

F1 China Blog – Sunday press conference

The post-race press conference in Shanghai featured the same three men as the post-qualifying session, albeit in a slightly shuffled order. It was a hard-fought four-way battle for the podium that Sebastian Vettel lost out on by a mere 0.2s.

Present were Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), and Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes).

Q: Fernando, congratulations. A fairly dominant victory in the end and your 31st victory, putting you fifth in the all-time list just behind Ayrton Senna. What does this one mean to you?

Fernando ALONSO: Well, hello everybody first of all and thank you for the support all weekend. Amazing fans all weekend and it's very nice to race here. About the race: yes, definitely it was a fantastic race for us, from the start to the end, without big problems with the car. The tyre degradation was better than expected probably, so we managed more or less the pace. Yeah, it feels great after the retirement in Malaysia, we had some pressure to finish the race. The two races we finished this year; one second place and today the victory so definitely the start of this 2013 campaign is looking good so we are very optimistic.

Q: We heard the team talking to you during the grand prix telling you not need to push. They were trying to slow you down in some respects and you were saying 'I'm not pushing'.

FA: Well, you always push. In a Formula One race it's impossible not to push but it's true that we had some pace, maybe, in the pocket. Not easy to know when to use it depending on the state of the tyres. A little bit more potential and hopefully we can show it in Bahrain in one week.

Q: Kimi Raikkonen, that's your 20th consecutive finish in Formula One. You're certainly Mr Consistency. You had to work hard for that second place today. You had some damage to the front wing of your car after some contact, so tell us about that and also how it affected the balance?

Kimi RAIKKONEN: I think in the end it was a pretty okay result. Obviously we want to win but after a bad start the car wads handling well but then overtaking Perez, I was next to him and he just pushed me on the kerb but I tried to avoid him but I went on the grass and hit him on the rear I think and damaged the front. That didn't help but luckily it didn't affect so much the handling, it was just a bit too much understeery but we could still fight for second place. For sure without the damage we could have been quite a bit faster. Anyhow, good points and we try to do better next time.

Q: We come to Lewis Hamilton, our pole-sitter. It didn't quite work out for you there on race pace. You really dropped away towards the closing stages, under a lot of pressure from Vettel but some great racing nonetheless.

Lewis HAMILTON: Yeah, I'm really happy with today's result. Great result for the team, very happy with the points. The team did a fantastic job all weekend. Unfortunately, we didn't have the kind of pace these two have but still very fortunate to get on the podium.

Q: Fernando, a closing question for you. Only one week until Bahrain. What are you expecting in terms of performance there and what's the celebration going to be like tonight with your Ferrari team?

FA: I expect a tough race again. In Bahrain I think we will see different conditions and who knows how competitive anyone can be. But definitely, as I said before, from the races that we finished this year the car seems to be able to be on the podium, so we hope to be on the podium again in Bahrain. The celebration tonight? Nothing special. I have a flight very early for Bahrain, so tonight I think some dinner. I think they guys will celebrate more than me.

Q: Fernando, congratulations, well done. You were a winner here in 2005, how does it feel to have won again? It seemed to be a perfect race for you.

FA: It feels good. Obviously a long time from the victory here – eight years. Definitely it was nearly a perfect Sunday for us, with not any problem in the race. The start was clean: it was good. We managed to overtake Kimi. And then in the first stint we managed to pass Lewis as well. The car felt a little bit better on the degradation side let's say. And then in the rest of the race, obviously you need to take care of the tyres a little bit, you need to manage the gap with the guys behind. It was not so easy to understand the race sometimes. We were overtaking the McLarens, Hulkenberg, Sebastian, so it was a little bit of a mix. So it was not an easy race and there were some moments of action let's say and the risk is there when you have to do an overtaking manoeuvre and you have to manage that as well. The team did a perfect job with the set-up of the car for quali and the race, perfect pit stop times and pit stops executed let's say. At the end of the race the victory is a good reward for the team, well deserved after the disappointment in Malaysia and you know, the car felt good. The two races we finished, one was second and the victory today, so definitely it's a positive start to this championship. We need to keep going like that, in this direction, with good weekends, with not any extra risk and hopefully in Bahrain we can score some good points again.

Q: Kimi, obviously a bit of a problem at the start there, tell us about that, and also how much pressure was there at the end as well?

KR: I think we just had wrong settings. The practice start was very good but then it was really bad the real start and we lost some positions and after that the car was okay, but I had a little accident, some problems with Perez and we damaged the nose and the front wing. I was surprised there was no more damage because I hit him quite hard. Also bit surprised that we didn't have any more problems after that. A bit too much understeer and destroying the front tyre because of that but we still could fight for second place and get quite a good result in the end. Obviously we wanted to try to win but today with all the issues it was not possible.

Q: Lewis it was kind of tight at the end with Sebastian closing on you and obviously you were trying to put pressure on Kimi. Tell

us about it.

LH: Yeah, it was a good race for me. Quite happy with third. Of course I would have liked to have won but congratulations to Fernando, he did a great job and so did Kimi. They were both a little bit too fast for us during the race. I was seeming to be able to apply a little bit of pressure to Kimi but not enough to get close to him and overtake. My tyres were shot at the end and there was nothing I could do really to hold off Sebastian. A little bit unlucky with some traffic. Still, to get on the podium, really happy. Really happy with the points as well.

Q: (Abhishek Takle – Midday) Lewis, we heard Ross comment on the radio at the end, saying ‘we’re not quite there yet’ but of course a good race for you. What area do you and the team have to work on to give you that little bit extra?

LH: That’s a good question. I’m not really sure where we’re losing out. Today, overall pace was just not there and there’s definitely a couple of areas that we can focus on on the car but we’ve got to bring some more updates and keep on improving but the team is working on that. But at least, after this I will go and analyse a little bit and try to figure out whereabouts we’re losing the time and see if we can zone in on that and try to improve there.

Q: (Frederic Ferret – L’Equipe) Fernando, who is your main rival for the title, as a driver and as a car? Is it Kimi and Lotus or Sebastian and Red Bull?

FA: I think it’s a little bit too early to say. We need to wait until maybe after the summer break or something like that to clearly see the real contenders. Hopefully we are in that group after the summer. Hopefully Felipe can be in that group as well, that will mean that the car is going well, and I think at the moment Lotus, Red Bull and Mercedes are in the same position as us, let’s say. I don’t see anyone has a clear advantage. Maybe Red Bull was very dominant in Australia in all free practices; in qualifying and the race they were suffering a little bit of degradation but definitely very fast. In Malaysia, they were maybe a little bit more in the groove but here they were similar to the others so let’s wait and see what the updates of every car brings to the pace, and we will see how luck plays. It happened to Nico in Australia where he didn’t finish with car problems, it happened to us in Malaysia. I think hearing Kimi’s comments today... you never know whether the front wing will remain there and finish the race or if the front wing will go underneath your car and you don’t finish the race. The same with Webber, who had the problem with the tyre today and didn’t finish. This can happen to anyone and this will also dictate who are contenders as well, so the luck factor is there.

Q: (Trent Price – Richland Fl) Fernando, despite the problems in Malaysia, since Melbourne Ross Brawn has been singing the praises of Ferrari’s long run pace. Do you think your win today with the margin that you had confirms that?

FA: I think it’s normally one of the strongest points for us, not only this year, also in the past two or three years, we are normally more or less OK on Sundays. On single lap pace we struggle a little bit, so whatever reasons, the long runs are normally good for us and tyre management but we don’t also really know the reason so we need to be careful on that and maximise these type of weekends, when everything goes well, but I’m sure we will struggle on some other weekends and we need to maximise the points there. Sometimes we can win, sometimes the maximum is third or fifth but we need to do the job. I’m looking forward to next weekend because it’s a very good test with very high temperatures and we will again see some problems and we need to deliver when the tough moments arise.

Q: (Michael Schmidt – Auto, Motor und Sport) Kimi, how much lap time did the problem with the nose and front wing cost you and did it compromise your strategy, would you have gone for or tried a two stop strategy without it?

KR: There’s no way to tell or not how much the front wing damage affected the whole race but obviously the car is not designed like that so it’s not going to help. But I cannot tell you if it’s a tenth or half a second per lap. I was surprised how good the car was, even with quite a lot of damage. It was unfortunate, but I think we also have to be a bit lucky not to lose more. Hopefully next race we can have a normal race and be up there again fighting for a win.

Q: Was it your decision not to change it?

KR: Actually I wanted to change it and wasn’t sure if they changed it because... I think they looked at the wing at the first pit stop but they probably thought that it would take too long or... I don’t know really. I haven’t talked to them. Also, the reason why they probably didn’t change it was that the car was reasonably OK, I could still overtake people.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – O Estado de Sao Paulo) Kimi, can you please describe your view of the incident with Perez?

