

Fl Bahrain Blog – Sunday press conference

In an odd piece of symmetry that reflected the teams' capabilities at the Bahrain International Circuit over the past two years, the 2013 Bahrain podium – and, consequentially the following press conference – was identical to that seen in 2012.

Present were Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), and Romain Grosjean (Lotus).

Q: Sebastian, fantastic victory. You're laughing and I haven't asked you a question already!

Sebastian VETTEL: No, it's good to see you. First of all, thank you very much, fantastic race. Big, big thank you to the team. A flawless, seamless race from start to finish. I knew it was crucial straight away after the start to get into the lead if I could and then go from there and look after the tyres. The pace was phenomenal. The car was very quick and it just started to get better and better towards the end. Really, a beautiful race where you could push every single lap. We took care of the tyres, so overall very happy. Also to have a woman on the podium [is good], I think it's not happening every day. Gill Jones, she takes care of our electronics in the team, she looks after the boys, so great to have her up here as well.

Q: There certainly was great wheel-to-wheel action on those early laps. Can you recall much of it? Was that just instinctive racing or can you give us a standout point from those early laps before you went on to your dominant victory?

SV: There's no alcohol in this, so I can recall, yes. It was obviously very tight already in the first corner with Fernando on the outside. Unfortunately I had to give way. I wanted to line it up to get Nico probably on the next straight but then Fernando squeezed in. But then I got him back which was crucial. I saved some KERS and could out-accelerate him into Turn 6. And then Nico was a tough one. I really had to think for a while because he was quite quick down the straights. Obviously the headwind today helped all the cars behind but still it wasn't as straightforward as I was hoping for and then again quite tight and out of Turn 4 I again managed to save a little bit of KERS up and got him on the inside and the track was clear and we could unfold the true pace of the car.

Q: It was a great race. If I could come to our second-placed finisher here: they call him the Iceman but they should really call you Mr Consistency. Another podium. Tell us about your strategy today. On reflection do you think that was the right one? Was second place the best you could hope for?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: Yeah, I think yesterday wasn't ideal. We planned to... I wanted to already, Friday, try to do a two-stop because it felt OK and today it worked well so we gained a lot of places. I didn't have a very strong first or second lap, so I lost two places. After that the car started to come to me and I could start pushing more and more, and in the end it was OK.

Q: If I could move around to your team-mate Romain Grosjean. If anyone is getting a feeling of déjà vu, this is exactly the same podium we had last year. Romain, great race. You must feel a little bit of pressure off the shoulders because although this is only race four, the first three races didn't really give you the results you were looking for. How do you feel?

Romain GROSJEAN: Yeah, that's completely true. The first three races have been consistent but not what we wanted. We worked hard, the whole team. It wasn't easy to find out what was missing to get the feeling back into the car but basically we got it. Started the race with a strategy a bit different from everybody. We started on the hard tyre, thinking that we go long on the first stint, but got the debris on the car, so the race was a bit harder and we had to do some good fights on track but this is why we're racing and what we enjoy. So, very pleased to be here, same as last year. Now just keep this consistency and get the results.

Q: Well, we're very happy to see you up here. If I could just come back one more time to our race winner: I'm just spotting, you've got some lucky charms outside your boots, I've never noticed that before. Do you want to tell us about that before giving us your feelings about where you are in the championship right now?

SV: I don't know, probably in a good position regarding the championship...

Q: Can you show the fans around the world or is it top secret?

SV: Not top secret but I don't get my legs so high because I'm not a woman... I've had them for a long time and they seem to work. One is actually from my grandmother, actually the other one as well. Again, very, very straightforward race and incredible the pace we have today. We surely did not expect that. In the end it was quite controlled. We managed the gaps and we still had enough tyres to push towards the end. The other thing I would finally point out is congratulations to Renault. It's the same order as last year so basically the first three cars on Renault engines. The guys back in Viry in France are pushing very, very hard and sometimes get criticised for not having the strongest engine but in the end we stand up here, three Renault-powered cars, somerci beaucoup, well done to them and looking forward to the next races.

Q: Sebastian, was that the sort of race you expected? Long periods when you just seemed out on your own, driving against a delta – or did you just expect it to be much more closely competitive than that?

SV: Surely I did not expect that. I think, yeah, was pretty dominant today, as I said, certainly not the expectation. Yeah, in the beginning, obviously quite tight, wheel-to-wheel racing. I knew it would be crucial to get in the lead if I can because then you have a little bit of an advantage, looking after your tyres and managing the race from there. I could feel that I was able to pull away and the medium compound felt pretty strong but then obviously we had three sets of new hards and for us the car seemed to work very well on those tyres. Obviously I realised in the second stint that I was able to open a gap so I thought, 'right, I'll take my chance as much as I can to pull away.' Because you know it can only help at the end of the race, you don't know what is going to happen. It probably buys us some flexibility. Fortunately we never got into a pressure situation again. But a very strong race. We were able to look after the tyres and really manage every stint the best way we could. I have to say, big compliments to the guys at home, to the guys here, on the strategy side. Yesterday wasn't probably that straight forward but we decided to save the tyres that I mentioned and they seemed to

work very good today and we had a very strong race, it all worked in our direction, so very pleased.

Q: Speaking of strategy, Kimi, you said you wanted to make a two-stop strategy work. You felt that was the right way forward. But did you need to be five, six places further up on the grid? Was it qualifying that cost you a chance of the win today?

KR: I think it didn't help but I think overall we would not have had the speed for beating Red Bull in here this weekend. And even if yesterday we could have been a few places better but still we couldn't have challenged on speed whatever we would have done to the front. So, I mean, I don't think on the speedwise we could really have challenged for the win. But I would say then second was the best that we could achieve and also third for the team so a good result.

Q: Romain, at the end you seemed awfully pleased with that third place, congratulations to be back on the podium. You say 'this is where we should be'. Do you also believe this is where you should be?

RG: We've got a difficult start to the season. I think we've put in a lot of work and effort to understand what was exactly going on – and it wasn't easy to find out but basically I think we came back where we should be. Yesterday qualifying was a bit disappointing but never mind, we had a lot of new sets of tyres for today, which was good. At the start of the race... well after the first few laps there wasn't optimism because we have a lot of big debris coming into the radiator and the rear brakes and we had to pit it very early because the temperature was going up. So I knew that the two first stints would be normally quite long on hard tyres and then do short on mediums but we had to pit and change the tyres. But then the car was good. And I think it was one of the races where I had the most overtaking manoeuvres and fights on track. Easy, not so easy, and the last ten laps was pretty good because I had a Force India in front of me. I knew I was much quicker but for how many laps is the medium because they start to lose pace? So I was trying to take care of them but at the same time pushing hard and finally back on the podium. The same podium as last year, so it's pretty good to be here.

Q: (Abhishek Takle – Midday) Sebastian, as you said, dominant performance today but how crucial was it to get that place back from Fernando early on and do you think you would have been able to win with the advantage you eventually you had without getting him back at the start?

SV: Well, certainly we had more pace than we expected today, which I think is related to the way that we worked with the tyres. We know that the car is quick, we saw that yesterday that we were able to pull a strong qualifying lap together. Sure, it was crucial because another car in front and especially once you start to settle into a rhythm it's difficult to overtake. I think today it was probably helped a little bit by the fact that there was quite a strong headwind down the main straight, so the advantage for DRS or for overtake was probably a little bit bigger than usual. At the beginning, I thought that if there was a small chance to get into the lead I have to take it because then I can take care of the tyres the way I like and hopefully divert the race the way that we planned beforehand, whereas if you sit behind someone and get stuck then you struggle, you lose grip, you start to slide and the tyres start to go off and you might have a different race, but surely with the pace that we had, I think we could have had a strong race, even not being in the lead immediately but I preferred it that way for sure.

Q: (Heikki Kulta – Turun Sanomat) Kimi, you have been on the podium six times here in Bahrain; which has been the best of these six races?

KR: I don't know. It doesn't really matter. Second is obviously better than third place but we haven't won and that's what we try to do. Today we got good points, we didn't lose too many to Sebastian but obviously it doesn't help to finish second if he's winning all the time. So we try to find something but all of them have been improved, in a way.

Q: (Kate Walker – Girl Racer) Sebastian, we've heard quite a few negative comments about Pirelli's rubber so far this year but the loudest voices that have complained have come from your team. Now you're actually leading the Drivers', leading the Constructors' (championships): we're seeing you do very well. Does this mean that we're going to see an end to the complaints from Milton Keynes about the Pirelli tyres?

SV: Well, I think that certainly the fact that we won the Constructors' championship the last three years makes people listen so probably more than other people. At least, from my point of view, I did talk about the tyres, I did complain but I always said that as long as there are other people doing a better job then we have no right to complain, we need to catch up. I don't think you have to be a genius to see that from race to race some people suffer with the tyres – maybe someone more and some people less – and cannot go the true pace of their cars. It's obviously very strategic these days but then again, it's the same for all of us. Out of four races, I think we've had two good ones and two maybe average ones but then if you look at the results, the average is not really disastrous either. To come third and fourth is a very strong result and I'm sure not complaining about the results. Comparing Formula One to a couple of years ago, you probably have to ask Kimi more than me but it's surely different, the fact that you can't push as hard as you like every lap, you have to work with the tyres and sit at a certain pace and go from there. So I think that's what we – at least the drivers that I have talked to – that's what we think is very different and to some extent less enjoyable than in the past.

