

Fl Belgium Blog - Sunday press conference

It was a confused and chaotic podium, thanks to a protest by Greenpeace activists seeking to embarrass Shell, title sponsors of the Belgian Grand Prix.

Present were Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), Fernando Alonso (Ferrari), and Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes).

Q: Sebastian, your 31st Grand Prix victory, you're now just one behind the man who finished in second place. That looked pretty easy for you today.

Sebastian VETTEL: Yeah, it was fantastic race for us. From start to finish really very good tactics. Obviously it helped the first lap to have the tow off Lewis through Eau Rouge and then I was flying. Once I passed him we had incredible pace and really could control the race until the end. We were a bit afraid of the rain coming towards the end but I think it just passed the circuit. Great race. Thank you to the team, thanks to Renault. All the guys have been working very hard and... yeah, fantastic result, can't be any better.

Q: You passed a milestone today if you're into statistics. You seem to like to get the fastest lap towards the end of these grand prix but you've now led well over 2000 laps in your grand prix career. Were you aware of that one?

SV: Now I am. Thank You! Yeah, incredible. We are a bit confused down here because the crowd is booing and cheering and booing and we don't understand why.

We're not going to highlight why that is at the moment.

[note: the drivers were unable to see a protest taking place around and above the podium]

Q: Fernando, this must feel like a victory today. You've never won around the Belgian Grand Prix circuit, which is surprising given that you've got 32 victories in your career but that was typical attacking stuff from ninth place.

Fernando ALONSO: Yeah, we had to recover some places. We were not OK yesterday and everything went OK from the start and then the car has the speed to overtake some cars and it was a little bit boring. After we get the second place we are nowhere near Sebastian and not a big threat from behind.

Q: Looking ahead to Monza, you must feel pretty much buoyed for Ferrari, going to what is the home grand prix for the Ferrari team.

FA: Yeah, definitely it's an important weekend for us, for the team. Last year we were very close to repeat the victory that we get also in 2010, so we arrive fully motivated again and in Monza we would like to give some smiles and some satisfaction to the tifosi and we will try our best.

Q: Lewis, that's your 54th podium, that equals you with Niki Lauda who is one of the senior management at the Mercedes grand prix team. Does that statistic mean anything to you and what do these points mean for you this afternoon?

Lewis HAMILTON: We had a tough race, these guys were a little bit faster than us but the team did a great job throughout the weekend and I'm really happy with the results. Of course to be put in the same sentence as someone as legendary as Niki is a real privilege. I'm happy with the result we had, I'm glad to see so many great fans here this weekend. They made the weekend.

Q: Once again we heard you on the team radio saying you were taking absolutely everything out of the car and the tyres. You went off into the summer break as the victor, you've come on a roll of four pole positions. Looking ahead to the next grand prix, what do you think you've learnt from this Belgian race.

LH: I came in this weekend and when we started I felt that we perhaps didn't have as good a package as these two here. I think we'll go away after this weekend, we'll try and see if we can improve for Monza. But definitely when we get to Singapore, I think we'll have a much better chance there.

Q: I believe your points lead is extended to the largest ever margin you've had. You must feel good looking to the second half of this season.

SV: Yeah. Obviously winning helps. Just really controlled. The car was much better than I think we expected going into the race. So we had a bit of pace on hand to control the race. I really enjoyed that a lot. I think the guys on the pit wall as well, it was not as stressed as at other times. Fortunately there was no rain, so in terms of critical calls there were none to make. It was a very good afternoon for us and obviously looking forward to Monza where we don't expect, maybe, to be that strong but let's see.

Q: Sebastian, your 31st career victory - two less than Fernando - and your fifth this season. Clearly the decisive moment was the opening lap of the race. Tell us about that and how it set you up for the rest of the afternoon.

SV: Yeah, obviously very difficult around here to plan your start because first of all you need to have a good launch off the line and then there's a long straight coming. A bit like Korea. I tried my best to line up behind Lewis and basically benefit from a massive tow through Eau Rouge. I think especially in the opening lap when the tyres are not yet completely there and the fuel tank is full, Obviously the cars are quite heavy up the hill and produce a lot of drag and I was able, in the tow, to make up a lot of speed and when I got side by side I had a lot of advantage over Lewis and was able to get straight ahead. So, yeah, it worked very well, what I was trying to, let's say, plan at the exit of turn two. And after that I just tried to settle into the rhythm. I tried to open a gap to be flexible at the first stop and yeah, until the end we had incredible pace. We didn't expect that. We knew, probably, going in that, in the dry, we should be able to beat Mercedes on the track but we knew other cars - Lotus, Ferrari - they looked very competitive in the dry, so in that regard yeah, we had massive pace and could control the race until the end.

Q: You've increased your championship lead as well, now over Fernando, almost two race wins clear. How are you feeling about it at this stage?

SV: For sure a positive message today but I'm honestly more happy to win the race today: it's a fantastic track and especially when the car works well, you don't want the race to stop. The car is getting lighter and lighter and I was very comfortable at the end on the Primes. The car, as I said, was just a pleasure to drive. You don't... I didn't think about the championship or points. Obviously I know the higher up you finish the better it is: ideally ahead of everyone else, which worked today. But yeah, such a great circuit. We've had good races here in the past so it's nice to have another one, another great memory today. So, that's what honestly I was focussing on most. For sure, regarding the championship, it's a bonus.

Q: Fernando, obviously for you also the start was pretty decisive. Ninth on the grid, up to fifth on the opening lap. You passed Rosberg, Webber, Button, Hamilton to come through to second place. That's quite a recovery from what must have been a very disappointing qualifying performance yesterday.

FA: Yeah, I think the weekend was more or less good for us with recovering some feelings that we lost in July with the car especially. We were a little bit more competitive – or we felt a little bit more competitive this weekend. Not for sure maybe for pole position but to be in the first four or five positions on the grid, maybe that was possible but yesterday I think were extremely unlucky with the situation in Q3 with weather and the track: where we were, in the place we were, at the time we were was wrong. So, unfortunately some times in these changeable conditions you are lucky, sometimes unlucky. I remember Malaysia very well in Q3, we were in the right place in the right moment and we were second and third of the grid. Yesterday was a little bit the opposite. So we had to plan a perfect race from the start to the pace of the car, to the strategy and everything worked fine and we could recover some places and extremely important for the championship also to get some good points again after three races not so good.

Q: Lewis touched on it yesterday in the press conference here, that throughout the practice and qualifying as well the Ferrari looked quite quick and looked like it had taken a step forward. Do you feel that over the course of this weekend? Is that giving you encouragement? Obviously we're going to some very different kinds of circuits in the next few weeks but are you taking encouragement from this weekend?

FA: I'm happy. I'm happy with the feeling that I had this weekend. I'm happy with the parts that we brought here, seems that they are working fine. We need to take things very carefully because, as you say, this is a very specific circuit and we are not first and second in any practice or any qualifying or any race. We are ninth and tenth in quali and now we are second and seventh in the race. At the moment it is still work to do.

Q: Lewis, great getaway from pole into the first corner but describe the remainder of that first part of that first lap from your perspective.

LH: It was not particularly exciting or anything. It was pretty straightforward. Half-decent start and I felt like I got a good exit out of turn one but these guys... Sebastian just caught me massively, particularly through Eau Rouge. There was no defending really. I could only move once, so I moved once and just had to watch him glide by. After that it was very, very difficult to hold onto him. And also when Fernando came by, particularly down the straights, he was just pulling away.

Q: At one point on the radio you were saying "I'm getting everything I can out of the car." Obviously finishing around 27 seconds behind at the end of the race. Is that a concern for you, given the way you translated pole to victory before the summer break?

LH: Not really. I think every year you come here – here and Monza – you come with a new package, new front and particularly rear wing and sometimes you hit the nail on the head and sometimes you don't. I think we've done a decent job but obviously these guys have done a slightly better job. Whether or not we can make an adjustment before the next race, we'll wait and see but I think more importantly we'll be back to being very competitive – or more competitive when we get to Singapore.

Q: (Oana Popoiu – F1 Zone) Fernando, definitely a good race for you, starting from P9 but is it also good for your championship, as Vettel finished ahead of you?

FA: I think it's good; obviously we lost an extra seven points but when they are dominating the weekend, when they do everything better than us and they win the race, they deserve the win and we need to aim for maximum points. Weekends like this one we need to extract the maximum from the car. That is what we did this weekend, all we could in qualifying, all we could in the race. In the race, once we were second we were two to four tenths slower per lap. When you are the second fastest, you deserve to finish second. So we just need to congratulate Sebastian, Red Bull and try to get better for Monza, but in terms of the championship, as I said, we came from two fifth places in Hockenheim and Hungary, with a little bit of a not good feeling and not good performance from the car and today I think we recovered some of the optimism that we lost and I think it was a good weekend for the championship in terms of feeling and in terms of points as well.