KR: I got the better run out of turn three and was on the outside on that little kink through to corner four. I thought that he would leave me enough space but he just pushed me off the circuit. I tried to avoid him but there was first grass and then the kerb and then the kerb saved me. I got grip but I couldn’t slow down and I hit him at the rear. I don’t know if he didn’t see me or what happened, but there was no way for me to avoid him any more because I was there next to it and I ran out of road.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Kimi and Lewis, in your mind, with this tyre situation, is the most serious candidate for the title now Fernando and no longer Vettel?

KR: He didn’t get it but he has the same challenge. But as Fernando said, from race to race, one team is a little bit stronger at one race and the next race is a bit of a different story. I think all four teams are close to each other so whoever gets it best on Sundays and Saturdays I think will win, so it will be interesting.

LH: As Kimi said, I think it’s a bit open at the moment, but obviously Fernando is doing a great job, but as you can see from the last race, you finish the last race and some of us may have those problems in the future – who knows? But it’s far too early to say, I think.

Q: (Luigi Pernia – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Fernando, was there maybe extra psychological pressure for you in this race, did you feel it or not?

FA: Not really. I think there is pressure at every race I start. Every year, especially in Ferrari, especially every campaign you start people expect only wins from you, the World Championship. Every race is more or less the same. Every season I’ve started in Formula One, this is the 13th, there is a battle with teammates, always discussions. So this year is no different. I think pressure is always there sometimes. As I said, you can deliver a good result, everyone is happy. Sometimes you cannot do it and you need to improve. I think we’ve been working very hard this winter with the team and after the first two races as well, these three weeks were very useful for us in Maranello, working out a little bit which way we can perform a little bit better, especially in qualifying which is one of our problems normally at the weekends and also looking very carefully at driving style and what we can do to improve the performance with each year’s rules which they keep changing and you need to adapt a little bit, so I’m very happy with the job done and I’m in the best team, so I should be confident that everything will go in the right direction.

F1 China Blog – Race report

As had been the case one year earlier at the Shanghai International Circuit, tyre strategy was king on Sunday afternoon in China. Fernando Alonso piloted his F138 to a commanding victory that began with a run on soft tyres to deliver the Scuderia with their first win of the season, one race after their star driver was knocked out of action in Malaysia.

It was a war of strategy between those teams that had elected to start the Chinese Grand Prix on the option tyres, Pirelli's soft compound, getting the fast-degrading rubber out of the way before settling down to complete the longer stints on the much more durable medium compound, and those who had done the opposite, saving the softer tyre for a presumably quick stint on low fuel towards the end of the race.

But while tyre degradation was better than had been predicted, despite the dramatic shots of marbles off the racing line, the soft compound simply wasn't up to the task of a succession of qualifying laps in the dying minutes of the race, and three of those who were running on mediums completed the podium.

The race got off to a dramatic start when the Ferraris overtook the slow-moving Kimi Raikkonen, and Esteban Gutierrez made a ghastly rookie mistake, ploughing into the back of Adrian Sutil on lap five and taking both cars out of play. For causing the collision, the Mexican racer was issued with a five-place grid penalty for the next race in Bahrain.

Gutierrez was not the only man penalised after an incident on track in Shanghai – Mark Webber was given a three-place grid penalty for ploughing into the side of Toro Rosso's Jean-Eric Vergne. The Australian racer complained in the immediate aftermath of the race that he had expected the Frenchman would give way, but later admitted responsibility for the incident to the stewards.

Sunday afternoon was a catalogue of errors for the Australian, who spent the weekend lurching from one disaster to the next. A fuel pressure issue in Saturday's qualifying session saw Webber stuck on the side of the track at the end of Q2, unable to give the FIA a sufficient sample for analysis. He was disqualified from the results and moved to the back of the grid.

And while Red Bull elected to rebuild his car to give their driver the best possible chance from a pitlane start, Webber ran into Vergne and returned to the pits. But on exit it was discovered that he had a loose wheel, and despite doing his best to make it round safely, the wheel was off before the end of the gentle lap, and Webber was out of the race.

The last man to retire was Mercedes' Nico Rosberg, who called it quits shortly after his second pit stop as the result of a suspension issue that had been hampering his performance all afternoon.

A far better day was had by Daniel Ricciardo, who built on his strong qualifying result with a solid performance in Shanghai giving the Toro Rosso driver the best finish of his F1 career.

Another driver to perform well in China was second-place finisher Kimi Raikkonen, who managed to stay on the podium despite early front wing damage that should have hampered the Lotus racer's chances.

Raikkonen made contact with Sergio Perez that saw the McLaren driver force his rival off track in an unpenalised but aggressive manoeuvre, but because the telemetry showed that the Finn's grip and pace appeared to be unaffected, the brains on the Lotus pit wall elected not to change the front wing in the stops, saving time by making small tweaks instead.

That decision, coupled with the team's choice to start Raikkonen on the softer tyre compound – a strategy shared by race winner Alonso and third-placed Lewis Hamilton – enabled the Finn to keep his spot on the podium.

Further down the pack, Jenson Button managed a P5 finish thanks to a two-stop strategy that enabled him to leapfrog much of the competition during the stops, while fourth-placed Sebastian Vettel was mystified by the Red Bull's comparative lack of pace in Shanghai despite a dramatic closing laps battle with Hamilton that saw the two world champions cross the finish line split by only two-tenths.

Hamilton, who had started the race on the soft compound, found his tyres going away from him very early on. In the opening laps of the race the Briton was already struggling for pace, and was quickly overtaken by both Alonso and teammate Felipe Massa in a neat double-pronged attack which saw the Spanish race use his DRS to slip past the Mercedes driver down the finish straight. Before Hamilton had recovered, Massa took advantage and overtook into Turn One.

It was a nifty manoeuvre from the Brazilian driver, who slipped away from the leading pack thanks to a badly timed pit stop that saw Ferrari leave out their man for one lap longer than his rivals also on the soft compound. Massa both lost pace and was returned into traffic, and his chances of a podium finish were lost.

Chinese Grand Prix results

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1h36m26.945s
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 10.168s
3. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) + 12.322s
4. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) + 12.525s
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 35.285s
6. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 40.827s
7. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 42.691s
8. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 51.084s
9. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) + 53.423s
10. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) + 56.598s
11. Sergio Perez (McLaren) + 1m03.860s

12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) + 1m12.604s
13. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) + 1m33.861s
14. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) + 1m35.453s
15. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) + 1 lap
16. Charles Pic (Caterham) + 1 lap
17. Max Chilton (Marussia) + 1 lap
18. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) + 1 lap

Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) RET
Mark Webber (Red Bull) RET
Adrian Sutil (Force India) RET
Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) RET

F1 China Blog – Saturday press conference

For the first time in 2013, the post-qualifying press conference was bereft of a Red Bull driver, after the team suffered a plague of issues on track.

Present were Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes), Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus), and Fernando Alonso (Ferrari).

Q: Lewis, a fantastic, last-minute shoot-out for pole and you won it for your new team.

Lewis HAMILTON: Yeah, an incredible feeling, so happy to have our first pole for some time. I'm just ecstatic really. The lap was great. The team performed well all weekend so far and I hope that we can carry that into tomorrow.

Q: And quite a margin too.

LH: Yeah, really surprising because obviously in P3 the Ferraris were very, very quick – didn't know where they'd be in qualifying. Obviously we had really good pace for Q1 and Q2 but that last lap is so difficult to get. Obviously in qualifying we had 10 minutes but we left it down to right to like three minutes to go or something like that. You've got to get the perfect out lap, you've got to do the perfect lap to get yourself up there and I really can't complain about the laps, so I'm really happy.

Q: Kimi, you held pole briefly but you were just pipped by Lewis.

Kimi RAIKKONEN: I think the gap is quite big still and we don't have that speed right now. So, second is not bad, I think it's the best that I've been with the team ever. Not too bad, but of course you'd rather be in first place but I guess we don't have the speed. I think we are missing downforce in the middle sector a bit, but we'll see what we can do tomorrow.

Q: Great speed from Ferrari we've seen today as well, with Felipe and then you this morning and now third on the grid this afternoon Fernando. Are you happy with that?

Fernando ALONSO: Yeah, very happy. I think the weekend has been very good for us. The car felt completely different Friday. This morning we made some changes and the car is responding well and I think we have a good set-up for the race as well, which is more important than qualifying always and I think tomorrow if everything goes well we should be able to fight for the podium, hopefully with both cars, so this is good news so far for the team.

Q: Back to you Lewis. You've won this race twice already but tomorrow could be a real tactical race when it comes to the tyres.

LH: Yeah, these tyres are very tricky this weekend. Making the option tyre last is almost impossible so it's probably going to be quite a short stint at the start. But everyone has the same... except for this guy on the right [Raikkonen]. He seems to be able to look after them a little bit better than most people. Still, I think we'll have a competitive race. We've got good race pace so I expect a really tough race but I hope that we can maintain position.