Q: Kimi, how much different is it to seven, maybe eight years ago?

KR: First of all, I don't think Pirelli could please everybody, whatever they would do. There's always somebody who will complain, even if they changed and made them happy then I'm sure there will be people who want something different and not happy so I don't think it's their job to try to always change things if somebody's complaining or doesn't like it. Even in the past, if we would have put the same amount of fuel in the cars, we couldn't have run at full speed all the time, because the tyres would have gone off so I don't really think it's all that different now. We just made more stops and ran less fuel in those days. I would say that's really the biggest difference. I'm sure the tyres wouldn't have lasted long in those days.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, how different is this win to Malaysia, where there was a lot of criticism, and do you think that without Fernando's DRS problem it might have been a little bit harder today?

SV: Regarding the second question, I don't know or I can't judge the Ferrari's pace. I think the last couple of races they have been very strong, so everything else but a strong performance today would have been a surprise to be honest. But how strong, I don't know. I think we felt pretty happy today and in very good shape. I don't know where Felipe finished but we can't really judge Fernando's race with the problem that he had with the DRS that I was told, so difficult to say. The first question was? Ah yes, if you race for victory, you try to pass whoever is in front of you so I think Malaysia is a long time ago now, I think we've moved on and I think that in terms of crossing the line first there's no difference. But obviously we were in a better position at the beginning of the race already, so a very very different race in that regard.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – O Estado de Sao Paulo) Romain, we read that Alain Prost said that your problem at the beginning of the season was self-confidence. Do you think that a result like this – if that is the problem – can help you?

RG: I think that the fact that you're able to come back from a very difficult situation proves that I think he was wrong. I haven't seen him this year, I

have a deep respect for what he did but I think it's easy to speak when you are not here.

Q: Did the new chassis help at all?

RG: No. It was different matters. We got a bit lost last year. Our struggle mid-season – Hockenheim, Budapest and Spa-Francorchamps – and then we came back. There is so much technology with those cars and it's true that Pirelli tyres are not easy to drive and every time we have a small problem somewhere it makes it worst but when you manage to get it right then it's OK. It was just something with the feeling of the car: when you're not confident with your car it's not self-confidence, it confidence in your car, there's nothing you can do.

Q: (Heikki Kulta – Turun Sanomat) Sebastian, with these tyres, who would you rate as your strongest competitor for the championship?

SV: Well, I don't know. It's a long long championship. I think if you look at the first four races Lotus is very quick, they manage the tyres pretty well in the race. Ferrari is very quick, the cars haven't changed too much compared to last year. If you look, pure performance is very tight. On a Sunday it can be different because of the way you take care of the tyres; sometimes you're in a better shape, sometimes not. But I think the Ferrari is an all-round car as in they're always quick and they've been very competitive in the race. Mercedes is surely very quick over a lap but probably a little bit too aggressive with the tyres. Yeah, a little bit surprised by McLaren but I think they will come back at some stage this year, probably already in Barcelona and that's how it is but to point out the main rivals, I think we need to look after ourselves, make sure we score points and everything else is difficult to predict.

Q: (Khodr Rawi – F1Arab.com) Romain, was it possible to do a two stop strategy like Kimi today? And do you expect the same kind of performances in the next races?

RG: Well, it would have been possible if we hadn't had to stop on lap six or seven, due to the temperature problem and the front wing from a McLaren that flew and completely blocked the radiators. We had to stop because we were having water issues and the rear brake drum was completely closed, the brakes were not working any more. Kimi was in front of me, so it was better to stop rather than losing the brakes. Then tyre management was OK, I think it's getting better and I don't see any point where shouldn't be able to repeat the performance.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – O Estado de Sao Paulo) Sebastian, we know that Christian Horner is pushing Pirelli for harder tyres and we saw that it looks like today your car behaves a bit better on hard tyres. You had three sets of new hard tyres. Can you comment on that?

SV: Well, I'm not sure I understood everything but I think on the tyre strategy we were more or less committed to that yesterday, using all the softs in qualifying and able to position ourselves on the front row nicely for the race, and then trying to make the first stint as long as possible and go from there with three sets of new hard tyres. In the end, I think there was not that much difference between the medium and the hard, we already saw that yesterday on high fuel performance. We felt a little bit happier on long runs, probably on the hard, that's why we decided to go that way and it seemed to work. It's difficult to say how good or bad the medium would have been because we didn't have a new set of medium tyres. I didn't see what other people did but I think that the fact that we sit here is pointing out that we did a good job today on that front.

F1 Bahrain Blog – Race report

Sebastian Vettel became the first multiple winner of the 2013 Formula One season with a commanding victory at Bahrain's Sakhir Circuit on Sunday afternoon. While the Red Bull driver did not pull off one of his lights to flag classics, the apparent ease of his victory brought to mind the walkover that was the 2011 season.

What pace Vettel lacked on Saturday afternoon, when Nico Rosberg took the second pole of his F1 career, the triple world champion more than made up for on Sunday, making swift work of both Rosberg and Fernando Alonso in the early laps of the race despite a less than stellar start which saw the Red Bull driver lose position to the charging Ferrari.

Alonso's early good start was the best it got for the Ferrari driver; the Spanish racer was forced into an early pit stop with his DRS flap stuck open. Despite the team's attempt to repair it at speed, Alonso was forced into a second stop that still failed to do the trick. But even a DRS-less Alonso cannot be discounted, and the Asturian fought his way back up into the lower end of the points from 19th place despite being vulnerable to his DRS-equipped rivals.

If it was a bad afternoon for Alonso, it was a terrible one for teammate Felipe Massa, who stumbled home in 15th place after losing a front wing endplate and suffering dramatic tyre problems. First, the Brazilian suffered intense graining. But then he was forced to pit twice following dramatic punctures and delaminations that forced Massa towards the back of the pack for the rest of the afternoon.

But the worst weekend by far was had by Toro Rosso's Jean-Eric Vergne, the only man to retire from Sunday's race. The Frenchman was knocked into the Caterham of Giedo van der Garde in a first lap incident with Williams rookie Valtteri Bottas, and the Toro Rosso driver was the only one of the three who sustained damage so heavy that retirement was the only option.

The Bahrain podium was an eerie echo of the 2012 race, which also saw winner Vettel bookended by the Lotus pairing of Kimi Raikkonen and Romain Grosjean. Paul di Resta narrowly missed his first F1 podium finish on Sunday afternoon – the Scottish racer delivered a strong performance that saw him running consistently in P3 before a late charge from a more freshly shod Grosjean knocked the Force India driver into fourth place.

Sunday's race was atypically action-packed for the Bahrain International Circuit, which hasn't been known for its nail-biting races in the past. But the placement of the DRS zone was very effective, while the varying tyre strategies on show helped to shake up the action over the course of the 57 laps.

Part of the action on Sunday afternoon came about thanks to Lewis Hamilton, who gave a spirited performance after a dismal start to the race. An FP3 incident saw the Mercedes driver replace his gearbox before qualifying, earning the Briton a five-place penalty for Sunday's race. Hamilton then got off to a poor start, dropping behind both McLarens. He appeared to be in difficulty for much of the race, before a dramatic upturn in his car's performance after the final round of stops, enabling Hamilton to push hard for a 5th-place finish.

But the real drama came from McLaren pairing Sergio Perez and Jenson Button, who had a drawn out wheel-to-wheel scrap that the older driver deemed overly aggressive in the aftermath of the race. There were certainly nervous faces on the McLaren pit wall for the duration of the battle – contact was made on more than one occasion, and Perez lost a front-wing endplate in the fight – but both cars survived to finish in the points.

Further down the pack, it was a good day for Caterham, who saw Charles Pic finish ahead of not only the Marussia pairing – in what was a season-first for the team – but also Sauber's Esteban Gutierrez. The 17th-place finish was a timely morale boost for Caterham, who have high hopes that the 'super-upgrade' package planned for the next race in Barcelona will give the CT03 the balance it has heretofore been lacking.

Bahrain Grand Prix results

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1h36m00.498s
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 9.111s
3. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) + 19.507s
4. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 21.727s
5. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) + 35.230s
6. Sergio Perez (McLaren) + 35.998s
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 37.244s
8. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) + 37.574s
9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 41.126s
10. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 46.631s
11. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) + 1m06.450s
12. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) + 1m12.933s
13. Adrian Sutil (Force India) + 1m16.719s
14. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) + 1m21.511s
15. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 1m26.364s
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 1 lap
17. Charles Pic (Caterham) + 1 lap
18. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) + 1 lap
19. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) + 1 lap
20. Max Chilton (Marussia) + 1 lap
21. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) + 2 laps

Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) RET

F1 Bahrain Blog – Saturday press conference

It was a short and sweet media grilling that took place at the post-qualifying press conference in Bahrain on Saturday afternoon.

