

Fl Belgian Grand Prix – Thursday press conference

After a long summer break it was a refreshed group of drivers that lined up to face the media in Belgium. All waxed lyrical about Spa, but their comments showed a surprising lack of awareness of the venue's history.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Vitaly Petrov (Caterham), Charles Pic (Marussia), Pedro de la Rosa (HRT), Michael Schumacher (Mercedes), and Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso).

Jean-Eric, this is a new circuit for you in Formula One but I understand you've raced here before?

Jean-Eric VERGNE: Yeah, I think it's my favourite track. I'm really happy to be here in Fl, to learn this track in and Fl car. I found it amazing in Formula 3 and World Series. So I can't wait to drive tomorrow in this car, it should be nice.

So you've been here in Formula 3 and World Series by Renault?

JEV: Yes. I won three races in F3 in the same weekend here and last year I won as well. I finished second and first. It's generally a good track for me, so hopefully I make a good run here as well this weekend.

A lot of people feel that with the problem with the technical director at Toros Rosso that development might have finished but I understand that's not the case.

JEV: So far everything is OK. The team is still pushing really hard. I don't have much to say about it.

You have some updates here though?

JEV: Yeah we have some good updates. Well, I don't know if they're good, but we have some and also we're testing some new things for next year's car – front suspension. So, everything is still going on quite well in the team and we're looking forward to this weekend.

Charles, obviously you've raced the first half of the season – how do you feel it's gone as far as you're concerned?

Charles PIC: Quite good. I am quite happy about my first half of the season. Everything was new for me. So, first races were not easy because everything was new and there were a lot of things to learn. But I am quite happy with my progress and quite happy with the team's progress because the start of the year was not easy. We were not able to make the winter tests. They worked really hard and made a lot of improvements and even if you cannot always... it's not easy to see because the position is not changing but we are trying to close the gap. So, really looking forward to the second part of the season and to updates coming from the summer, so we'll see how it is and on my side I will be focused to keep pushing hard and improving myself.

I guess you measure yourself on your team-mate obviously but also on the people either side of you and in front of you. Are you happy with the gap between yourselves and Caterham?

CP: Yes, we are not in the position yet to fight with them but it was much closer for the last two races – Hockenheim and Budapest. It's great and I hope that with the update it will be even closer this weekend.

Vitaly, the one problem you've had so far is qualifying in relation to your team-mate, whereas in the races you seem to have beaten him. Is that something you intend to tackle in the second half of the season?

Vitaly PETROV: Of course I will try my best. What is good is that I know the problem, so we will try to fix this problem in the second half of the season, so I will try to get close to my team-mate and then we will see.

One of the things you did during the break was visit some cities in Russia. It seems that you're going to all sorts of cities that most of us have never heard of. What's the idea behind that programme?

VP: First of all it was part of my private sponsor, called Russian helicopters, so I visited two big cities, the first one is Rostov and the second one is Ulan-Ude. Actually, it was a good visit because it's the first time I've been there. You know, Ulan-Ude is very close to China. It's like if you go across the river you will be in China. From Moscow it's six or seven hours flying. I visited the biggest lake in the world, it's called Baikal. Unfortunately I was just there for one day. This lake it's line is for 365 kilometres and length, it's quite... I don't how much it is. Actually, it was a good experience and I hope that I will go back there maybe, one day.

Pedro, the team has obviously made strides forward, what are your own ambitions for the second half of the season and what about your thoughts professionally for the second half of the season?

Pedro DE LA ROSA: Professionally? You mean racing? Well, I think that we've made progress: we've managed in this first of the season to go in qualifying, from not qualifying in Australia outside the 107 per cent, to 103.4 per cent in Valencia, so I think that's a very, very aggressive improvement. However the positions are similar. In fact we're qualifying in more or less the last two positions and then it's difficult for us. Although we're closer to pole position we still haven't made enough steps on the positions regarding the qualifying and the race finishes. So that's where we are concentrating: we still have to make the car quicker in the second half of the season. We don't have anything new for the next few races. We will have an upgrade for Singapore. That's where we are – but we are definitely happy with what we've done and what we've achieved, although it may not look like it in the results. We've still can do a lot better in the second half.

And how important will the break have been to the team? OK, you're saying they won't have brought anything for the immediate races – but for future races?

DLR: I think the break is nothing as we haven't been able to work or gain any advantage from the break, so for us it doesn't make any difference. Before the break we knew that the upgrade was coming in Singapore, if everything goes to plan – and after the break it's still the same. Until Singapore I think we will be more or less in the positions that we've been so far, and then wait for Singapore for this next upgrade.

Michael, another milestone here at Spa: 300th grand prix weekend. What does that mean to you? Does that mean a lot to you at this stage or will it in the future?

Michael SCHUMACHER: It's certainly an interesting, beautiful, nice number to be around. A number that I didn't think about, that I would do that, at the time that I retired at the end of 2006. And now here we are and I'm counting the 300 – because at one point it was the talk about whether there would be somebody able to beat Riccardo Patrese's record of 250-whatever. I said 'forget that, it isn't interesting for me', and here we are. And suddenly... it isn't anything that I'm challenging or looking for to have just a number on my board but being the 300, yeah it's a beautiful side-effect.

I think you've seen the poster down the road which says 'Michael, make it 400'. What chances?

MS: I guess I can say not. It's obviously nice that the fans are still with me and encourage me to go on. This morning I had a beautiful welcome, becoming the honorary citizen of Spa, that is something very special to me. And that's why the 300 becomes special – because it's in Spa. It all happened to me here in Spa. First race, first victory, some beautiful victories and interesting races and 2004 the seventh title, last year the 20th anniversary and now number 300 and being honoured. So it's a full package. Spa has always meant a lot to me. I always called it my living room – now I can officially call it my living room. It's good.

But should we never say never?

MS: For the 400? We probably say no for that one.

Jenson, during the break, not only an Iron Man but your own triathlon as well. But the triathlon didn't end quite the way you wanted to – perhaps we should share that story?

Jenson BUTTON: I think we should move on from that one!

The whole of Britain knows about it, so how about the whole of the world.

JB: I did a triathlon for [charity] Help for Heroes and it was quite cold in the water. People were wearing wetsuits, I'd left mine in the hotel so I decided to try to squeeze into my girlfriend's... which felt OK until I got into the water and then it tightened up in... certain areas. So that was the end of my race. I had a panic attack in the water! So yeah, good and bad memories but it was a great event and I think everyone had fun and we raised a lot of money for Help for Heroes. In the end it was fun but the most important thing is what we raised.

Your aims for the second half of the season? How do you see the second half of the season? People are talking about perhaps driver orders that you'll help Lewis...

JB: I'm I think 40 points behind Lewis, so you'd say that I'm going to give up on fighting for the Championship just because I'm 40 points behind my team-mate? Lewis is 40 points behind Fernando and I still think he thinks he's got a very good chance of winning this Championship, so no, we go racing as always and try to do the best job we can. The last two races for us before the break were very good: I had a second in Hockenheim and obviously Lewis's win in Hungary – so we come here positive we can get a very good result. So, no, that's definitely not the situation and we want to get as many points for ourselves but also for the team. The team championship, the Constructors' Championship is very, very important to McLaren and it's something that we're going to work on as much as we can.

Michael, congratulations on the 300. When you were with the red team, I think you set a record for reliability. I think it was something like more than 50 races without a single mechanical retirement. With the current team, things have been quite the contrary. I wonder if you have thought about trying to move elsewhere, which is what somebody, let's say 20-years old would be doing at that stage of his career?

MS: I haven't thought about that. Maybe I should! First of all, you have those moments when things do run against you and I have mentioned that at any time I have full trust in the guys because they all do their utmost. Nobody wants to retire, everybody does their best job but then we have prototype cars and unfortunately things like this do happen. I don't mind too much about this, because I was aware, reasonably early in the season, that we wouldn't be fighting for the championship so to retire is not a big deal for me at that moment, not being in the championship anyway. Much more important is that if you would be in the championship, then it would obviously bother me much more. So, no, I look forward to the rest of the season. We still have a lot to go through and a lot to improve on, a lot to understand. The team is pushing hard to go forward in order to make our process a much more reasonable step forward compared to what we have been doing. Already we have achieved quite a bit more but I think it needs a bit more of that. And then reliability.

Michael, congratulations again. You said just now, forget about the 400 but having all the records in Formula One, can we maybe think about 326/327? Can you remember all of your races? How many can you remember without looking at the stat sheets?

MS: I don't know how many I would remember: certainly not all of them, that is very clear. How many it will be in the end? We will have to find out. Don't know yet. Certainly go to the end of the season.

My question is similar: when does the point come when you decide if you're going to continue or if Mercedes decides whether they want to stay with you? Do you already have a deadline, or are you already starting to talk about it?

MS: I think we made a very clear statement some time ago that by October we will be able to give an indication and nothing has changed since then, so no news I'm afraid.

Jenson, just following on from the earlier question and your answer regarding not supporting Lewis at this stage, Martin Whitmarsh has today suggested that there could come a point at some time this season when you might be asked to support Lewis. Is that something you would consider further down the line if the situation dictated, or does your personal attitude just say no, I'm not going to do that at all?

JB: Personally, I think it's a pretty pointless conversation right now. If I was 40 points behind Lewis in the championship and he was leading, do you think they would turn round and say 'you've got to support your teammate'? It's not a big margin, it's less than two wins. Half the grid is in front of their teammates. All their teammates are not going to turn round and say 'yes, we're going to help my teammate win the championship' because you still think you're going to have a good chance. And until that chance is gone you're going to fight for it. I'm not here to just race around and just help my teammate win a championship because none of us are. We're here to fight and we're here to do the best job we can for ourselves first of all and

also for the team. I think it would be a pretty boring championship if there's only twelve of us actually fighting for a victory and the rest of us were there to help our teammates. It's not the sort of formula that we should want. So yes, I'm going to be fighting all the way until I either win the championship or it's not possible.

Michael, we know that all drivers are very very superstitious. Do you have a mascot without which you cannot sit down in the car? Maybe for Spa you have a very special mascot.

MS: I've had one for more than 20 years. It's my wife. She comes tomorrow.

Michael, do you remember the feeling you had on your first podium, and how was it different after that?

MS: I think it was in Mexico, if I'm right? Is it right? '92? Was it two? Yeah, '92, OK, so there you go. Is it different? Probably a little bit but no matter what, up there it's always special. It depends on the circumstances. If you are a regular podium contender and you have the package to win races then you end up being third, you have less joy up there obviously versus not expecting to be there at all and then being third. So it really depends on the circumstances. Remembering Valencia, yes, it was a beautiful feeling, for myself, for all the guys, the team for everybody, it was beautiful. It was that way in '92.

Michael, you have 299 races so far. Can you single out one which is your favourite?

MS: I keep talking about Suzuka in 2000, both for the quality of the race, for the end of the race and for the whole meaning of that result obviously, so it was a total package of many circumstances, why that race turned out to be a very special one for myself and then for so many others.

To all of you: Spa is a very historical circuit where Grand Prix racing started back in 1925. Have you ever been on the old track having a look at the 14 kilometer layout like the fast Masta downhill between Malmedy and Stavelot?

JEV: I was too young.

