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Given the amount of time and money it takes to travel to China, it just wasn't possible for me to get to Shanghai and keep the bosses at my day job happy. Given the volcano that saw many stranded in China, it's a good thing I stayed at home. I never have enough money for extra days spent in hotels. At this point, I barely had enough money for food!

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## F1 Sofa Blog: Engines, F-ducts, and FPI

You know the routine as well as I do – it's stupid o'clock in the morning, and thousands of miles away engines are firing up for the first practice session of the Chinese Grand Prix weekend.

I'm not quite sure what I'm doing up. In theory I should be watching FPI, but there's not really anything to watch at the moment. Installation laps complete, the drivers are pretty much all in the pits while their cars are tweaked and new parts put on.

Things you should know about... Fernando Alonso is going to be the guinea pig for Ferrari's version of the F-duct. He's running one, while teammate Felipe Massa will be settling for other upgrades. No news on whether Massa will be running an F-duct at some point this weekend, although I assume he will be. The Scuderia's F-duct is fed by holes on the airbox, whereas McLaren's uses what we've taken to calling a snorkel.

Sauber will be running their own version again this weekend – they had one in Malaysia, but didn't really have the chance to test it in action, thanks to the twin engine failures the team suffered. Williams were reported to be working on a device, but either it's not ready yet or that was just hearsay, as they've not got one working in Shanghai.

What Williams do have is a new front wing, which Rubens Barrichello will be trying out this morning.

And while I've been writing all that, cars have taken to the track in droves. Times are popping up on the board faster than I could hope to keep track of them.

Lewis Hamilton was top of the timesheets with teammate Button just behind, but the two McLaren drivers have now swapped places. The two Lotuses and Virgins are dramatically off the pace – about four seconds, as I type – but margins are very tight further up the field.

Fernando Alonso's Ferrari has just stopped on track with what looks like another engine failure. Big puff of smoke and now flames are coming out of the exhaust. Oops. The Spaniard hadn't completed a flying lap before reporting engine problems on the team radio. Will it be two engines down, six to go for the season?

This is not looking good for Ferrari. It may have been an old engine – the Scuderia were supposed to be reusing the Bahrain engines this weekend – but with 19 races and eight engines, any engine failure now is likely to cause problems at the end of the season. At least it was in a free practice session, and not during the race itself...

Both Lotus and Virgin have been struggling with a bump on turn 1 – parts have been coming off their cars in a worrying fashion. Timo Glock was having front wing issues at the start of practice, and one of the Lotuses just lost bits of its diffuser. Blame the track or blame the cars? Let's wait until parts start flying off cars further up the pitlane before making judgements.

Other points of interest from the weekend – you'll have heard about the cloud of volcanic ash currently sitting over airports in north and west Europe. People are stranded, flights are cancelled, yadda yadda yadda.

Not sure whether or not any of the UK-based teams are waiting for upgrades that should have left the country in the past 36 hours, as parts are often taken over by team members, but there is at least one person missing from the circus – Eddie Jordan has yet to leave England, and is said to be investigating ways of getting to Shanghai to keep his co-presenters on the straight and narrow.

Big crash from Sebastian Buemi, and the session is red flagged. Both his front wheels fell off under braking – insane. Was the suspension made from spun sugar? I have never seen anything like that before in my life – a slight bump, and then the two front wheels pop off and the car scrapes along the track, driven solely by the rear wheels. One of the wheels flew over the track into the public area, and nearly brained a cameraman. Could have been much more serious than it was.

Unbelievably, Buemi's walked away and looks to be fine. What an accident to walk away from.

Buemi had spent the practice session waiting while his car was being worked on – there were leaks in his braking system. Toro Rosso haven't worked out what was behind Buemi's accident; it could be a freak occurrence, or an unintended error introduced in the pits.

Session restarts with six minutes to go – how much change will we see on the leaderboards? I've not paid much attention to the actual timesheets this morning. Too much else has been going on. And what do times set in practice sessions really mean, anyway? Everyone's spent this morning trying out new parts, working out how to heat their tyres, and refamiliarising themselves with the track.