Q: (Heikki Kulta – Turun Sanomat) Sebastian, Kimi is now 63 points behind you. Do you think he's out of this championship?

SV: No, there's more than 63 points you can score before the end of the season. I don't know what happened to him. It's obviously a shame for him but these things can happen. I had a technical failure in Silverstone, we lost the race. It hurts but equally you have so many races that all of us we have these kind of things happening; surely the cars are – in terms of generation – at their end and it's not a completely new car if you look at the previous years but still we are pushing. The cars are on the limit and you try to get everything out of them. Things that are built on the limit can also break.

Q: (Paolo Ianieri – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, do you feel you are like in the situation of two years ago when you won the championship quite early in Japan? Do you think it's going smoothly and you are relaxed with the situation around you?

SV: Well, I... maybe you have a different memory but what I remember from 2011 is that we had a fantastic season but we were working very hard, step by step, race by race and surely not working towards a certain race to seal the championship with a couple of races to go. I wasn't relaxed at that time, I was as nervous as I am today, hopefully. Therefore, as I said, it's really step by step and not trying to be too smart, too clever and think too far ahead.

Q: (Andy Young – Richland F1) Fernando, once again you were fast in the race but not so much in qualifying. Do you think this could affect your championship chances against Sebastian?

FA: Well, we need to improve the qualifying performance but to be honest, I'm doing what I can. I'm 8-3 against my teammate, I think. Yesterday was about qualifying but I was 0.6s quicker than my teammate, so in a way, it's not that the races are good and the qualifying are bad, it's just the way it is and we are extracting the maximum from the car all the time. In the races there are more aspects, not pure performance of the car. There is the strategy, the management of the tyres, the characteristics of the cars and on that aspect, I think we are very strong. In the pure performance of the car, we are maybe lacking some performance compared to the others but as I said, I'm extremely happy with the performance we are achieving on

Saturday and also on Sunday and the championship is open and we have the best example last year. I was leading with 41 points ahead of Sebastian after the Monza race and I arrived in Texas 15 points behind, so things can change very quickly. Our hopes are to keep developing, to keep improving performance and try to repeat what happened last year the other way around.

Q: (Livio Oricchio – O Estado de Sao Paulo) Lewis, after being on pole position, is this more or less what you expected in the race or did you expect to be closer to Red Bull?

LH: I think yesterday I said that I don't think we generally have the same pace as these guys, or at least, not necessarily the Ferraris but more so the Red Bulls. But they were both too fast for us today. It's the best we could have done. Yesterday, the weather helped us to get up to where we were. At the end of the day, we just need to work a little bit harder. I think we can do a better job, hopefully for Monza.

Q: (Jerome Pugmeister – Associated Press) Fernando, you said the team's recovered some of its optimism. How far can that optimism take you: do you still believe you can mount a genuine title challenge with eight races left?

FA: Yeah, yeah. I think we cannot forget that in the first five races we were a very competitive team. We won two of the five races and we were in a position to fight for the podium all the time. At that point, we were a very few points behind the leader. Then there were some races in the championship where we went backwards in terms of a step in the car and we lost direction a little bit. We understood the problem, we analysed everything and all the things that we are now bringing to the races are delivering what we expected, finally, so this gives us the possibility to get our good form back but we still have to recover some of the gap, to fight for pole positions etc but the championship is very long, and as I said before, the example is what happened to us last year. If you have a competitive car and you win four or five consecutive races like Sebastian did last year in India, Japan, Singapore etc, you recover very quickly. If we are in the position to do that, we will find out very soon.

Q: (Peter Farkas – Auto Motor) Sebastian, I think unusually for Red Bull, your car was set up for quite a high top speed. Was it because you have taken into consideration that you expected to do some overtaking during the race, and how well does that look for Monza, with reasonably low downforce? You were very quick here.

SV: Well, ideally we try to set up our car to the optimum. I think we were maybe more competitive than we expected. Whether that's us over-performing or the others under-performing, I'm not entirely sure to be honest. So in that regard, it's always nice to have speed on the straights if you have to overtake, then it's obviously easier to get yourself side-by-side with the other car and to lose something more under braking, whereas if you're limited by straightline speed it's very difficult to pass. We've had some bad experiences around here so maybe this year we were a little bit on the higher side in terms of speed. For Monza, I don't know actually. It's very difficult to predict. We had painful years in a way, where we just get hammered down the straights and we've had years where the loss down the straight was limited, so we could come back in the corners and for sure, if you look back the 2011 experience was great in that regard. How it turns out to be this year it's difficult to say. I think we can be quite confident. We had a good race in Canada, we had a very good race here which are both medium downforce type of tracks, so I hope that our low downforce package goes in the same direction.

Q: (Michael Schmidt – Auto, Motor und Sport) Sebastian, when you attacked Lewis did you have some KERS left for it and then obviously to Lewis, did you have some KERS to defend yourself or was everything gone after the start?

SV: I had some left.

LH: I had some left but he was catching me so I didn't use the rest of it, I saved it for the rest of the lap.

F1 Belgium Blog – Race report

After the Hungarian Grand Prix, we entered the summer shutdown with the slim prospect of a championship battle that would last well into the Asian leg of the season. But when Sebastian Vettel trounced the opposition at the Belgian Grand Prix, the Red Bull driver effectively ended the fight before the pack had completed a single lap of the Spa-Francorchamps Circuit.

All that stood between Vettel and a lights-to-flag victory was pole sitter Lewis Hamilton. The defending world champion made short work of the Mercedes driver, taking advantage of the leader's tow into Eau Rouge and slipping past Hamilton with ease before building a 1.4s lead by the end of the first lap. The gap at the front kept building and building, and when Hamilton pitted at the end of lap 11 Vettel was seven seconds ahead of Fernando Alonso, who inherited second place.

By the time the first round of stops had been completed it was clear that the race belonged to Vettel. Had the promised rain fallen during the race, the Red Bull racer might have found himself with a fight on his hands. Over the course of 44 dry laps, however, there was nothing to ruffle Vettel's newly bleached hair.

A disappointing qualifying session for Ferrari faded to distant memory as the lights went out to mark the start of the race, with Alonso rocketing up to fifth place by the end of the first lap. Five laps later, the Spanish racer dove past Nico Rosberg for P3. The double world champion showed once again what he is capable of when he has the bit between his teeth, making short work of Mark Webber at Eau Rouge and DRSing his way past Jenson Button in the early laps.

For the rest of the afternoon, Alonso's only moment outside of the top three came after the Asturian's first pit stop, when he returned to the track in P4, behind Hamilton. But the Ferrari driver made short work of getting past his old teammate, and spent the rest of the race in second place, too far behind Vettel to mount a realistic charge for victory, yet comfortably ahead of Hamilton's Mercedes. It was an excellent result from a poor grid position.

Also in the race but not presenting much in the way of a threat were Nico Rosberg and Webber, both of whom spent much of the afternoon lapping in fourth and fifth place respectively, battling each other without troubling the podium.

For the bulk of the afternoon, there was little – if any – change at the top end of the points, with the top six drivers changing position as they pitted, before returning to the places held previously. The real battles took place lower down the order, with three- and four-way fights for positions well out of the points.

Shortly before the race reached its mid-point fans were treated to a series of impressive battles split across laps 17 and 18, with the Force India driver pairing taking on each other and Sergio Perez, the three cars fighting side by side. Adrian Sutil then pulled off a ballsy manoeuvre on Esteban Gutierrez; the Sauber driver then found himself being overtaken by Kimi Raikkonen before diving into the pits.

But the big four-way battle of the Belgian Grand Prix came about on lap 27, when Pastor Maldonado, Sutil, Paul di Resta, and Gutierrez were fighting for eleventh place. Four men entered the chicane, three cars left it, and Maldonado's disappointing afternoon – the Williams driver didn't complete a single lap in a points-paying position – was capped off with a stop-go penalty for causing a collision.

2013 Belgian Grand Prix results

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1h23m42.196s
2. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) + 16.869s
3. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) + 27.734s
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) + 29.872s
5. Mark Webber (Red Bull) + 33.845s
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) + 40.794s
7. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) + 53.922s
8. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) + 55.846s
9. Adrian Sutil (Force India) + 1m09.547s
10. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) + 1m13.470s
11. Sergio Perez (McLaren) + 1m21.936s
12. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) + 1m26.740s
13. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) + 1m28.258s
14. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) + 1m40.436s
15. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) + 1m47.456s
16. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) + 1 lap
17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) + 1 lap
18. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) + 1 lap
19. Max Chilton (Marussia) + 2 laps

Paul di Resta (Force India) RET

Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) RET

Charles Pic (Caterham) RET

F1 Belgium Blog – Saturday press conference

For the fourth consecutive race weekend, the central figure in the post-qualifying press conference remained unchanged.

Present were Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes), Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull), and Mark Webber (Red Bull).

