



Bahrain was my first race as an accredited F1 journalist, and it was a pretty incredible experience. I woke up on Wednesday morning and went to work in a typical office on the outskirts of a typical English town, and after work I took my suitcase off to Heathrow where I boarded a plane to Qatar. One transfer later and I was on a bus en route to Sakhir Circuit, ready to spend Thursday learning the F1 ropes on no sleep whatsoever. Start as you mean to go on, right?

F1 Bahrain Blog: Sakhir Circuit for beginners

I feel like such a noob. Everyone else in the media centre keeps leaping up and air-kissing people they've not seen since the start of the season, but I've not found anyone else looking lost that I can pretend to know. Except Nick Heidfeld, and I'm not sure he really wants to be leapt upon by a journalist who's still wearing the clothes she slept in on the plane.

But despite my nooblet status, people are being really friendly. Proper thanks must go to Autosport's Edd Straw, who took me under his wing at the airport, guided me to the media room, and helped me jump through all the signing-in hoops. I assumed that this was a cut-throat business, but first impressions show that whatever happens in pursuit of a story, the F1 crowd are willing to show debutantes the ropes.



There have been disappointments already, I'm afraid. First, my press pass is green, not red. That means I can't go on to the pitlane or grid unless I steal the red pass of someone who looks just like me. Not sure that's an option, really... But walking the paddock is brilliant - as this is a flyaway, the teams haven't brought their motorhomes. Instead, they've all got a different villa in a terrace, and as I type the various teams are gathering on their verandahs and doing the lunch/strategy thing.

In terms of celeb-spotting, it couldn't be much better. Within 30 seconds of entering the paddock I'd walked past both Fernando Alonso and Felipe Massa, both of whom were very patient with the hordes of cameramen walking backwards in front of them at a snail's pace. Then I spied Heidi, looking a bit lonesome in front of the Mercedes villa. Got my camera out, and before I could put it away Jenson Button walked past with his girlfriend. Need to balance my desire to take eleventy billion photos with the need to appear professional. This is the downside to being both a fan and a member of the press.

So, what can I tell you about Bahrain that you might not know already? Apparently the race is known amongst the media for being the most stress-free of the races. I'd anticipated making my own way through the airport and across to my hotel before missioning over to the circuit post-shower. Boy, was I wrong.

Got off the plane and there was a man holding an 'F1 Media' sign. He then escorted us through a special fast-track immigration area set aside for F1 teams and media (probably the closest I'll get to feeling part of an F1 team...), before putting us on a minibus to Sakhir. I wanted to take photos of it all, but when I say fast-tracked, I mean it – we were on the minibus within 20 minutes of getting off the plane, probably less.

Now I am in the media centre, downing free coffee till the cows come home. I need a nap, and a shower, and a clean set of clothes, especially if I want to go about making friends without acquiring the nickname 'Ms Stinky'. I think the reality is going to be a baby-wipe bath and lots of deodorant in the media centre loos.

Life as an F1 journalist – it's all glamour, make no mistake!

F1 Bahrain Blog: The first press conference

Yay, the season has officially begun! And while I'd love to tell you I was sitting in the same room as Michael Schumacher, Felipe Massa, Fernando Alonso, Lewis Hamilton, and Jenson Button, it would be a lie. I didn't find the room till after the press conference had started, so I'm watching it on telly in the media centre.

But about 85% of the media centre is journos watching the conference on telly, so I don't feel so bad. It's air-conditioned in here, which probably explains why more people can be found in front of their laptops than chatting to drivers.

The circuit staff have been very helpful and friendly, but only up to a point – when asked where things are, they direct you via landmarks that I've been unable to find. As a result, I am starving! Apparently there's catering for the media, but all the directions I've been given have been different, so there's been a lot of wandering around in circles and absolutely no food.

But back to the racing. Not actually much of interest to report from the press conference – it began with a group hug, and predictable comments along the lines of 'hope you're all still friends in Abu Dhabi'. The drivers have all given pretty standard quotes on being excited about the start of the season, wanting to race again, and finding new challenges. It's the same stuff we here every year, so I won't repeat it here.

Massa's glad to 'be back in business – nice to be back'. The Brazilian wants to start racing again, and wants to start the 2010 season with a bang. Not a bad bang, mind you – a good start that will enable him to compete for the championship throughout the season. Like teammate Alonso and countless tifosi, Massa is excited about this year's Ferrari.

Schuey's just said he thinks he can make it three wins at Bahrain, but fellow two-time Sakhir winner Alonso also wants to see his third Bahraini victory this weekend. Should be a good competition, even if the race does come down to a tussle between Ferrari past and present. The Schumacher-Alonso on-track are likely to provide some of the season's racing highlights – the Spaniard beat the German legend in the latter's last two seasons in F1, and there are definitely some old scores to settle.

From the sounds of it, the drivers are as curious about the season to come as we are – no one knows quite how the racing will pan out under the new regulations. Schuey thinks there's now more scope for strategy, which is never a bad thing. Alonso wants to wait and see before making judgements, much like teammate Massa. Lewis has called the new season a new challenge, and thinks the drivers will put on a good show for the fans.