The two McLarens, Mercedes, Red Bulls, and Renaults have been in the top ten for most of the session. It might have been two Ferraris, but for Alonso's engine problems – we'll never know. And no prizes for guessing the bottom six (Alonso's lack of a time doesn't count). Yup, it's the three new teams. Quelle surprise.

So, times:

- 1 Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:36.677
- 2 Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:36.748
- 3 Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:36.775
- 4 Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:37.509
- 5 Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:37.601
- 6 Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:37.716
- 7 Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:37.745
- 8 Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:37.980
- 9 Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:38.008
- 10 Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:38.098
- 11 Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:38.161
- 12 Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:38.375
- 13 Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:38.421
- 14 Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:38.569
- 15 Paul di Resta (Force India) 1:38.618
- 16 Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:38.678
- 17 Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:39.939
- 18 Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:41.531
- 19 Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:41.779
- 20 Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:41.830
- 21 Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:42.181
- 22 Bruno Senna (HRT) 1:43.875
- 23 Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:43.949
- 24 Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) no time set

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## F1 Sofa Blog: The relative calm of FP2

So I decided to stay awake between the two practice sessions. Work later will be loads of fun.

There are five minutes to go before the on-track action will get going again, and the garages are a hive of activity. Ferrari are busy working on Fernando Alonso's car following the Spaniards engine failure in F1. Alonso is now running the engine he won with in Bahrain, which the team were planning to use in the race – here's hoping it survives the weekend, or he'll be down to four new engines and one old one to see out the final 15 races of the season. Not ideal.

And the Toro Rosso garage is also hard at work. Sebastian Buemi walked away from what looked like a terrifying accident in F1 – he suffered total failure on a brand new front right upright, and both of his front wheels flew off just after turn 14. The team have put an old set of uprights back in his car, and it looks like the accident was just a freak event.

The inevitable investigation will no doubt furnish us with more answers in time.

And now the session has started, engines are revving, and installation laps are underway. Karun Chandhok is the first man out on track.

Other than accidents, ride height devices, Ferrari engines, and all of the other points of note, grip is the big story of the day so far. The cold air and track temperatures – relative to the other races we've had, anyway – make it that much harder to get the necessary heat into the tyres.

Further complicating the issue is the track itself. The aerodynamic set-up in Shanghai is a balancing act – lots of downforce for the corners, but low drag for the straights. (Hence everyone singing the praises of McLaren's F-duct, which is a best-of-both-worlds innovation.) If the set-up's slightly wrong, and you're not getting enough downforce, any grip issues caused by the colder tyres will only be exacerbated.

As the track rubbers in – and heats up over the course of the afternoon – you can expect to see grip levels improve dramatically.

People have been questioning the future of the Shanghai Grand Prix, but Bernie Ecclestone has said that the circuit has a rolling contract with FOM. "No dramas... the contract is ongoing here [in China] and it will go on. It is a rolling contract," Autosport have quoted the F1 supremo as saying. Also courtesy of Autosport is the news that the future of F1 is for one race a fortnight – nearly. Ecclestone said the 2011 season is "20 races – getting ready for 25."

So get ready for a lot more early weekend mornings. You might want to consider going nocturnal to support the sport.

Poor Sebastian Buemi. He's not been able to get any running in this afternoon – his car's still undergoing extensive repairs following his F1 accident, and with only 20 minutes remaining in this session, it doesn't look like he'll have a chance to get back out until tomorrow morning.

But teammate Jaime Alguersuari is making sure that Toro Rosso's efforts aren't all for naught – he's currently sitting eighth in the rankings, and has been in the top ten for most (all?) of FP2.

The biggest complaint so far today seems to be understeer. Robert Kubica was suffering from it in his Renault, Adrian Sutil has made similar noises about his Force India, and the two men are far from alone. If I weren't sleep deprived and trying to look like I'm busily working, I'd be able to give you a more complete list.

Thank goodness I get a lift to work. The power of my dongle meant I was able to keep on top of developments in Shanghai while circumnavigating the Oxford ring road. Technology rocks.