Present were Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), and Fernando Alonso (Ferrari).

Q: Congratulations Nico, your first ever top four start in Bahrain and you did it in style. Were you as surprised as some people that pole was yours today?

Nico ROSBERG: A little bit, yeah. It wasn't really clear before who was the quickest car, especially over one lap. I was a bit closer this morning already, so I was a bit more happy than yesterday for sure, so as a team I think we worked really during the night to improve the car because yesterday we were really struggling. So that's been going well. I'm really, really happy, that's a fantastic result. That's great for tomorrow. Of course tomorrow it's going to be a tough race for sure, with rear tyre degradation especially, so a lot can still happen.

Q: We'll talk more about the race in a couple of moments. Sebastian, you're qualifying today: was that the pace of the Red Bull or was it a lap that could have been better? Are you disappointed with second place?

Sebastian VETTEL: Definitely not disappointed. I think congratulations to Nico: he put a very strong lap in. I think it was all his today. Initially when I crossed the line I saw that I didn't go first, so I saw second placed on one of the screens but I didn't know how much was missing, because the lap was fine. You always a little bit here or there but, yeah, when I got told the gap to P1, to Nico, it was clear that even with the perfect lap he was unbeatable today. But nevertheless, very happy. I think we managed to save some tyres throughout qualifying. As Nico touched on it will be all about tyres and tyre degradation tomorrow, once again. So, we'll see what happens but for sure it's good to start from the front.

Q: Today, Fernando, was all about the dash for pole, though, and it was a lap, your second lap, that contained a couple of errors right at the end and you came back into the pits. Was that trying too hard because Nico's lap was too fast or were you just not happy with the balance of the car or what?

Fernando ALONSO: Well, in the car obviously you don't know Nico's lap, we don't have TV in the car yet! So we tried to complete the second lap and it was very, very similar until the last corner and in the last corner the exit I saw it was half a tenth or one tenth slower than the previous lap so we decided to come in just to save one lap on those tyres. You never know if you have to use them again in the race, so very, very happy with third place. Normally in qualifying we're struggling a lot but today the car was very competitive in qualifying and this puts us in a strong position to start tomorrow's race with the group of the leaders and fight for the podium with a little bit more margin.

Q: Nico, both Sebastian and Fernando have hinted at tyre degradation sorting out tomorrow's race. It's something that Mercedes have suffered from in the past, so is today your day for celebration and is tomorrow just a day to limit your losses?

NR: I really want to kick-start my season. It's really been a rough ride in the first three races and so today's really been the first normal qualifying up to now, so I just want to kick-start everything now, my whole season. I'm OK for the race tomorrow, you know. For sure the competition is going to be tough, definitely. Difficult to say if we have enough pace to win the race tomorrow but for sure we're going to try and I look forward to starting first – definitely.

Q: (Abhishek Takle – Midday) Question to Fernando: you must be pretty confident heading into tomorrow because you've shown good long-run pace and a strong start could set you up for the win, don't you think?

FA: Well, let's see. I think the race is very long so we need to wait and see how the pace is tomorrow. It's true that on Sundays normally we do improve our performance and we seem more competitive on Sunday than on Saturday. Friday also the long runs were more or less OK and not a big drama with the tyres. So, let's wait and see tomorrow. The conditions keep changing all the time here in Bahrain with the circuit running more and more categories, not only the Formula One, so I think tomorrow will be a good opportunity for us, first of all to win the podium and try to get some consistency and races in the podium and if we can fight for the win, even better.

Q: (Frederic Ferret – L'Equipe) Question to all three drivers: are you surprised by the time of the two Lotus?

NR: Where are they? [Ninth and eleventh] In that case, yeah, for sure, because all weekend they've been looking very quick.

SV: Did they run in Q3 or not? [Räikkönen qualified and ran] Yeah. Same as Nico, it's a big surprise. I don't know, that's why I was asking. I don't know what's their plan for tomorrow but yeah, they were quite quick this morning, for sure. It didn't matter the compound, they were quite quick all weekend so something must have gone wrong.

Q: Fernando?

FA: Yeah, same.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – O Estado de Sao Paulo) Nico, the race simulation you did in free practice, you have indication that you have a good pace for the race or maybe it will be like in the last races where you were very fast in qualifying, not so much in race?

NR: I think it's not going to be... we're not going to be as quick as we were in qualifying compared to everybody else. I think it's much closer tomorrow on race fuel but you just have to wait. There's so many factors that influence that, you just have to wait and see. For sure it will be much more difficult, yeah.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Nico, when we met yesterday, we were joking a little bit with bad words in Italian about your situation.

NR: What were we talking about?

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) We were joking with a bad word...

NR: Ah yeah. You said that, yeah?

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Yes, I know, my apologies. How did you improve the car?

NR: Yesterday we were in a difficult situation. We were not where we wanted to be and not where we were in the last couple of races, so it was all bit question marks and a bit surprising. But as a team, we really did a fantastic job to turn it around and to be absolute quickest today, it's great. That's just down to having done really really good work last night and this morning.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, can you explain to us why you saved all three sets of the harder tyres? Do believe that there will be four pit stops tomorrow?

SV: To be honest with you, I don't know how many stops we have to do. I think you don't have to be a genius... one stop is impossible for everybody, two stops is impossible for most, I think, and then it's between three and four stops. I think we decided to do what we did because we think it's the best way. In qualifying we were not exactly sure how quick we would be. We didn't want to take any risks, we wanted to make sure that we finish in front and we believed that the soft tyre was faster, or the medium tyre, so we went for that in qualifying.

Q: (Carlos Miguel – La Gaceta) Fernando, are you afraid of Massa starting on hard tyres in fourth position? And after your 1m 32.8s on hard, could it have been better to qualify on hard tyres?

FA: Well, I think it's fantastic that Felipe is fourth. He finished sixth in qualifying but with (the penalties for) Webber and Hamilton he will be fourth, so it's better to start alongside Felipe than to start alongside Lewis to be honest. I really prefer this combination of results, that I should help the first corner attack and hopefully we can both do a good start and hopefully – with these different strategies that we have – can cover some more scenarios in the race than maybe wouldn't be in our control if we had the same tyres. It's true that we felt comfortable on the hard tyre in Q1. He also felt comfortable on the hard tyres in Q1, but he chose them for Q3. I think they are very close together and I think that when you gain something in qualifying you can lose it in the race: when you lose in the race, you gain something in qualifying so it's a difficult trade-off but I'm extremely happy with our strategy and I'm extremely happy that we're third and fourth. Tomorrow, we both need to think about being on the podium. It will be really important for the Constructors' championship as well.

F1 Bahrain Blog – Saturday report

After a busy final practice session that ended with Lewis Hamilton damaging his car's suspension when the Mercedes driver clipped a kerb it emerged that the Briton's gearbox had also been a casualty of the incident.

The resulting unscheduled gearbox change landed Hamilton with a five-place grid penalty for tomorrow's race. Also penalised for the Bahrain Grand Prix – following incidents in last week's race in Shanghai – were Esteban Gutierrez and Mark Webber, both of whom admitted causing collisions. Gutierrez was handed a five-place grid drop for his clash with Adrian Sutil, while Webber lost three places for his run-in with Jean-Eric Vergne.

As qualifying got underway on Saturday afternoon the skies over the Bahrain International Circuit were cloudy and overcast, but the desert climes meant that track and air temperatures were unaffected, with the former standing at 41 degrees and the latter at 23 degrees.

The first driver to put a timed lap on the board in Q1 was Sauber's Nico Hulkenberg, followed closely by teammate Esteban Gutierrez. But both drivers were knocked down the order as their rivals began to leave the pits, with Mercedes, Lotus, and Force India all showing strong early pace.

Last to leave the pits were the driver pairings from Red Bull and the still-struggling McLaren, plus Hamilton. The five had yet to put times on the board

with the session more than half-run, with those confident in their pace doing their utmost to conserve much-needed rubber for Sunday's race.

Hamilton's first timed lap was a shocker, a 1m51.104s effort that was fifteen seconds slower than the Caterham of Giedo van der Garde. But the Mercedes driver's second effort was a much more representative 1m33.498s.

When the chequered flag fluttered to mark the end of Q1, it was Pastor Maldonado and Gutierrez who joined the driver pairings from Caterham and Marussia in the dropout zone.

There was a slight variance to the teams' approach in Q2, with Red Bull among the first drivers out of the pits. First to cross the line was Webber, setting a benchmark of 1m33.907s that was soon bested by teammate Sebastian Vettel, a full half second quicker than the Australian.

But Vettel's time was improved upon by Paul di Resta, who was just over a tenth ahead of the defending world champion, the last man to stand on the top step of the Sakhir podium. As the session progressed, the occupant of the coveted top spot changed with increasing frequency – Fernando Alonso had his moment in the sun, as did Nico Rosberg.

