maldonado's retirement came as a consequence of an unspecified mechanical fault, which could lead to further problems over the course of the season if not quickly identified and rectified.

Meanwhile, Virgin's result showed that the car is still off the pace. Rookie driver Jerome D'Ambrosio finished Sunday's race three laps down on the leaders, while Timo Glock was not a classified finisher, thanks to problems with damaged wheel pegs after a pit stop that led to the German spending five laps in the garage while the team got to work on his car. No team is immune from pit stop problems, but it was a disappointing result from the team, who should have been the only "new" outfit to see both cars earn a classified finish.

Neither HRT driver qualified for Sunday's race, and only 22 cars took to the track in Albert Park. The Spanish team need to find extra qualifying pace as a matter of urgency, or they risk sitting out the bulk of the season as their rivals' development leaves them further and further adrift.

Race results

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) – 25 points
2. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) – 18pts
3. Vitaly Petrov (Renault) – 15pts
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) – 12pts
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) – 10pts
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) – 8pts
7. Sergio Perez (Sauber) – 6pts
8. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) – 4pts
9. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) – 2pts
10. Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) – 1pt
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India)
12. Paul di Resta (Force India)
13. Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso)
14. Nick Heidfeld (Renault)
15. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
16. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)

Timo Glock (Virgin) NC

Rubens Barrichello (Williams) RET lap 49

Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) RET lap 22

Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) RET lap 19

Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) RET lap 19

Pastor Maldonado (Williams) RET lap 10

Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) DNQ

Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) DNQ

F1 Sofa Blog – Saubers disqualified from the Melbourne Grand Prix

After an impressive performance from rookie driver Sergio Perez, both Sauber drivers have been disqualified from this afternoon's race as a result of a technical infringement.

Details of the technical infringement have yet to be confirmed by the stewards, but the complaint relates to the bodywork on both cars.

According to reports currently circulating online, both Saubers were running with an illegal rear wing. SpeedTV reporter Will Buxton is reporting that "the concave radius of sections of the three rear wing elements in contact with external air were smaller than the legal 100mm."

The new race results are:

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13. Jarno Trulli (Lotus)
14. Jerome D'Ambrosio (Virgin)

Timo Glock (Virgin) NC

Rubens Barrichello (Williams) RET lap 49
Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) RET lap 22
Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) RET lap 19
Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) RET lap 19
Pastor Maldonado (Williams) RET lap 10

Tonio Liuzzi (HRT) DNQ
Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) DNQ

Sergio Perez (Sauber) DSQ
Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) DSQ

F1 Sofa Blog – Sunday press conference in Melbourne

Sebastian Vettel might have won the Australian Grand Prix, but the biggest grin at the post-race press conference could be found on Vitaly Petrov's face. The Russian driver scored his first career podium this afternoon.

In a wide-ranging press conference that touched on a variety of subjects, the topics of note were Red Bull's pace, Petrov's confidence, Lewis Hamilton's floor, Vettel's victory, and the drivers' thoughts on KERS, the DRS, and the Pirelli tyres.

First up, the damage to Hamilton's McLaren. "The plank and part of the floor is massively damaged," the British driver said. "I don't know when it happened. It might have happened when I went off but I think it maybe happened before that. I was losing quite a lot of downforce so in the end I was just trying to nurse the car home and bring in those points as we need them for the rest of the year.

"I went underneath [the car]," he continued, "and you can lift [the floor] up and it is flapping, so when that touches the ground it just stalls the underneath of the car and disturbs a lot of the flow. I was having some oversteer moments every now and then, some stalling through high speed corners, and under braking, particularly, the car was a little bit unstable. Maybe that was the reason, when I was braking into Turn 1 it was on the floor, and I just locked up my left and right and went straight on. I had to bring the braking back quite a bit after that, so I am not really sure, maybe I had a bit of debris or something on the circuit, I don't know. We will try and find out."

Hamilton also talked about his (comparatively) poor start, which saw the McLaren driver come close to losing a place to Mark Webber. "I'm sure the dirty side had an effect on that," he said, "but the guys behind me had a better start, at least, I saw Jenson had a slightly better start than me. ... What I know is that when I dumped the clutch, I just got masses of wheelspin. I did make a change to the clutch settings on the way around as I was asked to, and maybe it was too aggressive, and after that I was just really trying to recover from it, so I was just wheel spinning. Fortunately I had KERS to save me, but if I hadn't had that I would have lost position to Mark and potentially to Jenson."