Q: Lewis, you mentioned yesterday you weren't particularly comfortable in the car. Were there a lot of changes that really worked overnight?

LH: Yes. Just generally this season being in a new car, just getting the car optimised to your feelings. For me I was struggling a lot on the brakes, losing a lot of time on the brakes, even the last couple of races and so made a bit of a breakthrough there with some improved braking system, so I'm much happier with that area – but there's a couple of other areas with the setup and really there's so much more information than I probably even expected that I need to get on top of, and I'm still learning as I go on.

Q: How much was it the team hitting the ground running, having led here for the last two or three years, winning last year etcetera? How much data was there that they were able to just go straight into this meeting with a lot of data, a lot of knowledge.

LH: I don't really think that's affected us. I think the knowledge we've had and the experience from the last two races really is what mostly counts with where we've put the car. I think obviously last year they had a very competitive car here but at least from what I've seen, none of last year has really come into this year. Of course the car is competitive, as it was last year, so that's a big plus for us and I really hope we can maintain the kind of pace that we have today, going into tomorrow.

Q: Kimi, updates on the car – how much have they worked?

KR: Erm... We have very small update. The car, I would say, is almost the same as it was in the last races, or the last race. It seems to be working OK. We have some issues with some stuff but bit similar story than in Malaysia but we choose to take than chance now and we know that car works the way how we want to run it but it's not easy to keep it on that order or in that setup all the time. It's been a pretty tricky weekend to get things exactly right. It's very sensitive but we're happy to be where we are now so hopefully it helps us in the race a bit.

Q: You said yesterday the car wasn't quite so good on the mediums: good on the soft but not quite so good on the mediums. Is it better now?

KR: I don't know really. We only used the soft once in qualifying and the car wasn't the same this morning as it is now so it's a bit of a question mark because the things that I've just told, that we have to play around a bit with the car. I think it should be... went pretty OK yesterday so should be OK. I

don't know if it's good enough to fight for a win but at least today we put ourselves in a pretty OK position.

Q: Fernando, it almost seems as though there were a lot of updates on the Ferrari and it was a matter of choosing the right ones. How difficult a choice was that?

FA: Not too difficult I think. Friday you test some new parts. Some of them, they work as you expected and you put on the car for the rest of the weekend. Some of them they're not working as expected and they're a little bit worse than the previous ones, so you remove it and you make some modifications for the next race or the next time that they go in the car. So, is a normal job for Fridays and obviously we brought here some new parts and as we said now, some of them are positive, some of them were not so positive so we need to keep working on that if we want to have the pace of the leaders. Especially in qualifying: on Sunday normally the pace has been good in the first two races. It happened also last year: normally we improve on Sundays. But definitely for pole positions it is not, at the moment, perfect.

Q: It seems here that some cars are better at treating their softs better than others, some are treating the mediums better than others. How's the Ferrari working?

FA: We have no big issues with any of the tyres to be honest. Obviously the soft, they degrade much more and they will last not too long but in the long runs we did nothing that was surprising us, let's say. Hopefully we can have a good race, a clean race and be on the podium at the end of 56 laps.

Q: (Kate Walker - Girl Racer) Lewis, I know that there are no points available on Saturday but how much satisfaction do you derive from answering those critics who said you were a fool to make the move that you did at the end of last year?

LH: Yeah, well you can't really answer it in one result but definitely, bit by bit, the more and more we impress and improve they have to stand to be corrected. Obviously the team are just doing an incredible job and I'm just grateful, because it could have gone either way. Of course, people have an opinion, but I'm just really grateful that I'm here and I'm in the fight. Today is such a blessing to be here, because it was such a big change for me, and a big step for me. I think I made the right choice.

Q: (Abhishek Takle - Midday) To all three of you, in the first session we saw a lot of drivers using the softer tyre, which we don't usually see. Was that just because you guys were saving a set of mediums for the race?

LH: I think everyone was really saving their tyres for the race. The option is the one that we don't really want to use and there was no point in saving options or using a prime considering everyone will probably want to use them tomorrow.

Q: (Michael Schmidt - Auto, Motor und Sport) Two drivers out of the top ten start with a different strategy tomorrow, they start on the harder tyre. Is that a concern for you, did you think about the same strategy? And why didn't you do it?

LH: I've got really great strategists, I just trust them, if they make a decision we still stick by it. I think everyone, no matter what strategy you're on, everyone's going to struggle on the option tyre, whether it's high or low fuel.

KR: Obviously we believe that our choice is the best, that's why we do it. If we would have thought that starting with primes and qualifying with the primes would have been the better choice we probably would have done it.

Q: Fernando, do you think it varies from car to car?

FA: I don't think so. I think the strategy choice that you make, as Lewis said, in some parts of the race you are maybe looking good and some other parts maybe not looking so good - the times when you are putting on the options probably.

Q: (Luis Fernando Ramos - Racing Magazine) To all of you: we have a kind of racing now which is all about managing and controlling your pace, whereas if you go back to 2008 with different aerodynamics and refuelling, it was a sprint all the time. Which type of racing was more challenging and which type of racing did you enjoy more?

LH: It's quite easy: it's more challenging now with the tyres that we have. For sure it's much tougher for all of us, but it was definitely more enjoyable previously, I would say.

KR: It is what it is, really. We have to get our best out of it. Years go by and rules change. It's not easy to get things right, last year and this year, but it's the same for everybody and it makes a big challenge but it's also part of F1.

Q: Which did you enjoy more?

KR: It makes no difference, because this is what we have and you'd better like it or do something else.

FA: It's more challenging now. We maybe enjoy different times in Formula One: I enjoyed 2003/4 more with the V10s for example, but they are no longer. As Kimi said, we need to make the maximum of what we have now and try to enjoy it now also.

Q: (Michael Schmidt - Auto, Motor und Sport) Fernando, you had been fastest in the last sector by a big margin; was it all about tyre management in the first two sectors, to have the tyres right in the last, or is the car just good in that sector?

FA: I don't know really. I think it was something that we were looking at this morning as well and we don't have a clear explanation either. We will see tomorrow. The last sector is the very long straight so maybe we have a little extra speed in the car but it's not so clear. Tomorrow we will find out.

Q: (Livio Oricchio - O Estado de Sao Paulo) Kimi, considering the history of your car, which is able to look after the tyres, do you think that a better first run than your competitors will help you significantly during the race?

KR: Like I said a little bit earlier, it's a big question mark because we were pretty happy yesterday but the car is not exactly the same as it was then. For sure, we had some issues with the front tyres yesterday but that should be pretty easy to change. Every day seems to be a bit different, so I don't know if it's going to be OK or not. Usually we've been pretty OK, apart from the last race when we had some issues. Hopefully it turns out to be good tomorrow but I think it will be very close and whoever gets things exactly right might make enough of a difference to win.

Q: (Ted Kravitz - Sky Sports) Lewis, you mentioned your allergy on Thursday. Were you afraid at the time that it might affect your vision, you might be affected in terms of driving for the rest of the weekend?

LH: No, I've been healthy for the last two weeks and then came here and felt ill. Of course, it worries you a little bit, thinking you might not be a hundred percent but I've just been getting plenty of rest and this is definitely the best day I've had for a few days now and hopefully tomorrow should be even better so I'm quite happy.

F1 China Blog – Saturday report

It was a thrilling start to qualifying in Shanghai for the 2013 Chinese Grand Prix, with nearly ten minutes of silence and empty track before Jules Bianchi made his way out of the pits and kicked proceedings off in earnest.

With Q1 half over before it had even begun, teams were looking to their tyres and putting all their eggs in a single-lap basket where possible. Pirelli are predicting a two- or three-stop race not dissimilar to Melbourne, but the naysayers on the pit wall are portending rubbery doom.

The Mercedes pairing were the first of the front runners to set timed laps, and accordingly both Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg had their moment at the top of the timesheets, followed closely by the Mercedes-powered Force India pairing.

Once the rest of the pack crossed the line with their own timed efforts both Adrian Sutil and Paul di Resta were forced down the order by the usual suspects from Ferrari and Red Bull, while McLaren saw both drivers in the top ten.

At the back of the pack, all eyes were on Jules Bianchi, who spent most of Q1 ahead of the Toro Rosso pairing in his slower Marussia. But Jean-Eric Vergne and Daniel Ricciardo found the pace to make it through to Q2, knocking out Esteban Gutierrez and Valtteri Bottas in the process.

Of particular interest in Q1 was the tight run of times in the middle of the pack – P12 to P18 were covered by less than a second, while the gap from P17 Bottas to P22 van der Garde was a dramatic two seconds. Whatever happens at the front, Sunday's race should see battling throughout the mid-field.

The second round of qualifying started in the more traditional fashion of a car actually leaving the pits, and Sebastian Vettel had the circuit to himself for a brief period before his rivals started pouring out of their garages.