Last to put a time on the board was Romain Grosjean. When the Frenchman crossed the line with a 1m33.762s, the dropout zone was made up of Jenson Button, Sergio Perez, Hulkenberg, Daniel Ricciardo, Valtteri Bottas, and Vergne. In the danger zone were Sutil and Kimi Raikkonen, with the Lotus not performing as expected.

Ricciardo saved himself – temporarily – just before the chequered flag fell, knocking Raikkonen into the dropout zone while the Finnish driver was on his last attempt at a timed lap. The Lotus driver found the necessary pace, and in so doing knocked his teammate out of the running. Button scraped through into Q3 in P10, while Perez was knocked out once again.

The final round of qualifying marked the beginning of the next round of criticism for McLaren newbie Perez, who has failed to perform to the level expected of a driver from a front-running team. While the Mexican racer impressed at Sauber, his move to Woking has been less than successful, and Perez is waning in the face of ever-increasing criticism that has led to paddock insiders questioning his ability to see out the season with McLaren.

The last ten men left standing in Q3 were the driver pairings from Red Bull, Ferrari, Mercedes, and Force India, plus Button and Raikkonen. Webber and Hamilton were under additional pressure to perform in the final ten minutes, with both men hampered by grid penalties for tomorrow's grand prix. But performance on Saturday – and the resulting grid position – must be balanced with the need to preserve rubber for the race itself, given the challenge of nursing tyres that have been pushed early in their life.

Rosberg was the early timesheet topper in the final stage of qualifying; the Mercedes driver was one of four men to set a timed lap in the first half of Q3. Alonso, di Resta, and Hamilton all put times on the board in the early stages, while Webber and Sutil waited until they had time left for only one lap before joining the fray.

The rest of the pack then followed suit, and the last two minutes of Bahrain qualifying saw all ten drivers out on track, fighting for a gap in traffic.

Provisional grid

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m32.330s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m32.584s
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m32.667s
4. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m33.207s
5. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m33.235s
6. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m33.246s
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m33.078s**
8. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m33.146s
9. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m32.762s*
10. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m33.327s

11. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m33.762s
12. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m33.914s
13. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m33.974s
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m33.976s
15. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m34.105s
16. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m34.284s

17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m34.425s
18. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m35.283s
19. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m36.178s
20. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m36.304s
21. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m36.476s
22. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m34.730s***

* Lewis Hamilton was issued with a five-place grid penalty for an unscheduled gearbox change, so will start the race in P9 despite qualifying in P4.

** Mark Webber was issued with a three-place grid penalty for causing a collision, so will start the race in P7 despite qualifying in P5.

*** Esteban Gutierrez was issued with a five-place grid penalty for causing a collision, so will start the race in P22 despite qualifying in P18.

It was a small crowd of media that had turned out to grill the senior team personnel on Friday afternoon in Bahrain, a far cry from the hordes that had attended the same session last year with a view to getting to the bottom of the political situation in the small island country.

Present were Eric Boullier (Lotus), Stefano Domenicali (Ferrari), Paul Hembery (Pirelli), Monisha Kaltenborn (Sauber), and Martin Whitmarsh (McLaren).

Q: Stefano, I have no previous experience but I'm sure the role of team principal at Ferrari is not the easiest job in the world, but it has seemed – apart from the front wing on Fernando's car in Malaysia – a fairly straightforward and happy start to the season for you all at Maranello.

Stefano DOMENICALI: Well of course, above all in China it was a great weekend for us. It was a reward for the team and also for Fernando after the difficult race we had in Malaysia. But we have done only three races, so we have done nothing. Our experience and my personal experience tell me that every Sunday could be something different, so we need to keep the feet on the ground and work hard, knowing that things can change significantly, quickly. Therefore, it's important to try to keep this momentum also here in Bahrain; try to maximise the situation of the performance of the car we have now; improve because we are not really at the level we should be, but at least it's important to see that we are starting from a relatively good base to try to keep the development of the car as quick as possible because I'm sure that not only the teams that are represented here but also the others will do a big push already from the first race in Europe. So happy, but very focused.

Q: Where do you think that the progress has been made with the competitiveness of your car? Where has the strength has come from? What have you put right over the winter that wasn't necessarily going so right this time last year?

SD: Difficult to say for sure. We have done some modifications to our methodology. We have chosen to go towards the Eurozone in one wind tunnel. Without doing a lot of comparison then sometimes in these conditions you may get lost. So I believe that is the main thing. For sure, the speed of the change that you do during the season you cannot see immediately, so it takes time and I'm pleased to see that the improvement is there but, as I said not, enough as I'd like to see.

Q: Well, we'll see what happens over the rest of the weekend. Monisha, good afternoon and welcome to the first team principals' press conference you've been involved in this season. Two new drivers, an all-new driver line-up at Sauber. How would you gauge the progress of the rookie and of the experienced driver you have this year?

Monisha KALTENBORN: Well, I think they've really integrated well into the team. With Nico it's less of an issue because he does have more experience now. Of course he has been changing a couple of teams in the last few years, so it's tough for him as well. But as far as I can see he's well integrated. People are happy, he's happy and we're going in the right direction. We can see that with the last steps we introduced in China – because we know we have issues on performance – and we're getting very good from him. On Esteban's side, we have been very convinced, and still are, of his talent, so it's for us now to make sure that he has the surrounding that he can develop that, because clearly neither he nor we can be happy so far with the results that he's shown.

Q: It's part of your job, almost, reassuring Esteban that you believe in the talent he has.

MK: Oh, I don't think I really need to reassure him that much because he's quite confident and he also knows why these mistakes have happened but it's important that you talk a lot to him and you try to support him in getting used to the situation in Formula One and the pressure, because actually drivers like him, rookie drivers, it's quite a dilemma, because they hardly have any opportunity to drive the car, especially in Esteban's case, because he never goes any Friday sessions from us. At the same time when he comes in as a race driver the expectations are so high, from the team's side and from his side as well, and there are so few opportunities to actually make points, so it's a difficult situation to handle.

Q: And the situation you have in terms of the budget this year: Nico Hulkenberg has been urging the team on to push, you need to develop the car. You have excellent facilities at Hinwil, but do you have the resources you need to use those facilities to their optimum?

MK: Well, clearly if we had more resources we could do more. We still have room to move on top, but on the other hand we are of course fighting for a resource restriction but the gap actually just gets smaller. No, our situation is pretty clear there: we still have room to move to the top but with whatever we have we're trying to do our best.

Q: Martin, no doubt about it, a very difficult opening three races of the season. What progress do you feel the team has made since winter testing, and Australia. Is it enough or are you really pinning your hopes on a major breakthrough when we get to Spain?

Martin WHITMARSH: It's never enough, wherever you are in your level of competitiveness, but this year, as you say, we had a very difficult start. We didn't have the performance in the car that we wanted and Australia was a very hard weekend. I think since then... clearly, there's no testing, it's quite difficult to make some progress and these first four races come quickly, one after the other. I think we've been, again today, every time the car leaves the garage it's another experiment. We've been gathering data and we've been trying things. I think we've made a little bit of progress – never as much as I'd like or as the drivers or the team would want. I think we're gaining a little bit of performance, we're gaining a little bit of understanding but clearly there's a big push for an upgrade package for Spain and it's important for all of us that we make good progress. But in the meanwhile, we're racers, so those of us in the field we'll take the car and do the best job we can with it, try to maximise the points we can get out of these first four races.

Q: It's likely that you'll be even further behind in the Constructors' Championship when we get to Spain. I know that will only be round five and it's very early, but realistically, are you still racing for a Constructors' Championship or is it now just wins?

MW: I think after three races or even after four races you don't give up in these championships. I think Ferrari did an excellent job last year of showing all of us how you can turn it round and be there right at the end, capable of winning both championships. So, there are always big hills to climb and mountains of challenge but that's why we come motor racing. At the moment we're concentrating on understanding and improving the car. As soon as we make progress we'll be trying to win races and as soon as we win races we'll be thinking about championships. But at the moment clearly we're focused on the here and now and what's the best we can do this weekend. It's a tough circuit for us. This is clearly a rear-limited circuit. It's a circuit where traction is important and that's been a deficiency in our car so far. We came here knowing it was going to be a tough weekend but we'll fight as hard as we can to get what are possible.

Q: Paul Hembery, Pirelli made the decision to change the tyre compounds from soft and hard to medium and hard, can you explain why that was?

Paul HEMBERY: Yeah, it was done on the Sunday night after the Malaysian race. Malaysia obviously being similar in some respects, from a tyre

point of view, to here in some respects: very hot, very abrasive. We felt that both had worked well there and that was the right thing to do coming here.

Q: Pirelli were tasked with spicing up the racing. Given the level of opinion on the tyres and the racing this year, do you think the introduction of softer compounds has been an aggressive step just a little bit too far?