Jenson's excited about the new qualifying regulations, but thinks that the performance differential between qualies and race will be greater than it's been in recent memory.

The biggest shocker of the press conference so far – insert sarcasm here – is that everyone wants to hear Schumacher's opinion on everything from the racing to come to the price of milk. I'm beginning to feel sorry for the other four – despite being some of the grid's big hitters, they're not getting much attention from the floor. Possibly they should have had a separate press conference just for Schuey – that his return is the big story can't have been a surprise.

Ooh, a McLaren question, all about the team dynamic! Jenson and Lewis stop joking with each other in the back row and start joking with the press. Button and Hamilton are teasing the media for ignoring them, and claiming that the good relationship we see before us is all acting. Apparently they start throwing spitballs as soon as the cameras stop rolling. Sounds pretty tongue in cheek to me, but that could change once the racing starts...

Jenson just burned Schuey – 'it's great having Michael back, it makes me feel young again'. Everyone laughed, but Schumacher cringed a bit. I don't blame him.

The Michael-mania seems to have calmed down a bit now – we're having questions addressed to the other drivers for a change. A lot of them alluding to the challenge of racing Schumacher, but still – it's about time the McLaren and Ferrari boys got a decent chance to talk.

I know it's old news now, but I still can't get over seeing Schuey in silver. In fact, he's the only driver at the press conference not wearing any red – Jenson and Lewis have got red hats on, and the Ferrari boys haven't decided to break with tradition and turn up in purple. Although it would be pretty funny if they did – aren't Shanghai qualies on April Fools' Day? Methinks I smell a brilliant joke...

Award for dumbest question of the press conference: 'If Michael keeps winning and winning, will it be bad for the other drivers?' Ummm... Lewis didn't know how to answer that without being sarcastic, and the others were having problems. It's almost as good as 'what colour is your blue dress?' and 'do sad things make you unhappy?'.

And now it's over. Fingers crossed I can make sense of the directions to the food this time!

F1 Bahrain Blog: And they're off!

All I can hear is engines. Sweet, sweet engines – do you reckon I can get it as my ringtone?

Having spoken to more friendly media peeps, the best place to be for practice is right here in the media centre. There are banks of TVs showing the action on track with live timings, and if I squint a bit I can actually read them.

The footage I'm watching is pretty similar to the stuff I'm used to seeing on telly – panning shots of the track, close-ups of the cars, and footage of the garages and pitlanes. I can't tell you how exciting it is just to be here – I may be looking at a screen, but I can hear the action outside, and I am covered in goose bumps. It feels a little bit like falling in love, to get all sentimental on you.

So, practice. Pretty much everyone's out on the track, as the drivers are as keen for the season to start as we are. Track temperature is 37 degrees, while the air outside is a more refreshing (yeah, right) 29 degrees. And this at 10am! I am beginning to understand Kimi Raikkonen's ice-cream passion.

One of the Virgins (sorry...) is just pulling in to the garage. Still seems to have all its parts, which must be a relief for the team. Have heard a rumour that the car has actually spent some time in a wind tunnel, so I'm going to see if I can get that confirmed for you. Apparently the design was all CFD, as has been widely publicised, but the team used the wind tunnel data to corroborate their computer predictions. Wouldn't be surprised if that turns out to be the case, but remember – at the moment it's just a rumour, albeit a believable one. And the logical is rarely true in F1, as we know all too well.

HRT are still fiddling with their car, but all the other drivers (except di Grassi) have now completed at least an installation lap. We'll see how long it takes the Spaniards to get on to the track – everyone's waiting with baited breath to see how the car survives what is essentially its first test session. Apparently there are hydraulic issues with Karun Chandhok's car, but hopefully we'll see some action from Bruno Senna before too long.

Installation laps completed, it's now a bit quieter. Most people have returned to the garage so the teams can do all manner of checks and tweaks before the session begins in earnest. We've got another 73 minutes of morning practice, so it's all still to play for.

I'm going to head off into the paddock and see if I can get you any photos or quotes from the drivers. More of a practice report to come once there's actually been some action to write about. The big news at the circuit today (and yesterday) is the legality of the McLaren. The FIA have said the car's okay, but the other teams are muttering about interpreting the spirit of the rules. Remind anyone of the double diffusers last year?

Basically the fuss all boils down to a hole in the cockpit, which McLaren say is used to cool down the driver. And it may well do. But when running on a straight, if the driver chooses to use his knee or elbow to block the hole, the rear wing stalls, generating straight-line speed. Ingenious, especially in these days of the homologated chassis, meaning the other teams can't copy the idea straight away.

Anyway, off to the paddocks – back with more news by the time you've got to work!

F1 Bahrain Blog: Force India top first practice

Wow. This morning's practice session was full of surprises in the intra-team battles.

Jenson Button bested teammate Lewis Hamilton, Mark Webber posted a faster time than Sebastian Vettel, and Nico Rosberg must be sporting a mile-wide grin – his best time takes him to eighth on the timesheets, while the legendary Michael Schumacher came in tenth.