MS: Even not me!

DLR: Why me? Unfortunately not.

Michael and Jenson, why is Spa so particular for drivers, why do you like it so much?

MS: There are many reasons, particularly for me because I started in the days when corners like Eau Rouge and Blanchimont were extremely challenging corners, because the cars were built in a certain way and the circuit made them absolutely on the edge. It's one of the old character tracks with lots of history. It is going through the natural countryside that we are in, the up and down like a rollercoaster so there are so many variants that make it so particular and so special. We all, as race drivers, prefer high speed and if you have a challenging high speed corner it's special, and if you go through Eau Rouge... even nowadays it's probably a little bit too easy flat out except maybe in the race sometimes, but the sensation, the forces that go through you in a cornering sense and in a vertical sense, that is a combination that you don't find everywhere.

JB: I think there are many different things: the history of the place. When you used to watch Formula One, you would see the greats racing around here and the circuit has changed over the years, even since I've been racing in Formula One, but it still feels very special. This circuit is very very flowing and there are only two corners that are below third gear and that's very unusual, especially when you have so many corners on a circuit and it is one of those circuits which you just love driving. Whatever car you're in, it's just such a great feeling driving around a circuit like this. I think there are only a couple of other circuits like it. One is Suzuka, one was Silverstone. I think it's changed a little bit now. It's lost a little bit of the flow but those three really stand out for me, to be a real fast flowing circuit, and a circuit where we just love driving out of the pits and knowing you're going to tackle.

Michael, you are here for your 300th Grand Prix. Do you still have the same passion as you had at the beginning for the first races, and are you able to deliver in the same way as you used to do when you started in Formula One?

MS: I think that by saying yes I answer both of the questions. I have the same passion for what I am doing, yes, absolutely. Formula One is the ultimate racing and if you're involved, you're only involved because you want to do the best that you can do. Obviously we all depend on our machines, but nevertheless, within your machine you have a certain frame with which you can prove yourself and that's the challenge and that challenge you like to outbrake that frame and you like to do anything on top of that. That's the particular moment that you can have and the great thing in sport is that you have immediate feedback: whether you do achieve or you don't achieve. There's been plenty of satisfaction that I've had over more than 20 years now and I still enjoy it. I would probably think that my capacity to achieve is better, because I have a much better view and understanding, a lot more experience. If we have problems, it takes me less to come to the point with the team in explaining those problems and that's helpful.

Michael, for the second time, you are now an honorary citizen in Maranello and now here in Spa. What are the conditions which are necessary to fulfill this reputation and do you have special duties? Please explain to us concerning this subject?

MS: The only thing I can say is that both moments, the idea and invitation from those citizens that they offered me this honour and I was definitely pleased to achieve it, but I have no obligations and I'm just happy to have received such an award.

Next week, after Spa, we have Monza, another special for you, Michael. Is there any particular souvenir of the Italian Grand Prix that you remember? Which has been your best race?

MS: We obviously had a very beautiful ending in 2006 at the time. In both ways, I do remember it being special, because we were behind in the championship and in that race we put ourselves back into the championship fight. Then came the beautiful celebration, obviously my message to retire after the race so it was a very particular weekend.

Jenson, it was only a year ago that you did your 200th Grand Prix but given the number of races in the calendar, do you see yourself emulating Michael and hitting 300?

JB: Yeah, there's no reason why not. It's four and a half years of racing. Yeah, it's possible. I really don't know how I'm going to feel in a couple of years' time. Now, of course, the hunger is there. If I lose that, that's when I'll stop. If I'm in a position where I get the choice to retire it's the best position to be in, but it's a long time before I need to start thinking of that.

Jenson, you never won at Spa and you've had a bit of misfortune here. Do you think that's maybe a little jinx?

JB: Not really, because that was really only one year. I think you mean 2010, with Sebastian. I love racing here. It's a great circuit to race on because to qualify here when you get everything out of the car is such a nice feeling because this place is really unforgiving, so you're always living on the seat of your pants. It's a great place to race. There are a lot of possibilities for overtaking, in wet and dry. I've had quite a few podiums here but never on the

top step. Hopefully that opportunity will arise very soon.

We've been hearing about F1 with electric cars. What would you think about that sort of competition, and how would you like to drive a noiseless car? Is that safe for you?

MS: Looks like none of us has heard anything about that. We have partially electric cars already. We have KERS!

My question is basically about having a Formula One race with no noise. Would that be the same feeling for you? If it happens.

JB: If I'm sure we could try and make some sort of noise that we like. It would save our hearing, because these things are pretty loud. We wouldn't need earplugs, which is quite a good thing. I don't know. I don't know what the possibility is of having a completely electrical car, how many manufacturers would be involved.

DLR: I must say I've heard about it, it's Formula E, and it's obviously a new era, and we should be open-minded to the fact that we're used to racing with noise, but I remember a few years ago, going to indoor karting in Finland and racing with electrical cars for the first time which was an incredible experience because you were racing, you were braking for turn one, or accelerating on the straight and then you had a kart next to you and you didn't hear it, which was shocking, because we are basically from the noise era, but we should be open-minded. Let's wait and see how it develops, because it could be extremely interesting...

JB: Can you hear a Formula One car coming?

DLR: Absolutely, yeah. You can feel... yeah, especially when I'm shown blue flags, I can hear you guys!

JB: You get out of the way straightaway. I've seen you Pedro!

DLR: I mean karting, karting, karting, indoor karting. I don't know how it will feel with single-seaters, but for sure you can still hear something.

Maybe when you get very old you won't but...

JB: You tell me, Pedro!

DLR: Anyway, my bottom line is it's a new era, it's an interesting avenue, we should be open-minded and let's wait and see how it looks like, because we've never seen a fully electrical single-seater and I'm really looking forward to that.

JEV: I have no idea. Maybe it will come. To be honest, I haven't heard about it, so I don't know how it is, I don't know how it's going to be. I know I did a kart race last year in Bercy with electric karts. It was quite a fun race. We could hear other noise as well. The funny thing is that we could hear the whole crowd around the stadium. But I have no idea how it would be in F1 or single-seaters.

MS: That's actually a good point. It would be the first time that we could hear the crowd and not the crowd us.

JB: I think you've got to ask the fans more than us. It would be a big difference for the fans. I know there are the obvious reasons for doing it which are very important, but for the fans, they would miss something, with the buzz of the sound of an F1 car, because that's the first thing you notice when you come and watch an F1 car, it's the sound.

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – F1 report

After a month-long break, Formula One returned to action at Belgium's legendary Spa-Francorchamps Circuit. At least, that was the plan. But the heavens opened ten minutes before the start of the first practice session, and as a result running was very limited.

By the time the session reached its midpoint, only Kamui Kobayashi had put a time on the board – a rain-affected 2m17.705s.

The Sauber driver's colleagues were far more cautious in their approach to the Ardennes track, gingerly completing installation laps before returning to the pits with complaints of running water, standing water, and a circuit better suited to ducks than to race cars.

With a brief window of sunshine, and around twenty minutes of drier – but not dry – conditions on offer around llam, half the grid braved the track for long enough to set a timed lap or two, with times ranging from 2m19s for the HRTs to 2m11s for Kobayashi, the only driver to push as conditions worsened.

With fifteen minutes remaining of the session, Jenson Button was the only one of the grid's six world champions to have put a time on the board. And of the main title contenders, only Webber was setting times in the wet.

And who could blame them? Except those soggy fans who'd hoped to see them run, naturally. We're approaching that part of the season where every point becomes even more important, with fewer opportunities to make up for bad weekends. With Friday expected to be the worst day of the weekend in weather terms, none of the title contenders want to risk binning it post-aquaplane and finding they've got a damaged chassis or worse.

Les Combes proved to be the most problematic part of the circuit in these slippery conditions, with all and sundry struggling to stay on the track.

Shortly before the session drew to a close, Michael Schumacher set his first timed lap of the weekend, followed in short order by Kimi Raikkonen, Lewis Hamilton, and Fernando Alonso. After the chequered flag fell, Felipe Massa had something of an engine failure at the Bus Stop chicane. As a result, the Ferrari driver was unable to set a timed lap.

While there was some running this morning, the times set during F1 are not representative of the capabilities of either man or machine. Read into them at your peril.

F1 times (unofficial)

1. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 2.11.389s [20 laps]
2. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 2.11.941s [14 laps]
3. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 2.12.004s [12 laps]
4. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 2.12.824s [15 laps]
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 2.13.191s [13 laps]
6. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 2.13.861s [16 laps]
7. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 2.14.210s [14 laps]

8. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 2.14.660s [16 laps]
 9. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 2.14.860s [12 laps]
 10. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 2.15.402s [13 laps]
 11. Paul di Resta (Force India) 2.15.812s [11 laps]
 12. Timo Glock (Marussia) 2.16.409s [16 laps]
 13. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 2.16.786s [10 laps]
 14. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 2.16.788s [16 laps]
 15. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 2.16.827s [5 laps]
 16. Jenson Button (McLaren) 2.16.861s [8 laps]
 17. Charles Pic (Marussia) 2.17.519s [14 laps]
 18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 2.18.199s [10 laps]
 19. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 2.16.546s [12 laps]
 20. Dani Clos (HRT) 2.19.689s [12 laps]
 21. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 2.38.701s [9 laps]
 22. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 2.40.749s [4 laps]
 23. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 2.46.580s [9 laps]
 24. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) NO TIME SET [2 laps]
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F1 Belgian Grand Prix – FP2 report

What a thrilling session that was. A rain-soaked Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps made wet-weather running somewhat treacherous, and the track was empty for most of the ninety-minute session.

After 52 long minutes, Nico Rosberg broke the silence when he exited the pits in his Mercedes for the first installation lap of the afternoon. Rosberg was soon followed by teammate Michael Schumacher and Caterham's Heikki Kovalainen.

Kovalainen had a dramatic spin at Les Combes on his only lap of the afternoon, but managed to avoid damaging the car.

Over the course of the final half hour the track filled up a bit as drivers attempted to gingerly feel their way round the infamous circuit. But it took until 30 seconds before the chequered flag for a timed lap to appear on the boards.

The final few minutes of the session then turned into a flurry of slow times, as the ten men out on track all tiptoed across the line with the hope of claiming the top spot.

That honour fell to Marussia's Charles Pic, who dethroned Toro Rosso's Daniel Ricciardo with a 2.49.354s lap. Putting the lack of running into perspective, Nico Hulkenberg's five laps made him the busiest driver on track. With a total of 57 laps completed over the course of FP2, there was very little to comfort the rain-soaked fans.

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Charles Pic (Marussia) 2.49.354s [4 laps]
 2. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 2.49.750s [3 laps]
 3. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 2.50.497s [3 laps]
 4. Paul di Resta (Force India) 2.51.333s [3 laps]
 5. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 2.51.660s [4 laps]
 6. Timo Glock (Marussia) 2.52.076s [4 laps]
 7. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 2.53.232s [4 laps]
 8. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 2.58.232s [3 laps]
 9. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 2.59.125s [5 laps]
 10. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 3.12.901s [4 laps]
 11. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) NO TIME SET [3 laps]
 12. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) NO TIME SET [4 laps]
 13. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) NO TIME SET [1 lap]
 14. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) NO TIME SET [2 laps]
 15. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) NO TIME SET [3 laps]
 16. Jenson Button (McLaren) NO TIME SET [2 laps]
 17. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) NO TIME SET [2 laps]
 18. Bruno Senna (Williams) NO TIME SET [3 laps]
 19. Mark Webber (Red Bull) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
 20. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
 21. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
 22. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
 23. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
 24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) NO TIME SET [0 laps]
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F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Friday press conference

After a wash-out of a day on track, it would be easy to assume that there wasn't much to talk about in the senior team personnel press conference.