PH: It depends what you're looking at. If you look at it with three different winners in three races, three world champions, then it's been pretty good. Melbourne was probably one of the more exciting Melbournes than we've seen for many a year. We almost have this conversation every year: we've had it the first two years we've been here, and then as we get through the season, the teams – obviously there are very talented engineers in all the teams – and they master the challenges given to them and going beyond certainly mid-season then you'll find these sorts of discussions die away.

Q: If you're looking at it from the Saturday afternoon and a lack of action in the early part of the qualifying sessions and then on the Sunday with drivers having to pit after two, three or four laps. Is that what you would have wanted as a tyre supplier?

PH: Well, pitting two or three laps in is no different than pitting two or three laps from the end, we've seen that as well many, many times as well in the past, so it's just doing it the other way around. It really doesn't change that much. As long as you've got a core product that will give a racing tyre and gives what we were asked to achieve, which is two to three pitstops. I think there was only one time in the past where we felt it went too far, was Turkey I guess in 2011 when we were at four stops. That was too many. I think you'll find the average over this season will be just over two pitstops average so from that point of view, we're happy. In terms of qualifying, last year was probably a good year for qualifying because the cars were very close together in performance. We often saw 16 cars within a second in Q2 – that's maybe pushed out a little bit this year, there's been some strong development from the cars at the front and we're starting to see a little bit of strategy coming into play for Q3 that we saw in 2011. It's early days, one event like that, let's see what happens going through the season. But if it's only on the odd occasion then it's probably not an issue. There are different points of view: some people will say that adds a strategy element to the Q3, and people are generally really interested in who's got pole position and maybe the first three places. Obviously last race we had three ex-world champions in the first three with less than a few tenths between them, so that was good from that point of view. And you could probably say as well a couple of cars starting on a different choice gave us quite an interesting finish with Sebastian coming flying through at the end. And probably if he hadn't had the traffic he might well have even got a better result. So it's a game of opinions. Ultimately we'll do what the sport asks us to do, of course, and if we do feel together that the qualifying's not work I'm sure we'll all find a solution together.

Q: Eric, Romain Grosjean has a new chassis for this weekend and for the next few races. What was the thinking behind that? Was there a problem with the old chassis? Was it trying to help his confidence rebuild?

Eric BOULLIER: It's a whole thing package. We try to find out. He's not as his best, let's say, where we think he should be. There's nothing to blame, actually to finger-point anything, it's just the addition of different things. So, we decided to go though in details and deep enough to even take into consideration to change the chassis.

Q: We have a debate in Formula One, as F1 fans, what's more important: good car or a good driver. At the moment you've got a good car and in Kimi Räikkönen a very good driver – how important is Kimi Räikkönen to the long-term success of the Lotus team?

EB: I think he's part of the success, or sort of success, that we've had since a couple of years, or let's say at least last year. It's true that Kimi does help the team stepping up but behind Kimi there are a lot of people – and good people – working hard and actually working well. I think as usual it's to get the full package really working all together. Then you can see some results.

Q: And you're confident that once again you have the budget to cope with a title battle and a development race off the track as well as on it as well.

EB: Yes, we do.

Q: (Kate Walker – Girl Racer) Monisha, we've heard recently in the last week or so talk of Pirelli bringing an extra set of slightly harder tyres for teams running a young driver on Fridays. Given your comments earlier, is this an initiative you support? To give rookies and developing drivers more opportunities on track? Do you think it's a good idea, will it be better for the show, and so on...?

MK: I think it's a good idea because it gives you first of all a good reason to really get in these drivers. And I think it also should be done in such a way that it should be not just an option. Maybe as a regulatory thing coming in that really you have to do this, otherwise not many teams would really make use of this kind of an option. We see it with ourselves: if you have already a rookie driver who is one of your regular race drivers, do you really want to take away time from them to still get another one in? So, I think if it just comes in as an option we really would have to think about it: do we make use of it or not? But on the other hand it's extremely important as we can see with such drivers that, if they have more opportunities they're simply better prepared. It will be a difficult call for us if it's just an option. I'd prefer if actually it went down somewhere in the rules that you have to do this. And apart from all of this is the show element that you mentioned. You are maybe make it more exciting and maybe you could also get more cars to run. If you look at the sessions on a Friday, you have the first half an hour fundamentally, nothing going on. It could have overall a very good impact and also for the tyre supply I guess it would have a lot of positive effect: always getting someone new in, something exciting, new information, new faces coming in.

Q: Just to clarify, what would you prefer? Two cars running on the track or a third car being run for a rookie with the extra tyres?

MK: I think it's too early to say that right now but what would be good for a team like ours is that you simply have to do this. If it's just with one car, it would be fine for us – but not just as an option. Because if it were an option, like in our situation, we'd really have to think about it. If you have even two new drivers coming in one season, do you really want to make use of that or not? If we tend to say 'no' it's got us nowhere with this rule

Q: Stefano, if I can bring you in on this. Would Ferrari be wanting to run rookie drivers, drivers from your Young Driver Development programme?

SD: Just to answer to your question about the tyres: yes, extra set on Friday to be used in the morning. Not only for rookies but for everyone. It would be difficult to explain to the people that are on the grandstand that Mr X has an extra set of tyres to run and Alonso, Hamilton, whoever is not running because that extra set of tyres is just for the rookie. If we have to do something then I believe it is a good idea, to be honest, that we should do it for everyone in order to increase the number of running on Friday morning.

Q: Martin, don't run a rookie driver?

MW: Well, I think similar opinions to Stefano. It was originally discussed that there should be an extra set of tyres for rookie drivers but I think that's quite difficult. At the end of the day, if the people who we're thinking about in the grandstands, I think they come to see Alonso, Hamilton, Räikkönen, Button – that's who they want to see. I think if we all put out rookie drivers they've not heard of, I think they feel cheated in some way.

Q: Eric, your theory?

EB: I have to say I do share the opinion of my colleagues in the front. An extra set of tyres, yes. We need to just make sure that we could maybe run it for everybody and not only for rookie drivers.

Q: (Mike Casey – Associated Press) It caught my attention the other week that Red Bull were talking about possibly breaking the two second mark in pit stops. I just wanted to get your thoughts how pit stops had changed in the last year or two and if they're becoming a much more significant part of the whole race, especially with the tyre issues?

SD: I think that it's many many years that pit stops are part of the performance of the team, performance of the team is a performance of the position on the track, it's part of the performance with the strategy and so on. So it is quite natural that you try to develop systems to try to minimise the reaction time of the guys, to be as quick as possible, and I would say this is part of the attraction of Formula One and I think that we are reaching the limit, where to have a pit stop shorter than what we are almost doing is virtually impossible. The driver has to arrive and has to at least engage the gears and the clutch to start again, so it's a physical thing that he has to do. So it's one of the things where Formula One teaches everywhere that there are all sorts of room for improvements everywhere and this is a challenge. I also remember when we had the pit stops with refuelling, it was another stop where there was another part to it and unfortunately I remember very well in 2008 you can make mistakes which can cause problems to the team, but as I said, this is part of the nature of Formula One. I think it's really nice to see that.

EB: Pit stops are part of racing. In most of racing today you have pit stops. It is clearly important to get this association with the pit crew, having this competition involved into the result as a global performance.

Q: Martin, I suppose with the regulations getting ever tighter, pit stops are one area where you can gain tenths of a second.

MW: You can. They've got quicker and quicker. We used to think four second was stunning. I think at the moment, as far as I know, I think we still have the quickest one at 2.32 seconds. I think it's possible to get below two seconds. I think it's dangerous to put too much focus on that. I think now they are sufficiently short that in fact the odd tenth difference between the stops isn't material. What is material is the pressure we put people under to get to about a two second stop. Every now and then it goes wrong, and so the ones that are material are the ones that go wrong because of the pressure we put on people to try and do it in two seconds, and those are the ones that are often the game-changer, not 2.3s versus 2.4s versus 2.6s. I think we've learned that to our cost, we've certainly put a lot of pressure to try and get down there and consistently be the quickest. In recent weeks I've said to the guys I'm happy for it to be a bit slower providing they're absolutely foolproof and I think that's probably the right thing to do.

Q: At Sauber, how do you prepare your crew for a pit stop and try to gain extra tenths?

MK: Well, we've had some good examples like McLaren managing to get under three seconds. We're not quite there I would say. Over the years, you see how quick pit stops have been getting so now this margin for us is trying to be at or under three seconds. I think what's also happened is - which the guys with the pressure are fully aware of - is that even if you get things just a little bit... just a few (tenths), not even a second or so wrong, you have so much more to do than gain positions because the whole field has got together, so I think that's where also a lot of pressure has come from. Even the slightest mistake can lead to quite a lot of position losses in the race.

Q: (Dieter Rencken – The Citizen) Last week, I asked the team principles present in China how they felt about the fact that the FIA will apparently no longer get involved in regulating the cost control process. How do the four team principles here feel about that?