As with this morning's F1 report, I've not been paying much attention to the timesheets. Both Ferraris look to be miles off the pace, but they're actually doing runs on heavier fuel, so read into that what you will. The top of the timesheets looks pretty similar to the end of F1 - we've got both McLarens, both Mercedes, both Red Bulls, both Renaults, and Sutil. The only difference is Felipe Massa's out and Alguersuari's in. For now. Ten minutes remaining, and all could yet change.

And with minutes to go, Heikki Kovalainen grinds to a halt on-track. Apparently the warning of a drop in oil pressure only came once the engine has cut off. Handy!

The chequered flag has now fallen. Not much change in that top ten, which is eerily similar to this morning's. The Mercedes engine looks to be a good one for this circuit, and the F-duct does appear to be giving the McLaren a slight advantage. Whether that will translate to a strong qualifying session remains to be seen.

Back tomorrow for FP3, but I'm leaving you with the times below...

- 1 Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:35.217
- 2 Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:35.465
- 3 Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:35.593
- 4 Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:35.602
- 5 Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:35.791
- 6 Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:35.995
- 7 Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:36.254
- 8 Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:36.377
- 9 Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:36.389
- 10 Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:36.604
- 11 Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:36.944
- 12 Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:36.986
- 13 Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:37.421
- 14 Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:37.431
- 15 Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:37.657
- 16 Vitantonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:37.804
- 17 Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:37.867
- 18 Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:39.624
- 19 Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:39.947
- 20 Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:40.233
- 21 Karun Chandhok (Hispania) 1:41.008
- 22 Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:41.107
- 23 Bruno Senna (Hispania) 1:41.345
- 24 Sebastien Buemi (Toro Rosso) no time set

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## F1 Sofa Blog: FP3 and the fists of fury

The title of this piece is something of a misnomer, There were a few fists of fury in F1 and FP2, but I forgot to write about them at the time. It was early.

But if the three practice sessions are any indication, this weekend's qualifying will be characterised by heavy traffic, slow backmarkers, and fists shaken by drivers on ruined laps. As long as that doesn't translate to the racing on Sunday, I'm sure it will all be fine and dandy.

So, FP3. It's all action on the track, for about two and a half minutes, as installation laps are go, go go! And then it stops. Installation laps complete everyone piles back into the garage, tweaking set-up, giving feedback, and trying desperately to find that extra tenth. I recommend looking down the back of the sofa.

Good to see Sebastian Buemi out on track after yesterday. He may just have been doing an installation lap, but I would have been a bit twitchy behind the wheel. Probably why I don't get paid loads of money to be an F1 driver - I'd need a day or two to relax once I'd seen both front wheels fly off my car at nearly 200mph. I'm a delicate little flower like that. Buemi is evidently made of sterner stuff, and it's good to see him unharmed.

Claire Williams has popped up on Twitter to announce the Williams team will be trying out some new upgrades this morning: "Having been impounded by Chinese customs for a couple of days, our new parts have now all arrived and are due to run in P3." Maybe the customs officials were Renault fans?

Drivers are now beginning to pour onto the track to complete this weekend's practice programmes. Too many times are popping up on the board to keep track of them, and they don't mean much right now anyway. Every time a faster car arrives on track it outpaces the slower times that were there already. In further earth-shattering news for you this Saturday morning, bears prefer woodland toilet facilities.

In real news, this weekend is all about wings, and not the Red Bull variety. Rubens Barrichello has been moaning about his rear wing all morning, so it doesn't look like Williams' version of an F-duct is particularly effective. Better luck for Barcelona, boys!

Mercedes seem to be having better luck with theirs. They're not top of the timesheets by any stretch of the imagination, but they have been able to improve their straight line speed. Keep an eye on them in qualifying later - when we know they'll be running low fuel we'll be able to work out how much speed their device is actually giving them.

Ferrari tried to run a wing stalling advice in Friday's practice sessions, but the team picked the wrong horse to back. All of the equipment was on Fernando Alonso's car, and the Spaniard was on track for about three seconds before his engine blew. Unsurprisingly, the team don't have much data on the efficacy of their device yet...