Easy, but incorrect.

Present were Mattia Binotto (Ferrari), Ross Brawn (Mercedes), Dave Greenwood (Marussia), Paul Hembery (Pirelli), and Paddy Lowe (McLaren).

Paul, are these ideal conditions and temperatures for you at Spa? Seriously, looking at temperatures though, this combination of dry tyres is the same as we had in Malaysia and Monza, which you can imagine would be similar temperatures to each other and this here is pretty cold.

Paul HEMBERY: I think you have a situation here where the temperature can change very rapidly here. We can easily have 25-30 degrees and you can obviously have what we have today 11 degrees and full rain. We do have a limitation on the choices, we have four compounds to choose for the season and sometimes you're maybe a little bit more compromised than you'd like to be. Having said that, the harder tyre will work reasonably well in cooler conditions. If it gets near 15 degrees that will be right at the lower end of the area we'd like to be working at. Here the challenge is normally for integrity reasons - the loadings on the tyre, which are our real challenge.

What about the rest of the season? People have talked a great deal about how unpredictable the championship has been. Has there been a policy change? Are you going to stay very much with the way the choice has been so far this year?

PH: Yeah, pretty much so. We're certainly not making any changes to the tyres. Last year we did make a few changes during the season. This year, because it's so close with 10ths of a second between the teams, it would be wrong for us to have changed anything because if one team had started then maybe performing better we would have been accused of favouritism. So we've had to leave it. The choices probably going through to the end of the season are pretty logical now and I'm sure the teams will guess what's used.

Have you been happy with the way things have gone so far?

PH: Yes, absolutely. It's been an exciting season. I'm sure the headaches for the technical guys here have been quite big. But the racing's been fun - very interesting. I think we're seeing a pattern emerging now in terms of results.

Dave, have you been happy with your season so far, from the Marussia point of view?

David GREENWOOD: Yeah I mean, obviously from the start of the season we knew we had a long way to improve. That's mainly what we've working on with recent upgrades. I think it's easy sometimes to look at the classification sheet and see the gaps and the positions at the end of the race and not think that there are improvements being made but that's not the case. But if you look at the underlying pace that's getting a lot better. We started the season around 4.5% off the leaders in the race and it's somewhere around 2-2.5% now, so that's a good improvement and going forward that will look even better when we have these upgrades and at the end of the year the gaps will be significantly less.

Now, you've already announced Cosworth continuing for next, plus you'll have KERS next year as well. Are you feeling that's heading in the right direction?

DG: Yeah, I mean one thing this year, obviously we haven't had the KERS. Conscious decision to concentrate on aerodynamics. That's all happening now and we're much happier with progress on aero and correlation to the windtunnel etc. So logical step with 2014 in mind and the new powertrain that's coming along is to take KERS for 2013, get operational and sort of start the next stage of our journey.

Mattia, quick question about Felipe this morning: what was the problem there?

Mattia BINOTTO: Obviously the engine failed. We'll need to analyse it. I don't think we have a clear answer at the moment. The engine was quite close to the end of its life, so it's something that can normally happen on a Friday even if you never expect to have such a problem during a Friday practice session. We have been lucky due to the weather conditions so we have not compromised the programme of Felipe. The engine will be back in Maranello, we expect, next week.

Now, Ferrari are very much developing the V6 already. How difficult is it to work with the current race engines and the new engine?

MB: That is I think the real challenge of the new power unit. Designing it, developing it is quite difficult but having two types of project in parallel, overlapping is quite difficult. From the facilities point of view, at some stage to put the V6 engine means using that dyno for V6 and no more for the V8. It means that all the dynos need at some stage to be transformed from V8 to V6 and you need in terms of scheduling to choose the right moment to do it. We are running the V6, that's correct and in some ways that means we have one less dyno for the V8s, and that will be more and more. So it's really difficult. Moving on the facilities is a real job, in terms of investment, in terms of timing, in terms of schedule. To shorten up that timing is very challenging and very important because each day you gain in that respect will be one more day you can spend on the development of the V6. You need to push on the current season, on the next you can obviously not slow down on your development of the V8 but at some time you have to move to the V6.

And you're also having to manage the use of eight engines in 20 races. How does that work as well?

MB: You need already to create your pool at the start of the season and then you need in some way to decide when to fit a brand new engine in the car and at which race. Normally you make your choice based on what is the power effect, circuit by circuit. So the circuits where the power is more important in terms of lap time you'll fit a new engine. It is normally the case for Belgium and Monza. I'm expecting all the manufacturers will do as we do in some way. Looking at the current situation we have so far used four engines, five for our competitors, which we believe can in some way be an advantage at the end of the season. Fitting new engines in Belgium and Monza means that everybody else will be at seven engine already used and then you need in some way to manage the end of the season. Having a brand new engine compared to an engine having already done one race, it's some horsepower, not a lot, but looking at the power effect it can up to one tenth per lap in qualifying. Knowing that the grid is very short, everything is quite important at the moment.

Nico [Rosberg] was quite interesting recently in saying that both he and the team have learned from the barren patch that you've gone through. Tell us what was learned during that time?

Ross BRAUN: I think our season has in many ways improved over previous years. We've won our first race this year. Michael was fastest in qualifying in Monaco. So, we've had some highlights but we've not been consistent enough. And I think the consistency has been amplified by the closeness of the cars. There's been a few tenths between cars and often a few tenths have been extremely significant. So, I think we're working towards better consistency, both of the car and how we use the tyres. Tyres have been a very interesting challenge this year: the same challenge for all the teams. But getting the most out of the tyres is where we want to improve. I think we still want to... as everyone does, we're fighting hard to make progress with the team. So we strengthened the team considerably last year and the first half of this year and I think we're going to see the

benefits of those changes start to feed through into a stronger, competitive position for the future.

Does that translate into a specific aim for the second half of the season?

RB: Well we're still very hard on this year's car, given the rules haven't changed very much for next season. Anything you do this year will be relevant for next year. We have started next year's car, as I think most teams have, but we're not so concerned about continuing the push this year because we know things we run this year can be carried over into next year's car. There's still a strong push this year and there probably will be until the end of the season.

Paddy, I can ask you pretty much the same sort of thing: how do you manage next season and you're still in contention for the championship as well? How much of a juggling act is that?

Paddy LOWE: It's very difficult actually, although in this particular season, as Ross said, it's less difficult than it can be. If you have a big rule change then you're faced with a dilemma as to how much resource you put into the current season relative to the following year. But as Ross says, in this season the rules are very similar in 2013, so most of what you develop now will carry across, so it is easier. We have quite a few teams who would still believe they're in the running for a championship and I think we will see a lot of development carrying on right through for the next two or three months and that will make it tough, because inevitably you do have to put significant effort into next year's car at some point, if only to get it out the door in March.

And yet at the same time we've got four double-headers, just one standalone race, so everything has to be timed presumably for those double-headers and then you get, as you pointed out, three Fridays that have been complete washouts...

PL: Yeah, I mean that doesn't make life easy at all because now, with no in-season testing, what we've grown used to is using Fridays as effectively our tests for all the new parts - very difficult when they're rained off. But it's the same for everybody I guess.

And what are the drivers saying now about the car? What are they looking for mainly?

PL: I think it's the same story we always have: they need balance through the corner and between the high and low speed - and to keep that consistent, that's a matter of getting the best out of the tyres through the various stages of the race. It's the same formula it's always been but I think particularly with the tyres this year, that has proved to be very difficult.

Ross, I believe after the last race the FIA circulated a multiple-choice proposal about the RRA. With entries closing on the 30th September, with it being effectively a month away, what's your prognosis of the situation?

RB: We've always been strong supporters of RRA. We're also strong supporters that there should be correct procedures and policies followed in Formula One, so on that basis, the existing Concorde Agreement, it's difficult to see the FIA RRA being introduced next year unless there's unanimous agreement. We believe you should still follow the policies and principles that have served Formula One very well for a number of years - but our feeling is also on that basis, because there was a strong majority, that it should be something which can come in for 2014, the FIA-policed RRA. Because we have an RRA at the moment but it's an inter-team agreement and probably we'd like to see some more strength in terms of the application of the RRA, some more consistency between all the teams on how it's interpreted and I think that's the next step we have to make with the resource restriction.

Question for both Ross and Paul: what is the connection between the Mercedes engine and the degradation of the tyres? How does the characteristics of the engine influence that?

RB: I think any engine, whether it's Renault, Ferrari, Mercedes or Cosworth, can have an influence on the tyre's behaviour and tyre degradation and every team in the pitlane is looking at their setting-up on the engine, the tuning of the engine that we're allowed to do during a weekend to make the best of that. I don't think there's any evidence we're in a more difficult or better position than anyone else. I think undoubtedly the more power you try to deliver, the more stress you put on the tyres, so it's a balancing act at always. But I don't think we have any unique issues - but it is a challenge for all the engine engineers - and Mattia can probably comment with more experience than I can - but you're always seeking over the race weekend to find the best setup of the engine as well as the chassis. Hot track, high temperatures is where you can feel perhaps the most sensitivity to the engine characteristics.

Mattia, would you like to comment on that?

MB: It seems that Ross already commented. Mainly it's very difficult to work on the engine in some way to improve the durability of the tyres. Setup-wise you can do a lot more [with] mechanical grip of the car itself. We can try to help: we do it by fine-tuning and calibrating the mapping but at the end, the things you can do from the mechanical parts of the car are a lot more important than what you can do with the engine.

Paul, anything to add?

PH: Not really anything to add to that.

Question for Paul. A couple of months ago your test team came here to test the 2013 tyres, I believe. Do you plan any other tests this year and what about the future? Because I read somewhere that you consider the Renault you are using is becoming a bit obsolete now.

PH: We have some more testing planned, yes. When we were here we had much better weather than we've got here now, so it was a very useful session. We were meant to have been at Monza at the beginning of August, but unfortunately for some reason we weren't able to test - but we are going to Barcelona in a few days. So we do have a number of sessions still planned before the end of the season. The Renault car that we're using has been extremely good, very reliable. Going forward it depends of course whether we're going to be in the sport beyond the end of our contract - because anything we did next year would be related to cars for 2014, not 2013. And also, probably the Renault is the right level of car going forward, because the cars of last season were quite substantially different. So, at the moment we're happy with what we've been doing with the test plan. Very reliable, good engineering support and we've been able to achieve what we want - so at the moment we're happy.

Ross, 300 GPs for Michael [Schumacher]. You've been alongside for most of them - can we have your comments? And also, has Michael been still able to surprise you over the past two years, compared to the previous times?