Q: Lewis, it was all about timing today and your timing was absolutely perfect.

Lewis HAMILTON: Yeah, it was. It was obviously a good job by the team. I was so surprised when I crossed the line. When I started the lap, it looked like, on the board... I saw on the screen that I was about seventh or eighth and I thought 'Oh my God', especially as it was raining more. I went wide in turn one and the dash display is usually telling you whether you're up or down and it said I was three seconds down and then five seconds and six seconds, so I didn't understand what was happening in the lap but I just kept pushing. I could see I was catching Sebastian towards the end but what a blessing, I feel so fortunate to be up here.

Q: Particularly the middle sector seemed to be strong. So clearly through the Mercedes and yourself are well hooked up. How do you explain that?

LH: I think generally I feel quite comfortable in changing conditions and I feel I'm able to find the limits when the conditions are really on the edge. And in the middle I pushed quite a lot in the middle sector particularly as I thought I was down three seconds, so I was really caning it. But, yeah, the car's feeling good.

Q: Sebastian, today was obviously also keeping your nerve. What were you thinking about the closing stages? Were you thinking that there is as much to lose here as there is to gain?

Sebastian VETTEL: No, there's always something to gain. Yeah, it wasn't clear that the first lap we did in Q3 was the lap, on intermediate tyres. Obviously we all went out for the start with slicks tyres. It was quite entertaining because it started to rain pretty heavily. Then on intermediates, as I said, it wasn't clear because in the beginning it looked like there was more and more rain coming, so we were all rushing to get a lap in. But then it stopped raining and the circuit came back very quickly and the last lap turned out to be the fastest lap, with the circuit drying. It's difficult to know how fast you can go. Obviously I saw Lewis catching up in the last lap and I thought I could have gone a bit quicker here or quicker there. In the end it was quite close I think across the line. In these conditions anything can happen. A shame to miss pole, once again. I'm quite happy today. The boys did a very good job changing tyres from slicks to intermediates and got us an extra lap. Unfortunately the circuit wasn't ready but all in all I think a good day for the team, so let's see what happens tomorrow. We expect similar conditions to today, rain, dry and a bit of everything, so we'll see.

Q: And Mark, your final qualifying session in a Formula One car at this Spa-Francorchamps circuit and it delivered its usual mixture of conditions. How was your session?

Mark WEBBER: Yeah, difficult for all of us to make the right calls. But in the end I think we got most things right. It's very easy to look stupid in those conditions, from a team side, from a driver's side, making the right calls. In the end, we got most things OK I'd say. It's a little bit bizarre with the DRS on or off in the session, actually in Q3. It's available in the first part of quali but not at the end, but it's the same for everyone, so it's a very, very difficult thing, as Lewis has touched on, to know where you are, how the track's moving around so much. It was quite a ballsy thing for me to go slow

in the middle lap know if the track's going to be better on the last lap, to save the tyres, because they're struggling quite a bit in those conditions, on the inters. In the end, it wasn't too bad a lap and it was quite tight obviously. So, yeah, pretty happy to be right up there for tomorrow's race.

Q: Back to you Lewis. Obviously it's not been the easiest weekend so far from the looks of things as far as practice has been concerned for you and the Mercedes team. Tell us about the race tomorrow. You're obviously starting from where you want to be, but can you keep these two guys behind you?

LH: I think this weekend they've both shown that they have incredible pace this weekend. But I'm hoping that whatever the conditions are tomorrow we can try to fight it out with them. The guys have done a fantastic job in bringing a good package here. I generally feel we're quite close. I still feel the Red Bull is generally a little bit ahead of us in performance and that's why results like this today feel even better because it feels like we extracted more than what the car can actually do, so I'm really happy with it.

Q: Lewis, second race in a row now that in the closing stages of a Saturday afternoon you've spoiled Sebastian's day. It's becoming a bit of a habit and you two are having quite a duel at the moment.

LH: I'm trying to catch him up. He's obviously had incredible success over the last few years so I'm trying my best to battle with him and I hope that we can do that in the race tomorrow whatever the conditions are. I just feel grateful for the way the year has turned out and that we can be so competitive and really try to challenge the Red Bulls. It's a huge accomplishment by the team.

Q: Tell us about communication on a day like this. You were saying just a moment ago that you weren't really quite sure what was going in the first part of the lap, obviously the times were all over the place, but in terms of the way the team communicates. We saw people making mistakes in Q1 and Q2, very easy to make mistakes and communication clearly critical to that.

LH: Yeah, everyone is on edge and communication is key for all the teams. So they're asking me what the track is like at certain points of the circuit and of course they need to be on it to make sure we get out at the right time. We nearly got pushed out of Q2, which I really wouldn't have been happy with...

Q: Two one hundredths of a second.

LH: Yeah, by the grace of God we got through. And then at the end, I didn't know that I was going to be one of the last ones across the line. I just kept pushing and at the end of the day it was a good job by the team, particularly when the moment counted.

Q: Sebastian, as we were saying, Lewis and Mercedes coming on strong at the moment.

SV: Yeah, surely. Obviously in qualifying they have been quite strong in the first part of the season and they keep doing it. I think today you have to look from a different point of view. In these conditions anything can happen. Lewis had quite an impressive middle sector. He was right behind me. Maybe it helped a little bit to know how fast he could go here and there. I checked in my mirrors and thought I could have gone quicker here, quicker there because he was closing up. But I'm very happy with the result. As I said, in these conditions anything is possible. Mark touched on it – it's very easy to do the wrong calls and you're out. So, overall, a good result and everything is possible tomorrow, condition-wise we expect the same as today.

Q: You obviously looked very comfortable yesterday, apart from the puncture obviously in practice two and again this morning, the Red Bull looked well balanced, quick on the circuit. There was a sign in Q2 when you just waited and went out and did that one run that there seemed to be quite a lot of confidence as far as you were concerned about the session.

SV: Yeah, well confidence in the weather let's say, mostly. It was supposed not to rain. I said OK there's no point in going out, let's wait, because the circuit will improve, which is what we did in the end. My first lap was not fantastic so I did another lap. I think we did the right thing there. Fortunately it didn't rain. Obviously when it starts raining and you haven't gone out you look really stupid. I think we trust the guys on the pit wall to judge the weather and the situation. Obviously, Q3 was different. The boys were quite in a hurry when we came back in to change tyres and go back out. But for Q2 I think it was the right call.

Q: Mark, we mentioned before that this is your last run in F1 quali at Spa-Francorchamps. Tell us about your relationship with this circuit, what you feel today and what you feel about this place.

MW: It's a sensational circuit. Compared to the ones that have been attempted to be designed of late obviously they're nothing like this track. It's a beautiful circuit to drive on, all the guys love coming here, the teams, the engineers. Even the cars I think in a bizarre way know they're here in terms of Eau Rouge and Blanchimont. You know, La Source is very tight and then 10 seconds later you're through Eau Rouge so it's a great mixture. I won the Formula Ford race here in 1996 so it's a beautiful circuit to drive on in any category and yeah, looking forward to bringing the Porsche here next year.

Q: (Oana Popoiu – F1 Zone) Lewis, Toto Wolff said that Mercedes should start focusing on next year's car. What are your thoughts about that, especially now when you are in front of Red Bull?

LH: I think there's several different people that have different opinions about it but I feel quite relaxed and comfortable with the people who are at the top who are going to make that decision. I don't feel that next year is compromised at all or this year just yet. I think it's trying to find a real fine balance. Of course we want to have the best shot possible next year but of course all of a sudden we're competing as well as we are now so it's striking a fine balance, but I think they'll do a good job of that.

Q: (Graham Keilloh – F1 Plus) Lewis, do you think if it hadn't rained in qualifying that Mercedes had the pace to contend for pole position?

LH: I would be guessing but my guess would be maybe not. The Red Bull was looking particularly quick and also the Ferrari was looking quite quick in the dry conditions, so I'm not necessarily sure that we had the pace to be as fast everyone today. But who knows, it's just a guess.

Q: (Simon Cass – Daily Mail) Lewis, you said coming into the second half of the season that you've never felt better. Is it fair to say that you've never been driving any better or certainly as well as you have been at the moment?

LH: It feels like I'm driving the best but I feel like I've been driving well for quite some time and just sometimes circumstances don't allow you to really show that. But I really feel that I'm getting everything out of the car, I'm getting everything out of every opportunity that I have. I know there's a lot of pressure for everyone but I feel in a good place. And yeah, absolutely, I can't remember the last time I crossed the line and had such a good feeling, particularly as I was looking for the TV screens and I just couldn't believe... I could see the team was cheering so I couldn't believe that. It's just crazy to think that this is my 31st pole and it still feels like it's the first one. It's just an incredible feeling and I'm very grateful to be here today, as I said.