It took Fernando Alonso to best Vettel's first timed lap, beating the Red Bull driver by nearly a tenth. The gap between Vettel and teammate Mark Webber was a more dramatic 0.4s; the Australian found himself out-paced by both Ferraris and di Resta before stopping his car on track after being asked to save fuel. The instruction came too late – when Webber stopped at the hairpin, it looked as though his tank had run dry, leaving the Australian a sitting duck.

With times at the top changing regularly, Ferrari, Mercedes, and Kimi Raikkonen all looked strong, while Lotus teammate Romain Grosjean was still in the pits with no time on the board with three minutes remaining of the session. The Frenchman was banking on a single timed lap to see him through with a view to saving tyres for Sunday.

When the pitlane opened for Q3 it was Vettel who was once again the first man out on track. As the only Red Bull left running, the triple-world champion has double the pressure to secure yet another front row start. And for the first four minutes, Vettel had the track to himself. Rather than take advantage, however, he aborted his timed lap and returned to the pits.

Having started a lap, Vettel would be placed ahead of any driver that elected not to run – all nine of them. It was tyre saving the likes of which we've never seen before.

But with two-and-a-half minutes remaining, the pits emptied, with all ten drivers competing for empty track space with which to set their timed efforts.

The gamble didn't pay off for Vettel – the German driver flat-spotted his front tyres, drove straight into the run-off, and aborted his timed lap. Hamilton claimed pole position with a 1m34.484s lap, sharing the front row with Raikkonen.

Provisional grid

1. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m34.484s
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m34.761s
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m34.788s
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m34.861s
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m34.933s
6. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m35.364s
7. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m35.998s
8. Jenson Button (McLaren) 2m05.673s
9. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) NO TIME SET
10. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) NO TIME SET

11. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m36.287s
12. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m36.314s
13. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m36.405s
14. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m37.139s
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m37.199s
16. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m37.769s

17. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m37.990s
18. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m38.780s
19. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m39.537s
20. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m39.614s
21. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m39.660s
22. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m36.679s*

* Mark Webber originally qualified in P14, but was disqualified when his car was found to have insufficient fuel for an FIA-mandated sample. Accordingly, he will start from the back of the grid.

F1 China Blog – Friday press conference

As was the case with the drivers' press conference on Thursday, the main focus of the senior team personnel press conference on Friday in Shanghai was the use of team orders in Sepang last month.

Present were John Booth (Marussia), Ross Brawn (Mercedes), Christian Horner (Red Bull), Franz Tost (Toro Rosso), and Claire Williams (Williams).

Q: Claire, how have your duties changed within the team?

Claire WILLIAMS: First, thank you very much for having me here today, I feel privileged to be sitting among such amazing company. They haven't changed hugely. My primary focus has always been the commercial side of the team – to get the budget in, to keep us going racing. That won't change, that will remain my primary concern. Obviously with the Deputy Team Principal title comes some responsibility for the technical side of what we do, so I'm going to be working with our technical director Mike Coughlan to ensure we have the resources we need to get us back up to the top. And then inevitably there's the governance side of the role as well, so working with FIA/FOM issues.

Q: So how does the team structure work now?

CW: It hasn't changed hugely, as I said. We have a board at Williams made up of an executive committee that runs the team and the wider business on a day-to-day basis. That doesn't change but personally I suppose I will be going to every grand prix, so that's a slight change. I used to before. Frank is still our main leader and that doesn't change.

Q: Christian, you might have hoped that Malaysia was dead and buried and we could move on but your driver has reignited the subject by saying that he doesn't apologise for winning and that he would do the same again. Where does management stand on this?

Christian HORNER: You don't want to talk about Malaysia the race, or the pitstops or anything like that? In Formula One you're always going to have a conflict between a drivers' interest and a drivers' championship and a constructors' world championship and I think unlike other sports you don't have those two elements going on at any point in time. Of course from a driver's perspective, the drivers' championship is everything to them. Sebastian made clear his position yesterday, some of the rationale behind that. As we've always known, the position between our two drivers, there's never been too much love lost between the two of them and it's a situation that's been clear for probably the last four to five years. It's something that we've managed and during that time we've still go on to score over 2000 points, 35 grand prix victories, six world championships. So within the team it's nothing new. Obviously it's a bit more public, it's a bit more interest for you guys in terms of what's going on but as far as we're concerned it's business as usual. I think, as far as team orders goes, what's happened, happened. Sebastian's explained himself, he's explained himself to me. He's apologised to myself and every individual in the factory and the issues been dealt with. We move on and focus on the challenges of this weekend.

Q: Has he basically been given the green light by the fact the team owner and his advisor have said that there are no team orders?

CH: Well just to be clear, I sat down with Dietrich (Mateschitz) after the race and discussed at length with him what happened in Malaysia and Dietrich is a purist, he's a fan of the sport, he's a... through Red Bull I think, y'know, Red Bull is clear in its intent that it wants to support competition and Red Bull athletes across all different categories of sport. Of course in Red Bull Racing we also have a team. So there exists that conflict of what the drivers want and what the team wants. The purist obviously wants to see the drivers race and race wheel to wheel and in fact as the drivers have done on many, many occasions. Sometimes you get instances that you have to deal with. Our primary concern in Malaysia wasn't the two drivers racing each other, it was the fact we were concerned about tyre degradation from all the information that we'd seen prior... during that weekend in terms of managing the race to the end of the race with the least risk possible. Of course the call that we made at that point in time didn't suit what Sebastian's intent was and therefore you end up in this conflict between driver desire and the team's position and it's something we've discussed, it's something we're clear on going forward where of course we will trust the drivers. We will allow them to continue to race each other, they will have the information, they will know what they need to do with that information.

Q: John, you seem to have a decent car and a decent driver pairing. How much does that contribute to your security in F1, the team's security in F1?

John BOOTH: It does play a part. Our shareholders want to see us going forward and we have to show that progression. We're very pleased with what we've produced this year. We're 170 people in total in Marussia and we're very proud of what we've produced – but we have to keep working and keep pushing forward. Our shareholders expect us to go forward.

Q: Tell us about Pat Symonds' contribution to this year's car and also his influence at the circuits?

JB: Pat's only been coming back to the circuit this year, made a couple of appearances and very welcome too – but I rather hope he stays at home more and makes the car go quicker than attending circuits. He's a massive influence in our drawing office: brings a lot of discipline, a lot of knowledge and a lot of experience, particularly with the wind tunnel programme that we've been pushing on with for the last 18 months. It's made a massive difference to us.

Q: Franz, a new technical structure headed by James Key, tell us about the changes.

Franz TOST: There were a lot of changes from the technical side, from the personnel side. James reshuffled the team, he bought in much more people in the aerodynamic department – in the wind tunnel as well as in CFD. He also brought in some more people in the design office and the way, the method of working has changed as well. I'm quite positive and convinced we are on a correct way and I also expect a successful season because James has built up quite a strong team around him and as you can imagine it takes a little bit of time. But I think from the middle of the season onwards all the positions should be fixed and people will work concentrated and so far I must say the performance increases and I think we are on a correct way.

Q: And that goes hand-in-hand with the physical expansion at the factory as well?

FT: Yes. We built up the new composite building, which is finished now. That means we've bought in much more people in the composite department.

We are producing now in-house the monocoque, the front wing, rear wing, nose, bodywork, the engine cover as well as the brake ducts as well as the floor and diffuser. That means we are much more flexible. The reaction times are much shorter and from this point of view, the team has really increased.

Q: Ross, your imposition of what might be seen to be a team order has also been perceived to be establishing a hierarchy within the team. What do you have to say about that?

Ross BROWN: There is no hierarchy in the team. Both drivers have exactly the same status. Inevitably in a hard racing season on driver may start to get the upper hand and that may become a factor to take into account towards the end of the season. We would expect a driver who perhaps didn't have a great chance to win the Drivers' Championship towards the end to help one who perhaps does. I think that's our expectation of the drivers. Certainly we don't have any different status between the two drivers. In terms of our situation in Malaysia, I think there are some similarities with Christian's situation. We had... certainly Lewis was very tight on fuel and Nico was low as well. Not as bad as Lewis but still not in great shape. So it seemed that it could lead to a problem where we had both drivers racing each other, because one gets past and then you can slipstream and use the DRS and start saving fuel when you get past and I could foresee a situation where it could get very delicate at the end and for me there wasn't a great deal to gain, because we were third and fourth and no threat and no real opportunity to catch the cars in front. Fortunately our driver, because it mainly affected Nico, respected the request and did what he was asked to do. But it's a very emotional situation when you tell a driver he has to back off. He has the bit between his teeth, he's charging and he feels he has an opportunity, that's what they're there for. As I think I said afterwards I would have been disappointed if he hadn't been upset, because they're very, very competitive individuals and that's what we pay them for. But it's a very delicate situation and I've been there several times. I think what we mustn't do is push it underground. I think if we have clandestine team orders then that makes us look far worse than accepting the situation we have, which is that it's both a team sport and an individual drivers' sport and the teams will try to find the balance between those two objectives. And they don't always marry easily. We want our drivers to race. The rule is don't hit each other and that's all we ask of them and we want them to race. We have demonstrated many times that we're happy to let our two drivers race. But there will be occasional circumstances where the risk is very high and for the good of team we'll make a team decision about what we need to do.