RB: I've been very fortunate to be a part of Michael's racing career in Formula One. It's been... there's so many records that Michael has established that will be extremely difficult for anyone to match. It may happen one day, as with all records. But quite the exceptional performance, quite an iconic performance that, as I say, is going to be extremely difficult to match. I've been privileged to see most of those race wins. And I think Michael's achieved it, not just from his raw ability - which of course is exceptional - but from his attitude and his approach. Being part of a team he's always

been very committed, and enjoys being part of a team. So, he understands that part of it. And that's why I think he achieves such consistently good results because he was able to motivate and incentivise the whole team to achieve the results, not just for him but for the other car as well. So I think he's been the most – in my view – the most complete racing driver of my generation. Does he still surprise us? Of course he does. In Monaco he was the fastest driver in qualifying. It's a shame that because of the penalty he wasn't on the front row. So he's still producing exceptional performances and still a privilege to work with.

I have a question for Ross concerning your Ferrari era. It was a time you were very successful and that success was very much based on the testing and the tyres. At that time McLaren already focussed very much on simulation and that turned out to be weakness of Ferrari recently – was it on your agenda that Ferrari has to improve in that area at the end of your time at Ferrari – or wasn't it a big topic at Ferrari?

RB: I think Formula One does evolve in different directions to suit circumstances. It's possibly correct that we had a very heavy commitment to testing when I was there. We had two test tracks of our own and of course we focussed on the most effective way of improving the performance of the car. Which for us during that period was intensive testing. Also, there were a lot of battles between the tyre companies and that needed track testing. If we had... all the stuff Paul's finding out, it's pretty challenging to develop the tyres without every car in the pitlane out there testing them. I think if we had a tyre war at the moment, that would be very, very difficult without track testing. But I think we also recognise, the period I was at Ferrari, the need for modelling, simulation – and the driver simulator is only a portion of all the simulation that's going on within the team, it's obviously an important part because it does involve the driver – but there's a huge amount of simulation going on in aerodynamics, in the mechanical behaviour of the car. And all of those things I believe that my time there, Ferrari were pretty strong. And, the driver in the loop simulator was something we were starting to look at, and I think most teams are in a pretty good position now with that sort of technology.

Two questions to Mattia Binotto: first of all, at what stage is Ferrari in developing the new V6 engine, and how much can it influence the performance of the car aerodynamically in 2014?

MB: So, at what stage are you with the V6? We are on plan, our plans. We don't know what that means to the others. In Formula One, it's always a matter of being better than the others and not being good in absolute. We are on schedule in that respect. We are happy. Each day there is something new to be learned. 2014 is just around the corner, so in some ways it's really difficult, very challenging and we cannot be happy at the stage that we are. We are pushing every day, trying to do more than what we are doing at the moment because we know that 2014 is nearly here. At this stage of development we are quite worried because you don't really know what will be the latest stage of your engine. It's really early days. You are mapping it, you are trying to know it better than what was on the paper at the very start but as well, in terms of reliability, I think it's an entire work that needs, in some ways, to be understood. We are pushing, we are on time, we are on schedule but it's never enough. In Formula One, you cannot be satisfied, you can never be satisfied. In terms of aero, I think it will in some ways modify the car. I think that my friends beside me are more expert than me, but the power unit is quite different to what we had so in terms of layout and architecture it's quite different. It will have big implications for the gearbox as well and I think that even now, maybe we have not chosen what will be the final architecture of the new engines. As well, in that respect, we are still developing.

As a follow-up to the earlier question about Michael's 300th Grand Prix, Ross, were you here in 1992 when Michael won his first race and if you were, what are your memories of that weekend?

RB: Er, yes, I was here. I think it was a mixed weather race from memory. Again, it's completeness that I think Michael has as a racing driver, his ability to make the most out of those mixed conditions. I think his ability to work with the team, to come to the right decisions from the pitwall on what to do with strategy, what to do with tyres and giving you the information, giving you the pointers that you need to help come to a conclusion. Yeah, I think those first few race wins that Michael had were probably opportunist wins in the sense that we perhaps weren't the fastest car on the day but he managed to put it all together in difficult circumstances. Then of course as the car improved and we were able to give him a better car than the wins became more consistent.

Could you just elaborate more about the B192, its strengths, weaknesses, what it was like to work on?

RB: I'm getting old now. I think most of the people up here would know that you forget your car almost as soon as you stop racing it and get on with the next one so I can't remember that well quite frankly, but obviously it was the start of my working with Michael, working with Rory Byrne and the start of that era that started at Benetton and then continued at Ferrari. Each year is an evolution when you stay together like that. When you stay together as engineers, when you stay together as drivers then you evolve well, I think, from year to year. I can't remember the B192 specification but it obviously wasn't a bad car but not as good as the cars we were able to do after that.

And the fact that Michael was so quick in that car and is still quick today, just talk us through the versatility of the man who's been able to drive both?

RB: I think it relates to what I said about variable conditions. Michael looks to get the most out of every situation. He's extremely competitive and obviously hugely talented, so it's not looking upon those situations as a problem, it's looking upon those situations as an opportunity. When those situations get difficult, then how can you get the most out of them, how can you extract a result from that, get a race win? I think Michael stated this as one of if not his best favoured track and he's had some sensational results here. I think it is that all-round ability and most importantly consistency. You can count on less than one hand or one hand the number of bad races that Michael has over a season and there's not many drivers who can say that.

Ross, you just spoke most eloquently about Michael's ability to incentivise a team but only yesterday Michael himself told us, rather surprisingly, that the lack of reliability that he's had this year, was no big deal for him. This suggests to me that perhaps he's rather less ambitious now than he once was. I wonder if this is going to affect your decision about whether or not to re-employ him next year?

RB: I think you need to separate the opinions Michael gives to the media and the opinions he gives to the team. They are sometimes quite different. Michael's tough, Michael's very demanding in terms of within the team, but he does that in a very positive way. He demands things of the team and he commits himself to the team in return, but that's not something Michael shares outside of the team. As I say, he's a good team member so when we do have a problem, Michael's as disappointed as any of us, perhaps more so and will express that disappointment. But quite honestly he doesn't express that to the media because that's not part of being a team. It's as simple as that really.

Ross, you know this year's Mercedes car very well; where do you see its biggest weakness and where do you have to improve the most to be fighting for the championship next year?

RB: It is very close this year. A few tenths seem to make a huge difference. Sometimes we've had qualifying where there is a very small amount

between the whole top ten so small differences are pretty significant this year. We've had some good races with the car and some more difficult races. I think the more difficult races - for instance the most recent one was Hungary, we struggled with the balance. Paddy mentioned about what you try to seek with a racing car and it's balance, consistency of balance through a corner: entry, middle, exit. We've been struggling a little bit to find the right balance that also gives the consistency we need with the tyres so we can get consistency with the tyres, but then we don't have the quickest balance, the quickest car. When we have perhaps the balance we need for the quickest time then we perhaps struggle with the consistency of the tyres so it's just finding that... yeah, optimising the car around that has been difficult. We've got ideas, we've got our theories and views on what we need to do with the car and some of those will be implemented this year in order to understand what we need to do for next year's car. But it is this question of finding consistency of balance against tyre consistency and tyre durability. I think at the beginning of the year we had a very quick car but we were damaging the tyres too much. As we've improved our usage of the tyres, we haven't necessarily taken the performance forward and that is what we're focusing on now. But these challenges, these aspects of the car are what all of us here faced, it's what we're fighting all the time. Sometimes your car becomes a reference point; with no changes, after a period, it's not quick enough, because other people have improved, so it's a constantly moving target.

For all three at the front, it's a question about the V6 engine. The V6 is on the dyno for everybody. With the current test situation, not being allowed to do any testing; what will happen? Are you discussing a new open session just for the V6 and is it a possibility to put the new engine in this year's car or next year's car for some testing?

PL: There have been a lot of discussions about whether we might make what is called a mule car to run the new engine next year. It's very expensive to make a mule car, especially when we have other programmes running as well, not just expensive in money but in terms of the people you need to design it. We talked earlier about the challenge between different seasons; then you're adding a new challenge. Actually, most of the teams are agreeing that we will not have mule cars. The regulations wouldn't currently make a mule car of any benefit anyway but we're not agreeing to introduce any new test sessions that would use mule cars. So then the question is: can we enter a new season with a new power unit, without that track testing? That will place great reliance on the laboratory testing, using dynos, transient dynos. I think that compared to previous points in time when new power trains were introduced the technology is far more sophisticated now in the lab, so I think generally the manufacturers and the teams are feeling that it is realistic to bring in these new power units without needing to introduce special cars to get that earlier learning. But we will see. As we get closer to the time and the fear builds, maybe different agreements will be reached but at the moment, that seems to be the consensus. Ross, I don't know if you have some comments on that.

RB: I think Mattia should answer this one as well.

MB: It's clear that from an engine point of view we are very keen to run the new power unit earlier because what you can find on a car is never equal to what you can find on the dyno: all the dynamics of the car, gearchanges, running on bumps, whatever, is quite different to the dyno itself so we are all afraid that by the start of the season you find out that you have a big issue with the engine and the power unit, and you have no time to sort it out. On the other hand, I think it's very equal for all the manufacturers so whatever will be the decision, and it will be the decision of the teams, we have to accept it and we will try to do our best from that.

RB: I think the points have been expressed absolutely correctly. I think the only point I would add that rather like Paul is doing now with testing of the tyres, he's using an old car to test the tyres and my understanding is that there's nothing to stop a team testing an engine with an old car if they want to. Whether that is the most effective thing to do is a different matter, because it's a huge resource to do that and as Paddy said, there's a lot of improved technologies there since we last introduced a new engine. We have lots of ways of trying to understand the engine and the complete power train and the systems will work together, so I think there's going to be a lot of laboratory work but I think a team can choose to use an old car and put the engine in it, but it's a pretty massive programme.

Paul, some teams did have issues with blistering here last year. I just wondered if you could just run through what Pirelli have done to look at that and what the teams have been asked to do in terms of that as well?

PH: Yeah, we've obviously got a similar issue to last year, in that we haven't been doing any running today in the dry so replicating what happened last year there's always that risk that the teams don't have a chance to run at what is a very very difficult track for the tyres. Here we've made some slight changes. We've got a slightly thinner tread to reduce the material in the shoulder area which is subject to blistering, reduce the camber levels for the front tyres. We ran here earlier, as I said, in testing and that seemed to give us a positive result so if we get some dry weather we will see.

Ross, there are rumours of Mercedes thinking of quitting the team and AMG becoming the owner of the Formula One team. Can you say something about that?

RB: We don't comment on rumours as you know but we're very committed to succeeding in Formula One and the level of commitment that's being made in the team is indicative of what we want to achieve. As I say, we don't comment on rumours but Mercedes has been in Formula One for a long time through good years, through bad years and we're committed to succeeding.

I'm not sure to what extent this follows on from what you were saying about mule cars, Paddy, but in light of the WEC (World Endurance Championship) rules, is anyone tempted to put some bodywork on an F1 car and try testing your engines at Le Mans?