Q: (Peter Farkas – Auto Motor) Lewis, yesterday you said on the radio that the car was all over the place and even today in the morning you had some problems, and now you are on pole position. I think Nico had quite a good long stint yesterday, how confident are you in the long stints of the Mercedes and the race pace, and would you prefer wet or dry in that respect?

LH: I feel that the long pace is not bad. I think we... again, over the evening, last night we made some decent changes, but going into qualifying we made some better ones. Qualifying was more about just being there at the right time and you never know when you're going to be in the right position and I just happened to be one of the last ones coming across the line and that's when the track would be at its best. But I think Nico proved that the long run was good and I think I had a few good laps as well but the Red Bulls are still pretty quick. I think it's going to be close but I hear it's going to rain pretty heavily tomorrow.

Q: (Dan Knutson – Auto Action and National Speedsport News) Mark, it's very easy for anybody to look silly out there, make a stupid mistake. How much more chancy is a session in the wet compared to a session in the dry when there are far fewer variables?

MW: Yeah, emotionally it is a bit more of a roller-coaster, particularly when you've got... really it's the conditions changing so much. In our industry and in Formula One we like to control as much as we can, obviously, and the plan into a normal dry qualifying session is obviously very regimented, very organized and the fine tuning is incredibly precise. When it's like that, obviously you have to make decisions on the bounce, the driver's got to be very interactive with the pit wall, the pit wall has got to make the decisions with the boys so yeah, there is just, by circumstance, more emotion and the timing is a bit more – well, a lot more critical and that's what makes people a bit more squeakier, let's say, in terms of pressure. As I say, it's easy to get it wrong.

Q: (Paolo Ianieri – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, we saw today that it was very easy to make mistakes. Ferrari looked like they made mistakes at the end so they are quite far behind, while you and Mercedes did everything perfectly. How easy is it for you mentally to get in the car and know that you can trust completely what's going to happen on the pit wall?

SV: I don't think you are in any doubt – at least for myself – in doubt of what the team does. Obviously in terms of which tyres to use and when etc is largely depending on us inside the car, but I think, as Mark touched on, obviously in these conditions it's a lot trickier to get it right, not just for the team, also for the driver because it's so much easier to make a mistake. In the end, I think all three of us had very good laps at the end, on the lap where it mattered most. But for sure, compared to the dry, I think it's much harder to nail that one where you don't have room for error and it's so much easier to make a mistake, go wide, lose the car, lose time so yeah, if I look back to the lap I had now, obviously, there's room for improvement but many times I was quite close to lose the car. It doesn't mean that I had to go off and crash the car but lose the car, lose time. That's why, in the rain, in the wet, in these mixed conditions, there's a chance for everybody to over-perform, but there's also the chance to get it wrong. It doesn't take much and you are somewhere at the back.

Q: (Leonid Novozhilov – F1Life) Lewis, what were you feeling in your last qualifying lap?

LH: This one just now? Again, it didn't feel spectacular. As I said, I went wide in turn one and my dashboard was really confusing me in terms of whether I was up or down on my previous lap, but I just kept pushing and particularly the first corner and the last two corners were terrible. I thought that the lap wasn't that great but...

SV: You thought I was on a cool-down lap which is why...

LH: I was catching him...

SV: ...so much that I will just take it easy.

F1 Belgium Blog – Saturday report

It was cool but dry on Saturday morning in Spa as the cars left the pit lane for the final free practice session of the Belgian Grand Prix weekend. Rain was anticipated, but the track stayed dry for the duration of FP3.

Sebastian Vettel once again dominated the session, showing the pace of the Red Bull, but Fernando Alonso was hot on the German's heels, only one-tenth slower. Mercedes were in the middle of the timesheets for the third time this weekend, sparking speculation that the Silver Arrows were disguising their true pace in conditions thought to be ideal for their car.

The session ended with a sigh of relief along the pit lane as the sixty minutes passed without any tyre troubles, putting paid to concerns that Friday's failures would lead to weekend-long safety issues.

Ten minutes before the pit lane opened for qualifying, the promised rain began to fall in the Spa paddock. Qualifying got underway on a damp track, and the drivers left the pits on Pirelli's intermediate compound tyres. Early lap times set in Q1 were between 15 and 20 seconds slower than those set in FP3, as drivers chose to lap gingerly rather than risk damaging their cars in qualifying.

Half-way through Q1, Vettel led Mark Webber on the timesheets, while Esteban Gutierrez was in P4 for Sauber. In the dropout zone were the driver pairings from Caterham and Marussia plus Paul di Resta and Valtteri Bottas. But as the track began to dry, talk turned to running slicks, paving the way for chaos on the timesheets in the closing minutes.

Before anyone moved to slicks, however, the times changed as track conditions improved, with no fewer than seven drivers claiming the top slot in less than a minute. Giedo van der Garde popped up in P3 on medium tyres, and posted the fastest sector three time in the process. Both Marussias made it out of Q1, while Pastor Maldonado, Jean-Eric Vergne, Daniel Ricciardo, Bottas, Gutierrez, and Charles Pic made up the dropout zone.

As Q2 got underway, drivers were warned that there was more rain on the horizon, making the setting of an early banker vital. The variable track conditions had already led to the surprising Q2 presence of van der Garde, Max Chilton, and Jules Bianchi, and it is in circumstances such as these that front-running teams can slip up and find themselves out of the running.

Despite the risk of dropping out, however, Jenson Button, Lewis Hamilton, Vettel, and Nico Rosberg all remained in the pits as Q2 approached its midpoint. Felipe Massa elected to complete a timed lap on the hard tyre, an unusual choice in a field shod in mediums. Rosberg's first effort saw the Mercedes driver remain in the dropout zone while teammate Hamilton crossed the line in P2. Surprising no one, Vettel went fastest on his first timed

lap of the session.

It was a tense end to the session, with drivers jumping up and down the order in the final minute. When push came to shove, Nico Hulkenberg, Adrian Sutil, and Sergio Perez joined van der Garde, Bianchi, and Chilton in the dropout zone.

As the pit lane opened for Q3, so too did the skies, with umbrellas raised as one around the circuit. The final sector was the heaviest hit, and with the pack out on track on the medium compound there was the potential for numerous slides and offs. All ten drivers returned to the pits en masse for a change of rubber before the real run of qualifying laps could begin.

With five minutes remaining, only di Resta had completed a timed lap. Then the rain began to plummet down in earnest, raising the prospect of a Force India on pole. After all ten drivers had set times, only Rosberg was within spitting distance of the Scot's time, despite having completed his own lap in much worse conditions than the Force India driver.

Rosberg crossed the line in P1 just after the chequered flag fell, while Hamilton and Vettel both crossed the line in time to complete one final lap. Webber was fastest in sector one, and claimed provisional pole, but held the position for a nanosecond before being bested first by Vettel and then by Hamilton, who took pole with a 2m01.012s lap set in wet conditions.

Provisional grid

1. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 2m01.012s
2. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 2m01.200s
3. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 2m01.325s
4. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 2m02.251s
5. Paul di Resta (Force India) 2m02.332s
6. Jenson Button (McLaren) 2m03.075s
7. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 2m03.081s
8. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 2m03.390s
9. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 2m03.482s
10. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 2m04.059s

11. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m49.088s
12. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m49.103s
13. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m49.304s
14. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m52.036s
15. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m52.563s
16. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m52.762s

17. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 2m03.072s
18. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 2m03.300s
19. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 2m03.317s
20. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 2m03.432s
21. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 2m04.324s
22. Charles Pic (Caterham) 2m07.384s

F1 Belgium Blog - Friday press conference

It was a meeting of technical minds in the Friday team personnel press conference at the Spa-Francorchamps Circuit.

Present were Nick Chester (Lotus), Andrew Green (Force India), James Key (Toro Rosso), Jean-Michel Jalinier (RenaultSportF1), Tom McCullough (Sauber), and Pat Symonds (Williams).

Q: James, if I could start with you. I want to talk about the engineering challenges today, of developing new technologies, such as we have for 2014, but in a resource-restricted environment in Formula One, as we have at the moment. What are the key points in your mind?

James KEY: That's the secret to it in many ways, isn't it, because we have a lot of new technologies and new things we have to do for next year. Fundamentally, it's a case of getting the priorities right and understanding how best to pitch what technologies are going to be important and which aren't, or which are going to be less important let's say. Certainly when you have a limited budget as a team, you can't iterate through everything. It's very easy to spend a lot of money very quickly, so you have to circumvent certain things by kind of iterating and then take your best guess and move on from there. So to certain extent there's a bit of knowledge you have to go on and in other respects it's a case of setting priorities.

Q: Obviously you're switching from Ferrari to the Renault for next year. Do you get the gearbox from Red Bull, presumably as part of all that package. Can you talk a little bit about how big a boost that is in terms of your efforts to move yourselves forward up the grid.