Vitaly Petrov has just red flagged the session. Completely loses it coming around the final corner and plants his car in the tyre wall. Looks like the front of his car lost a fight with a wall, which I suppose it did. Let's see how quickly Renault can rebuild it - with luck, this won't affect the young Russian's qualifying later on today. Petrov looks to be fine, if a bit annoyed.

Quick look at the timesheets while the action's on hold. So far this session the McLarens, Ferraris, and Mark Webber have been scrapping for the top spot, with Vettel and the two Mercedes not far behind. Webber and the two McLarens look the most convincing at the moment - Lewis Hamilton leads from Mark Webber, with Jenson Button just behind.

And now the session's restarted with a whole ten minutes remaining. Button said yesterday that he didn't think the Red Bulls had shown their hand this weekend, and I think he might have been right. Webber has just snatched the top spot from Hamilton, and Sebastian Vettel popped up in second place almost immediately.

A few more changes in position, all too fast to record, and the session has ended. Webber was fastest in FP3, followed by Hamilton in P2 and Vettel coming in third. Button was fourth-fastest, with Alonso behind and Nico Rosberg in sixth (yes, he's out-performed Schuey again so far this weekend, all of you who are keeping track).

Full set of times below...

- 1 Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:35.323
- 2 Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:35.564
- 3 Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:35.691
- 4 Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:35.747
- 5 Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:35.857
- 6 Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:35.913
- 7 Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:36.262
- 8 Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:36.343
- 9 Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:36.416
- 10 Kamui Kobayashi(Sauber) 1:36.634
- 11 Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:36.879
- 12 Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:37.031
- 13 Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:37.192
- 14 Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:37.240
- 15 Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:37.339
- 16 Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:37.585
- 17 Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:37.664
- 18 Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:37.784
- 19 Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:39.579
- 20 Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:39.616
- 21 Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:39.749
- 22 Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:39.776
- 23 Bruno Senna (HRT) 1:40.316
- 24 Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:41.141

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## F1 Sofa Blog – Red Bulls fly in qualifying

For the second time this season, Red Bull have locked out the front row in qualifying. The team have scored every pole of 2010, with Sebastian Vettel taking three and Mark Webber claiming one.

And while the other teams have been blaming the Red Bull's alleged ride height system for their dominance of qualifying, recent FIA clarifications have brought that particular battle of words to an end. As Christian Horner said over the team's radio, "Who needs ride height control?"

Vettel's pole position was something of a surprise. While the young German has traditionally performed well at Shanghai - he scored both pole and victory in 2009, and came fourth for Toro Rosso in 2008 - teammate Webber seemed stronger all weekend. The Australian had battled with the two McLarens for dominance in the three practice sessions, and Lewis Hamilton was the man to beat in Q1 and Q2.

The third qualifying session was a disappointing one for Hamilton - he only managed a sixth-placed finish, and was outqualified by teammate Jenson Button for the third time this season. And Red Bulls aside, the teammate battles among the big four are not playing out as expected. Thanks to his consistency and Fernando Alonso's engine failure in Malaysia, Felipe Massa is currently leading the drivers' standings, beating his teammate in the

process. Button is ahead of Hamilton in the rankings, thanks to his Melbourne win, and Nico Rosberg has outperformed returning seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher every weekend.

And while Schumacher and various talking heads from Mercedes have spent the past week assuring the world that all was going to plan regarding the German legend's comeback, the gap between the two widened in Shanghai. Schuey made it into Q3 by the skin of his teeth, and was only able to find a ninth-placed 1.35.646s. Rosberg will be starting from the second row, having posted a 1.34.923s lap, good enough for fourth place.

Although it didn't affect their qualifying performance, both McLarens had issues with false neutrals on their out and in laps. Neither team nor drivers appeared worried about the problem when interviewed after the session, saying that normal upshifting in the race and full throttle to the engines would ensure it didn't recur.