Of course, this is only a practice session, and I don't yet know who was trying out what in terms of fuel weights, new parts, and the like. But I imagine Vijay Mallya is sporting a smile not dissimilar to the one found on Rosberg's face – Adrian Sutil came top of the timesheets with a 1.56.583, and teammate Liuzzi wasn't far behind, in at seventh with a 1.57.194.

The downer of this morning's session was the total lack of running for poor Karun Chandhok. As one of the hacks in the media centre put it, his car 'crapped out its hydraulics at 4am'. Not yet sure how long it's going to take them to get the car back on its feet – or on its feet, given that we were expecting a maiden run this morning – but with any luck the Indian driver will make his F1 debut this afternoon.

Fellow newbies Bruno Senna and Lucas di Grassi didn't post any times in this morning's session, but both men were out for installation laps.

So what does it all mean? Nothing much. Although there are already discussions going on in the media centre about the psychological importance of these times – Lewis won't be happy to have been beaten by Button, even though the difference between the two men was 0.095 seconds. I can't begin to comprehend how small of a fraction that is – F1 is a crazy world dominated by milliseconds, and it takes longer than that just to blink!

Similarly, Schumacher and Vettel are probably a bit grumpy about having come in second to their number one rivals. We'll see in the afternoon if that grumpy manifests itself in the form of motivation and added speed, or if there's a performance slump. I'd be surprised to see the latter in such pros – hopefully any demotivation will take a few more races to start affecting lap times.

But back to the timings. Alonso put in a sterling performance to come second for Ferrari, a fact hardly likely to shock. Teammate Massa was about 0.3s behind, but the two men were split by Robert Kubica, who was a surprise in third place with a time of 1.57.041. I say surprise because the Renault was generally thought to be off the pace when testing ended – if this performance continues, the boys at Enstone may just have dragged Renault out of its fallow period.

The full set of timings is below, and make of them what you will. Not much of a surprise to see almost all of the big four in the top ten, and equally unsurprising to see the new teams bringing up the rear – the fact that they're here and ready to race is impressive enough, given the timescales they were operating to.

Bring on the afternoon session!

F1 Bahrain Blog: TGI Friday afternoon

And it's all change on the timesheets, all afternoon. The drivers are going for it in some longer sessions, word is that qualifying-style laps are more likely to happen tomorrow.

Skipped watching some of the early laps as I wanted to get out to the paddock and record the engines. Managed a rubbish recording on my phone, so tomorrow I'll do the same with the laptop and see if it sounds any better. Have now officially decided that if I ever get married, my wedding march will be F1 engines. Maybe if I get good enough at the journalism I can have the three-seater Renault F1 car as my wedding car?

Anyway, back to the serious business of racing. Times are obviously changing constantly, but as I type this Nico Rosberg's top of the sheets with a 1.55.409 and has been for a good 10 minutes. Next up is Lewis Hamilton, whose 1.55.854 puts him in the middle of a Mercedes sandwich. Schumacher's 0.494s slower than his teammate at the moment, but he's been steadily climbing up. The rest of the top ten is Button, Hulkenberg, Vettel, Sutil, Barrichello, Liuzzi, and Petrov, in that order.

Not much in the way of decent times from the Scuderia yet, but it looks like they're going for race simulations. Hulkenberg's the only driver in the top ten to have done more than ten laps, whereas the Ferrari boys have done 13 (Alonso) and 17 (Massa).

The keen-eyed race fans among you will spot that none of the lap times I've been quoting bear any relationship to last year's race or qualifying laps. It's not that the cars now weigh more than a herd of elephants, or that everyone's doing a go-slow to look extra special tomorrow. The length of the F1 circuit has been extended by half a kilometre, and lap times have gone up accordingly.

The new circuit involves six new corners but no new overtaking zones. Should be some interesting break wear on the new hairpin which joins old circuit and new, and the added corners won't be helping the tyres any.

Speaking of tyres, the powers that be have decreed that the teams now have even fewer tyres for a race weekend than they used to. The assumption was that we would see significantly less running on Friday as a result, but that doesn't seem to be the case today. I guess after the Spanish weather in February, this is the closest they're getting to a full-on test session.

Big 'ooh' from the press room as Alguersuari span off the track just now at turn 13, but once he'd pointed himself in the right direction he kept going like the well-trained racer he is. So far this afternoon there have been a couple of off-track moments, but nothing serious enough to cause more than a few seconds' delay.

Signing off now before the timesheets change completely, but I'll be back in about an hour with a run-down of the finished session.

F1 Bahrain Blog: The power of spin

'I'm so dizzy, my head is spinning. Like a whirlpool it never ends...'

Spin was the name of the game in Friday's afternoon practice session, with drivers off at turn 22 (Vettel), turn 13 (Alguersuari), turn 23 (Massa), turn 18 (Schumacher). All the offs have been more of a diversion than anything else - the drivers have continued within seconds.

Oddly, the offs seem to be coming mainly at the end of the circuit, and not in the new section which is unfamiliar and - according to the Renault team - pretty bumpy, especially at turn 6. I'd imagine that in the race itself we're likely to see a few offs in the new bit - drivers obviously have more of a reason to push in the race than they do in practice, and if Renault are right about the bumps we could see some handling issues in the early stages of the race, when the cars are more cumbersome.