JK: I think certainly it makes a huge amount of sense for us to have a few more synergies where possible with Red Bull - we fundamentally have the same ownership. I think that's good for both teams. We will take the same engine as well. We're working extremely well with our engine partners at Renault, who are doing a good job of supporting us. It's a new experience for us, we haven't worked with them in the past. In that respect it's good. We'll have to see for next year, there are so many unknowns still right now. But to move towards similar powertrain solutions to Red Bull Racing is a very obvious thing to do and can only be of benefit to both sides I think.

Q: Jean-Michel, at this stage, with just a few months to go before the end of this season and with testing starting in January, do

you have any sense of where Renault is in terms of power and efficiency compared with your rivals Ferrari and Mercedes?
Jean-Michel JALINIER: I cannot compare ourselves to our competitors but what I can say is that we have set very aggressive targets for all the parameters of the new engine and that we are achieving the targets one after one because today according to our plans we have some engines on benches, the results are now coming and they are in line with our targets.

Q: What is the first order of priority? Is it power? Is it efficiency? What do you see as the key for next year?

JMJ: I think that for next year the two keys are going to be reliability, because it's a brand new engine with high tech engine inside – internal combustion engine but also the two electrical engines, all the energy recovery systems – so reliability for this new technology will be key. The second key will be energy management for the race.

Q: Just finally, the latest on a deal with Lotus? Is there any more business to be done in terms of the teams you will supply next year?

JMJ: We're going to supply four teams. We have already a deal with Toro Rosso and Red Bull Racing obviously and the two other teams it's just a matter of time to finish the contracts.

Q: Pat, great to see you back, welcome, in your new colour scheme. Mid-1990s, I remember you and Michael Schumacher at Benetton racing against Damon Hill and Jacques Villeneuve at Williams, they then were the arch enemies in many, many ways. How does it feel to walk through the doors [of Williams] nowadays and be part of that team?

Pat SYMONDS: Oh, really great actually. Williams does have that incredible heritage and it's a heritage I respect a lot. But we can't live in the past. They were great times, of course they were, but my job now is to make the team today as successful as it was then. It's quite a challenge but it's a very enjoyable challenge. The fundamentals of the team are there. It's a very well equipped team, it has some very good people in it. An analogy I often use is it's like being the conductor of an orchestra. I think we have some very good instrumentalists in our orchestra. And now we just really need to get them timed together, playing the same tune and bring the success back.

Q: You said that the technical changes for 2014 are the biggest you've encountered in your long career. On the theme of technical developments in a resource-restricted environment, you've obviously worked for top teams, recently you worked for Marussia, a small team. Can you give us an overview of the impact of dealing with this change for the field in Formula One?

PS: It is huge and I think James summed it up very well, because you've got to decide where to put your priorities. When we have reasonably stable regulations you iterate to those priorities. Arguably if you have very stable regulations, everyone iterates towards a very similar design. You also iterate to similar processes. Now when the rule book is ripped up and you start again, you really have to think about what processes are important – what's going to bring you performance. And of course while everyone is focused on the powertrain and there are a lot of things to do there – cooling's a huge challenge, energy management is a huge challenge – but of course we must not forget that it's a reasonably significant aerodynamic change we're making to the cars. It may not sound much – moving the front wing in a little bit, losing the beam wing at the rear and small changes like that – but in actual fact the aerodynamics of the cars are so inter-related now that it really is something you need to think about a lot. And, of course, we never 'un-invent' anything, we never forget what we've already done. So we're not dropping any of our technologies in order to bring the new ones in, we're just adding to the job.

Q: Thanks for that. Moving to Nick Chester from Lotus. Welcome, Nick. There's a lot going on at Lotus at the moment. You've got the double DRS running this weekend. You've got a long wheelbase car, apparently, for Monza. Can you shed a bit of light on your thinking for this final part of 2013 and what kind of statement that makes?

Nick CHESTER: Well, we're still trying to develop very hard to give ourselves a very competitive run until the end of the year. The passive drag reduction system we've been working on for a while. We targeted it for Spa and we've run it through PI and we've learned some more with it. I don't think we'll carry on through this weekend with it as we didn't get enough dry running to get where we wanted in PI. We are targeting this strong development until the end of the year and the long wheelbase for Monza is part of that. So we are going to keep bringing developments through Monza and then the following races as well. There are certainly developments also planned for Singapore and Korea.

Q: Like everyone else here, you're obviously juggling the requirements of 2014. Do you have what you need to build a winning car in 2014?

NC: Yeah, we do. We started the design very early, we've been designing for over 18 months on the 2014 car. So that's given us a good head start and in a way that's meant that we could develop our 2013 car for longer through the year because we're in such good shape with next year's car. As Pat said it's going to be a very interesting year in 2014. It's the biggest rule change I've seen while I've been in the sport. Trying to optimise a car around what's a very different power plant with very different cooling, it's quite a big challenge. It is going to be interesting.

Q: Andrew, coming to you now. You're in a tight battle in the Constructors' Championship with McLaren. Fifty-nine points to you at the moment, 57 for them, battling for fifth. What's the strategy then? Are you going to try to hold on to that fifth place, even if it costs you some performance in 2014?

Andrew GREEN: Obviously we're going to battle as hard as we can. The strategy at the moment is to extract as much as we can out of this car and take each race as it comes and try not to make mistakes. That's one of the things we have been guilty of in a few races this season. We haven't really harvested the points we should have, we should be much further up. Now is the time to get our heads down and just not make mistakes, extract what we can, and not make mistakes and see where we end up. McLaren is... it's going to be very difficult to keep McLaren behind us, they're a huge team with huge resources and can carry on developing two cars simultaneously. We're a much smaller outfit; it's not something we can do. Our focus really has to be on next year, otherwise we won't have a car next year, it's as simple as that.

Q: On the subject of balancing the technological development with budgets, how are your existing arrangements in terms of powertrain? How are your existing arrangements in terms of powertrain for next year and how will that go forward?

AG: Well, it's nice to obviously keep the same engine partners. That does help. It is a massive change next year, there's no doubt about it. Reiterating what the other guys have said, it's the biggest change I've ever seen. And it is a challenge. We're a small team, so it's an even bigger challenge. There are lots of things we'd like to do. Lots of experiments we'd like to do, lots of information we'd like to take before we make some key decisions and we can't do them all. It's as simple as that. We have to make some best guesses and we don't really want to be [doing that]. It's a difficult place to be in and it can be very frustrating but it's a challenge and we'll see where we end up.

Q: Tom, the same theme really. It's no secret that Sauber has had some issues on the financial side. You've obviously got some new

investment coming in – so where are you as a technical group in terms of how you plotted out your development of 2014 and how it's actually unfolding as we go forward?

Tom McCULLOUGH: Like the rest of the guys said, we started work on our car pretty early for 2014, mainly aerodynamically and then more and more during the year, working closely with our powertrain partner, developing that car. So, the two cars are simultaneously being developed still, at the moment. The current car is coming to an end at the factory. At the track we'll still get bits later on this year. But it's just a matter of splitting resources really.

Q: Obviously the 2013 car hasn't worked out the way you would have hoped. Does that push you towards an earlier switchover to 2014? Considering where you are in the constructors', some way behind Toro Rosso, does that push you towards thinking you're not going to catch them and focussing your attention on next year?

TM: The start of this year wasn't as competitive as we wanted. Understanding that is key to making a good car next year, so a lot of the work we've been doing on the car is in conjunction with next year's car. So we couldn't just stop designing this year's car. We've worked very hard and we have made some good improvements. The update package we bought to Budapest, we were very happy with. We feel we're understanding the car a lot better now. The wind tunnel programmes and the CFD programmes between the two cars help each other – and that process is still ongoing, especially with CFD. Overall that should give us a more competitive car next year.

Q: So you have grounds for optimism?

TM: Yeah! For sure. This year's car, even though from a points point of view we were not scoring points and saw some of our direct competitors taking those points, in lap time we often weren't far away. A small difference in lap time, different competitiveness from track to track, bringing improvements to the car... all of a sudden the points can come your way. I wish we'd started the year as we are now but we feel confident for the second half of this season.

Q: (Oana Popoiu – F1 Zone) Pat, as we are already halfway through the season, how will the team benefit from your work at this stage?

PS: Well, I think with a lot of what I'm trying to do with Williams is still a bit of a process rather than the detail and that process can have an effect, reasonably quickly. Now, we are engaged in a battle this year as well, and there are still updates to come to the car: there's a new front wing, there's new bodywork, there's quite a few major upgrades but of course they are things that are already well in the pipeline and not things that I will be influencing. So really my job is to try and look at the process of determining how we get the performance out of the car and I hope that that will have some influence this year but of course it's not a five minute job and I think we will see a lot more in 2014.

Q: (Kate Walker – GP Week) Andy Green, I wanted to go back to what James said earlier about balancing the development of the 2013 car versus 2014. Obviously you don't want to sacrifice next year's performance. Do you have a plan... I mean if McLaren pull ahead in the Constructors' championship is that the point at which you switch more of your focus over? How much of your workforce is currently on 2014 versus 2013, because you're the team in the middle with the hardest decision to make, it seems?