Q: One more question. There is a new management structure at Mercedes, how is it working?

RB: OK. I think we all know Niki, he's quite a colourful character and I'm not talking about his hat. He has a lot of input, often a lateral view on different things, which is worth listening to. He doesn't have an active day-to-day role. Toto is now based in Brackley, taking over a lot of what Nick Fry did, thus getting more involved in the sport and politics as Nick did in the latter few years. I think we have our areas to look after and on that basis I'm happy.

Q: (Ian Parkes - Press Association) Christian, coming to you first. Obviously Sebastian has apologized, as you've mentioned, but yesterday his remarks were basically as if that apology never existed. As Bob has mentioned he said he would probably do the same again under the circumstances, that he'd effectively undermined you as team principal and that it was indirectly, quote-unquote, payback for what Mark had done previously in not helping either himself or the team. On that basis, has your authority been shattered and do you have a driver who, when he sticks two fingers up to you and the team, is uncontrollable?

CH: First of all, the drivers need the team. They're an essential part of the team and one element of 500 or 600 people. Has my authority been undermined? In that race he didn't do what I asked. Was I happy about it? Of course I wasn't. Did we discuss it? Yes, we did. Did he apologise? Yes. Has he learned from it? I'm sure he has. Would he do it again? I think he'd think twice but I think as he explained yesterday there is an awful of history between those drivers. It's something that isn't new. It's something that's been there between the two of them for the past four or five years. Let's not forget they are one of the most successful pairings that the sport has ever seen. They have won three successive Constructors' World Championships for the team and Sebastian, of course, has become the youngest ever triple world champion. Is my leadership undermined? I don't think so. I've led the team from the time that Red Bull entered the sport to those 35 victories, to those world championships. Of course there have been lumps and bumps along the way, there have been incidents between the two drivers. But we retain them because they are both fiercely competitive individuals, they drive each other forward and they bring the best out of each other and at some points of course it's uncomfortable for the team. But I think it's a healthy rivalry, even though they took things into their own hands. They gave each other just enough room and whilst it was uncomfortable for us on the pit wall to watch, it was spectacular driving, just giving each other room to work with, as they've done on numerous occasions. What's happened has happened. We can't change it, we can't go back and it's a question of looking forward and focusing on this event and obviously the next 16 events after this. As a team we're working as closely as we've ever done, as in both drivers to work closely together, to continue to improve, to continue to give their feedback to the team to keep moving forward because our competitors aren't far away. Sebastian hasn't achieved the success that he has in his career by being submissive. He saw an opportunity, he took it into his own hands, he'd saved a set of tyres from the previous day and he wanted that victory more than anything else. I think he justified to himself that previous events that had taken was part of his judgement on what he chose to do that day.

Q: (Dan Knutson - Auto Action/National Speedsport News) John, Jules has been doing a good job; what has impressed you most about him and what do you think his potential is?

JB: His calmness has impressed me immensely. Very likeable guy, we thought he may have been disappointed to lose out on the Force India drive, but he's just been positive from day one. As for his ultimate potential, it's very early to say. I've worked with him for two races and one and a half test days so it's a bit too early to see, but the potential certainly looks very good.

Q: (Dieter Rencken - The Citizen) I believe the president of the Federation circulated a letter last week to all team principals regarding its role in the cost-cutting process or cost control process and that it no longer intends playing a regulatory role in the process. This seems to be an about face after last year having called various meetings about this issue. How do you feel about this?

CH: I think it would be inappropriate to comment because it's a letter between the teams and the FIA. It's a private letter, I don't see there's any reason to comment in public about it.

RB: Well, we support the RRA (Resource Restriction Agreement) for instance, or we support a means of controlling costs in Formula One and we have to find a way forward, so we support whatever can be done to try and control costs or contribute towards controlling costs in the future.

JB: I'm not sure that Formula One is sustainable, the way it's heading, so the Resource Restriction is very important and we fully support it going forward. But I wouldn't want to discuss it, it's a private letter.

F'T: The Resource Restriction Agreement - there were numerous meetings. We have the Resource Restriction Agreement for the chassis which is not so important because we more or less have the chassis costs under control. We didn't manage to come up with a power train Resource Restriction Agreement which would have been much much more important because next year the costs will increase by eight to one hundred percent regarding the power train, and there we should have worked and should have come up with something but the manufacturers, as usual, had some meetings, pushed a little bit but brought nothing to paper because everybody is doing his development and is thinking of getting an advantage over the others.

The teams, the customers have to pay, they bill them at the end. This is reality and as I mentioned just before, next year will become very very expensive.

RB: I obviously can't comment on whoever Franz's supplier is but in our case, taken over a reasonable number of years, the costs will be no higher than existing costs so of course there will be a peak at the beginning because there's going to be a lot of activity but with the homologation procedures which are in place and it's our objective to bring the costs down, so I don't accept that the costs are going to be eighty to a hundred percent higher, not in our case anyway. We're doing the whole package with the drive train. It is a new project, I think Formula One needs a new engine, I think we've all heard the stories that Honda are coming in and there are other people looking at joining Formula One. I think it's regenerated that area, which it needed. That's our position.

CW: With respect to Dieter's question, Williams is an independent team so we're always in favour of cost controls in Formula One but with regards to that letter, no, we don't have a comment. It's not appropriate to discuss that.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Christian, today we saw Vettel didn't go so well, so brilliantly as the last two weekends. Do you think that's a factor of what happened recently? The second question, which is also for Ross, is about the soft tyre: Ferrari was very fast today on the soft tyre, do you think that they are serious candidates for pole and then starting in front, for leading the race?

CH: First of all, your question regarding Sebastian. Both drivers were working to different programmes today. It's an opportunity for us on a Friday to explore different set-ups and developments so obviously the information will be looked at this evening and set-ups will either converge or diverge over this evening into tomorrow but it's certainly been a productive day. As far as your question on the tyres: it looks like the softer of the two tyres is certainly quicker but not particularly durable and obviously it's a question of finding that balance between what's right for Saturday and grid position and what's right for the race on Sunday. Felipe Massa certainly looked quick today on the soft tyre, but again, we've seen so many times that Friday times are meaningless in many respects unless you understand the programmes that each of the teams has been running to.

RB: I'm presuming pole position will be set on the soft tyre, because it's over a second faster than the medium tyre but it has quite a short life, so you've got to work out your strategy over the whole weekend, from qualifying onwards and there may well be people who chose, in Q3, to conserve tyres or plan to start on the more durable tyre. But I think pole position will be set on the soft tyre because it's so much faster.

Q: (Kate Walker – Girl Racer) Christian, you've spoken extensively about the history between your two drivers and the successes that you've had as a team. However, with his comments yesterday, what Sebastian appeared to make clear was that he feels that he trumps the team. Formula One being both a team and a driver's sport, the drivers are still team employees: how do you intend to make him understand that his position is as your employee, not as somebody who has the right to decide whether or not to follow your orders?

CH: Well, I don't think Sebastian for one moment thinks he runs the team, he knows what his job is, he knows what we employ him to do, he knows why we employ him to do it and he's been with Red Bull for a long time now, as a junior driver and as a Formula One driver and now as a multiple World Champion. He recognises, more than anybody, the value that the team has behind the success that he's achieved in the car, and he knows that he can't operate without the team. So he doesn't put himself above the team or think that he's running the team for one moment. He's made a decision in a race as a hungry driver and obviously based that decision on all kinds of emotions at that point in time. I think that he's made his position clear, that he's apologised to the team, he's apologised to myself. It's happened and we move on but it doesn't change anything.

Q: (Chris Lines – AP) We move on from here to Bahrain; there are still ongoing political and human rights issues there. Are you concerned at all about how this reflects upon Formula One and how it reflects upon your sponsors?

CH: I've got enough problems with my drivers, let alone Bahrain. We've got our own issues.

FT: I don't see any problems going to Bahrain, like it was last year. I'm looking forward to going there. I think that it's very important to race over there. Formula One is entertainment. We should not be involved in politics. We should go there, we should do our race, we should be concentrated there and the political side and political topics should be solved by someone else.

Q: (Trent Price – Richland Fl) John, Jules was able to settle down to a very quick pace, early on in that session and had quite a handy margin over his direct competitors. Was the programme that he was on a reflection of that pace?

JB: Yes, you have to allow so much time for tyre evaluation in P2 now that the schedule tends to be changed around from previous years so we were on a qualifying simulation quite early.