HRT aren't having the best day of it, poor things. Their problems are no worse than Virgin's first few days of testing, but this is a race weekend, not a test session. God only knows if both their cars will be in shape to start the race on Sunday, let alone finish it - I predict late nights aplenty for the poor mechanics.

Karun Chandhok's car simply isn't running - he's the only man not to have completed a lap today, although Buemi was stuck in the garage all afternoon. A lost day here is not a good thing. In addition to the hydraulic problems reported earlier, there are now clutch and gearbox issues with Chandhok's car. As for Bruno Senna, he managed to complete a number of laps, but was a full 11.5 seconds off the pace. That's a dangerous difference in speed, and the FIA may decide to bring back the 107% rule.

For the uninitiated, the 107% rule requires that all drivers lap within 107% of the pole time. Any slower is deemed to be a hazard to the rest of the grid, and with good reason. The rule's been off the books since the end of the 2002 season, but a near 12-second difference in pace is reason enough to reinstate it. If Jean Todt and co. decide to bring it back, HRT will be the only team affected - Virgin were also within a cat's whisker of that magical 107, at over 9 seconds slower than Rosberg, but by the end of the afternoon session the difference had dropped to 6.6s and 6.7s for the two drivers.

Yellow flag in sector 1 just after the chequered flag dropped - it, and the safety car, are now out for Bruno Senna, who seemed to lose all steering - instead of turning into the corner, the young Brazilian drove straight into the long run-off area before coming to a halt. They've now pushed his car onto the grass, and that's the end of the session. Autosport are reporting that there was a problem with one of his wheel nuts, and I'll confirm that later if I can.

And that's the end of Friday practice. Times are...

1. Nico Rosberg - Mercedes - 1:55.409
2. Lewis Hamilton - McLaren-Mercedes - 1:55.854 + 0.445
3. Michael Schumacher - Mercedes - 1:55.903 + 0.494
4. Jenson Button - McLaren-Mercedes - 1:56.076 + 0.667
5. Sebastian Vettel - Red Bull-Renault - 1:56.459 + 1.050
6. Nico Hulkenberg - Williams-Cosworth - 1:56.501 + 1.092
7. Felipe Massa - Ferrari - 1:56.555 + 1.146
8. Vitaly Petrov - Renault - 1:56.750 + 1.341
9. Fernando Alonso - Ferrari - 1:57.140 + 1.731
10. Pedro de la Rosa - Sauber-Ferrari - 1:57.255 + 1.846
11. Kamui Kobayashi - Sauber-Ferrari - 1:57.352 + 1.943
12. Adrian Sutil - Force India-Mercedes - 1:57.361 + 1.952
13. Rubens Barrichello - Williams-Cosworth - 1:57.452 + 2.043
14. Tonio Liuzzi - Force India-Mercedes - 1:57.833 + 2.424
15. Robert Kubica - Renault - 1:58.155 + 2.746
16. Jaime Alguersuari - Toro Rosso-Ferrari - 1:59.799 + 4.390
17. Mark Webber - Red Bull-Renault - 2:00.444 + 5.035
18. Heikki Kovalainen - Lotus-Cosworth - 2:00.873 + 5.464
19. Jarno Trulli - Lotus-Cosworth - 2:00.990 + 5.581
20. Timo Glock - Virgin-Cosworth - 2:02.037 + 6.628
21. Lucas di Grassi - Virgin-Cosworth - 2:02.188 + 6.779
22. Bruno Senna - HRT-Cosworth - 2:06.968 + 11.559
23. Sebastien Buemi - Toro Rosso-Ferrari
24. Karun Chandhok - HRT-Cosworth

F1 Bahrain Blog: The Friday press conference

It's a brand new press conference and a brand new crowd – this afternoon's rabbits in headlights are Lucas di Grassi, Nico Hulkenberg, Robert Kubica, Sebastian Vettel, and Heikki Kovalainen.

The new boys have been asked what it's like to be in F1, and you could probably predict their answers. I'll give you a clue – no one's said it's been rubbish or a let-down. I'm looking forward to a few funny comments from Sebastian Vettel, because from where I'm sitting this looks like it's going to be a standard issue press conference, with little of the silliness we saw in yesterday's session.

The drivers are praising the hard work done by their teams; I'm sure you're shocked. Heikki was busy tweeting while waiting for the press conference to start, but I think he's now hidden his phone under the table, as he's answering questions in the usual polished manner.

I applaud their professionalism, but I'd really like to see a bit more of the drivers' personalities, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that. After all, other than a bunch of quotes reused by media outlets around the world, what do we actually gain from these Q&A sessions? Even when the drivers are different, the answers are generally the same.

The only recent exception I can think of was the legendary post-Brazil/pre-Abu Dhabi spat between Jarno Trulli and Adrian Sutil, which is probably the funniest press conference since someone threw a shoe at George W. Bush.