MW: I think Formula One teams are fairly tenacious so I don't think we give up on it. I think we all know that cost control is important in Formula One. There are maybe four teams that have financial stability and certainly we don't feel threatened at the moment as a team, but we're very aware that there are currently eleven teams, we need eleven or ten teams minimum and I think it's very easy to under-estimate the challenges that those teams are facing. It's something that when the emergency happens and teams start to fail, it's too late to react and I think that will go like dominos. Therefore, if we want to be responsible members and citizens of Formula One, then we've got to do what we can to control costs, we've got to do all we can to ensure that a minimum ten but at the moment that eleven teams have got sustainable business models. I think that's a right and sensible thing to do. We've put a lot of effort in. We've had some success. We're pretty good in Formula One at talking about our failures because we've had those as well, but we've had some success. There's some sensible measures out there. We need to do more. We've reached the point where it's natural for a governing body to get involved. We've seen that in other sports. I understand that the FIA needs encouragement from the teams and I'm going to continue to do what I can to encourage the teams to try and work together. We're not natural workers together on these sorts of issues. We work better in crisis situations but I think it would be foolish to wait for the next big crisis in Formula One to try and work together. I think the right thing is to work hard at it now. I'll certainly keep pushing but we will see where we go.

MK: For us it's absolutely clear that you have to control costs in the near future. You can do that in different ways. You can look at the measures that we have now, like an RRA. You can look at stable regulations, probably a mix of everything which would lead you there and you definitely need to do that to have a healthy sport. Ideally, like Martin said you would want your Federation involved in it and we won't give up on that, and try to maybe talk to the FIA to find ways how we can get the involved.

EB: I think we need to take into consideration how to control costs. It's a very serious matter now in Formula One. The RRA was one way to do it which I believe was the right way to do it but it looks as if there were different opinions. There are, as Monisha said, several ways to do it, we need to do it properly, having more stable regulations and stricter technical regulations to avoid any loopholes to spend more money. I think this may be the only way to control costs, to have them policed correctly. This is the support I will give.

SD: I agree that we should control costs, the matter is how to control them, to be honest, because we tried in a way, we made a great step forward, because I can talk about us, which for sure is one of the top teams which spends that amount of money because other teams honestly will not reach that level. For sure, we need to work together in finding the way to control it. I'm very open whether it has to be the FIA or the teams working together because there are always pros and cons but we should do something together, that's for sure.

Q: (Mike Casey – Associated Press) Obviously we're in a country that is going through a political crisis, not at the circuit but outside in some of the neighbourhoods there are some pretty tough clashes between protesters and police. Your thoughts on coming back here again, even with those protests going on?

SD: I don't think it would be good for Formula One to be involved in the political situation of the country because then there is the risk of being pulled from one side to the other, which is not really what we should do. For us, it's a place where Formula One has always been hosted at the top level and we see since 2004, when I believe the first Grand Prix was here, that there was a great development of Formula One as a sport in the Middle East area.

Other than that, I cannot comment more.

MK: I fully agree with that. For us, it's first of all the responsibility of our Federation and the commercial rights holder to evaluate the situation and then decide whether we race here or not and if they think it's the right decision then we come and race here.

MW: I think we're only all qualified to talk about it from a sporting perspective and since Bahrain introduced Formula One to this region, it's been a great event and a hospitable Grand Prix to attend. Really we're racers here, we're here to go motor racing, and I think that's all we should be commenting on.

PH: There's not really a lot you can add to what's just been said in many ways. It's hard when people try and draw you into a political situation which is something that we're not really qualified to comment on. I really just concur with what's been said.

EB: Being the last one... I just hide behind my colleagues saying they've said everything. It's true that we don't want to be dragged into a political situation. If the promoter, the FIA and the commercial rights holder agree with the decision to race here we race here.

Q: (Dieter Rencken – The Citizen) Paul, shortly before lunch, when asked about the Pirelli situation, Mr Ecclestone said rather cryptically that 'from our side it's all done.' Is that your understanding of it? Could you explain what he could have meant by that please?

PH: (Laughing) What, you didn't understand that, then? Well, it's all done then from his side. I think that's all I can say. It's on-going, I think I've told you before that we need to have some clarity over what's going on, going forward. As time passes, we have to make decisions as a business. We're not immune to what's going on in the European automotive business in particular; sales were ten percent down in March in the overall market. That impacts heavily on us and we're currently having to make action plans to address those challenges. I would think that from our point of view, sooner rather than later... time is of the essence, I would suggest now.

Q: What is the time scale?

PH: I don't particularly want to give deadlines to everyone because it seems like a negotiating point but there is a time scale and I'm pretty sure I know what it is. You might be inviting me here shortly to have a different type of press conference, I don't know, but there has been progress and we are discussing and hopefully it will get resolved in the near future.

F1 Bahrain Blog – Friday report

It was a closely-matched Ferrari pairing that topped the timesheets on Friday morning at the Bahrain International Circuit, with Felipe Massa leading Fernando Alonso by a scant 0.077s. The Scuderia's dominance did not continue into the afternoon session, which was headed by the Lotus of Kimi Raikkonen.

Friday morning saw two changes to the traditional driver line-up, with Heikki Kovalainen making his debut as Caterham's reserve driver – the Finn has been brought in by the team to provide a baseline from which the Leaffield racers will be better equipped to evaluate (and improve) the CTO3.

With two new drivers this season, it has been a challenge for the team to determine just where their car is lacking. But with input from Kovalainen, who has driven all of the four cars the team has developed since their 2010 arrival on the F1 grid, it was felt that ongoing balance issues would be more easily rectified before what the paddock is calling the team's Barcelona 'super-update'.

Making his FPI debut this morning for Marussia was Rodolfo Gonzalez. The Venezuelan was only able to complete seven laps of Sakhir following a gearbox issue, but despite his limited track time Gonzalez ended the session only 0.8s behind more experienced rookie teammate Max Chilton.

Both Force India and Lotus spent the session evaluating new parts. The Enstone racers supplied Romain Grosjean with a new chassis following a slow start to the season for the Frenchman, who has been unable to keep up with his world champion teammate. After a good start, Grosjean's efforts were hampered by KERS problems that cost the Lotus racer some track time.

Over in the Force India garage the mechanics were kept busy fitting new floors to the VJM06 of Adrian Sutil – the team brought along two versions for evaluation purposes, and both were run by the German F1 returnee.

The afternoon session saw less evaluation of parts and more work on rubber, with teams electing to run a combination of qualifying simulations and longer stints with a view to establishing their likely pace for the rest of the weekend.

As was the case last year, Lotus looked to be strong under the desert sun, with Raikkonen taking the top spot on the timesheets despite running wide on what turned out to be his pace-setting lap. There were worrying signs of degradation for the Finn, however, and the team brought him in to box earlier than anticipated when it transpired the E20 was heavier on its rubber than has been the case elsewhere.

Both sessions were largely free from incident, although Sauber rookie Esteban Gutierrez found himself on the receiving end of a puncture when he got too close to the Caterham of Charles Pic in an overtaking manoeuvre. The Mexican racer limped back to the pits after the pair's wheels touched mid-pass.

Pic's performance on Friday was the cause of some relief for Caterham, who have struggled for pace since the start of the season. But the Frenchman was able to keep ahead of both Marussias, giving the team hope that their planned Barcelona upgrade package will be what is needed to keep that coveted P10 in the constructors' championship.

FPI times (unofficial)

1. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m34.487s [11 laps]
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m34.564s [19 laps]
3. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m34.621s [22 laps]
4. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m34.790s [20 laps]
5. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m34.949s [17 laps]

6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m35.069s [22 laps]
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m35.101s [19 laps]
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m35.119s [19 laps]
9. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m35.345s [17 laps]
10. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m35.611s [14 laps]
11. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m35.640s [23 laps]
12. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m35.783s [16 laps]
13. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m35.792s [16 laps]
14. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m36.014s [19 laps]
15. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m36.485s [20 laps]
16. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m36.498s [17 laps]
17. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m36.755s [20 laps]
18. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m37.214s [21 laps]
19. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m37.850s [20 laps]
20. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1m38.401s [20 laps]
21. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m39.445s [12 laps]
22. Rodolfo Gonzalez (Marussia) 1m40.215s [7 laps]

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m34.154s [31 laps]
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m34.184s [26 laps]
3. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m34.282s [29 laps]
4. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m34.310s [28 laps]
5. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m34.543s [35 laps]
6. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m34.552s [34 laps]
7. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m34.631s [33 laps]
8. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m34.666s [37 laps]
9. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m34.932s [33 laps]
10. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m34.976s [29 laps]
11. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m35.356s [32 laps]
12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m35.506s [36 laps]
13. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m35.589s [36 laps]
14. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m35.761s [33 laps]
15. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m36.133s [36 laps]
16. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m36.279s [33 laps]
17. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m36.579s [28 laps]
18. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m36.616s [34 laps]
19. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m37.061s [32 laps]
20. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m37.313s [33 laps]
21. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m37.363s [29 laps]
22. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m37.970s [34 laps]

FI Bahrain Blog – Thursday press conference

While last year, Bahrain was all about the politics, this year the topic of conversation on everyone's mind at the Thursday press conference was the tyres.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Paul di Resta (Force India), Pastor Maldonado (Williams), Felipe Massa (Ferrari), Charles Pic (Caterham), and Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso).