AG: It is a difficult balance. I would say the point at which they have more points – they are further ahead than us there are points to score – then that's obviously over. Like I said, we'll keep pushing as hard as we can with what we've got, but we have to keep an eye on next year, there's no two ways about it. It's too big a challenge not for us to have one eye over there. McLaren are a huge, huge team, a championship-winning team and I don't expect they thought they'd be racing with us at the start of the season, and I'm pretty sure they probably didn't set themselves the target of fifth in the championship when they started the year. So we'll do what we can. We know it's going to be difficult, we'll take each race as it comes. There will be no step.

Q: Who will make that decision? Will it be the major shareholders or the technical people?

AG: It is a joint decision.

Q: (Mike Doodson – Auto Action) I guess my question is for Jean-Michel. Part of the success of the current V8 Formula One has been that the engine performance has been equalized between manufacturers. I'm wondering whether the FIA has informed you of when it intends to start imposing that same process, introducing controls to equalize the performance of the V6s and when that process does start, I wonder if you, as a highly competitive group, will try to resist it?

JMJ: There will be a process for convergence after – I don't know – the first two or three years, definitely there will be a process of convergence. Regarding the V8, one of our strengths is to work with the team to make the quickest car. We have never claimed to have the most powerful engine, we claim to work with the team to make the quickest car and that's the kind of methodology we are developing for the 2014 car with our partners.

Q: (Mike Doodson – Auto Action) And the FIA controls?

JMJ: I think there will be some kind of convergence because we cannot sustain – in terms of cost – free competition with open technology, open choices and open engineering. We need to have some limitation in order to reduce and control the development costs per season, so we need it.

Q: (Edd Straw – Autosport) Nick, the long wheelbase car, what's the reasoning behind introducing that and how will you be doing it? Do you need to make some monocoque changes or can you do it a slightly easier way?

NC: Well, we've wanted to do it because we've seen there's a performance gain associated with it. The way we're going to do it is with a front suspension change.

Q: But there's homologation to be done?

NC: Yeah, that's already been done.

Q: (Panos Diamantis – Car and Driver) Mr Symonds, you said that 2014 will see the biggest technical change you've ever seen in Formula One, and obviously Williams provides this energy recovery systems to other means of transport in London. Do you think that this will be a turning point in the history of Formula One to launch more ecological technologies?

PS: Yes, I do. It really is a bit of a double-edged sword, the 2014 power train regulations. On one hand, I'm very very pleased that the FIA have had the foresight to really look at engine efficiency or powertrain efficiency and use F1 to push those technologies. I guess the downside for us is that it's been a long process to introduce it and of course, from the time of starting to talk about it until introducing it we've been through a major worldwide recession which has made it difficult for all the Formula One teams to embark on such a big project. But we've managed to do it and I think what we need to do now is make sure that we capitalize on it. Formula One, I think, is guilty of far too often hiding its light under a bushel and a lot of the very

great things we do as engineers in Formula One we like to keep to ourselves and I think it's time for that to change. I think it's time for the world to know what we are doing with Formula One powertrains in 2014 is really quite advanced. It really is something new, it really is the way of the future and therefore I think we can stop before it happens those who may wish to criticize Formula One and motor sport in general for carbon emissions, for use of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are here to stay, let's use them efficiently and I think Formula One is doing that, and I think we should be very proud of what we're doing and we should tell the world what we're doing.

Q: (Marc Priestley – F1 Times) Question for Nick and Tom: firstly, Tom, both you guys have used this passive DRS-type system on the car today. Tom, do you expect to use it any more this weekend. Nick, you've already clarified that you won't, but is it something that you will continue working on? Do the 2014 rules mean that it's a viable concept to continue developing?

TM: So, today we performed a lot of tests on some new parts and the system actually performed better than we were expecting. It's still not at the stage where we think we're going to race it, even though we are pretty tempted at the moment, so there's plenty of engineers looking at a lot of data. We'll make that decision later on tonight. With regards to next year, any system that you can use to help reduce drag will always help you, so yes, it is part of the consideration for next year's car.

NC: And the same for Lotus; obviously anything that drops drag is a useful thing to have, so it's an interesting direction to pursue.

Q: Just for clarity, the reason not to continue with it for the weekend, is that because the downside of it, not switching properly, outweighs the possible gains of having it?

NC: Partly, and also because we didn't have a full dry session, we couldn't get the normal feedback we would like on it and all the measurements we would like, so it just left us a little nervous after P1 that we didn't want to go into the rest of the weekend with something that may give us a problem, particularly when the car's already competitive and we didn't want to risk having a problem in P3 or qualifying with it.

Q: (Edd Straw – Autosport) Pat, you talked about the need for getting more out of the potential of Williams with better technical leadership. Do you, based on your preliminary examinations of the team, think that you need further recruitment in senior technical positions to work just under you to achieve that?

PS: Well, the first thing to remember is that I've been there four days, so it's very much first impressions, but those first impressions are that it's a team with fabulous facilities, it's a great factory, there's most of the equipment that we need there and a lot of very good people. And of course, while I may have been there only four days, a lot of those people I have known for many years and worked with many of them, so there is a lot of quality and I think I would re-iterate what I said earlier, that I think that what we need to do at Williams is that we need to look at process and that's really where my focus will be.

Q: (Edd Straw – Autosport) Nick, the wheelbase change, any concerns that will have a detrimental effect on the good tyre management you've seen from your car? Obviously it will slightly change the way you're loading up the tyres.

NC: Yeah, we don't expect so. If anything, it should make the car a little bit more stable, a little bit easier to drive, it could even give us a small tyre management advantage so we think it's the right thing to do and we're looking forward to bringing it to Monza.

F1 Belgium Blog – Friday report

After three weeks of European sunshine that endured for the length of the F1 summer break, the circus got back to work under the leaden grey skies that blanketed the Spa-Francorchamps Circuit on Friday morning.

The length of the track – the longest on the current F1 calendar – is such that conditions change from sector to sector. Such was the case during FP1, with a wet track surface in sectors one and three, and a rapidly drying sector two with a clearly defined racing line. As a result, times set in the morning session were between four and five seconds slower than the times set in FP2.

Despite the difficult and slippery track conditions, FP1 was an incident-free session, with some drivers making use of the run-off areas around the circuit but no one causing their mechanics to work through lunch on a massive rebuild.

When the chequered flag fell it was Fernando Alonso who was fastest for Ferrari, marginally ahead of the Force India pairing. Paul di Resta had the advantage over his teammate, and was one-tenth faster than Adrian Sutil at the end of the morning's running. It was an unusual timesheet, with Sebastian Vettel in P6, Esteban Gutierrez seventh for Sauber, and the Lotus pair bringing up the rear.

FP2 was a more typical session, with Vettel at the top of the timesheets despite a puncture bringing the defending world champion's afternoon to a premature end. The Red Bull driver was on the medium compound when his right rear blew coming out of Courbe Paul Frere. At the time of writing, the cause of the puncture was still being investigated.

Courbe Paul Frere would prove to be the site of FP2's other incident, which occurred shortly after Vettel's tyre failure. Giedo van der Garde lost the back end of his car when exiting the corner, and ended up crashing his Caterham into the barriers and out of the session.

Despite Vettel's tyre trouble, it was a dominant session for Red Bull, with the German and teammate Mark Webber topping the timesheets by a comfortable margin. Vettel set the pace with a 1m49.331s lap, while Webber was hot on the young man's heels with a 1m49.390s lap. No other driver was able to lap under 1m50s, and Red Bull ended the day with an 0.8s advantage.

McLaren had a disappointing end to the day, with early signs of promise resulting in a P8 for Sergio Perez, 1.2s slower than Vettel, and a P15 for Jenson Button, who was nearly two seconds slower in the dry than the defending champion.

Lotus had contrasting fortunes on Friday, with a slow morning followed by an FP2 that saw both drivers in the top ten having tried out the double DRS – which the team have chosen not to race. Ferrari were not as strong in FP2 as they had been in the morning's running, but there appears to have been a marked improvement since the teams broke for the summer break. Last of the front running teams was Mercedes, with both drivers spending the day evaluating low-drag aerodynamic updates.