Q: (Michael Schmidt – Auto, Motor und Sport) Christian, Mr Mateschitz said that he doesn't want to see team orders any more in his team. Are you afraid that a situation might come up where it's necessary to have a team order, possibly a situation like Ross just described where the two drivers are down on fuel or let's say that one driver has a better chance at the end of the season to win the championship over the other?

CH: Of course. It depends what you define as a team order, at the end of the day. During a race, you have a hundred different things that you have to manage, whether it be fuel, whether it be tyres, whether it be reliability, whether it be KERS – so many parameters that you have to manage and that takes very close interaction between the pit wall and the car. Of course, the drivers have to follow those instructions. What Dietrich is keen not to see is a situation where the drivers aren't allowed to race each other. As I said, our concern in Malaysia was not the fact that the drivers were racing each other, it's what the consequence would potentially be on tyre wear and the outcome of the one-two position on circuit that we managed to get ourselves into. From a Red Bull perspective, of course we want to see the drivers race and compete fairly and equally but at the same time, the drivers equally know that they need to respect the requirements from the team, whether it involves any of the elements I just discussed. Team orders are something that aren't new to Formula One, they've existed in different guises through pretty much every year that the sport has existed, and while you have a team and a drivers' championship, there will be that conflict on occasions between the two championships and the aspirations of a team and an individual driver.

Q: (Peter Stebbings – AFP) Christian, you said how there was no love lost between the drivers in the past. How would you describe their relationship now, in light of everything? Are they even talking to each other, for example?

CH: To be perfectly honest, it's no different to the relationship before Malaysia in many respects. They're both professional guys, they're both very driven, they're both very talented race drivers. Right now, they're sitting in a meeting, debriefing, across from each other about what the car is doing and how they, as a pairing, can improve the car with their team of engineers. Of course they will continue to work professionally, to benefit the team and ultimately obviously themselves. But I doubt very much they will be spending the summer break together or Christmas, but that's not what we pay them for. Why we pay them and employ them is because we believe that they're the best and strongest pairing in Formula One, as they've demonstrated consistently over the last three or four years.

Q: (Ian Parkes – Press Association) Christian, following on from that, we've seen many times in the past when a driver pairing basically cannot stand the sight of one another – Prost and Senna, Piquet and Mansell – that it just doesn't work. At the end of the day, something has to give. Do you have any confidence whatsoever that your driver pairing this season, will be your driver pairing next season, or are you already casting your net for a potential replacement of either of your two drivers for next year?
CH: Well, first of all, Sebastian is on a long term contract so he's committed to the team. Mark's contract has been renewed on an annual basis over the last three or four years and that's something that we tend to address just in the same way again this year. Of course emotions are still fairly raw from the events in Malaysia, but they're still a very effective pairing and we won't make any decisions until later in the summer when Mark and the team will sit down and discuss the future. But after two races, it's far too early to even be contemplating what our driver line-up will be for 2014.

Q: (Dieter Rencken – The Citizen) Ross, you have a fairly controversial suspension set-up. It was a couple of years ago here that you had double-decker diffusers etc. At that stage, there was a proper governance procedure in place to look at the matter, investigate it and decide whether it was legal or illegal. How would the procedure work now in the absence of a Concorde Agreement, technical working group etc?

RB: Well, first of all, there's speculation but nobody knows what our suspension system is and from what I know, it's not uncommon throughout Formula One. The old days of simple rollbars, springs and dampers are long gone, and they've been long gone for several years and I don't think it's controversial, I don't think there are any issues. On the separate matter of what would we do in the case of a dispute, then I think the situation would be exactly as it has been before: somebody would go to the stewards, complain, they'd look into the matter, it would be resolved one way or another. If people weren't happy with that, then it would be appealed and go to an appeal court. The sporting and working groups are continuing as they did before, in the absence of a Concorde Agreement, which I think is showing good spirit from both the Formula One teams and the FIA. I know our technical director attends technical working groups, our sporting director attends the sporting working groups and they are following the same voting procedures and approaches which they did before, which, as I say, I think is showing good spirit from the teams and the FIA, and the FIA have advised the teams that's how they intend to continue until the Concorde Agreement is concluded.

Q: (Ian Parkes – Press Association) John, we spoke to Max yesterday and he informed us that to fund himself for this season in Formula One, he's basically giving away part of his future earnings. Could I just get your thoughts on that first of all as team principal and whether you feel that that's a good idea going forward for a young driver to boost himself up the ladder, rather than a driver who perhaps would bring in sponsorship for a team?

JB: It's nothing new. There are lots of schemes that have been tried over the years. I think Justin Wilson was the last one that I know that had a similar scheme; and sometimes it's required to find a way into Formula One. If it becomes self-funding then it's a great idea.

F1 China Blog – Friday practice report

It was a morning of race simulations at the Shanghai International Circuit, once the cars left the pits and started setting lap times after the customary opening half hour of dead time. Top of the timesheets when the chequered flag fell was Nico Rosberg, chased by teammate Lewis Hamilton.

Behind the Mercedes pair were the Red Bull drivers, with Mark Webber out-pacing Sebastian Vettel, while Jenson Button's P6 finish was heartening for those on the McLaren pit wall. The Woking team are pursuing multiple development paths with a view to reigniting their championship challenge as quickly as possible.

All eyes were on the tyres, with degradation continuing to be a major concern for teams the length of the pit lane. Mercedes appeared to have the advantage on their longer runs, with Rosberg maintaining his pace on visibly grained tyres while his rivals struggled for grip.

The morning session came to an embarrassing end for Sergio Perez, who wound up stuck in the gravel at the pit entry after the chequered flag had fallen.

The afternoon action in Shanghai saw an increase in pace as teams put one or both drivers on qualifying simulations with a view to learning as much as they could about the soft tyre in weather conditions expected to be similar to those on Saturday afternoon.

Less than half an hour after the pitlane opened for business, the move from medium to soft tyres saw early pace-setters Mercedes dethroned by the Ferrari pairing and Lotus driver Kimi Raikkonen.

Felipe Massa was the hero of the hour (-and-a-half), proving himself to be adept at maintaining his pace on rapidly degrading medium tyres over the course of his long runs. By the time the session was half run, the track was littered with marbles, and chunks of rubber could be seen flying from the tyres as the cars made their way down the main straight.

Partly thanks to the loss of grip caused by the fragile rubber, FP2 was littered with offs and minor incidents. Perez once again found himself flying across the kitty litter – this time at Turn 8 – before clipping his car on the barriers and limping back to the pits. Button had his own struggles, flat-spotting his rubber, delaminating his front left tyre, and leaving his tea-tray smoking in the chaos.

Max Chilton found himself beset by technical difficulties, missing out on much of the afternoon thanks to oil pressure issues that forced the Briton to stop on track at the beginning of FP2. The Marussia driver's next attempt at running was equally ill-fated, and ended with the rookie driver parking trackside for a second and final time.

Special mention should be made of Jules Bianchi, who briefly occupied P11 on the timesheets thanks to an early soft tyre run before slipping back down the order to a more realistic P19. But Bianchi's performance should be praised, not denigrated – he is proving himself to be one to watch, and is doing an excellent job of highlighting Marussia's improving form.

FPI times (unofficial)

1. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m36.717s [21 laps]
2. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m37.171s [20 laps]
3. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m37.658s [21 laps]
4. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m37.942s [20 laps]
5. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m37.965s [17 laps]
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m38.069s [24 laps]
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m38.095s [14 laps]
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m38.125s [21 laps]
9. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m38.398s [17 laps]
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m38.561s [15 laps]
11. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m38.790s [16 laps]
12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m39.057s [19 laps]
13. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m39.158s [22 laps]
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m39.180s [21 laps]
15. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m39.336s [19 laps]
16. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m39.360s [20 laps]
17. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m39.392s [20 laps]
18. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m40.032s [22 laps]
19. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m41.966s [16 laps]
20. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m42.056s [18 laps]
21. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m42.083s [21 laps]
22. Ma Qing Hua (Caterham) 1m43.545s [20 laps]

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m35.340s [32 laps]
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m35.492s [32 laps]
3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m35.755s [30 laps]
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m35.819s [35 laps]
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m36.092s [31 laps]
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m36.432s [29 laps]
7. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m36.496s [39 laps]
8. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m36.514s [32 laps]
9. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m36.595s [33 laps]
10. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m36.791s [27 laps]
11. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m36.940s [16 laps]
12. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m36.963s [31 laps]
13. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m37.103s [22 laps]
14. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m37.206s [39 laps]
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m38.127s [34 laps]
16. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m38.185s [18 laps]
17. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m38.211s [32 laps]
18. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m38.276s [34 laps]
19. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m38.725s [29 laps]
20. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m39.271s [21 laps]
21. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m39.814s [27 laps]
22. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m43.227s [15 laps]

F1 China Blog – Thursday press conference

At some press conferences, you know that one or two drivers will be the centre of attention. And after the Malaysian Grand Prix it was no surprise that Mark Webber and Nico Rosberg took most of the questions in the Shanghai Thursday press conference, leaving their colleagues twiddling their thumbs.