RB: I think it's a good incentive because obviously it's a huge investment in a new engine and I think the technologies on this new engine are exciting and much more relevant now than the engine we have. I think it's great that the initiative is carrying through into different forms of racing but I don't think any of us would be ready to undertake such a programme plus obviously the needs for an endurance engine can be a little bit different to an F1 engine, although we do have to make the engines last longer again than at the present time so we are moving in that direction, but I think the idea of having a cross-usage of the engine in different categories is very good and could certainly help with the investment that's needed in new powertrains.

Has that been mooted at all with either McLaren or Ferrari?

PL: No, I haven't come across that idea before, but as Ross says, I think the point of the new power unit in Formula One is that it's supposed to introduce a technology which is relevant to the automotive manufacturers. It is a positive direction, so if that is the case, then it must also be true for any other form of motor sport so if we can find ways of using the same power unit in other formulae then that must be a great idea.

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – FP3 report

The first dry session of the Belgian Grand Prix weekend was heaving as teams did their best to make up for yesterday's lost running.

When the pitlane opened for business at Spa, there was a long queue of traffic waiting to hit the track. There were race simulations to be run, development components to test, and the odd bit of light-fuel qualifying running to do, and only an hour in which to complete the work.

With the vast majority of teams taking the decision to complete their race simulations early on in FP3, Marussia drivers Timo Glock and Charles Pic both enjoyed a not-so-brief moment at P2 on the timesheets before they were eventually knocked down the running as the traditional pace-setters began their light-fuel runs. One of the only teams to concentrate on race simulations over qualifying runs was McLaren.

It was a bad day for Nico Rosberg, the first man to brave the rain on Friday afternoon. The Mercedes driver drew to a halt at Fagnes only twelve minutes into the session with what appeared to have been a gearbox failure. The lost track time will be a real blow to both team and driver, thanks to a paucity of feedback and data from which to determine the ideal set-up for tomorrow's race.

As was only to be expected after a long summer shutdown and a lack of running on Friday, Saturday morning saw all manner of minor quibbles on the cars. Heikki Kovalainen had issues with his DRS, as the flap was not opening as it should when the device was activated, while the team radios were littered with communications from drivers complaining of balance and handling issues.

Les Combes continued to be a particularly tricky corner, with what seemed like half the grid running off track and returning without incident.

FP3 times (unofficial)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1.48.542s [18 laps]
2. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1.48.683s [21 laps]
3. Sergio Perez (Sauber) 1.48.850s [23 laps]
4. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) 1.48.863s [20 laps]
5. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1.49.09s [18 laps]
6. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1.49.092s [16 laps]
7. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1.49.164s [21 laps]
8. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1.49.266s [23 laps]
9. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1.49.292s [23 laps]
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1.49.382s [22 laps]
11. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1.49.561s [23 laps]
12. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) 1.49.615s [19 laps]
13. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) 1.49.621s [26 laps]
14. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) 1.49.674s [23 laps]
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1.49.710s [21 laps]
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1.49.776s [22 laps]
17. Bruno Senna (Williams) 1.20.027s [20 laps]
18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1.52.339s [21 laps]
19. Charles Pic (Marussia) 1.52.566s [20 laps]
20. Timo Glock (Marussia) 1.52.630s [18 laps]
21. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) 1.52.809s [22 laps]
22. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) 1.55.383s [22 laps]
23. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) 1.53.562s [23 laps]
24. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1.58.113s [5 laps]

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Q1 report

Before qualifying even got underway at the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, there were two men at a disadvantage for Sunday's race – both Mark Webber and Nico Rosberg have been issued with five-place grid penalties for gearbox changes.

With such limited running over the course of the weekend thus far, pole for the Belgian Grand Prix is anyone's guess. Sauber have been strong, Fernando Alonso insists that his Ferrari is the slowest competitive car on track despite serious evidence to the contrary, and neither McLaren nor Red Bull have shown the pace expected of them.

Lotus have long been seen as the dark horses of the season, but the Enstone racers' Spa promise may have been curtailed by the team's decision to postpone running The Device – technical director James Allison's name for the team's double-DRS – until it has been proven to be more reliable.

With the session half run, three men have remained in the pits: Sebastian Vettel, Mark Webber, and Kimi Raikkonen.

Lewis Hamilton was concerned about the pace of his McLaren after FP3, and a raft of inter-session changes have seen the British driver lap Spa in 1.49.803s, good for a provisional P2 behind Sergio Perez. Milliseconds behind is Alonso, who has spent the weekend telling all and sundry that Ferrari need a wet weekend in order to perform.

With Vettel still in the pits and Webber and Raikkonen on their outlaps, the dropout zone is completed by Narain Karthikeyan, Pedro de la Rosa, Heikki Kovalainen, and Charles Pic. None of the drivers to have set a lap time fall foul of the 107 percent rule.

The perennially-unsatisfied Button is continuing to complain of understeer, which the McLaren driver says is worse than it was in the morning session. Despite his issues with the car's handling, however, Button was able to put himself at the top of the timesheets with a 1.49.250s lap set with just over six minutes remaining of Q1.

Raikkonen's first timed lap puts the Lotus driver safely in P3 on the standings, while Webber's first effort sees the Australian in P6. Only Vettel has

yet to complete a timed lap with less than five minutes to go.

The defending world champion crosses the line with a 1.49.722s, and demotes his teammate to P7 in the process.

With a full set of times on the board, the dropout zone is comprised of Michael Schumacher, Vitaly Petrov, Timo Glock, Pic, Kovalainen, de la Rosa, and Karthikeyan.

Pastor Maldonado goes quickest just as it is announced that he and Nico Hulkenberg will be investigated by the stewards for impeding.

Just over a minute to go and Schumacher saves himself, pushing Daniel Ricciardo down into the dropout zone. A good lap from the Australian will see Rosberg eliminated this session. The Toro Rosso driver does it in style, crossing the line in P6 and ruining the Mercedes driver's weekend.

Dropout zone

18. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)
19. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
20. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
21. Timo Glock (Marussia)
22. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
23. Charles Pic (Marussia)
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Q2 report

With Nico Rosberg the high-profile casualty of Q1 – a bad day made worse by a five-place gearbox penalty – all eyes turn to Lotus in Q2. Kimi Raikkonen was strong in the early part of qualifying, despite a short stint on track, while teammate Romain Grosjean was not far from being eliminated.

Unlike Q1, the second qualifying session got off to something of a slow start, and the pitlane was quiet for the opening minutes.

But the times started piling on the board, and offered little in the way of surprises. Despite early promise from the likes of Paul di Resta, once the serious front runners got out on track it became a fight between McLaren, Lotus, Ferrari, and Red Bull, as expected.

While Lewis Hamilton was an early pace-setter, it was teammate Jenson Button who impressed with a 1.47.654s lap that saw the McLaren driver at the top of the timesheets despite persistent complaints about understeer.

A mid-session highlight came about thanks to Bruno Senna, who elected to test the drifting capabilities of his Williams along Pouchon. It was an impressive save, but will have cost the Brazilian dearly when it comes to his rubber situation.

The dropout zone situation is far more intense in Q2 than it was in Q1, with Sebastian Vettel hovering on the edge with only a minute left in which to save himself, and Michael Schumacher currently down for elimination from his own living room.

Joining the homeowner in the dropout zone are Nico Hulkenberg, Vettel, Jean-Eric Vergne, Daniel Ricciardo, Pastor Maldonado, and Bruno Senna. All seven are out on track, fighting for position.

Of the seventeen men remaining, only Jenson Button and Raikkonen – currently P1 and P2 on the timesheets – remain in the pits.

Sergio Perez splits the pits pair with a 1.147.980s, but the real news is that Vettel was unable to save himself on his last effort; the Red Bull driver has dropped out in Q2 and will qualify no better than P11.

Maldonado saves himself from elimination, and the dropout zone (see below) is filled with surprises.

Dropout zone

11. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
12. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
13. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
14. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)
17. Bruno Senna (Williams)

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Q3 report

Another session over, another high profile casualty, this time in the form of Sebastian Vettel. If Mark Webber qualifies above P6, he will line up on Sunday's grid ahead of his teammate, despite the five-place gearbox penalty hanging over the Australian's head.

Kimi Raikkonen was the first man to put a time on the board: a competitive 1.48.205s. But the Lotus driver was quickly dethroned by Jenson Button,

who claimed provisional pole with a 1:47.686s.

Lewis Hamilton had the first off of the session, running wide at Rivage on his first timed lap. Hamilton then aborted the lap in question, and returned to the pits.

With only two times on the board and little more than three minutes remaining, all ten drivers are in the pits. This will be a one-lap effort from everyone barring Raikkonen and Button, although Paul di Resta could well take the traditional Force India route of not running at all in Q3.

Confounding expectations, di Resta leaves the pits with the rest of the pack, and all ten contenders are currently looking for space around the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps. Given that they have seven kilometres to play with, that shouldn't prove too troublesome.

Kamui Kobayashi crosses the line in a provisional P2, and moments later Pastor Maldonado claims provisional P3. But there is very little movement at the front, and it looks like this will be Jenson Button's first pole position for McLaren.

Hamilton is slow in the first and second sectors, and will not be lining up on the front two rows. The British driver crosses the line in P8, but will be promoted to P7 thanks to Mark Webber's penalty.

Provisional grid

1. Jenson Button (McLaren)
2. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber)
3. Pastor Maldonado (Williams)
4. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus)
5. Sergio Perez (Sauber)
6. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari)
7. Lewis Hamilton (McLaren)
8. Romain Grosjean (Lotus)
9. Paul di Resta (Force India)
10. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull)
11. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India)
12. Mark Webber (Red Bull)*
13. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes)
14. Felipe Massa (Ferrari)
15. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso)
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso)
17. Bruno Senna (Williams)
18. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham)
19. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham)
20. Timo Glock (Marussia)
21. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT)
22. Charles Pic (Marussia)
23. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes)**
24. Narain Karthikeyan (HRT)

* Mark Webber qualified in P7, but will start from P12 due to an unscheduled gearbox change.

** Nico Rosberg qualified in P18, but will start from P23 due to an unscheduled gearbox change.

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Saturday press conference

After a serious lack of track time, Saturday's qualifying session delivered a series of excellent performances and a surprise line-up at the post-qualifying press conference.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber), and Pastor Maldonado (Williams).

Jenson, your 50th race for your team and what a way to mark it, with your first pole position for them?

Jenson BUTTON: It's been quite a long time since I got my last pole position – that was back in 2009, Monaco I think. It was pretty emotional. Sunday's have been good for the past few years, but Saturdays have not gone perfectly you could say. So, a great qualifying session and it's so important to come back after the break, such a long break, with a good result on Saturday. I know the race is tomorrow but this is close to winning a race for me because it's been so long.

Kamui, your first front row in Formula One and also the first front row for a Japanese driver in Formula One, so yoku dekimashita to you.

Kamui KOBAYASHI: Really? Thank you. It's quite far from yesterday's practice where we struggled quite a bit and we really had no idea what we were going to do. But this morning in that hour we changed the settings and we improved better, definitely. Quali? Of course we don't know what is really a fact, how much there is an improvement of track condition. But we have good confidence at Spa and after the summer holiday everybody wants to have a really good potential in the car. In these three months there are going to be like nine races, it's quite busy but very important for us so I'm very happy to have a great result here.