Asked about the new rules and regulations for the 2011 season, the drivers were largely positive, although unspecific with regard to the overtaking assistance offered by the DRS.

"I think [the new rules are] very positive," Vettel said. "We have to make some compliments to Pirelli. After the tests we were all a bit scared but coming here in the end we didn't see as many stops as expected. ... I think the massive advantage that you all have is that you actually saw the race. We didn't. As far as I know, I had the opportunity to use [the DRS] a couple of times, as I said, getting close to Jenson, sometimes when I was close to a lapped car, for instance. I cannot really answer your question because I don't know what happened behind me."

Hamilton added: "I only used it once and it didn't really make too much difference because I wasn't close enough to the car in front, so I can't really comment too much on it."

Petrov had more direct experience of the DRS. "I used it a few times," he said. "I was lapping some cars and Alonso was behind and it helped me pull away from him a little bit. So as soon as I saw my blue light come on, I used it, so I think I used it two or three times."

KERS, and Red Bull's lack of it, was a hot topic this afternoon.

"I think [Vettel's performance] makes it very clear that they have a fantastic car as they have had for the last year and a half," Hamilton said.

“They’ve had the fastest car since towards the end of 2009, and they continue to have the fastest car, but to turn it over to what we’ve done, coming from a car which was probably going to arrive here probably two seconds off the pace to being maybe a second off in qualifying, if they had KERS, and race pace being very, very similar, I think that’s probably the most impressive part for me.”

Vettel was pleased with his KERS-free win, but admitted the team was working on their device for future races. “I think it’s pretty obvious,” he said. “If you ask Lewis how much KERS is worth, there is performance in there. Obviously we work very, very hard on that. It’s something we’re not proud of, but we need to keep working hard and improve for two weeks’ time. We have solutions, more or less, which should help us and make it possible to answer your question. But surely, you can’t rely on just having a good car or everything running smoothly. You want every single bit that you can get to make your car go quicker so KERS is one of the basic things this year and it’s worth something between three to five tenths a lap. I don’t need to tell you how much that is over a race distance. So, yes, we are working on that.”

Vettel also provided a detailed analysis of his Sunday afternoon. “The first stint we have seen there is a lot of things that we need to learn and understand with the tyres,” he explained. “Lewis was a bit better in control of his tyres in the first stint, so he was catching up, right up to the point that we pitted. Then it was crucial for myself to get past Jenson, which worked. He was on used tyres, so it was quite a big difference at that stage plus, because of the wing, I could get really close after turn one and then into turn three/four pass him around the outside.

“It was crucial to stay ahead of Lewis,” the Red Bull driver continued. “After that the car was getting a bit better. We made some small tweaks at the pit-stop, which seemed to help a lot, also for tyre life, tyre wear and from then onwards, I think, second part of the race, I didn’t know what was going on behind Lewis. If he was under pressure or not but he took it a bit easier, wasn’t pushing that hard anymore, So, I could do the same and just control the gap to him. The last part of the race was a bit more quiet. At some stage it was quite entertaining when I had Sergio Perez behind me. We can see how big a difference it can make being on different tyres even though you are on the same fuel load.”

Finally, first-time Sunday press conference attendee Petrov was brimming with confidence following an impressive drive to the podium.

“To be honest, I am very happy to be here, sitting with these guys,” the Russian driver said. “All weekend was pretty good for us but after the test we did not know where we were. But when we came here we had some new parts, and from free practice our car looked very strong and also qualifying was not too bad. Then we just focused on our race and today the team did everything perfectly and we must be proud about our place today.”

Petrov dismissed talk of increased pressure from Fernando Alonso towards the end of the race, saying “it was not so much, just [the] last lap maybe, and he was still quite a way from me. Even if he wanted to attack me, he needed some time, but my tyres were still in quite good shape, so I could do a good pull-away from the last corner.”

Asked whether today’s performance was affirmation of his ability to serve as team leader in only his second season in Formula 1, Petrov showed little doubt in his abilities. “I don’t think I need to answer anything,” he said. “I think you can see and also.... Yes!”