The only surprise in Q1 was the disappearance of Tonio Liuzzi, who went out in Q2 in Bahrain and Australia, and qualified 10th in Malaysia before retiring with throttle failure on lap 12. His performances in practice would have seen him through to Q2, but it was not to be – he will start from 18th. Behind him will be the three new teams – Timo Glock is in 19th for Virgin, Jarno Trulli and Heikki Kovalainen are 20th and 21st for Lotus, and then Lucas di Grassi in 22nd, followed by Bruno Senna and Karun Chandhok in 23rd and 24th for HRT.

Chandhok will take a five-place grid penalty after a seal was broken on his gearbox on Friday evening, but will still start in 24th. Kobayashi will also take a five-place penalty for the same reason, moving from 15th to 20th. The Sauber driver's penalty has led to more of a shake-up, with Nico Hulkenberg, Pedro de la Rosa, Tonio Liuzzi, Timo Glock, and Jarno Trulli all benefitting.

Q2 was fairly predictable as qualifying sessions go – we said goodbye to both Williams, both Saubers, both Toro Rossos, and the Renault of Vitaly Petrov. So the teams believed to be fighting at the middle of the pack went out in the middle. Hardly rocket science.

There were a few moments where it looked like Michael Schumacher wouldn't make it through Q2, as he was hovering on the edges of the dropout zone for much of the session, and lap times were very tight – see the less than 0.2s gap between Rubens Barrichello's 11th place and Adrian Sutil's 10th. But he was able to hold on till Q3, where he posted a 1.35.646s, good enough for 9th.

The final minute of Q3 was chaos on the leaderboards – lap times fell, and what had looked like a good 2nd-placed lap for Lewis Hamilton became 6th in a matter of nanoseconds. Mark Webber also appeared to have posted a solid time for pole, 1.34.806s, but Vettel took the lead with a decisive 1.34.558s. Alonso and Rosberg make up the second row, with the two McLarens behind. In row four are Massa and Robert Kubica, with Schumacher and Sutil the last on old rubber.

So what does this mean for tomorrow's race? Who knows. From the sounds of the interviews in the paddock, everyone's expecting a wet race tomorrow. McLaren in particular implied that their car was set up for the rain, although team principal Martin Whitmarsh seemed puzzled by the team's performance in Q3.

As with Melbourne, if tomorrow's race starts in the wet, all bets on old vs. new tyres will be flung out the window. Instead, we will see wets vs. inters, and possibly some risky early tyre changes with a view to emulating Button's Australian gamble.

Sebastian Vettel has had some very good wet races (Monza 2008) and some very bad ones (Fuji 2007), but if he can make the most of his pole position and get away cleanly, the race should be his, wet or dry. Four out of the six Chinese Grands Prix have been won by the pole sitter, and barring any reliability issues we could be in for a bit of a parade at the front.

But that's providing Vettel gets away cleanly, and the first turn is a very tight near circle that will be like Piccadilly Circus come rush hour with 24 Formula 1 cars haring into it at once. Teammate Mark Webber will also be looking to take the lead from his teammate, as was done to him in Malaysia. As long as the fight is a clean one, Red Bull team principal Christian Horner has given his drivers licence to race each other.

Fernando Alonso will also be looking to make the most of his third-place start, and overtake the Red Bulls if he can. The RB6 is still the fastest in terms of overall performance, thanks to their impressive levels of downforce, and the last thing the Spaniard will want is to slowly cook his engine in the hot air trailing off a Red Bull in front.

While Alonso has made the right noises about confidence in his machinery this weekend, the prospect of engine failure will not be far from his mind. Will the Ferrari driver have to settle for a comfortable points finish in clean air rather than risk pushing his engine towards possible failure and no points at all? If he can keep Nico Rosberg behind him – and the F10 seems to run better when heavy – a third-place finish could be the most sensible target.

The first corner will shake up qualifying order, but to what extent I will not hazard a guess. But it does look like we're in for another interesting race tomorrow. Will the predicted rains come?

I know Buemi's Friday accident is old news by now, but my boyfriend summed it up brilliantly when they did a replay this morning: "He turned a rollerskate into a Heely." Best description I've heard so far.

Qualifying times below.