Totally tuned out for ages, because it was that thrilling. But the drivers have now been asked for their opinions on the new circuit, and none of them seem to like it. Vettel's talking about a change in grip levels between the old track and the new, which is interesting. Both Heikki and Sebastian prefer the old track, and I'm sure they're not the only drivers who do. We shall see how long this extended circuit lasts – maybe we'll see the old F1 circuit restored for next year?

Not sure how much value this piece is adding to the general Grand Prix experience. Think I'll call it quits for now and see what sort of paddock action is underway. There's another press conference later, this time from Jean Todt, and it will be interesting to see if he brings back the 107% rule.

F1 Bahrain Blog: The final dress rehearsal

And the pitlane has just opened for the first free practice session of the season. Drivers are piling onto the pre-rubbered track for their installation laps, where they're dealing with a track temperature of 42 degrees and an air temperature of 32. Definitely hotter than yesterday.

One thing I noticed last night was the smell of the paddock in the evening. In the mornings all you can smell is heat – that certain scent of sun-baked stone and sunshine that Brits tend to associate with holidays. Last night, however, it smelled like a supermarket carpark after the joyriders had been out for a spin. Melted rubber was so thick in the air you could taste it.

Almost everyone's now done an installation lap – the two Red Bulls are just emerging from the pits, and we've yet to see movement from HRT, but the on-track situation is changing as I type. Predictably. Sebastian Vettel's just posted purples in all three sectors, but it's far too early to make any assumptions based on that.

The general sense is that we'll see some qualifying-style laps from the teams this morning, so there might be a one-lap pecking order about to emerge.

The beauty of this season, however, is that two strategies are needed to win – you must be fast enough in qualifying not to get caught in the middle of the pack, but then be able to eke out good performance from both cars and tyres to see you through the race. It's a combination of long- and short-game strategy that promises to keep us on our toes till Abu Dhabi, as the setup is different at every circuit.

And a tyre has just popped off a car and rolled along the track, leading to a brief yellow in sector 10. Yay for safety! Timo Glock's just made it back to the Virgin garages with only three wheels, which is no mean feat. Doesn't say much for the car, mind you – it was a flying wheel that led to the death of Henry Surtees at Brands Hatch last year, and no one wants a repeat of that.

The leader board is changing constantly, but there aren't really any surprises at the top – the first eight positions are currently held by the drivers from Ferrari, McLaren, Mercedes, and Red Bull. Lap times are hovering in the high 1.54s and low 1.55s, with a gap of 1.5 seconds between P1 and P8.

Bruno Senna has just set his first lap time of the day – 11.5 seconds off the pace of leader Felipe Massa, which is the same margin the Brazilian had at the end of yesterday's second free practice session. The only way is up, right? And while we might not see young Senna breaking any lap records this weekend, getting inside that magical 107% margin would be a psychological victory, even if it's not currently required by the regulations.

So what was going on with Glock's wheel? After all the moaning about the new teams being a safety hazard, this is the last thing they – or the FIA – needed. The Virgin garage is now the scene of a detective novel, with an FIA technical delegate playing the part of Sherlock Holmes. It seems that the wheel nut came off with the wheel – possibly something to do with the sub-two second tyre changes the mechanics have been training for? The teams all have new gadgets designed to make the pit stops as fast as possible, and it looks to me like Virgin don't have theirs working as it should.

According to the BBC, none of Virgin's wheel nuts were tight enough, and the other three wheels were also loose and at risk of coming off. (By the way, it is impossible to type the words Virgin, nuts, and tight without giggling like a schoolgirl. Everyone in the media centre is battling the same demon.) Turns out their wheel gun just wasn't doing the business.

Karun Chandhok is in serious danger of not being able to race this weekend. Having sat out both of yesterday's sessions while his car was being worked on incessantly, the Indian needs to get on track and post a practice laptime or he won't be able to take part in qualifying later this afternoon. What a let-down that would be.

Other than Glock's Robin Reliant imitation earlier, this has been a pretty safe session so far. A few wobbles here and there, but with 15 minutes to go we've not seen any flags.

The top eight are pretty much the same as they were – Hamilton's been nosed out by Adrian Sutil, and needs to find about 0.03s to beat Mark Webber to P8. Button's running well, although not astoundingly so – he's spent most of this morning's session in P6, behind the two Mercedes, the two Ferraris, and Vettel (although not in that order).

But at least Button's running – Lewis will be sitting out the rest of the session due to problems with the car – a loose brake duct. The team are confident all will be fixed in time for qualifying this afternoon, but that means the 2008 champion is going to have to pull a stellar qualifying performance out of thin air, with no time spent playing around with tyres and fuel weights. But if anyone can do it, Lewis can.

Felipe Massa's 1.54.761 saw him top the timesheets for the bulk of the session, with Rosberg a mere 0.084s behind. The young German has managed to keep his legendary teammate in his rear-view mirrors in all three practice sessions, and it's causing a bit of disharmony in the Mercedes garage. I don't think many people expected Schumacher to be off the pace of his teammate, Michael least of all.