Jenson, before we get on to this weekend in Bahrain, a general question for you. We've seen lots of variety this season, lots of overtaking, 10 different drivers have led a race and you're one of them but the fans seem a bit divided on what we're seeing, whether it's good or whether it's bad. Now you're the most experienced driver on the grid, so what's your take on the action so far?

Jenson BUTTON: Wow, that's question! I haven't watched the races to be fair, as we've been travelling around so much. So I haven't seen what's on the screen. Maybe it's the commentary that's the problem.

Quite possibly, but as a driver competing in them, what's your take? Is this racing as you want it or can you not push or do you have to save fuel or tyres or whatever?

JB: Yeah, we have to do all that, but I think there's been a lot of overtaking. You know, we're never going to be happy with everything in this sport or in any sport but I think the racing has been good fun. I was on the receiving end of most of it at the last race, because obviously doing less stops you're running old tyres most of the time, so there's people overtaking you most of the time. So it's not the enjoyable part of it for me, but I think if you were doing a three-stop strategy at the last race it was a fun race. They seemed like they were able to push pretty hard. In the past we had tyres that would last the whole race and there wasn't any overtaking. It's very difficult to get the correct balance. But we're having two or three stops which I think is what the idea was for racing in 2013 so that's good and there are a lot of teams fighting at the front. I think Formula One's great at the moment. I'm really enjoying racing. As I say, I haven't watched a race but from what I see around me it looks good to watch.

What are us commentators going to be saying about you and McLaren for this weekend? A continuation of the progress you've been making or...

JB: I hope you say something different because it's getting a bit boring. It's all about tyres when you talk!

Well, give us something different to say then.

JB: No, I think it's been a difficult start to the season, as we all know. The first race was stand-out bad for us. Since then we've made a lot of improvements and I think we understand the car a lot more. Here, it's a very different circuit to Shanghai. It's very front limited in Shanghai. Here it's rear limited - tyres. Last year it was a really tricky race to look after those tyres. Not sure if it's going to be the same case this year but we will see. We'll know a lot more at the end of practice, P3, and we can tell you a little bit more in qualifying.

Felipe, let's move on to you. Jenson's talked about this circuit. It's a circuit you've won on before. You've enjoyed success here. So what's the secret to a good lap here at Sakhir.

Felipe MASSA: The secret is secret!

Spill the beans.

FM: I don't know to be honest. It's a track I like to drive, since the first race, which I don't remember when it was, I was with Sauber - 2005 or 2005? It's a nice track. It's a track that has a lot of long straights, heavy braking, traction. I don't know, I just like it.

So I imagine that you come here with a fair amount of confidence, certainly different to last year. Your form seems to have improved immeasurably on this time in 2012. What's made the difference for you, the car, the tyres - what?

FM: Yeah, I think since the middle of last year we understood a lot more how to work with the tyres, how to work with the car, to improve the car, the set-up. I'm sure how we started this year was much more in a good way. I'm very comfortable in the car and I think when you are comfortable you drive automatically. So you can do the better job you can on the car. This is the job we did last year. For sure it's a different car, many things are different but I think the working is in the right direction.

Pastor, how comfortable is life for you in the Williams team at the moment?

Pastor MALDONADO: At the moment we are living hard moments, especially this start to the season has been very hard for us. But working very hard. The spirit is quite high in the team, we are working together as friends, as family, as a real team. We really hope to improve our performance quite soon and hopefully we will be there fighting for good places.

Does that improve come this weekend or is Spain more realistic?

PM: I think we need some time. We've been working hard as I mentioned before but we need some time. The problems we have got are quite big and yeah hopefully step by step we're going to get there.

Is that frustrating for you as a driver - maybe having to overdrive the performance of the car, putting more pressure on you?

PM: Yeah for sure. Sometimes you don't feel very happy, because this is the real situation in the team. But this is racing, you know. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not and we need to do our best when it's like that to try to improve, to try to survive.

Let's turn to Paul now. An interesting afternoon for you in China. A first-lap collision with your team-mate but a points finish in the end. Have you and Adrian had a chat since Shanghai?

Paul DI RESTA: Of course we've had the chat. It wasn't ideal but towards the end of the grand prix we managed to show the speed of the car. We were a bit locked because we were lost track position and I think our strategy was key on track position but I think looking back you can see how strong it was and the rewards was an eighth-place finish. We'll come into here hopefully with high confidence given our performance and how it was in Malaysia as well.

Q: It was a top-six finish here for you last year and the team are very confident that once again Bahrain could be a good track. Why necessarily is that? And do you agree: is top six possible?

DIR: Well, you're never going to say never. Last year was a bit of a key race for us. We tried the two-stop strategy which worked right down to the last corner and I think ran out of tyres and came under extreme pressure at the end. It would obviously be nice to repeat that but you're not going to say that on a Thursday going into a grand prix, given that tyres are the topic. But we'll manage our weekend as best we can and ultimately the end of the grand prix is what makes the difference and that's the key to this weekend because if we score points I think we can say it's a successful start to the campaign before we go to the European season when people start to bring upgrades and don't lose position out of that.

Q: A good weekend in China for Toro Rosso, Jean-Eric, not necessarily for yourself and once again qualifying didn't go quite the way you hoped. What is it about Saturdays that seem to be quite a struggle for you?

Jean-Eric VERGNE: Well last season it was a problem for me though I think I did improve from the middle of the season to the end. I don't think this year I've had so many problems on Saturday. At least with myself: in Shanghai I did get a problem, something wrong on the car, so that was the reason.

Q: The Toro Rosso car seems to have potential, seems to have pace. If you can unlock it, then is another weekend like the team had in China possible here in Bahrain?

JEV: Everything is possible! Last year Daniel did P6 in qualifying. The pace he had in qualifying in Shanghai shows we've made a step forward in the race, even though I had a big hole in my floor, I had the same pace as him who finished seventh, so you know everything is really encouraging and hopefully for this weekend we can, I mean once more at least for my car, get everything correct and be in the front. So, two cars in the front would be possible and that will be the target.

Q: Charles, an interesting development at Caterham this week. Heikki Kovalainen comes back as a Friday driver to the team. Do you welcome his return and his input that he can give yourself and Giedo?

Charles PIC: Yes, of course I welcome him. I think it's always good to have his advice, he's got a lot of experience so I'm sure he can give us some interesting feedback.

Q: Something that the team feel is desperately needed at the moment? Some experience just to see how good or how bad the car actually is.

CP: I think on the first three races for sure we are not happy with where we are at the moment and updates are coming for this race... so it will be

quite interesting to see how reacts the car here. Then we need to progress here of course.

Q: And these upgrades you feel will help you take the fight to Marussia? You should be on level terms with them?

CP: Yes, of course. It's always really hard to tell what will do the upgrades before running them but normally they should bring something and our job will be to try to optimise the car around them this weekend and get out one hundred percent of speed on Saturday and Sunday.

Q: (Kate Walker - Girl Racer) Charles, a question for you carrying on with the Heikki stuff, we spoke to him earlier and he said that one of the things he'd been told to look out for was balance problems with the car. Have you had the opportunity to talk to him about any struggles you've had with the car or would you prefer he went in blind and delivered his feedback that way?

CP: No, I didn't speak to him for the moment. I think what will be interesting is tomorrow when he will drive the car because as I said, he's got a lot of experience and he will be able to bring his experience and also knows the team for three years. I think it's always good to take, and then after we have to be focussed also on the race, to make a good weekend.

Q: (Dan Knutson - Auto Action / National Speedsport News) A question for Felipe: by now you're very used to having a world champion as a team-mate. Describe to us the challenges, the pressures and the satisfaction of working with and competing against a guy who's the champion and therefore one of the best in the world.

FM: Yeah, I think for sure I had most of my career a strong team-mate. I think many people say it's not good to have but I think it's positive. You always need to do the best you can and if you don't do the perfect job you know you're going to be behind. And I think in terms of experience you learn a lot by working with a good team-mate, a strong driver. I think to be honest, for maybe most of you guys or many people around the world is maybe everybody's talking about him as the best driver, y'know? So, you know you have a lot to do, you have a very important job and I think that's good. You're always under pressure because you need to be perfect every day. But I think, I like... think it's nice, I think it's important and we always need to grow, we always need to get better and better and that's still what I'm trying to do all the time.

Q: (Livio Oricchio - O Estado de Sao Paulo) Felipe, at the beginning of the last race you were fighting with Alonso for second place. Then after the pit stop, with the medium tyres, you suffered a lot. You said you had graining. What's the origin of this graining - the way you drive, the set up you chose? Could it be predicted during free practice?