Pastor, your holiday included a return trip back to Venezuela. The rest might have done you a bit of good as well, with another

top three qualifying. Not the most straightforward qualifying for you but in the end it all came good.

Pastor MALDONADO: Yeah, I think we've been quite consistent in qualifying all season, especially since Barcelona and now it seems to be a bit more strong, the car. We've been working so hard, even in the break, trying to analyse and understand all the problems we had in the past, to sort it out for the second part of the season and that means we are quite competitive. Especially this morning we were struggling a little bit with the set-up but we understand and we knew where to work on the car. I'm very happy because the team reacted. The spirit is high in the team. We are working so compact now. I'm looking forward to the second part of the season. The races were up and down in the first part and looking forward to the second part to recover what we lost at the beginning of the season.

Jenson, you mentioned an emotional day for you but there were three laps that were more than good enough for pole. What was the secret? Why was today such a good Saturday, when others have been such a struggle?

JB: If I knew, it would make everything great! We just got the balance right this morning. The car's been working really well all day. It's limited running we've all had but every run we've done the balance has been reasonably good and we just tickled it, especially through qualifying. Yeah, the balance is to my liking. I obviously have a style where it's quite difficult to find a car that works for me in qualifying but when it does we can get pole position. So, big thank you to the whole team, especially Dave and Tom, my two engineers, who on Saturdays, some of the time, have found it pretty tough. But today is a good day and it makes it a lot easier for us tomorrow being in this position but it's still going to be hard day I think.

Kamui, we saw the Saubers very impressive in the final practice session, the only dry session before qualifying. Was this a result you expected today or did it still come as a massive shock?

KK: Of course we expect like really high for this weekend because Spa is one of our favourite circuits. I think our car should be good here as well. Of course I didn't expect second in qualifying. We're basically quite strong in the race, but not strong in quali with other tracks. I think we have a really great opportunity for tomorrow as well. I think this is a really good start for the rest of the season. We need to be really strong in quali. Definitely, I think in this summer break, the guys had a lot of work and they did a really great job. We had really a lot of chats with them and we're happy to be here and confident and we showed that in quali. It's really great and thanks to the guys.

Pastor, Williams third on the grid. Did you expect that coming to Spa or is this just the team making good fortune out of others' misfortune in the qualifying session?

PM: We were optimistic for this race. Maybe this morning I was a little bit more worried because the car doesn't look quite good. But during the qualifying I was adapting myself to the car and adapting myself to the different conditions and the track was changing and improving at the same time. After Q1 I saw the potential we had, a bit less in Q2, we were nearly out, P10. I was a bit worried about that because the lap wasn't that good. In Q3 I pushed very much, at the maximum. I got a clean lap. We are not that fast, like Jenson, but I'm looking forward to tomorrow. In the past we've had very good pace in the races so looking forward.

Jenson, it hasn't been a particularly kind circuit to you – does this make up for it?

JB: Over the years in qualifying it hasn't been particularly that kind to me but twelve years ago for my first race here I qualified third on the grid, back in 2000, so I have some good memories from qualifying here. And this definitely adds to that. It's a very special circuit for all of us and to get a pole position here does mean a lot, especially because it's been quite a long time for me.

I think this was touched on [in the TV unilateral] have you basically found the secret to qualifying, your qualifying, or have you just hit the sweet spot?

JB: I really don't know. Maybe a five-week break between every race is what I need – getting old now so maybe that's the case! But no, all day the car's been reasonably good. We've been tweaking it all through P3 and in qualifying even. On both tyres the car's felt good. It's difficult to get a lap together this year with these tyres I think. And even a pole lap, it still doesn't feel like the perfect lap. After the qualifying the adrenaline is running high and you look back on it and think it's a great lap – but when you analyse it, it's very, very difficult to do a perfect lap with these cars, and that's something I've struggled with, with the way that I drive.

How much satisfaction has it given you that you've beaten everybody else?

JB: Yeah, definitely. Today we didn't put a foot wrong all through qualifying. And I say 'we' meaning the team and myself. The engineers have really been on it today. It's difficult when it's just one hour of practice – and basically you get about twenty minutes on the circuit in a one-hour practice session – and yeah, they've really been on it. So, congratulations to them. Obviously this isn't a win – the points are tomorrow – but this is very important to us.

Kamui, Sauber and yourself seem to have been on top of it all weekend so far, is that the case?

KK: Well from yesterday it was totally different conditions. But today, even in the morning we had quite good confidence with the car. I think Spa is one of our favourite tracks with our car, so we had quite [a lot of] confidence coming here but we didn't expect to be in second. Front row is a really good finish in the quali and we usually struggle in the quali and in the race I think we are not really worried. But this is where we want to improve and in Spa of course this is a favourite circuit but we didn't expect second. And I'm very happy of course. I think the team had a really great time during this holiday and they do really quite well and that's why we are here. But I think very important for tomorrow to score much more points for us.

And this is your best qualifying position by two places as well...

KK: Well, my best quali I think but I'm always focussing on Sunday and not on quali – so this is a good point but I want to focus on tomorrow. Second in quali we still cannot get any points, so just y'know, we see tomorrow, and if we can be on the podium that's really something we need to do.

Someone yesterday mentioned what a good overtaker you are – but you've only got one person to overtake...

KK: Well yes, of course – but always in the top three or top five it's always more difficult to battle. If we're P15 or something it's easy to do something. So, I think definitely tomorrow is a different story and of course we need to fight and we need to watch tyre management. But tyres are a little bit strange because we have different tyres from previous event, so we need a little bit to take care and we need to finish the race.

Pastor, how important was this third place after the results recently.

PM: It was important especially because we are here in Spa, which is a special track, I think, for all the drivers. We are expecting this race for all the year and yes, it's something special to be in the top three here in Spa.

And you and the engineers seem to have found the right setup straight away.

PM: Yeah, I think this morning we were struggling a little bit with the setup, especially with the option tyres, and then we were analysing and trying to push very hard to see what was the problem – and we solved the problem. The qualifying looked quite consistent and strong. The only problem was Q2. We were at the limit, P10, but yeah, the lap wasn't that clean. But in Q3 I push, I see where I'm mistaking in Q2, where to improve the car, and we did pretty good I think. That means that the team is working so good, especially after the break, so we stay competitive. The spirit is so high at the moment, so looking forward for tomorrow and even for the rest of the season.

We did see on the screen that you and Nico Hülkenberg have an incident being investigated by the stewards. Is that a concern as far as you're concerned.

PM: To be honest I don't remember that.

Pastor, would you be happy repeating this position tomorrow and being on the podium or are you aiming for a win?

PM: I think we need to go for the best we can do. For sure it's going to be important to be on the podium, it's going to be important to score some points tomorrow but if we can go for more, we will do so.

Jenson, presumably it's going to be quite difficult for you to be the sporting role for Lewis tomorrow, given your positions on the grid. How irritating has that talk been for you and just how easy has it been for you to focus on the rest of the season, just in terms of forgetting all the talk about where you are in the championship and making sure you're in a position to win races?

JB: Obviously not that difficult. It's halfway point and maybe we haven't had enough to talk about over the five week break so you get asked unusual questions and very unusual for this point in the season. It's part of Formula One and I've experienced it before. The important thing is that within the team we've got a very good relationship and we're working together to build the best car we possibly can and on the weekends trying to extract everything from it. Today is a very good day for us, and I'm sure Lewis is disappointed to be where he is but for me, a great day and hopefully this makes our life a little bit easier tomorrow but still, as I said, we really don't know what's going to happen in the race here. We missed Friday because of the weather and it's going to be difficult to know what the consistency is of everyone here. A little bit unknown, but we'll run through everything tonight, every scenario I'm sure and make sure we're ready for tomorrow.

How crucial is it for you to win this race tomorrow, trying to come back and catch up some of the guys who are ahead of you?

JB: It's very important. A lot of people have asked me if I can still fight for the championship. It is a long shot; I'm 80 points behind Fernando. I need to be on the podium and finishing in front of Fernando at every race for the rest of the season, which is not easy, given his consistency but this is a good start. Yeah, a win is very important tomorrow, to fight for the championship.

Jenson, how do you motivate yourself today before qualification?

JB: Same as always. You know, I'm doing the best job in the world. I get to drive Formula One cars every other weekend. It's something that we all dream about as kids, I think. It's easy to motivate yourself, especially when you're working with a team like McLaren, a team with such history and a team that really is behind its drivers and supporting them all the way. And also when you have your friends and family that come here to support you it makes a big difference. It was pretty easy to motivate myself and also it was such a long break for us to get back in the car is a really really good feeling. Nothing leaves you: you don't forget how to drive but there's a little bit more of a buzz there when you jump back in. We were unable to really use that yesterday because of the weather but today it was great to actually push a Formula One car to the limits. I enjoyed today very much.

Pastor, you were talking about ups and downs this season. What is the reason for your bad races? Do you think it was pushing or not pushing too hard?

PM: I think we still need to push hard. Yes, I've been involved in many accidents and a lot of bad luck at the beginning of the season, but the most important thing is to be competitive, to be consistent from now to the end. I think we have everything to do that and concentrate on this second part of the season. The team is pushing hard as well so everything looks quite good for us so I'm looking forward to the end of the season.

Kamui and Pastor: do you think that the fact that you are not title contenders compared to your direct rivals tomorrow... can you take advantage of that, maybe taking more risks than others?

KK: I'm not going to take any risks, of course. Races are something different. Starting second I think is not a risk, it's quite important, it will be important to manage the race. I definitely have to say it's not a risk race, we need to manage it well tomorrow.

PM: I think it's difficult for me to predict the races but starting from a very good position off the grid, for sure the points will be important for the team, it will be important for me as well, so I will always try to do my best against top teams and even Sauber and whichever team is fighting with us. But for sure, again I repeat it will be very important to be in the points tomorrow.

Jenson, you already mentioned there was restricted practice time. What do you think is the biggest question mark for tomorrow: the tyre degradation, the choice of tyres later on in the race or whether the choice of set-up with less or more downforce is the right one?

JB: All of that. We're not sure whether we've got the right downforce for tomorrow. Our straightline speeds seem pretty good which is important for the race, especially when you've got a lot of fuel on board but then the negative is, you spend a lot of time in the middle sector. Possibly you can damage the tyres more with less downforce but maybe that's not the case. Maybe with more downforce you generate more heat so I don't know, we have to wait and see. It's all very unknown at the moment. I think the important thing is that I thought we expected the guys with higher downforce to maybe be quicker compared to us in qualifying. It's a nice feeling being on pole by three tenths and these guys are obviously still pretty quick in a straight line compared to others but it's nice to have that advantage.

Jenson, for the last three years, your friend Sebastian Vettel was very often in the press conference on this day. Today he is missing. Do you like this situation and what would you like to say to comfort him today?

JB: Nothing! I'm not the person to be comforting Sebastian Vettel. I think he's eleventh on the grid, is that correct? I've started worse than that and finished on the podium so it doesn't mean his weekend is over, it does mean that it's a lot more difficult than maybe it was for him last year, starting on pole. He'll still be quick. There are many places to overtake here. I think we'll still see Sebastian fighting for some very good points.

Jenson, earlier on in Q1, we heard you complaining about understeer and then seconds later, top of the time sheets, you were really fast on it and stayed that way. What happens? Is this the tyres coming in or psychologically you just think sod it and you get on with it and do the business?