Q3

- 1 Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1:34.558
- 2 Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1:34.806
- 3 Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1:34.913
- 4 Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1:34.923
- 5 Jenson Button (McLaren) 1:34.979
- 6 Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1:35.034
- 7 Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1:35.180

8 Robert Kubica (Renault) 1:35.364  
9 Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1:35.646  
10 Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1:35.963

Q2

11 Rubens Barrichello (Williams) 1:35.748  
12 Jaime Alguersuari (Toro Rosso) 1:36.047  
13 Sebastian Buemi (Toro Rosso) 1:36.149  
14 Vitaly Petrov (Renault) 1:36.311  
15 Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1:36.422  
16 Nico Hulkenberg (Williams) 1:36.647  
17 Pedro de la Rosa (Sauber) 1:37.020

Q1

18 Tonio Liuzzi (Force India) 1:37.161  
19 Timo Glock (Virgin) 1:39.278  
20 Jarno Trulli (Lotus) 1:39.399  
21 Heikki Kovalainen (Lotus) 1:39.520  
22 Lucas di Grassi (Virgin) 1:39.783  
23 Bruno Senna (HRT) 1:40.469  
24 Karun Chandhok (HRT) 1:40.57

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## F1 Sofa Blog – Wet and tired

Pessimists will blame the rain, but Shanghai delivered an absolutely brilliant race. Two safety cars, masses of overtaking, constant changes in position, and a lot of tyre strategy. Sure, it might not have happened in the dry, but who cares? Good racing should be savoured, not excused.

There was even incident before the start – Timo Glock was up on two wheels as the formation lap began, and he gets taken back to the pitlane.

And at the start itself, Fernando Alonso showed the world the true meaning of jumping the gun. Following an investigation by the stewards, Alonso was issued with a drive-through penalty for jumping the start. He was suspiciously quick off the line – it looked as though he'd accidentally jumped the lights and then decided to follow through anyway.

But what a race – a first lap incident took out Tonio Liuzzi, Kamui Kobayashi, and Sebastian Buemi, and brought out the first safety car of the afternoon. On lap 3, still under the safety car, and the pits fill with drivers making the move to intermediates. Mark Webber is the first man in, and he is followed by teammate Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton, among others.

What initially looked like a good strategic move soon turned sour, however. By lap 6 the early pitters are struggling for power, and they begin to come back in for slicks. Lewis is struggling so much that he gets overtaken by a Lotus, and Heikki Kovalainen is briefly in sixth place.

Hamilton and Vettel had a bit of a duel in the pitlane – the two cars were released at nearly the same time, and both men raced for position. At the time of typing, no decision has been made about any punishment.

Lewis Hamilton spent another weekend fighting for position – he went wheel-to-wheel with Rubens Barrichello in lap 8, and pulled off a brilliant overtaking manoeuvre on Adrian Sutil and Sebastian Vettel on lap 12, making up two positions in a single move.

Lap 15 saw the young Briton go wheel-to-wheel with Michael Schumacher, a battle fans had been waiting for since the German announced his return to Formula 1. The two men tussled until lap 17, and Schuey managed to place his car just so, negating Hamilton's every move until the Brit finally made an overtake stick.

The second half of the race saw even more on-track battles starring Hamilton – on lap 30 he overtook the Renault of Robert Kubica, and on lap 34 he began to make moves on Nico Rosberg in the fight for second place. Rosberg, who had led the race early on, fought off Hamilton's advances for three laps but eventually lost the place.

While Hamilton was the star of today's race as far as on-track action goes, he was not alone. All of the drivers who chose to pit for inters under the first safety car found themselves at a disadvantage, and the result was battles up and down the field.

Vettel and Webber, who had started out on the front row, both pitted early and lived to regret it. The rain that had tempted the masses into the pits wasn't as heavy or long-lasting as expected, and the drying track tore up the inters.

By lap 6, the front of the field is made up of those men who had elected to stay out on their original tyres – Nico Rosberg leads, followed by Button, Robert Kubica, Pedro de la Rosa, Adrian Sutil, Vitaly Petrov. Mark Webber and Fernando Alonso complete the top eight, but Webber has pitted twice and Alonso three times – twice for tyres and once for his drive-through penalty.