Present were Romain Grosjean (Lotus), Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber), Sergio Perez (McLaren), Nico Rosberg (Mercedes), Adrian Sutil (Force India), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

Q: Mark, I'm afraid we're coming to you first. Very smart new haircut, fairly drastic, but I guess that's the summer haircut is it?
Mark WEBBER: Well, I went to the hairdresser's and he wanted to talk a lot and I said... I could see that I wanted to get in and out quite quick, so I said just shave it off. When he was half way through before I thought shit, that's a bit short now... but anyway it doesn't matter. It's practical, all good and yeah like you saw a few months too early but back to the old school haircuts. I used to get these when I was younger. Apparently I look younger now too so that's a good sign.

Q: When we last saw you, you left with quite a few questions being asked within yourself and also of the team as well. Are you quite happy with the way things are now within the team and in your own head?

MW: I'm fine. I was always going to Australia after that race. Obviously it was mentioned after the race in the press conference and people put two and three together and get more information I suppose. It was a little bit of a break for all of us – three weeks, it was Easter as well – so good to go down there for a bit of relaxation after the back of winter testing and the first few races. But you get pretty anxious pretty quickly. I'm really looking forward to getting back in the car here and getting on with the racing again. This track always provides good racing actually. We've seen a few (good races) over the last few seasons here, apart from Nico last year obviously when he was very strong off the front, but generally we've had some good

grands prix here. Looking forward to getting back in the car. Procedurally, the team, everything is fine. Obviously it was a bit of an interesting weekend in Malaysia but, yeah, looking forward to getting racing here.

Q: Let's move on to this race. How good is the car because obviously you had excellent result, a 1-2, in Malaysia, and also good in Australia? So, how good is the car and what are the chances here?

MW: Yeah, I think we proved the car is pretty competitive at the first two races, not dominating by any means – no one is doing that yet. We know we've got work to do. As you say, Melbourne was a pretty competitive outing but the long and short of it is we didn't have a car good enough to win there but in Malaysia we did – two different situations in terms of track layouts and temperatures and all sorts of things. Here, probably a little bit more back towards the Melbourne window let's say. So let's see how the track and the cars, the temperatures, how everything evolves around that great word – the tyres. So that's going to be important again this weekend. We've put a lot of effort in, the guys have been working hard and I've been doing a lot of work in the simulator, so ready to go.

Q: Nico, you left Malaysia a little frustrated as well. Do you understand the reasons for what happened there and are you happy with them?

Nico ROSBERG: Yeah, we've definitely discussed it and it's all sorted for the future, which is important, so yes.

Q: Well, you had a fantastic race here last year – your first ever pole and your first ever win as well. Testing's been good, in the two races so far you've been competitive, so what chances here?

NR: Yeah really looking forward to this weekend. Massively motivated because I led the race here the last years and finally winning it last year. So this track works really well for me, for the car and I'm convinced I can do a really good result here.

Q: You know what you did right last year and that went on to win you the race, so I guess the thing to do is choose the same set of regulations, the same set-up as last year?

NR: Unfortunately, it's not quite that easy. Things evolve so quickly – the different tyres we have this year bring us into a whole new situation. So you can't really compare, you need to take it as it comes and adapt to what you have this weekend. And so, that will be crucial, working through Friday and Saturday morning to try to optimise everything in order to have a great weekend.

Q: Romain, you won your first points here last year with sixth place. What are your feelings after the first two races of this season and looking ahead to this race as well. How do you see the current Lotus?

Romain GROSJEAN: It's difficult to say before the weekend. We've seen that Kimi won in Australia, which was good for the team. It means that the car was able to do it. Then in Malaysia we had a good race from the point where it was dry. We know that when it's wet it's not our biggest strength. But here it seems to be dry for the whole weekend, which is a good point. We have a few updates on the car, plus on my side the new exhaust that Kimi ran in KL. So it's going to be good and looking forward to it. And as you said, it's good memories here, as I scored my first every point in F1 last year and hopefully some more this year.

Q: You've mentioned that the car is very sensitive and sometimes it gives you what you want and sometimes it doesn't. Are you getting on top of that?

RG: It's difficult when you're not in the car to know. I think we have a few ideas of what we need to make sure is right and what can not get right and from there we have a more deep look into it and double check a few things. The tyres don't make it easier, as they are very, very sensitive to the performance of the car, sometimes a bit too much. But on the other hand it's the same for everybody, so we do our best. Hopefully updates help us to get on top of it and from there do every good session and see where we are Sunday evening.

Q: Is that the main concentration at the moment?

RG: Yeah. To do the best you can in every single moment of the weekend, starting in Free Practice 1 and finishing after the 55th or 56th lap of the race. You know then you can see where you are. We need to put everything right – tyre window, set-ups, everything together, and see where we finish.

Q: Adrian, you have made an absolutely dream comeback to Formula One. How difficult has it been?

Adrian SUTIL: No, not too difficult. I was just driving as fast as I could. I was happy to be back in the car and it worked very well. The car, for my opinion, is very good. It's the best car I've driven. Very neutral balance, quite good on the tyres and the race pace is very competitive. It was just a good start in Melbourne, disappointing in Malaysia because the pace was very, very good again but in qualifying caught out a little bit again with the rain and in the race, well, we saw the problems with the pit stops. But we solved those and we're confident. I'm confident and go on for the next mission here in China.

Q: The team does seem to have hit the ground running, what do you think is possible with that car?

AS: It's everything possible. It's in my hands, I think, so I have targets and try to do my best to reach those. Of course we want to be absolutely on the top, that's why we're here and we want to make that happening. But it's a hard way. We showed it's possible here and there to make a good result. I think in Australia that was a good start, to lead a race with this car. It's never easy. Nico did it last year; next race was Australia so two times in a row a Force India led quite a lot of laps in the race. It's just a sign that with this car there's definitely much more possible.

Q: Podiums?

AS: Podium is my goal, yes.

Q: Nico, you've changed teams from Force India to Sauber but also you have a new inexperienced team-mate as well. How difficult has it been for you moving to a new team and not really having somebody who's been there for a while?

Nico HÜLKENBERG: Well, I'm not too sure. In every team every driver looks and works for himself. Both drivers obviously work for the team but having Esteban there and he's a rookie, not long ago I was a rookie, so it's not a big penalty or big deal. I don't think it compromises my performance or the team's performance to be honest.

Q: What have been the positive points of joining Sauber? What's different, for example, to your previous team?

NH: I can speak my mother language a lot! It's a new situation: you're missing quite a few words sometimes, you know, technical words in English but otherwise the teams all work in a very similar way.

Q: Sergio, you obviously made a little bit of progress from Australia to Malaysia. Does that give you a little bit of confidence that you're going to make more to here as well?

Sergio PÉREZ: Yeah, we are positive. We expect to do progress every single race. I think we can make here make a little bit of progress but the most important is that we can learn a lot this week about the car which will help us for the big update that we are having for Europe. Once we go back to Europe.

Q: Now, obviously there was a lot of pressure on you right from the start of the season, a lot of interesting in you moving to McLaren. Does the fact you've had the problems with the car slightly relieve that pressure off you?

SP: I think the pressure is always there. It doesn't matter in which team you are, you have to deliver results. I want to take the maximum out of the car and I know that the car will come back and we will be competitive quite soon, so I am confident in that respect. About the pressure, there will be always pressure when you drive for McLaren. Even if you are at the back of the grid you have the pressure to deliver and to try to make the most out of the car that you have.

Q: (Bianca Leppert - Auto, Motor und Sport) Nico Rosberg, did you have the thought in any moment at the end of the race in Malaysia to ignore Ross's words and overtake?

Nico ROSBERG: At the end of the race, I didn't have that thought, no. I had decided well before to fully respect the instructions that Ross had given me.

Q: (Kate Walker - Girl Racer) Nico, as a follow-up to that question, if you find yourself in a similar situation at this race or any future races are you going to obey team orders, or are you going to rebel and fight for the win?

NR: The difficulty was that we hadn't really discussed them beforehand, y'know? And so that was the mistake that we did. So, important going forward is that everything is discussed and then whichever way it goes, if I'm in front and Lewis is behind then he will respect it and vice versa. Then it's OK. As long as one is prepared for it and it's discussed well and understood, that's the important thing and that's the main mistake we did as a team.

Q: (Qian Jun Pro Car) Mark, you are one of four drivers who have attended every one of the ten Chinese Grands Prix. Compared to the first Grand Prix in 2004, can you feel the difference? The atmosphere, races and yourself?