JB: I wish it was that easy. Especially with these temperatures and limited running it's been difficult to get the tyres in the working range. This

morning it was the other way around, they were working very well and then later on in the run they weren't working so well. In Q1 it was the other way around: lap one, I just had no front grip at all as you probably heard me say, and then it was better on lap three. It's really difficult to understand how hard to push on an out lap and also if you're doing a three lap run, on the second lap how hard to push, whether you should put more heat into the tyres, the bulk or the surface. It's not just drive round as fast as you can any more. It was good to get the balance today and get it right.

Kamui, you are one of the drivers that people love the most because you are always attacking everything. Lately there are a lot of rumours - even from the fans - that would like to have you in Ferrari next year. Is it something you are thinking of, considering? KK: It's the first time I hear that. Nobody has told me, so I'm really surprised to hear that. At the moment, after the holiday, our results compared to our speed of the car, I'm not very happy with how many points we've scored, so I am focusing on the last nine races to score more and still, of course, nobody's discussed about next year so it's not a bit too late and of course there's a good option to stay with Sauber as well, but we never know what's a surprise. Definitely my target is focusing on my races for the last nine races.

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Race report

How do you begin to make sense of a race like the 2012 Belgian Grand Prix? It was a race of attrition, punctuated by some near misses, an unusually high spate of dangerous driving, numerous incidents marked for post-race investigation, and unexpected tyre strategies.

But for race winner Jenson Button, it was a lights to flag win, 44 laps of smooth driving, excellent tyre management, and the professional finesse of a champion.

The combination of highs and lows evoked the Belgian race weekend as a whole – while Sunday's race took place in the dry, the paddock was flooded with the frustrated tears of the fallen.

It all went wrong at the first corner, when Romain Grosjean moved over into Lewis Hamilton. The spinning cars collected Sauber's Sergio Perez and the Ferrari of Fernando Alonso, and sent the Spanish driver flying. But that wasn't all – the incident was a pile-up in the truest sense of the word, with cars going over and under each other until it was hard to tell where a Lotus ended and a McLaren began. Alonso narrowly missed being clipped on the head by Grosjean.

All four drivers were out of the race, and for a few tense moments there were concerns that Alonso had been seriously injured – the trackside doctors were slow to remove the double world champion from his car as they were concerned he could have damaged his back in the incident.

While that was the most dramatic incident of the race by far, it wasn't even the first – Pastor Maldonado appeared to have jumped the start, although at the time of writing the matter was still being considered by the stewards. Whatever advantage the Williams driver might have gained at the start was negated on lap 5, when he limped off the circuit and into retirement with a damaged front wing.

The sixth and final man to retire from the Belgian Grand Prix was Narain Karthikeyan; the HRT driver lost control of his car on lap 31 when his front left wheel – which hadn't been properly attached during his pit stop – flew off the car and sent Karthikeyan into the gravel and out of the race.

With a quarter of the field out of the running over the course of 44 laps at Spa, it was up to the eighteen men left standing to entertain the fans. And entertain they did, with a series of spectacular overtaking manoeuvres, mid-field battles, and all manner of pit lane chaos.

The highlight of the afternoon came about courtesy of Kimi Raikkonen, who passed Michael Schumacher at the entrance to Eau Rouge with the sort of manoeuvre that race fans will be citing as magic for many years to come. The two had been battling for several laps, one man passing the other only to be re-passed as soon as they entered the DRS activation zone. The back and forth ballet could have lasted all afternoon, had the Finnish driver not seized the opportunity to slip past Schumacher where the German least expected it, before powering off into the distance and out of DRS reach.

Raikkonen had spent much of the weekend complaining of handling troubles, and was heard bemoaning his lack of grip throughout the race, which only made his pass all the more impressive.

Schumacher was also involved in the other incident of note: the Mercedes driver had what looked to be a dangerous dice with Vettel in the approach to the pits on lap 19. The two men had been fighting for position, with Schumacher defending hard – but fairly – against the Red Bull racer. But at the end of the lap, the elder German cut right across the track into the pit entry, narrowly avoiding a collision with Vettel in the process.

Tyres didn't play as big a role in Spa as they have done at other races this season. Degradation didn't appear to cause many problems, and while the majority of drivers stuck to the predicted two- and three-stop strategies, Button, Vettel, and Charles Pic were all able to complete 44 punishing laps of F1's favourite circuit with only a single stop each.

Vettel's tyre management was particularly impressive. Having made a poor start from P10, the Red Bull driver was lucky to avoid the first corner chaos but found himself stuck in the middle of a slow pack. Despite using his rubber to fight his way through the field, the defending world champion was able to make his medium compound Pirellis last until lap 21, just under half race distance, before switching to the harder compound for the last 23 laps. Button was on a similar strategy, but the race winner spent all 44 laps in clean air, and had a much easier job where tyre management was concerned.

Given the number of incidents still under investigation, a series of fines and penalties – most likely grid drops at Monza – are expected to be announced over the course of the evening.

Belgian Grand Prix results (unofficial)

1. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1h29m08.530s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) + 13.624s

3. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) + 25.334s
4. Nico Hulkenberg (Force India) + 27.843s
5. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 29.845s
6. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 31.244s
7. Michael Schumacher (Mercedes) + 53.374s
8. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) + 58.865s
9. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 1m02.982s
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) + 1m03.783s
11. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 1m05.111s
12. Bruno Senna (Williams) + 1m11.529s
13. Kamui Kobayashi (Sauber) + 1 lap
14. Vitaly Petrov (Caterham) + 1 lap
15. Timo Glock (Marussia) + 1 lap
16. Charles Pic (Marussia) + 1 lap
17. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) + 1 lap
18. Pedro de la Rosa (HRT) + 1 lap

Narain Karthikeyan (HRT) RET
Pastor Maldonado (Williams) RET
Sergio Perez (Sauber) RET
Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) RET
Lewis Hamilton (McLaren) RET
Romain Grosjean (Lotus) RET

F1 Belgian Grand Prix – Sunday press conference

After 44 chaotic laps, the post-race press conference at the Belgian Grand Prix was a scene of relative calm.

Present were Jenson Button (McLaren), Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), and Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus).

Jenson, the last few races were not really easy for you. Today you have done the perfect race. You did the fastest time in practice, you did all the race winning it, you are the only one, I think, this year who has won from the start to the end. It has been wonderful. Just let us know your feeling winning this wonderful Belgian Grand Prix.

Jenson BUTTON: Good afternoon everyone! Thank you very much. I still can't get used to this: talking on the podium, it's quite strange, isn't it? What can I say? This circuit is such a special circuit to most drivers and, yeah, the way that it flows and the history here so to get a victory here from lights to flag is very special, especially as it's not been the easiest year for me. So, yeah, a very special weekend. I'd like to thank everyone: the whole team and also all of you guys [the crowd] for being so supportive. And we're going to enjoy this for a little while longer before we head to Monza and hopefully do the same.

Well Sebastian, the weekend was probably not the one you would have loved to have: the fact you have missed your train yesterday is quite a handicap but you managed to finish second and you managed to come back in the Championship, reducing the score on Alonso. How do you feel?

Sebastian VETTEL: Well, thank you Jacky. Obviously it was a crazy race. From where I started the start was not so good, and after the first corner where a lot of cars went off I was pretty crazy and fortunately we came back with a fantastic strategy, I think it was the right decision to stay out – obviously I was keen to come in because when you're stuck in traffic it's difficult – but yeah, I think it was the right call and the car was quite good in the race so we were able to pick up quite some pace. Let's say after our poor start to the weekend, especially for you guys [the crowd] on Friday when it was raining like mad and you were on the grandstands, thanks for the support. Yeah it was good to come back and obviously a fantastic race, I had a lot of fun, racing a lot of people, racing Michael, so yeah, in the end obviously great to come second, great to be here on the podium and looking forward already to coming back here next year. This circuit is unbelievable. Thank You.

Well Kimi, first of all the crowd is really showing their pleasure to have you back in grand prix racing. You're flirting with the victory, now you are quite often on the podium, you did an incredible battle for third place. We had feeling that maybe you had difficulty with your car, maybe sometimes, but the result is that you are finishing third. It's a pure joy for us and we like to congratulate you for this great position.

Kimi RÄIKKÖNEN: Thanks a lot and I mean it's nice to be back here. Always lots of fans and good racing. So I think we have seen very nice racing today. Of course not the easiest day for me and for the team but the car was not exactly like we are liking but I was fighting and try to get the best out of it and we managed to get some good points for myself and for the team, so that's the main thing but for sure not the easiest race, one of the most difficult but that's how it goes and we try next week better.

Jenson, we said the other day that Spa hasn't necessarily been very kind to you – I guess that's changed now?

JB: Yeah, a little bit. All weekend, to be fair, the car has felt reasonably good. And this is the first circuit we come to that is lower downforce, we pretty much run full downforce everywhere else we go, so it's a nice change to try something different. I just love Spa, I think we all do. Through Eau Rouge, I know it's easy flat, but it's still an experience, the g that we pull through there. And yeah, to lead from start to finish, it's a very special victory. But I think you're going to say that about every victory. But it's really nice to win on a circuit like this. I remember watching Formula One back in the day here – it was a little bit different then – and there's so much history. It's really good to be a part of that.

How important was it to get that first set of medium tyres to last all the way through to nearly half distance?

JB: Yeah, well, we weren't really sure what to do with the strategy: whether it was going to be a one [stop] or a two, and we thought some people might even be doing a three and really we were just playing it by ear. And I think when Nico [Hülkenberg] got into second it did help us a little bit because I could just feel the car and not push it too hard and at that point I still didn't think we were going to do a one-stop, I still thought it was going

to be a two. And then on lap 12 the tyres started working and the car felt very consistent, really good to drive and I could control the degradation of the tyres. It's always easier when you're leading a race, to do that. But it was a great feeling to be able to go so much further than pretty much everyone except for Seb.

Were you a bit worried that the tyres might drop off at the end there?

JB: No. I had a bit more oversteer in the car, which isn't ideal, but yeah, the balance was reasonable, and it feels that the first ten laps were not perfect and then the tyres would come to you: you would lose a bit of front grip and you would get a balance – on both sets. So it was good. I knew that Sebastian stopped a couple of laps later than me, so he had a couple of laps' fresher tyres but he had to pull back 15 seconds, so we were in a pretty good position. But you think about everything: you think about all the things that could go wrong and, y'know, today they didn't. The team did a fantastic job and we really didn't put a foot wrong all weekend. So very happy and very proud of all the guys. And great to get this victory here in Spa.

Sebastian, you must be happy also, with second place from tenth on the grid.