The rain and the pitting led to all sorts of on-track action – every camera shot seemed to feature a battle of sorts. And while there were incidents aplenty in the first third of the race, with retirements from Pedro de la Rosa (another Ferrari engine failure) and Lucas di Grassi, the race-defining move was Jenson Button overtaking Nico Rosber on the back straight of lap 19. The manoeuvre put the current champion in the lead, and he held position until the chequered flag.

On lap 20 another mass of drivers heads to the pits. The rain is getting heavier, and everyone makes the move to inters, following Michael

Schumacher's lead. Jenson Button pits from the lead on lap 21, and manages to rejoin the race in the lead. Alguersuari pits and promptly loses and runs over his front wing. The debris brings out the second safety car of the race.

It takes until the end of lap 25 for the debris to be cleared, and by the time the safety car finally leaves the track the cars are so bunched up that the start of lap 26 was sheer chaos. Jenson Button holds the lead, with Rosberg, Kubica, Petrov, and Hamilton behind. Lewis overtakes the Russian heading through turns 8 and 9, and behind him on the track Schumacher slides backwards, overtaken by both Alonso and Vettel.

Lap 29 sees Hamilton overtake Kubica for a podium finish, and sets his sights on second-placed Nico Rosberg. Further down the field there is action aplenty – Alonso and Vettel and charging up the field, and Mark Webber is also looking to make up lost places.

The pitlane saw more action this weekend than the track in Bahrain – Nico Hulkenberg pitted six times, and huge swathes of the field stopped four and five times. The final push for new tyres started on lap 37, when Hamilton, Vettel, and Kubica all pit. By lap 39 they have been joined by Rosberg, Button, and Alonso, but McLaren manage to hold their 1-2 lead in the stops.

The last third of the race belonged to the two McLarens – while there was action further down the field, the focus was on Jenson and Lewis. First it looked as though the younger man was gaining on his teammate, and there was a chance Hamilton might have fought Button for the win. But then Lewis began to fall back from his teammate, and it looked like he might have pushed his tyres too hard, possibly at the cost of the 1-2 finish. But then Hamilton found extra performance just as Button was losing grip, and the two MP4-25s crossed the finish line a mere 1.5 seconds apart.

Finishing order was: Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton, Nico Rosberg, Fernando Alonso, Robert Kubica, Sebastian Vettel, Vitaly Petrov, Mark Webber, Felipe Massa, Michael Schumacher, Adrian Sutil, Rubens Barrichello, Jaime Alguersuari, Heikki Kovalainen, Nico Hulkenberg, Bruno Senna, and Karun Chandhok. Retirements were: Jarno Trulli, Lucas di Grassi, Pedro de la Rosa, Sebastian Buemi, Kamui Kobayashi, Tonio Liuzzi, and Timo Glock.

What this means heading into Europe is that F1 is going to continue to surprise us. The points system is such that while Jenson Button is now leading the drivers' standings by 10 points – and McLaren the constructors' by 19 – his lead is not unassailable. Should he fail to finish in the points in Barcelona, there are six men who could overtake him for the lead: Nico Rosberg (50 points), Fernando Alonso and Lewis Hamilton (49 points), Sebastian Vettel (45 points), Felipe Massa (41 points), and Robert Kubica (40 points).

There are also questions about the cars' relative performance in what we think of as normal conditions. Malaysia and Bahrain are both much warmer than the European heartland, while Melbourne and Shanghai were both defined by the weather. If Barcelona offers a sunny race in mild heat it will be the first chance we've had this season to see the cars race as intended.

The question of 2010 seems to be 'can F1 deliver an exciting dry race?' But I think that's the wrong question to ask. Going back over my notes of the season's races so far, the majority of on-track action has come at the hands of Lewis Hamilton. The real question of the year is 'can F1 deliver an exciting race when Lewis isn't fighting for position?' Answers on a postcard, please.

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