FP1 times (unofficial)

1. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m55.198s [11 laps]
2. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m55.224s [10 laps]
3. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m55.373s [11 laps]
4. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m55.518s [14 laps]
5. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m55.614s [10 laps]
6. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m55.636s [14 laps]
7. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m55.954s [18 laps]
8. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m56.110s [11 laps]
9. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m56.770s [14 laps]
10. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m56.858s [18 laps]
11. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m56.863s [10 laps]
12. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m57.081s [14 laps]
13. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m57.084s [17 laps]
14. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m57.281s [14 laps]
15. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m57.358s [10 laps]
16. Heikki Kovalainen (Caterham) 1m57.821s [16 laps]
17. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m57.887s [16 laps]
18. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m58.600s [14 laps]
19. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m58.929s [12 laps]
20. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m59.209s [12 laps]
21. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m59.441s [11 laps]
22. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 2m03.176s [15 laps]

FP2 times (unofficial)

1. Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull) 1m49.331s [22 laps]
2. Mark Webber (Red Bull) 1m49.390s [34 laps]
3. Romain Grosjean (Lotus) 1m50.149s [34 laps]
4. Felipe Massa (Ferrari) 1m50.164s [27 laps]
5. Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso) 1m50.253s [28 laps]
6. Kimi Raikkonen (Lotus) 1m50.318s [33 laps]
7. Fernando Alonso (Ferrari) 1m50.510s [21 laps]
8. Sergio Perez (McLaren) 1m50.536s [27 laps]
9. Nico Rosberg (Mercedes) 1m50.601s [33 laps]
10. Paul di Resta (Force India) 1m50.611s [27 laps]
11. Adrian Sutil (Force India) 1m50.629s [30 laps]
12. Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes) 1m50.751s [27 laps]
13. Nico Hulkenberg (Sauber) 1m50.972s [33 laps]
14. Pastor Maldonado (Williams) 1m50.991s [28 laps]
15. Jenson Button (McLaren) 1m51.195s [28 laps]
16. Daniel Ricciardo (Toro Rosso) 1m51.447s [26 laps]
17. Valtteri Bottas (Williams) 1m51.568s [28 laps]
18. Esteban Gutierrez (Sauber) 1m51.644s [26 laps]
19. Giedo van der Garde (Caterham) 1m53.157s [21 laps]
20. Charles Pic (Caterham) 1m53.251s [29 laps]
21. Jules Bianchi (Marussia) 1m53.482s [28 laps]
22. Max Chilton (Marussia) 1m54.418s [12 laps]

F1 Belgium Blog - Thursday press conference

After a long break filled with rumour and supposition, the majority of the questions at the Thursday press conference in Spa concentrated on one man who was not in attendance.

Present were Jules Bianchi (Marussia), Romain Grosjean (Lotus), Charles Pic (Caterham), Giedo van der Garde (Caterham), Jean-Eric Vergne (Toro Rosso), and Sebastian Vettel (Red Bull).

Q: Jules, can we start with you? Ten races into your Formula One career you've got some solid results. Do you feel you're established as an F1 driver now?

Jules BIANCHI: Obviously the first part of the season has been really good for me and the team. The second part a bit more difficult. Now we're going into the last part and I feel confident. I was really happy with the first result we had but we still need to push and improve.

Q: What do you feel is the right move for you? I know the Marussia team are keen to keep you for next season. Do you think the right move for you is to stay there or are you looking beyond?

JB: Well, I think the right move is first of all to think about this year, finish the season and let my manager and Ferrari see what we can do and they will decide and they will a good call but for sure I'm happy and pleased with Marussia.

Q: Giedo, moving to you now. A bit of a tough start to the year but things have really seemed to turn around recently, particularly in the last race. What was the secret of that turnaround?

Giedo VAN DER GARDE: I think it's a lot to do with the workload. I've been working really hard. Of course, it's for rookies not easy to come in. I think Jules was a little bit better than me at the beginning. But it went better and better and you see a good direction going, especially the last race, it was going really well. Happy with the team, happy with the performance and we keep on pushing like this.

Q: And your own thoughts about next year?

VDG: Next year is still far away. I still want to focus on the next following races, do well, maximise myself. I think the new tyres are helping me a little bit, with my style of driving, so then we'll see where it ends up.

Q: Moving to you Sebastian, I was going to ask you about highlights of the season but I see you've gone out and got a few highlights of your own, under your cap, you're hiding it now. You obviously have a comfortable lead in the championship but after the performance of Hamilton [in Hungary] and with Mercedes winning three of the last five are you beginning to feel less comfortable?

Sebastian VETTEL: I think we had a great first part of the season. Very good results, unfortunately one DNF, but all in all I think we can be very happy with the first half. Now entering the second half and looking at the calendar I think it will be very busy for all of us but I think we have the same reason to be confident as we had starting the season. I think we have a great car, a great team, a strong package, which hopefully is good enough to fight for victories in the next couple of races.

Q: Obviously things are hotting up in the search for your new team-mate – lots of discussions going on. What, to you... what do you feel would be the ideal characteristics of the person sitting in the car on the other side of the garage next season?

SV: At the end of the day I think it doesn't really matter too much. I think ideally you would like someone who is competitive, as competitive as you are, so that we are pushing each other. You don't have to be best friends with whoever is racing next to you. At the end of the day you have to work for the team. I think that's one of the most important bits, so you work in the same direction and hopefully ensure that the car gets faster, you pull in the same direction in terms of car development. I think that's the most important thing. Whether you like each or not is not that important. If it's the case, then probably it's a bonus, but I don't think it's absolutely necessary.

Q: Romain, first of all congratulations from all of us on the birth of your son. How does it feel?

Romain GROSJEAN: It feels like good entertainment, the best thing ever in the world.

Q: Will it change the way you drive?

RG I think I have a different mind from the past. I have been trying to progress a lot. It may not change lap times but I'm still trying to improve myself.

Q: Twenty-three points in the last two grand prix, your best form of the season. What's brought that about?

RG: We had a decent run since Bahrain, where we found out what I didn't like on the car at the start of the season. In Silverstone we had a little bad luck. I had a bad Monaco, that was myself, but then I think I was getting better and better and we had in the last two races fights for victory, which is always good. The car was performing well in quali and the race, so happy with that, happy with the progress we are doing and the updates that being brought by the team. Just trying to do my best and giving 100 per cent every time.

Q: You've had a clean sheet in race starts this season but obviously coming back here everyone remembers 12 months ago, what do think about that now?

RG: Well, as I say, a different state of mind and I think I've progressed a lot and worked on that and I think the 2013 starts prove that I did my duties. No, I'll keep pushing and trying to do my best in every circumstance. When every eye is on you, it's easier for the others to play with that. But I'm here today to give my best, trying to win races, what I've been trying to do in the last two grand prix and it's getting close and closer, which is good. So I'll keep progressing, keep working and keep doing the same things and I'll keep doing clean starts.

Q: Jean-Eric, moving to you, we saw the interview you gave to L'Équipe just before the summer break. Perhaps you could spell out for us the situation as you see it between yourself, Toro Rosso, Red Bull and the future?

Jean-Eric VERGNE: The situation is pretty clear. I don't have much to say. There have been absolutely no [statements] from Red Bull Racing or Toro Rosso. I'm happy where I am. I try to focus 100 per cent on my season and all the races that are going on for the rest of the year. Therefore I don't want to think too much about next year.

Q: There was a quote from Franz Tost saying you are secure at Toro Rosso for next year, you didn't have to worry about your future.

JEV: Yeah, absolutely I'm not worried. Of course as a driver I wish I could have a car to win races but I will be more than happy to stay in Toro Rosso. It's a good team. It's a team building up, just getting better and better. We have a new factory, a lot of good people coming in and I would be more than happy to stay in Toro Rosso next year. Nothing else to say really.

Q: Give us your thoughts on this race. Obviously a lot of support coming across the border from France, obviously always a very special feeling as well, racing on this historic track – a track on which Toro Rosso have done reasonably well in the past, certainly in qualifying.

JEV: First of all I love this track. I've always loved racing here. For some reason I realise I've had quite a decent car here with Toro Rosso. Especially this year I hope will be even better than the other ones. We are aiming for a good weekend, scoring some good points and ending all the bad results we've had recently.

Q: Charles, how do you feel about what you've been able to do so far this season?

Charles PIC: I think it was a good first half of the season for us. The two first races were difficult and for sure we were not at the pace we wanted to be but I think all the team, including the driver, made a good job and progressed race after race to become stronger and stronger after races. We finished in Budapest, I think our highest level of the season. So I think that is quite positive. Still not where we want to be so we need to continue like that and push it forward. But I think it was a good progression.

Q: This is the time of year where teams and the drivers and their managers are all thinking about the jigsaw puzzle which is who drives where in 2014. What are your feelings? Would you like to stay where you are? Do you see a move? What are you thinking?

CP: My job is to try to get 100 per cent out of my car every weekend. So I will be focussed on this for the next races and I will let my management do the rest.

Q: (Julien Febreau – Canal Plus) Question to all of you except Romain Grosjean: do you feel ready to be a father?

SV: Oof. I don't know. Maybe. Obviously Romain is a father, so maybe he can comment on what made him think he's ready or not. I think in the best case it doesn't take too long to get the job done! I think in that case we are all ready!

JEV: Well, following what Seb says, I will be ready to do the job but not the rest.