But the final minutes have seen Spanish double-champion Fernando Alonso find that legendary six-tenths he's said to bring to the car – a lap of 1.54.009 has seen him take P1, with Massa 0.662s behind. And all change as the clocks tick down to mark the end of practice in Bahrain – Webber and Schumacher push Massa down into fourth, and Robert Kubica's taken Liuzzi's P8 spot.

Nico Rosberg's on a flying lap, and it looks like he might take P1. I'm not sure he cares, as long as he gets Michael back behind him. A groan in the press centre as Nico misses Alonso's time by 0.269 seconds, but he's beaten Schumacher, and it's the intra-team battles that count. Maybe the presence of dad Keke, here for the champions' parade, has provided some extra motivation?

Chequered flag has dropped, with a few drivers still out on track. Doesn't look like anyone will beat Alonso's time, although Massa's giving it a go. The Brazilian made it over the line in 1.54.739s, keeping him in sixth.

Safety car's been deployed, and there's a yellow in sector 9.

Bruno Senna's trimmed the gap to 9.902 seconds, a definite improvement. Still not great, though. Looks like we'll only see one HRT car on tomorrow's grid, as Chandhok never made it onto the track. No time either from di Grassi, but as he made it through yesterday's practice, he's allowed to take part in qualifying later.

Times to follow, but the finishing order was: Alonso, Rosberg, Webber, Schuey, Vettel, Massa, Button, Kubica, Liuzzi, Hulkenberg, Sutil, Hamilton, de la Rosa, Barrichello, Buemi, Alguersuari, Kobayashi, Petrov, Glock, Trulli, Kovalainen, Senna.

F1 Bahrain Blog: Ready, steady, go

Less than five minutes to go before the first qualifying session of the 2010 season gets underway. On the screens above me in the media centre, the drivers can be seen strapping in to the cars and getting ready to go.

Following this morning's session, all eyes will be on the big four. Ferrari and Mercedes topped the morning time sheets, with Red Bull and McLaren not far behind. Lewis Hamilton wasn't able to make the most of practice earlier, thanks to an issue with his brake duct. He will be keen to put all that

behind him and make the most of the afternoon.

HRT will also be the focus of some attention, as it turns out Karun Chandhok can try his hand at qualifying, car willing. Apparently qualies count as a practice session, which sounds a bit odd but is good news for the Indian.

No engines firing yet – it seems deathly quiet around here. Any second now, and the revving will begin in earnest. Ah, the calm before the storm.

I spoke too soon – Fernando Alonso, Lucas di Grassi, and Vitaly Petrov have made it on to the track. Virgin's first ever qualifying lap came in at over two minutes, nearly 10 seconds off the times we expect to see from the front runners. Alonso's first lap was a 1.55.972s, and the Spaniard will only get faster as the session wears on.

Track temperature at the start of the session is a rubber-blistering 47 degrees, while it's 34 degrees out in the sun. I spent the time between practice and qualies wandering around the paddock, where the teams were all inspecting their tyres. It was the first time I've been able to see tyre wear up close, and in addition to the graining we're all used to seeing, there were blisters. So different types of wear for the drivers to manage – who said F1 was easy?

Karun Chandhok has made it on to the track for an installation lap – no time posted yet, but we should see the HRT driver post his first laptime of the season within the next couple of minutes. And it's in – a 2.21.793s, which is nearly 30 seconds off the pace set by the front runners. No one expects to see him make it past Q1, meaning Chandhok's got about eight minutes to squeeze in all of his pre-race testing.

And he's not making too bad a job of it – Chandhok's latest lap is a 2.08.424s. But that's enough on the back of the grid – the real qualifying action is up front.

Rubens Barrichello is in ninth, with former Ferrari teammate Michael Schumacher behind him in tenth. Mark Webber and Sebastian Vettel have been trading places with each other and Felipe Massa at the top of the timesheets. No major surprises in the top ten – Adrian Sutil's currently in seventh, but Force India are no longer the backmarker they were a few years ago.

The drop zone is fairly predictable – six of the seven drivers set to drop out are driving for the grid's three new teams, while Kamui Kobayashi is currently the last driver set to go. His time of 1.57.497s puts him within a hair's breadth of Jaime Alguersuari, Pedro de la Rosa, and Sebastian Buemi, any of whom could be at risk if Kamui speeds up.

Tonio Liuzzi's just popped up in number 8, so both Force India drivers have made it into the top ten in this first qualifying session. The chequered flag has fallen, so it's all about fighting to stay in the top 17.

Knock out zone: Alguersuari, Glock, Trulli, Kovalainen, di Grassi, Senna, and Chandhok. So the three new teams have been knocked out of qualifying in their first session, something which will surprise no one. It was a good showing for all three teams, but especially HRT – for a long time it didn't look like Chandhok's car would make the session.

Not much to learn from the top ten, as there's still lots to play for in the next two sessions, but we've got both Force Indias, both Red Bulls, both Ferraris, and both Mercedes. The other two places have been snatched by Lewis Hamilton and Robert Kubica. No massive shocks, although Jenson Button's absence will probably get the internet abuzz.

F1 Bahrain Blog: Seven men down, 17 to go

And qualy two has started, hot on the heels of the end of Q1. The two Red Bulls are out for their installation laps, as teams are looking to make the most of the session.