SV: Yeah, after the first corner I was probably the only one who was not improving because obviously a lot of cars crashed in front of us but my start was very poor and I lost quite a lot. I had a very poor initial launch and lost positions. Obviously I was starting around the Force Indias, and I think they were not far away from Jenson after the first corners – and I wasn't – I was behind a Caterham even. So yeah, pretty poor start to the race but after that I think the pace was there. We were able to get through the field but it's not that easy when everyone has DRS available: it's like a big chain and you sit on the limiter like everyone else. It's difficult to benefit from that but I think we made reasonable progress through the field. And then we were able to have a couple of good laps in clean air, which I think was the right way. And obviously allowed us to come back through the strategy and finish second, which I think after the first lap nobody expected. We didn't expect the tyres to last that well, I think there was some talk before the race, there were some concerns the tyres wouldn't last that long. As Jenson touched on, probably most people were thinking of two and three stops and one stop seemed out of reach. Same for us but after a couple of laps it was clear that the tyres were lasting pretty well and the pace wasn't bad – that was the most important thing for us. Saturday morning went quite well, qualifying was shit and today was well again. Yeah, happy with second.

You were battling through the field. So you were probably asking more of the softer tyres than Jenson was...

SV: Surely in the first stint but even with that I think the pace was there. We had the fastest times on the first set of tyres even though I had a lot of battling going on with Felipe – well the Caterham first but Felipe and then Bruno, Mark, Michael – so yeah, it was fairly busy but as I said, the pace was there, which was the reason why we were able to gain so much and in the end come second.

Kimi, two defining moments that we can remember from that race from you, particularly the start, tell us about that.

KR: I had an OK start, I gained one place on Sauber and I think a very similar start to Jenson and I just saw it in the mirrors that there's some accidents going to happen so I was pretty lucky to get out of it. I think they just missed me on the rear. But the Williams tried to get me – but he had a jump start, I could see it already, before the lights went that somebody was moving a lot so for me it was no problem.

And then the overtaking manoeuvre on Michael down into Eau Rouge...

KR: Yeah, my car wasn't very nice to drive the whole race, even yesterday with new tyres in qualifying it was OK but even third or fourth we were quite far away from the guys in front of us – so I wasn't expecting a very easy ride and it turned out to be very difficult. Not grip, the first few laps with new tyres were always good but then sliding: no front end, no rear end, just struggling with the grip and last we had to run a bit more downforce to get grip and we were really slow in a straight line, so with Michael I passed him once, he got me back and I knew my only chance was to try to get the DRS and then to be ahead of him because even if I had the DRS I could not pass him on the straight with the limiter. So, I had to just take a chance to overtake him with the KERS into Eau Rouge And it kind of paid off – but he almost got me still back which shows us that we didn't really have the speed today – but we had a third place so it's OK. Not the easiest race but pretty OK.

Sebastian, you overtook most people into the chicane. Why was it easier to overtake there than at the end of the straight, and how do you see the situation with Michael, who all of a sudden turned into the pit lane?

SV: With Michael there was a bit of confusion, I think. He probably wasn't that keen to defend his position because he was going into the pits anyway. I thought he would block the inside and then he came on the outside, it was very very close under braking. I nearly ran into the back of his car, and then I tried to get into a better position for the start/finish straight but he kept turning right and went into the pits. I think I was, within three seconds, twice very lucky not to lose my front wing. I think there was a bit of confusion. It doesn't matter where you get Michael on the circuit, whether you're fighting for P1 or P15, he will fight like hell which is great to see – he hasn't lost it. It obviously makes it hard for you, but it's always a great challenge. It's very very close with him but always fair. I enjoyed that, but as I said, there was probably a bit of confusion. Regarding the chicane, to be honest I think we were quite racy in terms of ratios. At some stage – especially if you had people in front of the car you were trying to overtake – you know there was a kind of stream up the Kimmell straight so it was difficult to use the benefit you probably had because you were close to the car in front. For some reason, it seemed better on the way back, it was better to attack into the chicane. You also have more of a braking zone which I think allows you to be a little bit more flexible and try something which I did for most of the people, round the outside. I think that's the reason.

Sebastian, you are now on 140 points while Alonso is still on 164, 24 points difference, less than one victory and we still have eight races to go. Can you comment on that situation regarding the championship?

SV: Better than before. I had a look at the championship before I went on holiday. Right now I don't really care in terms of scoring and points. Of course I care for the championship and it's good to hear that it looks better. I don't know what happened in the first corner but Fernando didn't finish the race. These things happen. We have to look after ourselves. I'm not bothered in terms of points and gaps at the moment. There are a lot of races ahead and... bloody hell, if you saw the first corner, you can see how quickly things can change. That's racing. Next week we go to Monza. It's nice if you qualify on pole, I did that last year so you're the first one to get into the chicane. If you're a little bit further back it can be quite tight, so you always have that risk. The races are very long and even if you're a little bit further back you can still come back, so we will see what happens.

Kimi, for the first time you failed to win a Belgian race that you have finished. How does that feel and do you think that double DRS would have helped you to gain a better position today?

KR: Well, we couldn't use it because Friday was such bad weather, but it's better third than not to finish, so OK, we didn't win but we didn't have the speed today so we didn't deserve to win either. In the last three races we had the speed in races where you cannot overtake and here we just didn't have the speed. I will take third place, I'm pretty happy to finish on the podium given how difficult the car was handling and how tricky it was throughout the whole race.

Sebastian, how did it feel to make almost all the overtaking moves into the chicane where you had the crash with Jenson some years ago? Was it good for your morale?

SV: It was clear that it was Jenson's fault a couple of years ago! I didn't crash today, no matter who I passed. It was fun.

JB: Don't care, I won anyway.

SV: I fucked up a couple of years ago when I pushed him out of the race which was not nice, so I learned my lesson. It was very tight but I knew I had to get past. I was somewhere, sitting in 12th, tenth position in the beginning of the race and obviously the target was to have a chat to you at the end of it, so I knew I had a bit on. I tried everything and most of the time it seemed to work so I was quite happy with that and it was good fun.

Jenson, next week we are in Monza. Do you think we're going to see McLaren in similarly good shape? You're coming back, you're still a long way behind but this was the win that you absolutely needed, with Fernando scoring no points.

JB: Yeah, as I said before the race, it's a massive long shot to win the title but today proves that you can claw back 25 points very very quickly. A great day for me, but still 63 points (behind). Anything is possible. Monza is a circuit like this in a way, so yeah, there's a good possibility that we will have good pace there. Whether we will be as competitive as we were here we still have to wait and see. The temperatures will be different - it is a little bit different in terms of downforce level so we will see. This is a great weekend for the team - for me anyway, our side of the garage so yeah, it's a good 25 points and if we can keep fighting for victories like this there's so many people in the championship that still have the possibility to win, there's still a small chance that I can really fight for that championship but going to Monza I don't think about the championship, I think - as we all will say - we go there to do the best job we can and to bring back home the most points that we can. It's a tough race for anyone that's not in a Ferrari but it's a great atmosphere there and it's one of the best races on the calendar.

Jenson, speaking of that, do you think that this victory shows that McLaren has improved a lot after the five week break, or is it just a different, unique Grand Prix because you had the accident in the first turn and no activity on Friday because of the rain?

JB: We've had a very up and down season. I'm not talking about me personally but as a team. We had such a strong start to the year and then a pretty weak part to the season. Then Hockenheim was a good race with second then with the win for Lewis in Hungary, and also the win in Canada. We've had some very very good races and it seems the last three have been very strong for us. It's great to see, because here is very different to the last two races. We were running a different... well, I'm running a different wing package in the last two races and it's good to see that they both work.

Kimi, the lack of power here, does it worry you just before going to Monza where you need even more power?

KR: I don't know if we were lacking any power. That's what people always say but we don't know what we have. We just didn't have the speed today and hopefully with a bit more warm weather and layout of the circuit might make a difference. I don't expect just to be suddenly in the front, be up there easily but we've been up there more or less at every circuit and giving ourselves a good chance and this was one of the most difficult races, for sure. Hopefully it will go back to what it's been in previous races for Monza. We'll just have to wait and see.

Sebastian, you used some very diplomatic words about the fight with Michael. The word you used was confusing. After 300 Grands Prix and about 20 of them here, you would have thought that there would be no room for confusion. Would you like to use some of your stronger language about that behaviour?

SV: I think the confusion comes from the way that... it's not anybody's fault, it's the way the track is designed with the pit entry... if you decide to pit then you have to go right, so you can't blame him if that was always his idea. As I said, I probably misunderstood, initially, as in I thought he would cover the inside under braking. I went on the outside and there was hardly any room, so he probably didn't expect me there or didn't see me. I don't know, I need to talk to him. As I touched on there, after turn 18, the first right hander, back to the left, I was probably in a better place to get good acceleration out of the last corner but he wanted to pit so what do you do?

Regarding this moment, he's going to speak to the stewards and probably you as well. Do you expect that there might be a punishment for his behaviour?

SV: You asked whether Michael deserves a penalty? I don't think so. I think I will talk to him. I don't think we need penalties all the time. It's probably easier for us to judge from the inside of the car than for the stewards. As I said, I think the problem, in a way, comes because the pit entry is on the right, the corner goes to the left... It's nobody's fault, it's not Spa or the circuit to blame. As I said, it's not Michael to blame. I will talk to him and that's it. I think that's the way we should handle this kind of situation and vice versa. We got away with it, nothing happened but even if we crashed, it would have meant the end for both our races. I think that's the approach I would have. When I crashed into Jenson, fortunately he had already left for the airport but I gave him a call and apologised. I think that's part of the sport. In the end, I think you should treat people the way you expect people to treat you.

To all three of you, looking at the start with Grosjean who caused another accident, it's not the first time that that has happened this year. Are you going to talk to him also or are you expecting the stewards to be harsh on him for the next race?

JB: I will leave this one for Kimi. I didn't see it.

MR: I don't want to talk about it because I didn't see the whole thing. Somebody can say it's this one guy's fault and another guy may have a different opinion. Until I see the whole thing I have nothing to say. It's not our work or job to tell somebody what to do and what not to do. That's why we have stewards. We will see what happens.

Jenson, how do you explain that you were struggling big time in the first half of the season and now suddenly there seems some kind of dominance, or this weekend you're absolutely on top of your game? What happened?

JB: Yeah, very good holiday. Maybe we should have five weeks between every race? I'm not looking forward to Monza! Many things. The start of the season was good for me - this could be long! - the start of the season was good for me, I obviously won the first race. In the first three or four races the pace was very good and then I had a period of about four races that weren't so good but for different reasons. We did try something with the set-up to try and help the tyre temperature issues that we were having in our team. I tried it on my side and it took us a couple of races to realise that data wasn't correct and we were probably damaging the tyres more than helping them. At certain times I've been unlucky, especially at Silverstone which was disappointing because it's my home Grand Prix. In Valencia, again the pace was good but it didn't go my way and from then on, I think the pace has been reasonably good. I'm much happier with the car in the last few races. I feel that I can work with it. Before, it was so inconsistent corner to corner, not just lap to lap. Corner to corner the car felt so different. I wouldn't say it's just our car, it's probably everyone's car, with the way the tyres are working but for me, that was more of a struggle than for Lewis and maybe some others. It's definitely a weakness of mine, but something I definitely worked on. This weekend proves that I can get the best out of the car when I like the balance.

Sebastian, did you think you would be on the podium today after starting tenth?

SV: It's difficult to know before the race, but I was quite confident we have a strong pace. As I touched on, the car was very good on Friday and Saturday morning and not on Saturday afternoon, but I was reasonably confident and knew that everything is possible here, because you can overtake, probably better than Hungary. I was looking forward to finishing on the podium.