VDG: I think when Seb does one he will have a nice boy or girl with the same hair. Just kidding. I don't know. First of all, I've been with my girlfriend for quite a long time. We're getting married this year and after that we will see what comes. I think we'll wait for a few more years.

SV: We are still in free practice!

JB: I think it's the same (for me); I don't feel ready at the moment but I'm practising!

CP: For myself at the moment I'm focusing on racing and my season and after that we will see.

Q: (Pierre van Vliet – Fli.com) Jean-Eric, do you still believe that you have a chance for the Red Bull drive next year?

JEV: It's a difficult question. Obviously I don't know much more than you. I don't want to think too much about it so it's difficult for me to answer this question but I still believe in our chances to have a good car next year, whether Red Bull or Toro Rosso but if I'm at Toro Rosso I'm sure we will have a good car. I don't have much else to say.

Q: (Kate Walker – GP Week) Sebastian, I've been bothering you for the past few races asking about the prospect of racing against Kimi in the same car and you were quite positive and enthusiastic about the challenge. How does it feel now that you know that prospective challenge has been taken away and that you might be racing somebody entirely different? Are you looking forward to it?

SV: Well, first of all, I didn't know how realistic it was or not. Obviously I've learned similar to most of us from the press that as it looks, it's not the case (that Kimi will be my teammate). For sure I'm talking with the team, but as I've said many times, it's not my decision and also I don't want to get too involved. As I've said, I think Kimi would have been nice in many ways. Now it's not happening so it doesn't make much sense to talk about that but who knows? He's still young, I'm still young so I don't know. A lot of things can still happen. Never say never but probably for next year it's not going to happen.

Q: (Jerome Pugmire – Associated Press) Sebastian, after Hamilton's win in Budapest, do you now see him as your most dangerous rival for the remainder of the season?

SV: Well, I think he's one of them. Obviously, like I said, we had a good first half of the season. We can be very happy with that. We just need to go step by step, race by race and then not get distracted by too many things happening around the outside, outside of the team. I think Mercedes has been very competitive, not just Lewis, also Nico who has won two races already this year. We know that they are very quick in qualifying. Hungary, in a way, for the first time – not really the first time – they had the ability, let's say, to show their speed in the race as well but really since Monaco, in a way, they've been competitive in the races. As I said, Nico won the race at Silverstone. Lewis was in the lead when he had the tyre failure. Surely, the last couple of races they were most competitive but then I think Lotus has always been there scoring points with Kimi. Romain is fighting his way back. Ferrari, I think, has a little bit of a low at the moment but still they've got good points so I think all of these teams and the drivers, you still have to keep them in mind but as I said, for us it's not that important to pick one particular driver or person or team. As I said, first of all we have to get our own stuff sorted and then we will see what happens.

Q: (Paolo Ianieri – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, there are rumours about Kimi that he might go back to Ferrari. Do you think that he and Fernando could be a more threatening couple for you, or would you prefer him to stay at Lotus?

SV: I don't know. I get along quite well with Kimi so I would be happy in a way if he finds a spot where he's happy. I think he has a good seat at the moment with Lotus but if he can improve then I would be happy for him. I think Kimi is very straightforward, you don't get any bullshit with him and politics so in that regard I don't know how realistic it is for him to return to Ferrari. Obviously he has been there and then Fernando came and Kimi left to go rallying. I think he's very uncomplicated.

Q: (Peter Farkas – Auto-Motor) Jules, can you make it clear if you're running for the Ferrari seat, and what other options are there for you apart from Marussia?

JB: Well, obviously I don't know. Actually I am just focused 100 percent on my season and I just let my manager decide it for me. I think it's not the moment to look at that, but for sure I will be ready if Ferrari call me, but for the moment I feel good at Marussia.

Q: (Luke Smith – NBC Sports) Romain, there are rumours of Kimi Raikkonen leaving the team at the end of the season; do you enjoy the prospect of potentially leading Lotus next season, in potentially a World Championship-leading car?

RG: Well, I always say that losing Kimi would be a loss for the team, he's very good, he's a World Champion, it's good to have him as a teammate. We push each other to the limit but if he leaves then we still have to do the job and to try to win races and score a lot of points. So at the moment I think we have a good way of working together but yeah, if he leaves then I would be more than happy to get the deal and try to keep Lotus where it is or still improve.

Q: (Dan Knutson – Auto Action and National Speedsport News) Sebastian, we're at Spa, a track you guys all love and we're going to Suzuka, a track you all love. What is your most memorable race at Suzuka and why?

SV: So you're not... you don't want to talk about Spa? Correct. Nice introduction though! Looking back to Suzuka, I think I've had fantastic races there. I've been very lucky. I think the last four years I've always been on the podium: won three out of four races there so yeah, I really like the circuit, it's fantastic. The first sector is great, similar to here: you have some corners which are very similar. I think we all enjoy the fact that when we get to challenge ourselves, not only ourselves but also the cars, and really get the cars to their limit and feel, once or twice, on these special types of circuits, what the cars can do and the corner speeds we have just through the first sector at Suzuka is very impressive. I enjoy that a lot, to feel the speed, to really get that sensation. It's just a great level of satisfaction and that's why it's like a drug, you want more and more every lap and if you have a great car which fortunately I had the last couple of years, then it's just great to go for another lap and another lap. I think the best memory I have is winning the championship there in 2011, even though I didn't win the race but still it was a great experience, a crazy day and crazy karaoke at night after that.

Q: (Marc Priestley – FT.com) For anybody who has been to do a track walk today; you will have noticed that the first few grid slots have had some drainage channels cut into the track surface. Has there been talk amongst your teams, firstly about the

different strategies for the start procedures and secondly about the possibility of even doing practice starts at some point over the Grand Prix weekend before we get to Sunday?

RG: Well, we noticed it while doing the track walk but we haven't spoken with the start guy yet. It's true that it looks different when you do the walk but I think the first eleven grid positions are more or less the same so there is no disadvantage; the advantage will be more with the eleventh, twelfth positions if there could be any problems, but I think from the first few rows, it should be the same for everyone.

JEV: Actually, we had a meeting just before the press conference and we were discussing it. I think we will probably bring it up during the drivers' briefing or team managers' briefing to try and ask if we can have a practice start to see if there is a difference or not.

SV: Yeah, we've noticed it, we've talked about it, we don't know the difference because we've never had starts on that kind of surface. I don't expect it to be a big difference. Obviously I think we are not allowed – at the moment, at least – doing any practice starts. Maybe that will change, to have a look for all the teams. If it's wet, it's better, if it's wet for all of us for sure, but I think that's the reason why they did it. Like I said, no experience so we don't know.

VDG: I think we are at an advantage then.

Q: (Paolo Ianieri – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Romain, talking about Kimi, one thing that his manager said is that it depends a lot on Lotus whether he can stay or not, from what Lotus can offer technically and also financially. I think this is also something that interests you: have you spoken with Boullier and with Lopez, what do you know about next year? Do you feel secure about this?

RG: Well, I was a bit busy the last few weeks to be honest. I didn't have much time to make phone calls. I feel very happy with the team. It's no secret that I would like to stay there. I think we are on a good progression. There's a lot of talk about Kimi but to be honest, at the moment I am just trying to focus on the way back and having the races that we've had in the last two Grands Prix and doing a good job.

Q: (Andy Young – Richland F1) Question for the back row: it's forecast to rain on Sunday, are you hopeful that it does and therefore gives you a chance to maybe get a point or a decent result?

JB: Well, obviously when it's raining I think it's better for us because it's like kind of crazy races so we have more chance to finish in the front but it's also a chance for us to be out of the track, so it's not easy. I would like to have some rain on Sunday.

CP: I think, as Jules said, each time you have changing conditions, for us it's good because it means that if you take the right decisions you can take advantage from it and try to get a finishing position that you are not able to get without changing conditions. I think it's good but then after it's the same for everybody so you still have to take the right decision and a better one than the one (driver) you are fighting against.

VDG: I think it's a good opportunity for us. I think it's always nice here in the rain. I think our car performs quite well in the rain and with that, a lot of things can happen in the race so we will see. I think it would be nice for us to have a little rain, a little luck here and there. Hopefully we can get back our tenth place in the team championship.

Q: (Andrea Cremonesi – La Gazzetta dello Sport) Sebastian, yesterday Alonso tweeted impressive numbers about his training during the summer break. Could you tell us what you did during the break?

SV: What did I do? Holiday, so rest a little bit and for sure, you use the time to... soon enough, hopefully, get back into rhythm and train. I didn't log every kilometer that I did on the bike or run or swim so I don't know what he did. I know that he's quite active on Twitter but I'm not following him. I don't have the... I don't know if you actually need the application or not on your phone or if you... I don't know, if you have to subscribe. I don't know. I'm not a member, I'm not part of that exclusive club but yeah, I think he's pretty fit, no doubt, so I'm sure he was training pretty hard.