FM: Well, for sure I had a big problem with graining in the last race, with the medium tyres. It was something that I was already having at the beginning of practice on Friday. It was a little bit less graining on Friday, but I had it anyway and for sure, the track gets better up to Sunday. I had a lot more grip at the rear of the car so the graining was even more in the race. I started the race concentrating very much on not over-using the front tyres, because of the graining, but then the graining started and I was not pushing because I was trying not to use the front tyres. I lost the second stint because of that. And in the third stint I had the graining and I started to push and I cleaned the front tyres and then the car started to be very quick after a while. So for sure the direction I took - saving the fronts - was completely wrong. I suppose to push a little bit harder with also a bit of traffic in the second stint and very concentrated not use the front and that was wrong. The third stint and the second last stint was not as much of a problem as the second stint but in the second stint I lost many positions, I lost a lot of time to these guys in front and I lost the opportunity to fight with them. For sure, it's something that we understand and it shouldn't happen again.

Q: (Khodr Rawi - FIArab.com) Jenson, do you think the big chance for you to score big points at the moment is to take a gamble on strategy in qualifying and the race until the pace of the car improves?

JB: Yes, I think we've been improving since the first race. Every race we have made improvements and I think maybe these circuits suit the car a little bit more, in terms of where we have to put the car in terms of set-up. But to finish fifth at the last race and to beat some very quick cars, I think to do that we had to try something different. We beat every single car on the grid, at least one of the drivers, which is positive I think. P5 is not where we want to be, but I think we have to take a lot from last weekend and yes, we had to try a different strategy, we had to try and do a two stop. We felt that it was the quickest way for us to the end of the race but it was very tricky to make it work because of the stint lengths that you needed. If you didn't make the stint length you dropped into a three stop race. By that point, you're pretty much out of the points so we had to make it work. A lot went into the strategy and trying to understand what we have to do with tyres and the lap time we have to do. It was a tricky weekend but in the end a good result I think we should be very happy with. And here, yeah, I think we have to wait and see. It's tough on tyres round here, it's hot, it's tough on the cars in terms of cooling so we have to see first of all what downforce people are running and how the degradation is, to see what we do with the car. Here, I think it's probably more likely that everyone's going to be running the same sort of strategy but we have to wait and see.

Q: Pastor and Paul, as drivers, as top drivers, do you enjoy the challenge of prolonging a stint, of driving on tyres that have less grip? It's a difficult way but it can be rewarding as Jenson said.

PM: Yeah, I think everyone is trying to make the tyres live for longer. For sure, that can change your final result in the race, because you can play with the strategy. At the moment, it seems to be that more or less all the teams are quite close on their strategies but this is only the beginning of the season. We saw the same in the past. We need a couple of races to learn the tyres more and it should be more or less like last year. For sure, this year the tyres are more sensitive, they are going away quite quickly but it's the same for everyone.

Q: It's something that you've had to deal with a lot, Paul, not just here but throughout much of last season.

DIR: I see it as a very positive thing in the position that we are as a team, midfield, where Jenson's fighting at the moment. Obviously we're trying to take it to them, but being unpredictable gives you chances. Equally, when you see the big guys at the front, putting a load through the tyres in qualifying, it plays into our hands towards the end of stints. At the end of a Grand Prix, that's valuable points for us and if you can take a gamble and it pays off, like the position we were in last year, we definitely didn't have a car that deserved to be sixth but we got ourselves to do that and went away with some very big success. That leads momentum into other Grands Prix.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi - La Gazzetta dello Sport) Felipe, tyres this year seem more important than ever, maybe as important as 2011. In this race, Pirelli has decided to change their option tyre from the soft to the medium. On the hard, you had problems in Malaysia. Could you tell us how the car feels on the hard and if you feel a little penalised by Pirelli's decision?

FM: Yeah, I think maybe you're going to see a race strategy which can be very important for the race as we've seen in most of the races up to now. It will be no different here. But I didn't have problems with the hard tyres in Malaysia. The only problem I had was that the degradation was similar to the medium, not just for me but for most of the teams. I think that's a little problem of the tyres. I think you need to chose the right difference, from one compound to the other, and I think that's the only... so I'm sure here the difference will be big on the tyres, from medium to hard, even though the degradation may be similar. Many people try to use the medium tyres as much as possible. I think here it's a track that is very hot so let's try to do a

good strategy as well.

Q: (Michael Casey - AP) Paul, have you had a sit-down with your teammate and worked out the differences after last weekend's race? And even despite all the problems, with the finish you had, what does that mean for the season? It's got to give you more momentum.

DIR: I already said, of course there were discussions, there were opinions, but I believe it's sorted. To take the positives from it, we obviously scored good points in China. Malaysia was a big miss for us. We went into that race with the unknown had we fixed the pit stop issue and the wheelnuts that we had? I believe that was probably the strongest Grand Prix until now in terms of the performance, so I think that's why we're fairly optimistic, hopefully that we can do something this weekend, back in the heat. Our car seems to work very well with that and I think as a baseline goes, the consistency I think is the key to how we develop the car, and how we're going to progress this year. Certainly going away with points this weekend is the target, but essentially, I think we need to get ourselves a bit more up the grid in qualifying, because that gives you the track position and that's what hampered our race at the last Grand Prix.

Q: Would you say the discussions were amicable?

DIR: It's always amicable, it always is.

Q: (Abhishek Takle - Midday) To all of you: with the nature of the tyres changing from year to year and given how crucial they are today, how much do you have to alter your natural way of driving or your driving style to get the best out of them?

JEV: The driving style between qualifying and the race is different. We all know the tyres don't last very long and you need to be very careful with how you accelerate, how you are in the high speed corners. You have to try and manage them as well as possible, the tyre energy and therefore you need to change your driving style quite a lot.

Q: Felipe, you've been driving for a while. Is it difficult to change your driving style after so many years in the sport, or is there something that you have to do in the simulator which helps you to achieve that?

FM: Well, I think Formula One is something that you have to learn year-by-year, it's part of the school that we have in Formula One every year. Rules change, things change. You need to learn how to drive the car with the tyres so you need to learn how to save the tyres. As Jenson said at the beginning, from a driving point of view, for sure sometimes the situation is not easy for us to race, to save the tyres, and as he said 'I was on a two stop, people were overtaking me very easily' but it was the right strategy that he did anyway so sometimes our life is a little bit difficult. When you are at home, watching the race, I think the race is very nice to see now. It's a nice race to see and it's much nicer in comparison to the past. So I think many people actually complain about what Pirelli is doing but I think they're going in a good direction for the sport and I think what is the formula is to chose the right difference between all the tyres, super soft, soft, medium and hard. I think that's one of the little things where we have to work in a better direction but I think the races are very nice to watch. You don't just need to think about ourselves, we need to think about everything. I think it's really important to learn how to drive and save the tyres and everything.

Q: Charles, what's happening with you towards the rear of the field? Are you working on trying to preserve your tyres, the fact that you have to move off the racing line a bit more than Jenson or Felipe, does that hamper your race more?

CP: I think on the tyre side, first of all you have to try to understand from where will come the degradation, because it's not always the same problem on each track. And then afterwards, you have to chose the best compromise between your car's set-up and your driving, to extract the best performance from them. And afterwards, in our position, we normally have quite clear first and second stints and then the last stint we get some blue flags, so what is important is try to not lose time.

Q: (Kate Walker - Girl Racer) Back on the tyres, we've heard over the last weeks Pirelli possibly bringing an additional set of tyres for teams running a young driver on a Friday morning; they're going to be pretty similar but more durable. Do you guys support this initiative, to help develop your cars but also to help bring up young drivers, or do you think it will just complicate matters too much?

PM: It's always difficult with this tyre story, because we don't have enough tyres to do many tests. The test plan is very restricted, especially during Pl, in which all the teams normally run only one set of prime tyres. An extra set of tyres would surely help the teams like us at this time, where we are having some problems with the car. You have to do many different tests.

Q: Jenson, McLaren don't usually run a Friday driver. With an extra set of tyres, a bit more usage of the track during that hour and a half, would it be beneficial to the team?

JB: I don't think you'll see many of the big teams having a third driver drive the car on Friday but I think it's a good idea to have extra sets for your drivers, yes. I think it's very difficult for young drivers to have mileage in a Formula One car. They need to bring a lot of money, it seems, to have the opportunity, but now that they have extra tyres, it could actually be useful for the middle of the grid teams and lower to have a third driver for more mileage, more information. There are quite a few test drivers who will sit around and watch Friday, Saturday, Sunday every other weekend. They don't get to drive the car, so I think it's good for them and for the future of the sport it's important that youngsters are actually getting the chance to drive an F1 car and to experience a Grand Prix weekend properly rather than just watching what happens.

Q: How beneficial would it have been for Red Bull's young drivers at Toro Rosso, Jean-Eric, and when it does happen this season, how good will it be for Toro Rosso?

JEV: It would have been good when I remember my case a year ago. I was pretty happy to get some miles on the Friday in the Toro Rosso. I think it's really good experience, as Jenson just said. First of all we need to bring a lot of money, we had the chance to be in the Red Bull programme and we get the opportunity to drive, but it's never enough. It's definitely a good thing.