MW: I don't think the race has changed a huge amount, I think we've seen a few more spectators coming over the years. The track itself has always been well-maintained, looked after. It's a good track for racing, as we say. It has been for quite a few years now. It's a challenging circuit, it has quite a few different combinations that you've got to get right - obviously with a long straight, things like that. It's a big surprise that we've been coming here for ten years, to be honest, it goes very quickly, as usual. It feels like about five but anyway if it's ten years, it's ten years but it really doesn't feel like a huge amount has changed. It was a very good event from the first year and it's still quite a good event now - obviously apart from the crowds getting better, which is good.

Q: Worth pointing out, Mark, that you've finished all nine of them as well.

MW: Hmm, OK, keep going, touch wood and finish the tenth one.

Q: (Livio Oricchio - O Estado de Sao Paulo) Mark, can you describe to us how was the period after your experience in the last race, and what do you think about what Sebastian said yesterday in the Infiniti press conference, the interview that he did for Infiniti?

MW: The second part of your question... I don't know, I don't know what Sebastian said in the press conference at Infiniti. The other part is yeah... the last part of the Grand Prix is... it's normal that there's a lot of emotions going through you because we put a lot of effort in, everybody does, there's never any guarantees for any Grand Prix victories so if the race is going quite well... still had a good result, obviously, but not the result that I would have liked but in the end, we know what happened. But Malaysia is not just one event in this scenario. We know we've had many scenarios in the past, so there's a lot of things which then come into your mind - positive, negative, whatever - how you can make things better in the future, so for me... yeah, and you've still got to drive the car, that's my job, so I still got the car home, good result and yeah, looking forward to this race. I think it's normal for a driver to have a lot of emotions in the car generally. You've got to try and get the emotions down, but it's part of our job, whether you're leading Monte Carlo and finishing the race there with different emotions and different disappointments, ups and downs, it's completely normal that in the cockpit we have emotions in the cockpit.

Q: (Ian Parkes - Press Association) Mark, when I asked you in Malaysia about your future with the team, bearing in mind what you've just spoken about... the emotions going through your head, you said over those closing laps you thought about many many things. I was wondering what you thought about during these past two weeks, what you thought your future might be now; if Red Bull offered you a new contract, would you accept it going forward?

MW: Well, first of all, I'm definitely keen to finish the season off. Obviously a lot of people were even questioning that one which was certainly not something that was in my mind. I'm definitely keen to race this year and put together a very strong campaign and challenge for more wins, and you do enough of that and some more things can happen. So that's the first goal. The next part is yeah, year by year, that's how it's always been for me, so come the summer, I will talk to Dietrich (Mateschitz, Red Bull boss) and then go from there. If I'm driving well, performances are good, then we'll make some decisions in the future but at the moment, it's the second or third race and I've never ever made decisions on my career at this point in the season and don't see... obviously it's a bit of a topic at the moment for different reasons, but I don't see why I should make any decisions at the moment for the future.

Q: (Trent Price - Richland F1) Question for Nico Hulkenberg: at the end of Sepang, you said on the radio that you had quite a long list of things on which to improve with the Sauber. Three weeks have gone by: have you come up with any solutions since then?

NH: Yeah, well, sure both the team and I aren't very happy with the recent performance of the car. We know we have to improve and we understand the issue, we know... we've identified it but fixing it is now the challenge and it's up to us. We have some new parts here, some developments which hopefully are going to put us in the right direction but we have work in front of us for sure, yeah. But in the three weeks we have made some progress, for sure.

Q: (Abhishek Takle - Midday) Adrian, obviously you know the car looked very strong in the dry in Australia and Malaysia. Is it the way you are using your tyres? What do you put that down to? And secondly, how important do you think it is right now to maximise the potential of the car, given that you might at some point have to switch your focus to 2014?

AS: Well, we've only done two races so we are focused on now. We can improve the car of course; as always, there's space to improve, I think, even when you're absolutely at the front. You have to work on, so at the moment the car feels good but here and there we are always bringing some updates to this circuit, to just get more downforce on the car. It's always the same things that you're looking at. Why are we competitive at the moment? Probably it's a combination, it's a package with the tyres. I just didn't have as many problems as some others have with these tyres, that's probably our advantage, so working on the car – every race we are working on it, to maximise the package which is normal in this sport, it's a performance sport, everyone tries that at every race. Now we've just had two races so of course we will concentrate on this car for a long time. I don't know when we decide to concentrate on the 2014 car. I think it depends on our general performance. If we're really good in the championship we have to push on until the last race. If not, then maybe it's more clever to concentrate on next year's car but it's too early to say; focus now on the next few races.

Q: (Michael Schmidt – Auto, Motor und Sport) Mark, apparently Mr Mateschitz has said that he doesn't want to hear anything any more about team orders. Knowing that beforehand, does it make life in the cockpit easier or more difficult?

MW: Probably easier, yep.

Q: (Tony Dodgins – Motorsport News) Mark, looking back at that last race, just before the last pit stop, I think you were leading the race by about four and a half seconds if I'm right, and yet Seb had the first stop and that obviously created the situation. Are you free to call your own last stops, was it a team decision and did that surprise you? How did that arise?

MW: Yeah, it was a little bit of a surprise. I think that the gaps were quite awkward, they were trying to manage the gap to Lewis as well which was three seconds. I think Lewis had pitted the previous lap, I'm not exactly sure, but Sebastian was exposed again to going behind Lewis which the team were obviously keen not to have that scenario happen. Four seconds is quite a decent lead but I was already in trouble at the back part of that lap, a little bit with the tyres. Sebastian then obviously had some fresh tyres ready to go and the out lap was strong and my in lap was quick as I could go with what I had so as I said, it dropped him straight back into a tighter situation than had probably been envisaged. Yeah, I asked for that lap, I wanted that lap but I couldn't have that lap so because of the situation I think if I asked for that lap and got it and Lewis was not there I would have got that lap. So I think it was just a frustrating margin as I think between the three of us it was making it quite tricky in terms of managing that last stop window. But a good question mate, anyway.

Q: (Ben Edwards – BBC) Just to follow up on that one Mark, the decision to change onto slicks in the early part of that race, was that purely your decision as to when to go onto slicks? Was the team involved in that decision at all?

MW: Yeah, I was not keen, I was a little bit surprised when Seb went. The first sector was late in terms of moisture compared to the rest of the circuit. I was definitely keen on the next lap, that they could work and I think we then got some information that it wasn't quite right. I think lap seven was super conservative but we could, also you could come out in traffic if you pitted like Seb did. And also Nico was quite late and this helps with your slick management of the race as well, so if you're not losing too much and there's a bit of a... so there are so many scenarios that you've got to look at to say OK, yeah, you've got the crossover right but you've got more range to do in the race on your dry tyres, so you've got to try and factor a lot of that in which is not easy when you're in the car, obviously, to try and think of all that. I was surprised the slicks didn't work as well in the first sector as I probably thought they would. Lap seven was OK, yeah.

Q: (Alan Baldwin – Reuters) Adrian, last time you were in China you left in – shall we say – unfortunate circumstances. How do you feel about coming back here and did you have any worries about them letting you in?

AS: No worries, no emotions. The past, for me, is done and I'm concentrating on my future.

Q: (Jonathan Legard – BBC Radio Five Live) Mark, how much have you resolved everything in your own mind over what happened at the last race and how to go forward and I suppose linked in there, is the haircut part of the new mean look?

MW: No, definitely not mate, the haircut's not... it was a little bit of a screw up. Once he'd started he was on his way. Haircut is not part of the new look or new feel. Going forward, mate, I think we know everything that happened; obviously in Malaysia there was plenty of interest from everyone, other teams, media etc, but for me myself mate, it's not an unusual situation and I'm looking forward to racing here this weekend and getting on with it. When you're at the front in Formula One there's always stuff going down so it just depends on how much is going down that you've got to manage. In the end, for me, I'm looking forward to driving the car here, putting in first gear and driving out of the garage and getting down there to feel what the car's like on the circuit. That's what I'm looking forward to, mate.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Mark, coming back to the previous questions about what was said yesterday. Vettel said yesterday 'I can't apologise for winning because I am paid for that' so I would like to have your reply about these words and if you've already talked about it, I would like to know if before the podium or afterwards at some moment, you thought 'OK, I want to stop now with this team, I want to leave Formula One to do something very surprising for everybody?'

MW: No. I think the rawest emotion for me was probably the first few laps after we had the race on track. After the podium and on the podium and around there I wasn't thinking about anything... reacting in a harsh way mentally for myself to think about 'now I will think about doing something different.' I wasn't thinking like that at all. And Seb's comments? If that's what he thinks then that's what he thinks, that's his position on what happened in Malaysia...

Q: (Ian Parkes – Press Association) Question for Nico Rosberg: I was wondering if, coming away from Malaysia, you were confident in your own mind that there was genuine equality within Mercedes, there was no number one, number two, because it has been suggested now after what happened in Malaysia that Lewis perhaps has number one status?

NR: Very confident, yep. No number one, no number two. Extremely confident. Plus you can also add to that yourself in a few weeks' time or months' time a question.