With 17 men on the track, Q2 has got nearly the same number of players as 2009's Q1. And if USF1 had turned up, we'd be looking at 18 cars on the circuit this session. The drivers are probably relieved to have a fraction more space for their flying laps.

Times are changing non-stop, but the top ten is pretty similar to the Q1 standings. Button's currently sitting in P10; if he's still there in eight minutes time the world champion will be at risk of being knocked out before Q3.

Hamilton's earlier car troubles seem to have been resolved much as McLaren said they would be. Lewis is currently sitting in sixth, but is one of a number of drivers to have returned to the pits for the moment. Button is in the drop zone, but only needs a tenth or two to push former teammate Rubens Barrichello into 11th.

There are a few surprises on the timesheets – Schumacher's currently in ninth, so could be at risk of being knocked out if one of the bottom seven make a real push. There's a three second gap between P1 and P17, but the fight is getting ever closer.

With just under three minutes remaining of this session, everyone's leaving the garages for some more flying laps. The queue in the pitlane looked a bit like rush hour, if rush hour were really glamorous and aerodynamically designed. Maybe not.

So who has a rabbit to pull out of the hat? We've got less than a minute to go before the chequered flag, and Vettel is still leading the timesheets. Button's at serious risk of dropping out now, locking up on his last flying lap. He's okay on time, but this is his only chance to escape P2. Vettel and Alonso are showing the champion how it should be done – Vettel is king of the purples, and Alonso isn't far behind.

Button made it through by the skin of his teeth – if the champion wants to make a decent start at defending his title, he's going to need to find some of that Q3 pace that was a constant feature of the first half of the 2009 season. If Q3 is as close as Q2, Button might well find himself stuck in traffic in the middle of the pack – danger zone territory.

Where does that leave us for Q3? It's goodbye to Barrichello, Liuzzi, Hulkenberg, de la Rosa, Buemi, Kobayashi, and Petrov. Red Bull and Ferrari were definitely in charge of Q2, and both teams should be fighting for the front in the next session. McLaren and Mercedes saw both drivers make it through, but Button and Schumacher were definitely slower than their teammates – can they turn it around in the last ten minutes of qualifying?

Just a few minutes to go before the final session starts. It's all left to play for within the big four – eight men on track, desperate to beat their teammate.

F1 Bahrain Blog: It's the final countdown

And they're off! Hamilton is first on the track, joined by the two Ferraris. Both prancing horses are trying out the supersofts, and the flying laps have started.

Massa's fastest in sector 1 for the moment, with only six minutes to go. There's talk that some drivers won't even leave the pits for this session, banking on having a fresh set of qualifying tyres to use at the start of the race. There's a risk in qualifying ninth or tenth, in that the cars behind will have fresh tyres and you won't, but I don't like this sitting in the pits malarky. Doesn't seem very sporting.

Only the McLarens and Ferraris have turned up on the track so far – the way things stand right now, Button only needs to post a time to make it to the front few rows of the grid. And he's in the pits for a tyre change – that gives the champ only one lap to set a decent time for position.

And the cars are emerging from the pits at last, with 2.5 minutes to go. This new qualifying tyres for the top ten rule seems to have taken some of the excitement out of Q3, which is disappointing – everyone's sitting in the pits to preserve their tyres, and then hanging all their hopes on one lap at the end of the session.

An exciting lap, but still. Low fuel qualifying should have meant blistering lap times and a real sense of who's fastest, but if today is any indication we're looking at safe strategies this season.

Hamilton and Vettel are on their flying laps now, so this could upset the provisional Ferrari 1-2. Vettel's taken provisional pole, but there are a lot of laps to come in. Chequered flag is down, and the pole is Vettel's,

So the final grid positions are as follows: Sebastian Vettel leads for Red Bull, followed by Felipe Massa and Fernando Alonso for Ferrari. Lewis Hamilton takes fourth, with Rosberg in fifth, Webber in sixth, and Schumacher in seventh. World champion Button is in eighth, followed by Kubica in ninth and Sutil bringing up the rear. The top ten were split by 2.2 seconds – 1.54.101 was what it took for Vettel to secure pole, while 1.56.309 did it for Sutil in tenth.

Bring on tomorrow – this will be a tussle to savour!

F1 Bahrain Blog: Can an old dog remember old tricks?

The biggest surprise of the opening round of the 2010 Formula 1 season – other than Vettel's reliability issues – was Michael Schumacher's performance. The seven-time champion has been slower than expected all weekend, but it was a real shock to look at the list of fastest lap times and see Schuey behind Toro Rosso's Sebastian Buemi in the standings.

It's only the first race of the season, so it's far too early to make any judgement calls about Schumacher's return to the grid, but one thing is for certain – this weekend has not been the instant return to glory that the Red Baron's fans were hoping for.

After every race, the FIA produce millions of pdfs with every statistic you could want. I've been going through them, and the results for Schumacher are pretty depressing. The German was 16th through the speed trap, with a best time of 306.1kph, behind Buemi.

In the first sector, Schuey's fastest time again saw him behind Buemi, this time in 12th place. The second sector saw him slide down into 14th, where the only drivers to put in a worse show were either rookies or driving for a new team. In the final sector the former master of the sport was faster, although still only 8th on the list.

The fastest laps list is probably the most surprising of all – the German's 11th place position just keeps him in the top half of the grid, between Buemi in 10th and long-time race leader Sebastian Vettel in 12th. At no point was Schumacher able to lap under in less than two minutes, a feat managed by Fernando Alonso, Adrian Sutil, Mark Webber, Lewis Hamilton, Felipe Massa, Rubens Barrichello, Tonio Liuzzi, Jaime Alguersuari, and Jenson Button.

So what can we extrapolate from all of these statistics? Truth be told, stats rarely tell the whole story – anything can be manipulated when taken out of context, and F1 is no different. But Schumacher didn't spend the race surrounded by heavy traffic or fighting for position, the two typical get-out clauses on track.

And the driver himself admitted earlier this weekend that he was feeling rustier than expected. It is worth remembering that when Schumacher dominated the sport, he also dominated in-season testing. The amount of kilometres he used to put in for Ferrari was nothing short of heroic, and he will certainly have felt the ban on in-season testing. So is it going to take the German a few thousand kilometres to get back up to speed? Only time will tell.

The one thing we do know is that Nico Rosberg definitely won the Bahrain intra-team battle. At no point was he bested by his legendary teammate, a fact that surprised many in the paddock. Great news for Nico, certainly, but Michael won't be returning home in the best of moods.

Best media centre joke of the weekend, to round off the piece: A seven-time world champion walked into a bar. The barman says 'so why the long face?'. Classic.

F1 Bahrain Blog: Pwning the n00bs

The opening race of the 2010 season saw three new teams turn a wheel in anger for the first time, and a host of new talents were given their first chance to demonstrate their skills in a Formula 1 car. Unsurprisingly, none of the new teams or drivers made it to the podium.

Before the race weekend began, the battle for best of new teams was a two-horse race. Only Virgin and Lotus had been able to attend the winter testing sessions, so hopes for HRT were not high. The battle of the bosses between Richard Branson and Tony Fernandez has been brewing all winter, and Fernandez got the first win for Lotus when both of his cars survived the length of the race.

Both HRT drivers were out of the race before the half-way point was reached, with Karun Chandhok out on the first lap, and Bruno Senna calling it quits after 17. Virgin rookie Lucas di Grassi was the second man to retire: he went out on lap 2 with the same hydraulics problems that had plagued the team in testing, while teammate Timo Glock made it till lap 16 before retiring. Glock's issue was more of a mystery.

"Timo's car experienced an unexpected rise in gearbox temperature followed by a gradual loss in the number of gears he could select, which ultimately caused him to retire," explained technical director Nick Wirth in a press release. "We're still currently investigating the cause of the high gearbox temperature."

Sauber, a new team that's not really, was fielding two new drivers. Kamui Kobayashi had a short run in F1 at the end of the 2009 season, and Pedro de la Rosa had been away from the racing action for three years, having retired at the same time as Schumacher. Unfortunately for the as-yet-unbranded team, both men failed to make it through the race.

Kobayashi suffered issues with both hydraulics and power steering, leading to his retirement on lap 12. The hydraulic issue is looking like it could be a big one for the team – de la Rosa was called into the pits on lap 29 over hydraulic fears. Willy Rampf, the team's technical director, had some positives to take from the Bahrain weekend, but all is not rosy at Hinwil.

"The race pace was okay," Rampf said. "Pedro drove an intelligent race and managed his tyres really well. Kamui, who was on the harder compound, was forced to stop before his first scheduled pit stop, therefore there is not much to say. Neither car finished the race due to a hydraulic problem which we have to analyse."

Nico Hulkenberg can walk tall tonight, as he was undoubtedly the best-performing rookie of the race. While Williams won't be going back to Grove – or on to Melbourne – with a massive points haul, the Hulk was the only newbie to finish the race.

"It was a tough and difficult debut for me today," he said. "Right from the start, I had to take some evasive action to avoid a crash in turn 2, which dropped me a couple of places and a few laps later, I spun at turn 6. Initially I thought there was something broken on the car, but it was not the case. I jumped the kerbs and maybe hurt the car a bit, as it was difficult to drive for the rest of what was a long and lonely afternoon for me."

Vyborg Rocket Vitaly Petrov was the final driver to make his GP debut this weekend. Although he started the race well, the young Russian was forced to retire on lap 13, due to a problem with his suspension. "I made a fantastic start and was running well in P11 at the end of the first lap," he said. "The car felt good, and my pace was better than Barrichello in front of me. Then I ran wide over a kerb in turn 12 and it seemed to damage the front-right suspension."

Despite the long list of retirements in Bahrain, the new teams and new drivers put on a good show for first timers. The majority of retirements seem to have come about as a result of classic rookie errors, and those will be ironed out as the season progresses. While some of the cars had more serious mechanical issues, Red Bull's weekend shows that car problems aren't just an issue for the newbies.
